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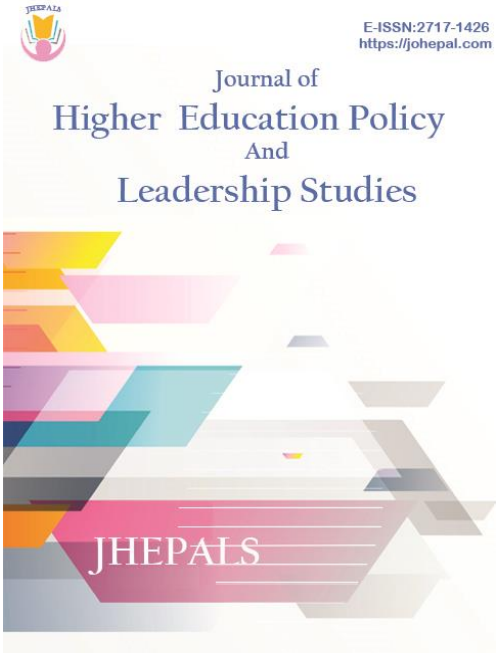

Policy as Slogan: Re-Imagining the 'Battle Cry' for Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This persuasive paper discusses the integration of the Alberta Education slogan, "Engaged thinkers and Ethical citizens with an Entrepreneurial spirit" from a lens of critical analysis. Through a governmental structure of managed participation, the educational slogan reflects an intrusion of neo-liberal economic values onto the public education arena that serves to undermine education's democratic nature. The final section of the paper suggests that educators could take a personal interest in the implementation of the slogan by defining the spirit of their students to ensure that more than economic values valued in educational settings. This paper should be interesting to policy-makers, academics, and school leaders involved in school and curriculum reform.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Spirit; Inspiring Education; Policy as Slogan; Curriculum; Alberta; Managed Participation

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Introduction

On May 13, 2013, a new Ministerial Order regarding the future direction for education in Alberta was signed into law. About two weeks later, a glossy brochure with a pretty circle and a rubric for teaching excellence were presented to me at a morning teacher and staff meeting. These communications from Alberta Education rarely garner little reaction from me, however, this time, my normally ambivalent response was jarred when my principal proudly announced that all our curricular outcomes, teacher professional growth plans, and daily lesson plans should relate to the idea that every student in Alberta will become an "Engaged thinker and Ethical citizen with an Entrepreneurial spirit".

I nearly spit out on my Starbucks Pike PlaceTM coffee. "What do you mean, entrepreneurial spirit?" I asked, aghast. With her usual distain, my principal answered, "Astrid, it just means innovative and creative, and is one of the E's in the new curricular slogan," and with that exchange, the discourse related to a significant change in educational policy and social direction ended. I looked to my colleagues to see if anyone else felt the same outrage that I felt with embedding an "entrepreneurial spirit" in students, but saw little more than the usual nonplussed, "Is this meeting over yet?" expressions around me.

Since that exchange, I have been involved in several different initiatives, including curriculum redesign consultations, high school redesign discussions, and Alberta Teacher Association (ATA) school representative meetings. I have also completed my Doctor of Education, and moved out of tertiary education into a post-secondary faculty position. Generally speaking, the school reform has moved forward and aligned itself with the slogan produced by the Inspiring Education initiative (Alberta Education, 2010), I continue to witness very little discourse around the reasons for the inclusion of entrepreneurialism in public education. Few practitioners have questioned, to me, the entrenchment of economic consumerism as a core value in a public service (Sandlin, Burdick, & Norris, 2012), or suggested that this educational slogan was a triumph of the neo-liberal habituation of market values into educational policy (Steger, 2009). Even the teacher association's written response at the time accepted the core value of entrepreneurship as it argued for increased voice for teachers and social justice for students in A Great School for All (Alberta Teachers Association, 2012). In the winter of 2021, a new draft curriculum (Alberta Education, 2021) was presented by the government that continues to elevate the concept of the entrepreneurial spirit. Why was it, I began to wonder, that I reacted so strongly against the word "entrepreneurial" when no one else appeared to do so?

I realized that the system of managed participation (Kiss, 2014) within the Alberta government and a global shift towards economic values (Litz, 2011; Steger, 2009) had thwarted discourse around the integration of the phrase "with an entrepreneurial spirit" into public policy. These structures limited the public outcry which should have been generated by such a bold, openly economically driven, rather than the previous democratically driven, political agenda onto public education. A study of the concept of neo-liberalism and consumerism, the re-definition of entrepreneurship, the Alberta

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government's communication strategy, and the use of 'educational policy as slogan' through a critical discourse analysis lens (Taylor, 2007) will illuminate how economic values have smoothly transferred onto public education.

Neo-Liberalism and Consumerism

Over the course of the last century, a shift has occurred in our western social consciousness (Steger, 2009). After the end of the Second World War, a new consumerism ideology has been eroding the traditional view of the role of the common good in public service (Sandlin et al., 2012). Sandlin, Burdick, and Norris (2012) viewed this erosion in education as the slow movement of societies away from the basic democratic imaginaries of John Dewey to the onset of modern consumerism. John Dewey, an early educational philosopher, viewed public education as the foundation of a just and democratic society, and teaching and learning as central processes for socializing the child into the present society – not an undefinable future society (Dewey, 1982). The advent of consumerism into the public educational system has moved the student from a learner of his social role in a civilized society to a customer who would find happiness and success through his purchasing power (Sandlin et al., 2012). The choice in education movement is deeply entrenched in the idea that the best education can be purchased or decided by market forces (Moss, 2019; Parsons & Welsh, 2006). This consumerocracy (Sandlin et al., 2012) was accompanied by the neo-liberal ideological shift which moved the characterization of the individual as a citizen of a society with a responsibility to the common good, to the individual having the primary responsibility for their own happiness and success, primarily achieved by purchasing goods.

The shift in focus, from citizen to consumer, distracted society from the social and governance structures that created systemic problems facing communities and nations (Sandlin et al., 2012; Moss, 2019), and it eroded the idea of a 'public good' in which collective action was needed to address large and complex problems (Steger, 2009). Subsequently, the role of the school was re-cast from democratic arena for social equality (Dewey, 1982) to spaces which promoted profit and other economic ends (Sandlin et al., 2012). Student literacy and numeracy grades, rather than being snapshots of a student's learning over time, became tools for marketing programs and for ranking the performance of countries on a global scale (OECD, 2021). While identifying areas of growth could assist countries with bettering their educational systems, in most cases, this data is used as an international competition (Forestier & Adamson, 2017). Sandlin et al (2012) conceded that resisting the encroachment of market-driven, neo-liberal, consumerist regimes was becoming increasingly difficult for schools as its ideological values increasingly became habituated into society's culture and identity.

As economic concerns became more integral to public education, the concept of the knowledge economy emerged (Bottery, 2006). The knowledge economy strove to commodify the intellectual and creative abilities of human beings within companies to increase the company's profit. Bottery (2006) suggested that in order to have power over individual human innovation and imagination, business leadership would have to increase

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collaboration between employees to ensure the transfer of knowledge and experience between employees. Further, by placing emphasis on participating in the knowledge economy, citizens in developed countries could be excluded from participating in the global manufacturing economy. The knowledge economy acted as an important part of economic globalization because companies could move their manufacturing to different countries having cheaper labour costs while preserving their critical purchasing populations in the developed world (Steger, 2009). The knowledge economy relied on consumerism as a basic tenet, so citizens would have to be educated to consume and manage goods and resources, not manufacture them.

Although appearing to value greater flexibility within organizations, a paradox emerged because the same economic globalization and knowledge economy that required flexibility, also required standardization and predictability (Bottery, 2006). In education, this standardization has been reflected in increased testing by schools to guarantee common results from graduates. For example, for a company to trust that a graduate from a degree program in India had the requisite knowledge to perform its base business in Canada, it would have to be certain that the Indian university conformed to standard practices from graduates of Canadian programs. This required certainty would lend itself to both institutions competing using standardized test results as assurances to the business that each institution was producing similarly competent employees.

This movement towards building a knowledge economy can be found in the documents supporting the reform movement in Alberta. Inspiring Education: A dialogue with Albertans (2010), asserted the dominance of competing in the knowledge economy in its opening paragraph by stating:

> Today's generation has seen the rise of knowledge as a key resource of the world's economy. In the future, Alberta's economy with be even more knowledge-based, diverse and grounded in value-added industries. As never before, the next generation will need to be innovative, creative, and skilled in managing knowledge as a resource. It will experience a world increasingly interdependent and competitive – factors that will add complexity to decisions about many issues, including the use of natural resources (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 4).

The document worked to decontest (Steger, 2009) the knowledge economy by presenting it as a certainty of the future. Alberta's citizens were not only witnessing the birth of the knowledge economy, we, as a province, were bound to ensure that our children and youth were instilled with the skills and values necessary to perpetuate this economy. Unlike John Dewey's assertion that we cannot foresee the educational needs of the future and should instead focus on the needs of the present, *Inspiring Education* grew from the question "Will the child born in this year [2010] have the skills necessary to both continue Alberta's legacy and strengthen it [in 2030]?" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 10). Participants were encouraged to foresee an unforeseeable future and determine education's role in it.

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The ominous inclusion of 'natural resources' at the end of the paragraph, without any further explanation, alluded to the movement from a commodity based to a knowledge based economy. Albertans of the future would be asked to manage their natural resources rather than produce, manufacture, or use them. This paragraph set the stage for the inclusion and predominance of "entrepreneurship" into the educational vernacular.

Re-Definition of Entrepreneurial Spirit

Despite a dearth of research supporting a correlation between entrepreneurial education and increased entrepreneurship by students (von Graevenitz, Harhoff, & Weber, 2010; Nabi et al., 2017), entrepreneurship has become an increasingly dominant term in educational policy (Hodgson, 2012; Ringarp, 2013). In 2004, the European Union directed its member nations to increase entrepreneurial education in their schools for the expressed purpose of to achieving economic gains and to centre the economy as the primary focus for citizens (Hodgson, 2012). Hodgson (2012) and Ringarp (2013) suggested that by centring entrepreneurship in education, the individual would become responsible for acquiring and accruing their own knowledge and skills, and it set the stage for the dismantling of the welfare state. By placing the responsibility of success on individuals, people made vulnerable because of gender, race, or poverty were not the concern of the government. Vulnerable people were accountable for their own hardships, and they should fix their own situation through hard work and increased levels of learning rather than governmental programs or social assistance. Entrepreneurial education should benefit those people with disadvantaged backgrounds so that the governments could slowly dismantle the welfare state and achieve their neo-liberal goal of little or no taxation to maximize profits (Bottery, 2006). To achieve this aim, governments would have to embed entrepreneurism into their educational system and define the term in a manner as to decontest it from those charged with enacting the policy.

In Alberta's new educational policy as written in the Ministerial Order signed into law in 2013 (based on the Inspiring Education document), students having an "entrepreneurial spirit" were:

> …motivated, resourceful, self-reliant and tenacious; continuously set goals and work[ed] with perseverance and discipline to achieve them; through hard work, earn[ed] achievements and the respect of others; [strove] for excellence and personal, family and community success; [were] competitive and ready to challenge the status quo; explore[d] ideas and technologies alone or as part of diverse teams; [were] resilient, adaptable, able and determin[ed] to transform discoveries into products or services that benefit the community, and by extension, the world; develop[ed] opportunities where other only see adversity; [had] the confidence to take risks and [made] bold decisions in the face of adversity, recognizing that to hold back is to be held back; and [had] the courage to dream. (Government of Alberta, 2013, para.10).

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This definition is in stark opposition to the shorter www.merriam-webster.com definition of entrepreneurial, which was an adjective relating to "a person who starts a business and is willing to risk loss in order to make money." Why did the Ministerial Order work so deliberately to distance the word "entrepreneurial" from its actual meaning?

In part, the long definition may have reflected an attempt by policy makers to accommodate resistant voices by expanding the definition to appease different points of view (McLaughlin, 2000). An alternative view would suggest that this long definition was a manifestation of the neo-liberal agenda in public education. The text described an ideal member of the knowledge economy who could grow the current Alberta economy and provide the basis for increased profit for corporations. It also created the framework necessary for the dismantling of the Alberta social services safety net, as it formalized the concept of the individual as responsible for their own success through hard work, risk-taking, resilience, and dreaming of a better future. Students may not need the assistance of a welfare state if they were entrepreneurs who created their own wealth.

The Ministerial Order text described an important element of entrepreneurs – that of a risk taker. The willingness to take risks has been identified as a primary characteristic of successful entrepreneurs (Lazear, 2005), however, entrepreneurial education programs may be more likely to dissuade students from starting their own businesses because of a perceived lack of this crucial characteristic (von Graevenitz et al., 2010). By asking all Albertan students to take on a characteristic proven to be one embodied by only the few has created a paradox for educators hoping to implement this directive (Stables, 1996). Can a personality characteristic be effectively instilled in students who do not already have such a temperament? The emotional aspects of entrepreneurism continue to be missing from research (Nabi et al. 2017) and are even less understood in relation to tertiary students. As a focus of further study, researchers could look to discover if students who do not identify as entrepreneurial would disengage from a school curricula promoting a career path they do not envision as suitable for themselves.

School leadership also would have to adapt by increasing entrepreneurship in its staff and students. Despite expressing a desire to support innovation, many schools may not have the leadership structures that support innovation. Eyal and Yosef-Hassidim (2012) conducted a case study on the type of school level leadership required to enable teacher "innovation champions" to flourish. They contended that collective leadership was the best vehicle to enable teachers to innovate in their schools, but without strategic resources and direct principal oversight, the innovations rarely outlived the innovation champion (Eyal & Yosef-Hassidim, 2012).

Changing to collective leadership would complement the knowledge economy, as employees would be more likely to share their intellectual capital in a collaborative environment (Bottery, 2006). In the Inspiring Education and subsequent documents, the policy-makers suggested that principal leadership would have to adjust to allow for innovation by becoming more de-centralized and involving community members in determining and delivering curricula (Alberta Education, 2010). Ironically, Eyal and Yoself-

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Hassidim (2012) suggested that de-centralization did not necessarily enable teacher innovation in schools because centrally controlled decision making tended to be enacted at the local level. True innovation required collective leadership, however, few principals seemed able or interested in relinquishing control over their schools.

Given that collective leadership had the capacity to improve teacher working conditions, and in turn increase student achievement, (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011), this reform to schools could be of benefits to both students and teachers. However, without a corresponding relinquishment of control by principals, innovation in schools could be limited (Eyal & Yosef-Hassidim, 2012). Using a catchy slogan to move the education system forward with an "entrepreneurial spirit" might be easier than re-educating all principals to change their leadership style.

Educational Policy as Slogan

The use of slogans by businesses has long been an effective way to promote their product to the general population. In fitting with the origin of the word from the Scottish-Gaelic word "slogarne" meaning "battle cry", slogans proclaimed an organization's identity as well as the benefits of using its product (Kohli, Leuthesser, & Suri, 2007). The effectiveness of a slogan is measured by its ability to enhance brand awareness through memorability and create a clear link between the product and the strategic direction of the brand (Kohli et al, 2007). The slogan chosen by Alberta Education to move schools and communities into the neo-liberal knowledge economy appears to be effective in both areas, and goes a step further by convincing the resistant individuals to conform through managed participation in governmental communication (Kiss, 2014).

Kiss (2014) suggested that in response to demands for greater government accountability and transparency in governance decisions, the Alberta government under Ralph Klein in the 1990s quietly changed the role of the Alberta Government communications bureaucracy. The Public Affairs Bureau (PAB), charged under the previous Lougheed government in the 1970s to autonomously produce public documents for the government, was politicized under the Klein government. The PAB mandate changed from apolitical bureaucrats producing standard brochures and non-partisan documents to communications professionals creating politically sensitive, persuasive messages. The Bureau moved from operating at an arm's length distance of the governing party to being under direct control under the Premier's office. Their communications were aimed at presenting the governing party's view on public issues rather than inform the public about governmental matters.

One of the communication management strategies employed by the reformed PAB to circumvent political debate was the use of representative consultations with citizens. When a politically sensitive issue arose, the government utilized carefully crafted public discourse to generate a "dialogue with Albertans". Kiss (2014) suggested that two consequences resulted: firstly, citizens were represented by unknown individuals who had no formal responsibility to espouse collective values; and secondly, democratically elected

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representatives were denied opportunities to debate issues in political forums as the 'citizenry' had spoken. Any messiness that could be created by politically divisive discourse was instead attributed to carefully messaged dialogues with Albertans (Kiss, 2014).

Kiss (2014) suggested that managed participation was the influence of a carefully selected elite to speak on behalf of citizens on matters of important value to society. These elites were appointed by the government to represent viewpoints rather than chosen by the population to express their ideas. The result was the politicization of governmental documents with an appearance of public agreement. Further, because the PAB managed Freedom of Access to Information requests, the paradoxical effect was the appearance of governmental transparency to an interested population, but an actual obfuscation of the truth behind carefully limited debate (Kiss, 2014).

This strategy of managed participation was evident in abundance in the Inspiring Education document. The title itself included the subheading "A Dialogue with Albertans" (Alberta Education, 2010, title page) thereby assuring anyone having alternative viewpoints that their opinions had been considered. The listing of those consulted suggested a large variety of input including "the public at large, parents and legal guardians, community and not for profit/volunteer organizations, education stakeholders, including trustees" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 15), and the affirmation that "we must thank the thousands of Albertans who took the time to express their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for our children's education" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 2) implied assurances of extensive debate. Despite this wide call for input, the final total of participants was 3807 which represents a very small percentage of Alberta's population of over four million people. Furthermore, the voice of teachers was not represented by their duly elected Alberta Teachers Association executives, rather it was represented by appointed delegates.

With resistance managed through apparent transparency including citizen dialogue, the slogan generated to permit the consumerification of Alberta's education system needed only to be presented to the community. The Triple E slogan, "Engaged thinkers and Ethical citizens with an Entrepreneurial spirit" has been formally moved into law (Government of Alberta, 2013) and effectively moved the "3 E's" into the decontested discourse of Alberta's educators. "Given [the slogan's] power to communicate what a brand has to offer, a slogan has the potential to change brand perceptions immediately" (Kohli et al., 2007, p. 421). In Alberta's case, the slogan with its quick adoption, had the potential to erase the democratic nature of public education without a large noise of complaint.

Educator Response to the Resist the Dying of the Light

> *Do not go gentle into that good night./Rage, rage against the dying of the light*.
> – Dylan Thomas, 1951

The *Inspiring Education* document, and resulting Ministerial Order, while holding significant legislative weight "…does not lay out a process for implementation. It is intended to guide, inform, and encourage decision-makers" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 14). As such, informed

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citizens have maintained the power to change this policy through its implementation phase which was interrupted by the election of a new provincial government in 2015.

In the intervening years, some higher education faculties in Alberta have embraced the entrepreneurial slogan, taking it on within their own strategic planning. The concept has been embedded into planning documents as "entrepreneurial thinking" (University of Calgary, 2018, p. 8), suggesting that post-secondary institutions not only promote entrepreneurialism in educational settings, but are embracing it as a core value. Similar to the previously discussed Kindergarten to Grade 12 documents, the definition of the concept is carefully constructed to distance itself from its primarily business roots.

> Entrepreneurial thinking is being creative in finding innovative solutions. It involves taking initiative, exchanging knowledge across disciplines, being resourceful, and learning from experience. (University of Calgary, 2018, p. 8)

In this example, the promotion of entrepreneurial thinking has grown beyond the business faculty, becoming an expectation of every all programs in higher education. While the focus of this paper has been on educational policy as slogan in K-12 education, clearly, the slogan is also a concern for post-secondary education as well. Not all research has an immediate consumer impact or can be sold for profit. Further, in cases such as developing life-saving vaccines or documenting elements of ignored human history, knowledge should be freely shared between individuals and institutions to improve the human condition rather than monetized.

After another change of government in 2018, Alberta once again in a new phase of curriculum design (Alberta Education, 2021) with a series of documents that harkens to the entrepreneurial spirit and raises the spectre of "declining and stagnant student performance" (para. 2) as a compelling reason to re-design curricular documents. The mechanism of managed participation is used once more through a *Have Your Say* survey for stakeholders that is open until 2022, despite the website clearly announcing that "all elementary students will be learning from the new curriculum in 2022-2023" (para. 4). The Triple E slogan is currently embedded into the Alberta Education Mission (Alberta Education, 2021b) as an accepted and normalized aspect of public education.

In terms of critique, I would prefer to re-imagine public education in the light of Paulo Friere, who suggested that "problem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor" (Freire & Ramos, 1993, p.78) or John Dewey who stated that:

> I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling, and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. (Dewey, 1897, para. 2)

Educational slogans would not used as a policy designed to limit debate and decontest neo-liberal values and would not define or limit the character of individuals to a singular

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spirit, limited to entrepreneurship. Their essence could be kind, creative, innovative, honest, humane, or any trait that reflected their role as a citizen in their classroom and their community. My 'battle cry' is that education should enable students to collaborate on global issues to generate solutions that require honest and open social discourse. Of course, students will choose to be "entrepreneurial", and this trait should be honored, but not at the expense of all others.

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