

**Pan-Canadian Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy
Organized by the Career Development Services Working Group (CDSWG)
of the Forum of Labour Market Ministers (FLMM)**

Winnipeg, October 29, 2009

Opening Keynote Address

**Can public policy support career development in a
complex, compartmentalized and harsh world?¹**

By Rachel Bélisle, Université de Sherbrooke²

It is a great privilege to be able to speak to you at this opening session of the *Pan-Canadian Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy* of the Forum of Labour Market Ministers. I accepted this invitation with great humility, because Michel Turcotte,³ who invited me,—and I thank him for doing so—reminded me that there are still very few of us in the Francophonie who are conducting studies on public policies that impact career development. He agreed for me to approach the topic primarily from the lifelong learning angle, given that societies, adults and governments have their expectations with regard to career guidance and career development actors.

Given the important studies currently being conducted on public policies and career guidance,⁴ I hope not to repeat too much of what has already been said by others. I accepted this challenge because I firmly believe that lifelong learning, from a human development perspective, is a collective course to take in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Delors, 1996a, 1996b)⁵. I also believe that career guidance and development services can play a key role in the lifelong learning field.

First, I would like to point out that while lifelong learning does indeed support learners across the life span (Bourdon and Bélisle, 2005; Delors, 1996a), my work deals with adults and I work specifically in the broad

area of recognition of prior learning and competencies.

This field includes activities surrounding official recognition by the government or its representatives. In Quebec, three systems in particular are involved: the education system, the public employment system and the professional system. However, the broad scope also covers activities undertaken by organizations working for social inclusion and occupational integration or employability. Their operations are often funded by government ministries, which we refer to here as labour market departments, and can generally be linked to active labour policies. This area also includes human resources management (HRM) activities in companies and enterprises.

Many actors and researchers support this broad notion. In Canada, we talk about *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (PLAR) or, in French, *Évaluation et reconnaissance des acquis* (ÉRA). This more comprehensive view is also adopted in the OECD report on career guidance (OCDE, 2004, p. 66.).

Together with a few colleagues, I study the demands for recognition and the response of the State and intermediary bodies. We use Vygotsky's sociohistorical perspective (Prot, 2009), and suggest, based on the work of G.H. Mead and Axel Honneth (Garon and Bélisle, 2009; Honneth, 2002), that adults experience recogni-

tion, or lack of recognition, in the three spheres of love, legal rights and solidarity. This work is in its very early stages, and the first book exploring such issues was recently published in French (Bélisle and Boutinet, 2009).

Now that you know a bit about where I am coming from, here is how I will approach today's presentation. It comprises three parts. First, I will elaborate a bit more on this world that I describe in my title as "complex, compartmentalized and harsh." Second, I will share some of the theoretical frameworks that I draw on here to talk about public policies, and I will provide a few examples. Third, I will talk about career development actors and their work in the public policy context. In my conclusion, I will come back to the importance of ongoing collective actions to foster the involvement of the career development actors in public policies.

A complex, compartmentalized and harsh world

The title of my talk refers to the complexity of the world, its compartmentalization and its harshness. These adjectives seemed particularly appropriate for describing the current labour market, as well as the more global world in which people move and make their way. I chose these three adjectives: one to remind us that some of the characteristics of today's world were also ancient realities; the second to symbolize the characteristics of the industrial age; and the third to convey the transformations under way in what some call "advanced modernity" (Beck, 2001; Giddens, 1993).

The harsh realities of the world of work are nothing new. Ken Follet's bestseller, *The Pillars of the Earth*, can be read and analyzed as a book on career development (Follet, 1992). The 12th-century England it depicts is

particularly harsh. While it describes the natural forces that beat down relentlessly on Ellen, Tom, Aliena and those near to them, it focuses much more on the brutality and roughness of a number of the characters, and the bloody, arbitrary nature of the power wielded by the monarchy and the church over groups and the people in them. We may think we are far removed from that world. While it may be reasonable to assert this from the heights of our heated towers, we should be aware that the forces of nature or those that seem to be right out of a bad horror film continue to impact career development. When I chose that adjective, I was thinking of the several thousands of people who are victims of war, abuse, violence or any number of crimes. It is also a reference to the harshness of our climate, which in some sectors and in some areas of Canada has a sustainable impact on career development.

Today's world is compartmentalized. I chose this adjective as a reminder that the Taylorian division of labour and binary approaches are still used as a matter of course by many people and organizations. If as an academic I know about the importance of deconstructing or breaking things down into smaller pieces in order to better understand them, I am also aware that this is not enough and that reconstruction and establishing linkages are equally important. This compartmentalization is still seen in the work organization of many actors, particularly those in the recognition of prior learning and competencies field. With a few exceptions, the silo approach to work continues to the extent that something like establishing a common vocabulary seems to be a major challenge.

Today's world is complex. Phenomena like the knowledge explosion, the challenging of fundamental concepts like masculine and feminine, con-

stant technological change, the mobility of goods, services and people, market liberalization, and disappearing borders all contribute to the multiplying and interweaving of possibilities but can also lead to numerous slippery slopes. In networking, in the cohabitation of people of different cultures or intersectoral or interdisciplinary work, it is important to understand what words mean. Bridges between previously separate realms, representations and codes are first built through language, “a dialogue of languages” in the words of Bakhtin, whose work is used by colleagues in France studying that country’s recognition of prior learning, the validation of knowledge acquired by experience (*validation des acquis de l’expérience* or VAE, in French) (Prot, 2009, p. 20).

In each of the disciplines studying the labour market and career development, we see the multiplication of theories and the cohabitation of world views that are sometimes quite incompatible. It is the same for many individuals who are socialized in vastly contrasting and sometimes opposite cultural universes. One of the theories of French sociologist Bernard Lahire that is supported by numerous empirical research studies is that the contemporary actor internalizes the plurality of the world around him (Lahire, 1998).⁶

In dealing with this complexity and plurality, lifelong learning would appear to be one of the most promising avenues. This learning involves people as well as organizations. We now speak of “learning organizations,” “learning cities” and “learning societies.” While we may be at the early stages of this large-scale collective movement, one of the challenges is to build bridges between previously separate components, to be open—through contact with “the other—to new interests and to changing certain beliefs. The intervention with indi-

viduals and groups also changes in order to help people “learn to learn,” analyze opportunities encountered, and establish an inner dialogue to better understand how prior learning and competencies developed in one context may or must be activated in another. To achieve this, the analysis of the contexts of the individuals helped becomes increasingly important in lifelong learning-oriented intervention.

To address this plurality and complexity, several OECD countries have developed public policies that target lifelong learning to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Theoretical Frameworks on Public Policies

Now let us take a closer look at what public policies are. Many people here may have heard about “government policies” in their initial policy courses, secondary or post-secondary education. This was a very popular term in the 1980s (Lemieux, 2009, p. 1). The term “public policies” is the current catchphrase. For instance, the OECD report published in 2004, with input from 14 countries including Canada, is entitled *Career Guidance and Public Policy* (OECD, 2004). I will come back to this report later on.

Vincent Lemieux, political science professor at Université Laval, suggests a definition of public policy as a set of activities focused on trying to find solutions to public problems in the environment, by political actors with structured relations, and evolution over time (Lemieux, 2009, p. 7). Seen in this light, public policies are what a government explicitly defines under a given policy, such as Quebec’s *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* adopted in 2002 (Government of Quebec, 2002a). However, the term “public policy” can also refer to a

law, an action plan, a strategy, a government program, and so forth.

In the political training for career guidance students, I tackle public policies by presenting the process by which they are developed (Bouchard, 2001; Lemieux, 2009). This is a non-linear process. It is my view that students can draw connections between this collective process stemming from an attempt to solve problems and some of their prior learning on individual problem solving. Obviously, this process is generally much more complex than what I am presenting here. However, it is a basis for future discussions on the subject.

The first stage is what is known as “problem identification and agenda setting.” In a democratic country like Canada, it is crucial to collectively discuss a public problem before adopting the policy to address it. Not only does this ensure that the problem at issue is in fact of a **public** nature, but it is also useful in moving toward a more or less shared vision that will be important for action.

The second stage in the public policy-making process involves looking for alternatives. This includes consultations, pilot projects, scientific studies, examining similar national applications, international missions and so on.

Adoption is the third stage in the process and can involve a number of intermediate steps at the government level, such as examination by a parliamentary committee. The fourth stage is policy implementation. This stage can take several years and lead to the identification of new problems or solutions. The fifth stage in the process, the public policy evaluation stage, is especially paramount when there are accountability concerns.

These five major stages in the process were helpful in the analysis of the role

of guidance counsellors in Quebec’s lifelong learning policy, in the chapter on recognition of prior learning and competencies (Bélisle, 2006). It revealed that no collective actors from career guidance organizations were involved prior to the implementation stage. Services like the competence audit (*bilan de compétences*) that are generally associated with prior learning recognition were not considered in the government policy.

In fact, collective actors from the career guidance field were absent from the entire process leading up to the adoption of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*. Little wonder, then, that they are not included in the policy itself or its action plan (Government of Quebec, 2002b), and that the official texts prior to implementation barely mention career guidance or career development.

This silence raises questions about the extent to which the career development actors felt implicated in (1) the recognition of prior learning and competencies, (2) lifelong learning, (3) the collective consultation processes put in place in **their** society and which involve **their** speciality. Perhaps this silence is indicative of how little the officials of the employment ministry involved in the alternative exploration and the adoption phases really know about the work of career development practitioners and their role in education, training and learning. There is also the possibility that these officials did in fact put career guidance or career development concerns on the table, but that the latter were set aside during the content negotiations that are part of such a process.⁷

Career Development

This absence of the guidance actors from the consultations on adult education and continuing education and

training in Quebec could perhaps be explained by a specific context or by a lack of strong identification with this area. All right.

Let's take another example, that of the difficulties faced by qualified immigrants in accessing additional training in order to enter the regulated trades and professional orders. By now, everyone agrees that this is not a personal problem, even though the situation has a direct impact on individual career development and people must be fairly resilient to cope. Quebec's career development practitioners have been aware of, and sensitive to, these access problems for years. However, they do not seem to have gone public with these concerns. Fortunately, others have spoken out, but the question will arise as to whether the problem could have been addressed in a more timely manner had guidance actors said their piece, shedding the reticence that is often characteristic of individual guidance practitioners. Today, this access problem, coupled with labour shortages in a number of sectors, is not only on the table, but it has resulted in the adoption of important measures leading to implementation in an effort to catch up. This work draws very little on career development theories or career development actors' understanding of mobility problems, at least in Quebec.

These actors do not seem to be much more actively involved in developing public policies for labour mobility such as those in Canada or in Europe and which give rise to various mutual recognition agreements (MRAs). These agreements have a definite impact on the career development of people who can, more than ever before, think about getting a job in an area that was previously unknown to them. New bridges are being built like never before.

But can practitioners participate in the process other than in the implementation stage? The answer is yes. For example, we can observe a cultural change vis-à-vis public policies with Quebec career development actors working with people in the 16-35 age group in youth employment centres (*carrefours jeunesse-emploi*, or CJE). These organizations, and not just their administrators, were more involved from the very start in developing the project that became a program, *Solidarité jeunesse*, later replaced by the *Jeunes en action* and IDEO 16-17 measures.⁸

Another recent example of ongoing involvement of Quebec guidance practitioners in policy development is the participation in the development of the *Act to amend the Professional Code and other legislative provisions in the field of mental health and human relations* (Bill 21). One of the aims of this legislation is to provide a regulatory framework for the practice of psychotherapy. It impacts the work of Quebec's guidance counsellors who are members of a professional order, the OCCOPPQ. I should also mention that for the past year or so, there has been a movement in the Quebec order of guidance counsellors to try to jump on the recognition of prior learning and competencies bandwagon.

So things started moving forward following the publication of the 2004 OECD report on career guidance. This review looked at how career guidance services can "assist countries to advance lifelong learning goals, and at how career guidance can help in the implementation of active labour market policies" (OCDE, 2004, p. 3). One of the review's findings was that "[f]ew career guidance practitioners show a great engagement in policy questions." (OECD, 2004, p. 7).

Anthony Watts, a career development researcher from England recalls the tension between two groups during the 2001 International Symposium on Career development and Public Policy: the “policy-makers,” and the career development practitioners. The two groups confronted one another at this symposium, each accusing the other of undermining its work for the common good (Watts, 2008).⁹

Some Quebec practitioners tell us that they put the individual’s interest, values and abilities first, but they sometimes feel that public agency officers—state agents—tend to stress labour market demands more.¹⁰ I think it is important here to make a distinction between labour market demands and the public policies that effectively play a role in regulating those demands for social justice. Generally, then, it is the state agents who ensure that the labour market public policies are applied. This nuance is crucial. Public policies are for society somewhat what a plan or project is for the individual. They include choices and reflect the maturity of a community.

The confrontation in 2001 (Watts, 2008; Baudouin and Hiebert, 2007) undoubtedly galvanized career development actors, who have worked diligently ever since to document the impact of interventions. One such example is the work of the Canadian Research Working Group on the impact of career development services.¹¹

Another encouraging fact is the development and the government support of activities based on constructivist career development theories (Savickas, 2008; Young and Collin, 2004), which place more importance on the context of the individuals helped and which do not view the environment or social aspect as a threat or something separate from the Self. I point also to the growing interest of

practitioners and students in social determinants and in the social dimension incorporated in adults. The social world is as much within us as outside us, writes Bernard Lahire in the preface of his book *Portraits sociologiques* (Lahire, 2002). I admit that this shakes career development theories and requires academics in the field to conduct a new type of research and review which teachings to prioritize. However, this is also the price of helping to change the dispositions and interests of practitioners with regard to public policies.

Conclusion

Since I talked to you about the importance of building bridges to live in a complex world, you will not be surprised to learn that I am committed to the collective effort of bringing together the public policy deciders, state agents and career development practitioners.

Career development work is valuable and fascinating work: helping people to find a place in the world at a specific point in world history and in individual history.

I suggest—and it is the professor in me talking now—that if we had a better understanding of public policy, we could work much more effectively together to foster lifelong learning, and the development and mobilization of resources at work, in training, at home and in the community.

In my view, contemporary democratic life with its many partnership activities makes it difficult—at least in Quebec—to talk about “policy-makers” as if they were the ones who managed society. There are of course decision-makers, those people and bodies charged by the state to make decisions, at the adoption phase and to ensure that these decisions are then applied or enforced. But in public policy making process, career de-

velopment actors, whether they are practitioners, administrators or academics, must not leave the decision-makers alone either before or after the decision stage.

What could the career development actors have added to a policy such as the Quebec adult education and continuing education and training policy if they had taken part in the consultations? Let's take the chapter on competency recognition as an example. Besides adding their voice to stress the urgent need for action to facilitate access to regulated trades and professional orders, they could also have:

- assisted the Quebec employment ministry in promoting the activities it funds and which help job seekers and workers develop their training plan in the broad sense of lifelong learning; and aligned these activities with partners' initiatives;
- ensured that with the coming into force of the Action Plan they receive information quickly, regardless of whether they work in the schools, in the public employment system, in community or private organizations, or elsewhere;
- demanded that the labour market information (LMI) frameworks be revised to explicitly include training activities, and that a section be added on the possibilities of access via the recognition of prior learning or competencies, mutual recognition agreements or other types of "bridges."

Fortunately, these actions can be introduced in the implementation stage if representations are made to the proper jurisdictions.

Each of us in our respective roles must contribute to these public policies, not with the primary aim of promoting ourselves, but to inform the debate, drawing on our expertise and presence in a specific environment. This is what I am inviting us all to do if we seek to support career development in a harsh, compartmentalized and complex world.

Thank you.

¹ This is the full text of the keynote address with added footnotes to provide greater detail. Some elaborate on an element of context, others contain information that could not be included in a 30-minute talk, and still others stemmed from the exchanges with conference attendees. Original is in French. See <http://www.flmm-cds.ca/francais/view.asp?x=1364>. Translation is by Traductions Freynet-Gagné Translations.

² Rachel Bélisle, Ph.D., is a researcher with a research center working on adults transitions and learning, l'Équipe de recherche sur les transitions et l'apprentissage (ÉRTA) and a professor in the Vocational Guidance Department of the Education faculty at Université de Sherbrooke. For more information, see www.erta.ca.

³ Michel Turcotte is a member of the Symposium committee. He is a guidance counselor and psychologist and works for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

⁴ See <http://www.crccanada.org/crc/symposium2/nav.cfm?l=e> and <http://www.iccdpp.org/>.

⁵ A document of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCU) draws attention to significant differences between the English and French versions of the Delors report and the confusion they could create in Canada (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 1997, Sheet 7). The document is also available in English at <http://www.unesco.ca/en/commission/resources/documents/LearningTogether.pdf>.

⁶ This work on actor plurality is currently being translated into English.

⁷ The action plan contains two very brief references to guidance, and none on career development (Government of Quebec, 2002b). They cover actions under the responsibility of the public employment service agency, Emploi-Québec, and its community partners. The policy does mention "career path" (*cheminement de carrière*) (Government

of Quebec, 2002b, p. 14) to support the notion of employer-sponsored training activities.

⁸ Research conducted by the speaker, including her PhD thesis in the CJE's and recent work on the Innovation, Development, Exploration and Orientation (IDEO) measures (Yergeau, Bourdon, Bélisle and Thériault, forthcoming) confirm the involvement of these practitioners working with young adults prior to the adoption phase. In Quebec, community organizations "active in employability development and job integration" also secured three seats in the 1990s on the Commission des partenaires du marché du travail board (see http://www.cpmt.gouv.qc.ca/organisation/membres_en.asp), enabling them to have some influence over Quebec labour market policies.

⁹ Robert Baudouin and Bryan Hiebert (Baudouin and Hiebert, 2007) also allude to this tension in the introductory text in a 2007 issue of The Canadian Journal of Counselling.

¹⁰ These remarks came up during the prior learning and competency recognition research (Bélisle, 2006) but also during more informal conversations.

¹¹ See <http://www.ccdf.ca/crwg/index.html>.

References

- Baudouin, R. et Hiebert, B. (2007). Introduction à édition spéciale sur la pratique basée sur les résultats en perfectionnement professionnel. *Revue canadienne de counseling*, 41 (3), 130-132.
- Beck, U. (2001). *La société du risque* (Trad. L. Bernadi). Paris : Aubier.
- Bélisle, R. (2006). *Relance de la reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences au Québec : la place des conseillères et des conseillers d'orientation* (collaboration Daniel Touchette). Sherbrooke : Équipe de recherche sur les transitions et l'apprentissage (ÉRTA), Université de Sherbrooke.
<http://erta.educ.usherbrooke.ca/publications.htm#RACCO>.
- Bélisle, R. et Boutinet, J.-P. (dir.) (2009). *Demandes de reconnaissance et validation d'acquis de l'expérience. Pour qui? Pour quoi?* Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Bouchard, C. (2001). Inspirer, soutenir et rénover les politiques sociales. In F. Dufort et J. Guay (dir.), *Agir au cœur des communautés. La psychologie communautaire et le changement social* (p. 343-365). Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Bourdon, S. et Bélisle, R. (2005). Suivre les activités éducatives tout au long de la vie. In P. Bernard (dir.), *Connaître, débattre et décider : la contribution d'une Enquête socioéconomique et de santé intégrée et longitudinale (ESSIL)* (p. 207-245). Montréal : Institut de la statistique du Québec.
<http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/publications/conditions/essil.htm>.
- Commission canadienne pour l'UNESCO. (1997). *Apprendre, ensemble, tout au long de nos vies. Trousse d'animation concernant le Rapport à l'UNESCO de la Commission internationale sur l'éducation pour le 21e siècle* (rédaction R. Bélisle). Ottawa : Commission canadienne pour l'UNESCO.
http://www.unesco.ca/fr/commission/ressources/documents/ApprendreEnsemble_000.pdf.
- Delors, J. (dir.). (1996a). *L'éducation, un trésor est caché dedans. Rapport à l'UNESCO de la Commission internationale sur l'éducation pour le 21e siècle*. Paris : Éditions Odile Jacob et UNESCO.
- Delors, J. (dir.). (1996b). *Learning : the treasure within. Report to UNESCO of the International commission on education for the twenty-first century*. Paris : UNESCO Publishing.
- Follet, K. (1992). *Les piliers de la terre*. Paris : Librairie générale française.
- Garon, S. et Bélisle, R. (2009). La valorisation des acquis d'adultes sans diplôme du secondaire : entre proposition de reconnaissance et risque de mépris. In R. Bélisle et J.-P. Boutinet (dir.), *Demandes de reconnaissance et validation d'acquis de l'expérience. Pour qui? Pour quoi?* (p. 103-131). Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Giddens, A. (1993). Identité de soi, transformation de l'intimité et démocratisation de la vie. In M. Auder et H. Bouchikhi (dir.), *Structuration du social et modernité avancée. Autour des travaux d'Anthony Giddens* (p. 455-476). Sainte-Foy : Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Gouvernement du Québec. (2002a). *Politique gouvernementale d'éducation des adultes*

- et de formation continue. *Apprendre tout au long de la vie*. Québec : Ministère de l'Éducation.
http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/REFORME/formation_con/Politique/Politique.pdf.
- Gouvernement du Québec. (2002b). *Plan d'action en matière d'éducation des adultes et de formation continue. Apprendre tout au long de la vie*. Québec : Ministère de l'Éducation.
http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/REFORME/formation_con/Plan/Plan.pdf.
- Honneth, A. (2002). *La lutte pour la reconnaissance* : Paris : Ed. du Cerf.
- Lahire, B. (1998). *L'homme pluriel. Les ressorts de l'action*. Paris : Nathan.
- Lahire, B. (2002). *Portraits sociologiques. Dispositions et variations individuelles*. Paris : Nathan.
- Lemieux, V. (2009). *L'étude des politiques publiques. Les acteurs et leur pouvoir* (3^e éd. revue et augmentée). Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- OCDE. (2004). *Orientation professionnelle et politique publique. Comment combler l'écart*. Paris : Organisation de coopération et de développement économiques.
www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/46/34050180.pdf.
- Prot, B. (2009). La double vie du collectif dans les acquis individuels. In R. Bélisle et J.-P. Boutinet (dir.), *Demandes de reconnaissance et validation d'acquis de l'expérience. Pour qui? Pour quoi?* (p. 15-41). Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Savickas, M., L. (2008). Helping people choose jobs : A history of the guidance profession. In J. A. Athanasou et R. Van Esbroeck (dir.), *International handbook of Career guidance* (p. 97-113). s.l. : Springer.
- Watts, A. G. (2008). Career guidance and public policy. In J. A. Athanasou et R. Van Esbroeck (dir.), *International handbook of Career guidance* (p. 341-353). s.l. : Springer.
- Yergeau, É., Bourdon, S., Bélisle, R. et Thériault, V. (à paraître). *Mise en œuvre, atteinte des objectifs et premiers effets de la mesure d'accompagnement IDEO 16-17. Rapport d'évaluation remis au Secrétariat à la jeunesse*. Sherbrooke : Équipe de recherche sur les transitions et l'apprentissage (ÉRTA).
- Young, R. A. et Collin, A. (2004). Introduction : Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (64), 373-388.