Creating a Crisis: Selling Neoliberal Policy Through the Rebranding of Education

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Abstract

How is it that neoliberal education policies, often lacking evidentiary basis, come to be endorsed—often by the very people they alienate and marginalize? This work seeks to expose how this kind of exclusive policy is sold to a public through intricate hortatory tools. Using critical policy analysis with an emphasis on historical development and political sociology, I employ marketing literature on branding as the analytical framework for a case study of the government's education platform in Ontario, Canada. At the conclusion, I propose that it is necessary to step away from accountability jargon to reconsider the purpose of education and to recuperate what it means to be *responsible for* rather than *accountable to* one another.

Keywords*: politics, policy, accountability, media, educational policy, ethics*

Introduction

That contemporary education policy is heavily influenced by neoliberalism has been broadly discussed among scholars in recent decades. Evidence of the principal tenets of neoliberal theory in education commonly manifests in policy discourse as goals of economic rationality, efficiency, and accountability (Apple, 2005; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Pinto, 2012). To interrogate the entrenchment of neoliberal values is to provide some context for these influences, allowing stakeholders insight into how and why policy is written and enacted. Why does the public continue to embrace neoliberal education policies that work against their own best interests? How is it that these policies, often lacking evidentiary basis, come to be endorsed—often by the very people they alienate and marginalize?

In response to these queries, and in complement to the growing body of literature on whose voices are often missing in policy debates and formation, this work seeks to expose how the public becomes convinced of the merit of these kinds of exclusive policies through the use of intricate hortatory tools. I use marketing literature on branding as the analytical framework for this case study of the government's education platform in Ontario, Canada. In this way, I investigate how education policy is sold to the public, just as products are packaged and sold to consumers. At the conclusion of this analysis, I propose that it is necessary to step away from accountability jargon to reconsider the purpose of education and to recuperate what it means to be *responsible for* rather than *accountable to* one another, so that neoliberal discourse does not become the only story of how education (and education policy formation) can be.

Theory and Methods

Using Ontario, Canada as the site of the case study, I approach this work from a critical policy analysis perspective that pays particular attention to the historical development and political sociology (Ball, 2005; Brewer, 2014) of a host of policies that emerged in support of an increasingly neoliberal agenda. Building on this idea, and because this is not singularly a discourse analysis, I find it productive to draw from Howarth's (2010) work thinking through the interrelationships among power, discourse, and policy. Howarth's (2010) conception of the possibility of political analysis being situated in a "problem-driven" approach is particularly relevant to this study. It "involves the construction of particular problems in specific historical contexts" and asks the questions: "What are the origins of particular discourses and policies? How can they be characterized? How and why are they sustained? When and how are they changed?" (Howarth, 2010, p. 324).

In congruence with Howarth's (2010) problem-driven framework, the issue motivating this case study is the way in which local politicians sought to create a crisis, without substantive evidence, to stimulate voter fear and to generate a new discourse of accountability that has since become self-sustaining. After over twenty years of accountability policy, there is a danger that educational success and achievement will only be measured through standardised test data. This research seeks to refute that premise by reaching across the distance of time to interrogate the historicity of such policies. It is about "shaking the false self-evidence of our current common sense and rediscovering the historical contingency of our policy approaches" (Brewer, 2014, p. 275).

The study begins in the 1990s, which was a significant period in Ontario's political history. This era ushered in considerable upheaval of and changes to Ontario's education policies that have had ongoing implications for the contemporary educational context (Pinto, 2012). I employ a case study research design to examine how the problem—or crisis— in education was constructed, to illuminate the origins of policy formulation, and to demonstrate the complex political interactions at work during a time of policy reform. As a qualitative research method, a case study is appropriate for this analysis because it permits the collection of multiple resources over time; in this way "the data …[may] resonate experientially with a broad cross section of readers, thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the phenomenon" (Tellis, 1997). In keeping with the multi-perspectival nature of case studies, I gathered data from a variety of sources and policy artefacts, from government reports and policy documents, to newspaper articles and publications from the province's "arms-length" (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2016, Links section) standardised testing agency.

What renders this analysis unusual is that in order to make apparent the political undercurrents that influenced election platforms and policy reform, I apply a framework adapted from marketing literature that is traditionally used to help companies build a brand for their product. I trace how education was rebranded as "in crisis" through political promises and platforms using five key phases: first, identifying or creating a need; second, offering and communicating a customer promise; third and fourth, making good on (and improving) that promise; and fifth, innovating beyond the familiar. In keeping with Howarth's (2010) critical policy approach, I invert the aim of the marketing literature: instead of thinking about these phases as a means of propagation, I suggest that the rebranding of education is emblematic of the problem of neoliberalism in education.

Neoliberalism

Central to the study is a deliberation of neoliberalism, which has been a dominant force shaping education policy for the past four decades (Sattler, 2012), and which I use as a frame for Ontario politics. In this context, and because this study examines policy formation as it emerges from a

government mandate, Apple's (2005) definitions of neoliberalism are most useful:

> For neoliberals, there is one form of rationality that is more powerful than any other—economic rationality. Efficiency and an "ethic" of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms. All people are to act in ways that maximize their own personal benefits. (p. 214)

This neoliberal point of view impacts both education and society in general. For education, the neoliberal viewpoint considers students as human capital where "the world is intensely competitive economically and students—as future workers—must be given the requisite skills and dispositions to compete efficiently and effectively" (Apple, 2005, p. 214). Within neoliberalism, public institutions, such as schools, are "black holes" (Apple, 2005, p. 214) that consume large amounts of money but fail to produce adequate results. Because neoliberal politicians essentially see the world "as a vast supermarket" (Apple, 2005, p. 215), democracy is undermined by the conception of the citizen as a consumer. As Apple astutely surmises, the neoliberal mandate has transformed what was once a political concept into an economic one.

I also make use of the term "curriculum of accountability" to refer to the neoliberal agenda for education. This concept is derived from Hopmann (2008), whose work defines accountability by: (a) the need to "ensure that units and persons provide services according to the goals set for them or agreed with them … by which those who are held accountable try to limit the scope of possible failure"; (b) "the intrusion of market-like mechanisms of distribution and control into the public sector [including] elements of competition, contractualization, and auditing [and] the co-existence of the traditional bureaucratic modes with the administrative tool kit"; and (c) the "assumption that more and more areas of social life are being made 'verifiable', i.e. subjugated to regimes of counting what can be counted" (p. 421). Klinger, DeLuca, and Miller (2008) articulate what this approach means for education by noting, "if an assessment has the explicit purpose to support the provincial commitment that students are achieving the expected standard, and the results are publicly reported, the purpose is considered to be one of accountability" (p. 8).

Defining neoliberalism and the curriculum of accountability furnishes a context for this study. Over the last two and a half decades, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) has devoted a considerable portion of its resources to two key mechanisms of accountability: data collection and reporting. The former is obtained through the Education Quality and Accountability Office's (EQAO) standardised testing for Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. The latter is reported officially, province-wide, through in-school communications as well as the School Information Finder website (OME, 2017). Each year the results are discussed broadly through popular media outlets.

Concomitant with these policies, the Ministry has created programs to target areas of concern revealed by the testing. This includes a heavily prescribed curriculum, with approximately 3400 expectations for students to master in 14 years of study (Brown, 2009). It also comprises a slew of programs and organizations, including multi-million dollar government initiatives (OME, 2007, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b) to support testing outcomes such as the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (OME, 2009), the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OME, 2008a), and detailed assessment policy in the form of the *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario's Schools* (OME, 2010c). While it is beyond the scope of this work to address the implications of all these policies (for further reading, see studies by Basu, 2004; Carpenter, Weber, and Schugurensky, 2012; Horsley, 2009; and Sattler, 2012), it is important to note that the policies have built the foundation for a curriculum of accountability that defines achievement as meeting the provincial level on a standardised test and, in turn, offer politicians a quantitative platform from which to base future brand innovations.

The Branding of Education in Ontario

Scholars around the world are increasingly concerned with the marketization of education (Ap-

ple, 2001; Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen & Murillo, 2002; Sleeter, 2007). Beckmann, Cooper, and Hill (2009) offer a critical study of the causes and effects of education marketization policies in England and Wales. Their analysis details several drivers of these neoliberal reforms, including mounting pressure for increased international trade in services and a shift toward a performance-management perspective that "reduces the school experience to narrow performance outcomes (essentially, test and exam success) rather than the means by which these are achieved (how young people engage with the learning process)" (Beckmann et al., 2009, p. 315). Despite the many issues and concerns involved in why neoliberal policies assume such a strict focus on markets and economic factors, for the purposes of this case study I will analyze the one aspect of that marketization that is connected to communication: branding. Branding is the component of marketization that targets consumer opinions and behaviour; in this case, the consumer is actually a consumer of public policy, the voter.

Branding Basics

Neumeier (2006) defines a brand as "a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or company" (p. 2); Kapferer (2008) notes that a brand platform is built around positioning, which asks the questions "for whom, why, when, and against whom" (p. 180). Traditionally, a brand was associated with a commercial good or service, but recent marketing literature has explored the idea that branding can be applied to various other contexts, including countries (Fetscherin, 2010) and government programs (Gummesson, 2008). Non-commercial marketing, such as the marketing of public services by a government agency, differs from traditional marketing as it targets the citizen, not the consumer. Another key difference is the divorce between the service rendered and the price paid. Gummesson (2008) takes note of this phenomenon by stating, "the citizen does not perceive a tangible connection between price, cost and such public service as healthcare, education and the police. Payment – the tax – disappears into a black hole" (p. 138).

The components of branding involve several phases. In their analysis of the strategies companies employed to build a brand, Barwise and Meehan (2010) determine that despite the complexities of media diversity, four fundamental strategies are important to successful branding: "offering and communicating a clear customer promise; building trust by delivering on it; continually improving the promise; and innovating beyond the familiar" (p. 83). These four phases presuppose that an area of need has been identified within a target market. Because that is not always the case, I would add a fifth phase at the beginning of the cycle: before offering customers a clear promise, organisations must identify an area of extant need in the market; alternately, they can work to establish in the mind of the target consumer an area of perceived need or privation (Pouchol, 2006; Simanis, 2009), creating an impetus for innovation or change.

Once the gap between what the consumer desires and what the consumer possesses has been identified or created in phase one, there is room to promise or persuade the consumer that a particular good or service can satisfy that need more completely than those solutions offered by competitors. At this point, the organisation moves to the second phase, which incorporates two embedded components: offering a promise and communicating that message to the customer. The content of the promise depends on the organisation's motive: for businesses, this motive is inevitably to grow, create profit, and satisfy shareholders (Pouchol, 2006); for public services the motive may be less transparent, but is professedly to improve service delivery or streamline a process (Gummesson, 2008). To communicate its promise, and promote and sustain brand image, the organisation must also determine which media would be most effective and simpatico with the intended message. Traditional forms of media include television commercials, voice spots on the radio, print advertisements in magazines, newspapers, billboards, and product placement; more recent forms of communication include social media and online advertising (Barwise & Meehan, 2010; Hollis, 2005; Scott, 2015).

The third phase of establishing a successful brand involves building trust by fulfilling the promise made to customers. To do this, the customer must perceive that a need was satisfied by the product purchased or the service rendered. This can be accomplished through a variety of means, but is often framed through measurable outcomes, supported by market research and quantifiable data (Abrams, 1952; Rodgers, 1952). Phases four and five are especially interesting because they suggest that brand-building is an ongoing process, cyclical in the exchange between promises made and promises satisfied, and unlimited in its potential to afford the opportunity for consumption.

With the five steps of brand building established, it becomes possible to trace the construction and evolution of the brand of education in Ontario over the last two and a half decades, as each of these conventional branding strategies is apparent at the aforementioned phases.

Phase One: Identifying or Creating a Need

In Ontario, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, politicians with neoliberal ideologies and agendas created the perception of need in the education sector by building a platform of fear: fear that students were falling behind their international peers and fear that Ontario would not be competitive in the global economy (Kerr, 2006; Radwanski, 1987). This set the stage for a series of policies that would curtail individual teaching freedoms and would see the establishment of a rigorous curriculum of accountability; simultaneously, these policies would allow politicians to create quantifiable, measureable targets of success upon which to build their election campaigns (Moore, 2003).

The "need creation" began in earnest in 1993, when the New Democratic Party (NDP) created the Royal Commission on Learning in response to "widespread uncertainty and anxiety" in society and "a large core of unemployed and underemployed men and women" (OME, 1994a, p. 23). While the NDP used economic instability as a reason to endorse the Royal Commission, nowhere in the document did the NDP make transparent the proof of their claim that society was living through a time of anxiety and fear; nor did they offer a rationale as to how this particular period's unemployment was any different from normal economic peaks and troughs (Sichel, 1994). Instead, the motivation seemed to spring largely from concerns about Ontario's ability to withstand the market forces at work within an evolving paradigm of globalised competition.

This idea is both confirmed and denied within the language of the report: on one hand, the document calls for increased accountability and standardised testing to meet the "apparent need to be 'competitive' in a ruthless globalized economy" (OME, 1994a, p. 24); on the other hand, the abbreviated, unofficial version of the report on the Ministry of Education website states that "the primary purpose of schooling is not to train students for a particular job, or to turn out a product, or to make Ontario more competitive in a globalized economy" (OME, 1994b, The Purpose of Schooling section, para. 2). The lack of clarity surrounding the reason for the provincial government's creation of the Commission becomes especially significant as one examines the nature of their policies in more detail and the confusion resulting from this contradiction has had a widespread influence on student-teacher relationships, engagement with the curriculum, and levels of motivation.

Notwithstanding the questionable justification used to defend its creation, the Royal Commission conducted a review of Ontario's public education system and published a report titled *For the Love of Learning* (OME, 1994a, b). This report advocated accountability through increased power for principals, more authority for the ministry, and standardised testing to hold teachers accountable for student achievement, noting that "the public school system is responsible to the public, and owes it to the public to demonstrate how well it's doing with our children" (OME, 1994b, Assessment: How We Know What Students Learn section, para. 2). The recommendations for increased accountability provided politicians with a powerful tool upon which to

base their campaigns: a brand promise of "children's learning and achievement" (EQAO, 2011a, p. ii) as measured by quantifiable data, amassed through a program of annual standardised tests. This imperative—the collection of uniform data—became the impetus for the current system of testing and accountability.

On assuming power in 1995, the Progressive Conservative Party responded to recommendations in the Royal Commission's report by initiating Bill 30, which passed into law in 1996 to become the Education Quality and Accountability Office Act [EQAO]. In the 1996-1997 school year, the EQAO began running standardised tests in accordance with its official mandate. Currently, the EQAO oversees reading, writing, and mathematics testing for Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. Test results are made available to the public through official ministry websites and also, unofficially, through newspapers, broadcasts, and school communications.

The final and most unequivocal evidence that the government was engaged in need creation, and was not responding to an existing area of need in the community, becomes apparent when examining the accidentally recorded and leaked comments made by the then provincial Minister of Education, John Snobelen. In 1995, Snobelen was inadvertently caught on camera in conversation with senior bureaucrats (Heble, 1997), and was overheard saying that the government needed to "create a crisis in education to generate support for change" (Mackenzie, 1998, p. 3). Snobelen went on to acknowledge the inaccuracy of his government's critique of education by revealing that he would have to "speak of Ontario's schools as being in worse shape than he actually believed to be the case" (Brennan, 1995). This manipulation by the government of the voting populace is compelling evidence of the brand-building at play in education. Duchesne (1999) observes:

> Snobelen, on a particular "quest for certainty" with concrete "cash value," proposed that the seeds of doubt could be planted in the minds of the citizenry by the government itself, by way of a false crisis. The "major reform," which would resolve this crisis, would then transform its artificially induced doubt into belief, and, ideally, further translate into voter confidence regarding both said reform, and the government in general. (para. 6)

Despite offering clear insight into his government's duplicity, Snobelen's remarks did little to slow the momentum for change to education policy in Ontario: a need had been created and the shift toward a curriculum of accountability had already begun.

Phase Two: Offering and Communicating a Clear Customer Promise

With the need for a curriculum of accountability in place in Ontario, provincial politicians laid the foundation for a clear customer promise with measureable targets of achievement. The first promises were offered during the 1995 provincial election in Ontario, when Premier Harris brought his Common Sense Revolution and demands for educational accountability to the fore. Once elected, and in defence of the sweeping changes his government was making, Harris starred in a series of television commercials offering a justification for his education policies. In his first commercial, and in what may be construed as a response to his most vocal critics, Harris tackled the issues surrounding his controversial educational policies and extolled the virtues of the curriculum of accountability by stating:

> *High* quality education is something we *all* want for our kids. To *get* it, we have a *plan* to make our school work *smarter*, with a more challenging curriculum for higher standards, *province-wide* testing, and a *focus* on the basics of reading, writing, math, science and technology. There'll be *better* results, *more* accountability, *less* waste ... Because *it's time* we put Ontario's kids *back* at the *head* of the *class* [emphasis in the original]. (as cited in Duchesne, 1999, para. 9)

The wording was vague, but the message was clear: Ontario's children were falling behind and the only way to improve the status quo was to focus on testing, results, and accountability.

By the 2003 provincial election, the implied promise of Harris' revolution became more explicit. Education was once again a considerable focus of campaign rhetoric, with neoliberal and neoconservative politicians adopting some variation of a promise in support of the curriculum of accountability. The Liberal party, led by Dalton McGuinty, made a "promise that 75 per cent of students [would] meet or exceed provincial standards on province-wide tests" (Moore, 2003). The Conservative party, led by Premier Ernie Eves, raised the accountability stakes by proposing the government should "make mandatory a literacy requirement for graduation from high school" (Moore, 2003). The Conservatives also wanted to assure board-wide accountability, pledging to "create [a] school report card, where boards must annually report on staffing, salaries, enrolment, average test results, and plans to improve student performance" (Moore, 2003).

This theme of accountability was certainly not limited to the field of education, which is consistent with Hopmann's (2008) findings that the "age of accountability" permeates all sectors impacting social welfare, including health, education, and security. In the same election, the health and crime campaign promises also connoted a sense of the virtues of state control: for healthcare, the Liberal party pledged to "create an independent agency ... to track delivery of medical services," while the Conservative campaign promises on crime included the decision to "make parole officers testify if a released criminal kills someone" (Moore, 2003). From the tendencies of these promises toward accountability, one is left to assume that the "crisis" depicted in education must also have been evident in the health and community safety sectors.

Once the nature of the promises had been determined, politicians were ready to implement the second component of phase two in brand building: communicate the promise on offer. In 1995, to convey his message with as much impact as possible, Premier Harris tapped into the power of television advertising (Fletcher, 1999). In addition to targeted televisions spots, the Harris Conservatives also adroitly controlled the message in the mainstream media by maintaining tight, central control on candidates' scripts (Fletcher, 1999). These regulated messages, iterated in speeches and public debates, were also widely publicised on television and in newspaper reportage. By 2003, the combination of television advertising and a narrowly defined message to public media was broadly employed by neoliberals and neoconservatives alike; in addition, each party's customer promises were recorded by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation "Ontario Votes" websites, which could still be accessed at the time I conducted this research.

Phases Three and Four: Making Good on (and Improving) the Promise

When Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberals won the 2003 election in Ontario, he kept his educational policies in line with campaign promises and with the neoliberal mandate of markets, competition, standards, and accountability. His party's brand promise of 75% of students reaching the provincial level became the benchmark of success, which took advantage of burgeoning public support for accountability measures and also allowed the Premier to demonstrate that his government was better for education than that of his predecessor.

Premier McGuinty's promise was clear, yet arbitrary: Why did policymakers decide that 75% of students should be able to achieve the provincial standard? Did policymakers choose that figure because it was supported by research? If so, why would there have been variation among the provinces? In Alberta, for example, at the time of Premier McGuinty's promise, 85% of students were expected to achieve their province's "acceptable standard" (Government of Alberta: Education, 2010). Alternately, was the benchmark of 75% shown to be achievable based on Ontario's diverse populations?[1] A further question is who determined what constituted the

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[1] Currently, Ontario's Grade 3 population writing the EQAO test comprises 13% English Language Learners, 17% with special needs (excluding gifted), and 22% whose first language learnt at home is not English (EQAO, 2016, p. 6); the data for Grade 6 reflects a population of 10% English Language Learners, 21% of students with special needs (excluding gifted), and 22% whose first language learnt at home is not English (EQAO, 2016, p. 8).

"provincial standard"? Were there data that advanced the idea that attaining 70% or higher on a standardised test reflected success or mastery of a subject? The practice of subjectively choosing a grade to represent proficiency, known as using "cut scores," has been shown to be both arbitrary and political (Bracey, 2008), to have little relation to actual student ability (Popham, 2001), and to obscure the achievement gap by generalising test results into levels.

Despite the vagueness of the language, the lack of transparency of supporting research, and the perceivable problems surrounding the use of cut scores, the Liberals forged ahead with their brand promise. On assuming power in 2003, the Liberals found that after an initial period of improvement from test inception in 1997 to 2000, provincial test results were "static" (Olson, 2007); yet, the first brand promise to consumers had to imply movement. The Liberal government platform suggested that it would have "75 percent of [Ontario's] 12-year-old students meet or exceed the provincial standard in all subject areas by 2008" (EQAO, 2006). By 2007, even fans of the curriculum of accountability had to admit that the results were nowhere close to what was promised: Only half of the system being tested was meeting the provincial standard (Olson, 2007); however, there was seeming quantifiable improvement in the test scores, with Grade 3 and Grade 6 subject scores moving up ten percentage points between 2003 and 2006. Consequently, while the McGuinty government could not make good on its promise entirely, the data gave the Liberals the opportunity to advance the curriculum of accountability on the premise that it was succeeding.

The figures from EQAO (2010) testing in Ontario from the mid-point of Premier McGuinty's second term (the 2009-2010 school year) show that, on the whole, the quantifiable data continued to bolster the Liberal brand promise. In comparison with the data gathered in the 2005-2006 school year, the percentage of students meeting the provincial standard in Grade 3 writing moved from 64% to 70%; the Grade 3 math scores had shifted from 68% to 71%; Grade 3 reading scores, however, had not moved from 62% except to fall to 61% in 2008 and 2009 (EQAO, 2010). Interestingly, and despite the fact that EQAO is supposed to be an arm's-length agency (Klinger et al., 2008; OME, 2016), the rhetoric used to describe the Grade 3 reading results at this time was not "static," which was the term used to describe the lack of movement in scores under the Harris Conservatives (Olson, 2007); instead the stasis of Grade 3 reading scores was described by EQAO (2010a) as "relatively stable" (p. 2). From 2006 to 2010, the Grade 6 reading scores at or above the provincial standard increased to 72% from 64%, the writing scores had moved from 61% to 70%, and mathematics scores moved up and down in the intervening years, but remained unchanged overall at 61%. Once again, the language used to describe the Grade 6 mathematics scores was that they were "relatively stable" (EQAO, 2010, p. 3).

In spite of the perceived uptick in individual areas of achievement, the reality was that by the McGuinty Liberal government's third election in 2011 the aggregate scores had not shifted to achieve the promised 75%. In 2011, 74% of Grade 6 students met reading standards (a marked jump over the previous year's 65%), 73% met writing expectations, and only 58% met the province's benchmark for mathematics, which was down 11% from the previous year's 69% (EQAO, 2011b). Perhaps more revealing was the finding that when tracking student progress through Grades 3, 6, and 9 tests, only 57% met the standard for reading and writing in grades 3 and 6, and 52% met the standard for mathematics across both tests. Also of note was the finding that "students who do not meet the provincial standard early in their schooling are most likely to continue not meeting the standard in later grades" (EQAO, 2011b, p. 3). These results indicated that the McGuinty Liberals had not made good on their brand promise to bring 75% of 12-year-old students to the provincial level by 2008, or by 2011 for that matter.

Nonetheless, through the manipulation of data reporting, the government was able to cultivate the perception that students were bettering their reading, writing, and mathematics ability. For example, in EQAO's "Province-Wide Tests: The Power of Good Information," the EQAO

cited that in a 2009 parent survey, "88% of parents consider the provincial testing program important; 62% believe it is *very* important" (EQAO, 2011a, p. 1). *The Globe and Mail* trumpeted the Liberal's success with the headline "Ontario School System Ranks Among Best in World, Report Says" (Hammer, 2010), with a picture of Dalton McGuinty sitting in a classroom and reading to students. And while McGuinty's Liberals—having not met the original promise—were not yet ready to improve the promise, it seemed that at the time of the 2011 election the public was content with the perceived progress of student achievement, as described in official (EQAO) and unofficial (news media) documents. The Liberal government was once again voted into power.

Phase Five: Innovating Beyond the Familiar

The concept of innovating beyond the familiar is a unique proposition for education, since what is often seen as innovation at one point is, in time, quickly renounced as regression at any political turning of the tide. One example of this variable perspective can be observed when examining the overarching socio-political zeitgeist motivating education policy development in Ontario from a tightly conservative curriculum in the early 1900s to a more fluid and dynamic curriculum in the 1950s to the accountability-oriented philosophies of the 1990s (O'Sullivan, 1999). Another example, concomitant with the shift from conservative to more liberal pedagogies and back again, is the question of how best to achieve literacy. The debate on literacy teaching has swung from a focus on cognitive psychological theory to psycho-linguistic, socio-cultural, and socio-political perspectives (Hall, 2003), only to recently drift back to a cognitive psychological approach in recent years. These shifts show how the term "innovation" can come to represent its antonym through the lens of time. Notwithstanding this potential paradox, for the purposes of this discussion innovation will be defined as any policies constructed in support of bringing the brand promise to fruition. Since the Liberals neither brought their promise to fruition, nor improved it, innovation had to be seen in service of the brand promise.

Premier McGuinty's government began with three areas of focus related to the original promise: to increase student achievement (as explicated by the quantifiable goals in the brand promise); to reduce gaps in student achievement; and to increase (consumer and voter) confidence in public education (Zegarac, Drewett, & Swan, 2008). All three of these targeted areas require upward movement of test scores as an indicator of attainment. To support these brand-building promises, the Liberal government set up a host of notable accountability-based organizations and policies. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (OME, 2009), which was established in 2004, the first full year that the Ontario Liberal government was in power, defines its mandate as "boost student achievement" (OME, 2009, para. 1) on EQAO tests. The Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OME, 2008a) was designed in direct support of the Premier McGuinty government's brand promise: the "drive to … 75" (Ontario Liberal Party, 2007, p. 9). The program, at more than $30 million annually, was "a key strategy intended to support all schools to improve student achievement" (OME, 2008a, para. 1). Finally, in 2010, the government released a detailed assessment policy in the form of the *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario's Schools* (OME, 2010c), which was designed to guide evaluation between testing cycles. The front matter of this document states that "The Ontario government is committed to enabling all students to reach their potential, and to succeed" and that "[the government is] proud that our students regularly place among the world's best on international standardized tests" (OME, 2010c, p. 1).

When it became apparent that students with exceptionalities, English Language Learners, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds did not perform as well as their peers on EQAO tests, the Liberals were forced to innovate further: In the 2007 campaign, while their promise remained unchanged (Zegarac et al., 2008), the government committed to putting more

money into closing the achievement gap. Wilson (2007) indicates that the Liberals, under Premier McGuinty, had pledged to increase funding for special needs programs by $144 million and provide students support completing their homework after school and online with a budget of up to $43 million. As detailed above, the extra funds did little to shift aggregate scores, but during the election this funding would have promoted as an innovation within the system to address areas of concern.

Brand Entrenchment and the Mass Media

In Ontario, political campaigns and platforms have employed savvy marketing strategies to render a new educational brand that aligns with the neoliberal agenda. Starting with need creation and moving systematically through the phase of brand development, politicians have created a vision for education that supports and requires a curriculum of accountability. With the brand of education resolutely established and the supporting curriculum of accountability firmly in place, the challenge for politicians has been to maintain support among parents, voters, and consumers. This is the point at which mass media has become a crucial factor: To preserve a brand image, or to entrench it even further in the minds of consumers as the best or only viable solution, the brand must be offered presence. In marketing jargon, "presence" is defined as frequency and reach, meaning that the brand and its associated positioning must remain at the fore of consumer consciousness as a result of consistent and visible reminders (Tellis, 1988).

How is this accomplished for non-commercial ventures? As discussed above, politicians are not above running traditional advertising spots; however, this is not a strategy commonly employed outside of elections. So how has the provincial government continued to entrench their brand position for education? The answer, as revealed by a reading of several newspaper articles from local newspaper publications, is that mass media has taken up and bolstered messages of the brand, especially focussing on promoting the elements of a curriculum of accountability (Carr, 2010). This is most conspicuous in September when EQAO results are made public and news media saturate discussions of whether education policy needs an overhaul based on the latest test scores. For example, there was a spate of articles published in Ontario in response to the latest EQAO math scores (Alphonso, 2016; Csanady, 2016; Stevenson, 2016). Within two weeks of the scores and articles being published, the current Premier of the province responded to public outcry by pledging funds in support of a new policy creating "lead" math teachers (Ferguson, 2016).

Where Do We Go from Here?

The promise of accountability that has characterised politics and public systems is illusory in nature, providing a false sense of security reliant on quantitative achievements and distracting voters away from more pressing questions of why and how decisions are made regarding education policy. But there is hope. Education discourse and policy can recover from the predicament of accountability-driven policies if we reconsider the fundamental purpose of education and if we recuperate some sense of what it means to be *responsible for* (rather than *accountable to*) democratic involvement and discourse.

Reconsidering the Purpose of Schooling: A Vote for Democracy

Neoliberal education practices have damaged the way students feel about learning, the way teachers and administrators feel about teaching, and the way society measures success (Amrein-Beardsley, 2014; Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Biesta, 2009; Kohn, 2000, 2004, 2010; Murphy, 2001; Ricci, 2007). Yet voters and stakeholders have provided near unquestioning support for these policies, seduced by the power of the word accountability, and hopeful that the choices they have made will result in a better life for the next generation.

Noddings (2003) opines that parents continue to support policies that systematically render their children unhappy because parents often equate their later successes in life with the unhappiness they felt in school. However perverse, these parents are afraid if their children are not miserable in school that later in life these children will be spoilt, undisciplined, and unsuccessful. Yet, Kohn (2000) observes, "adults who consistently do excellent work, and students whose learning is most impressive, are usually those who love what they do, not those who see what they do as a way to escape a punishment" (p. 14). With Kohn (2000) and Noddings (2003), I suggest that positive affect, *feeling good about one's work*, is the one of the most important determinants of success and should be included in discussions guiding public policy development and media discourse. As such, I argue that it is necessary to rebrand education by changing the nature of the conversation on schooling from achievement defined by test scores, to achievement connoted by a broad base of factors, not the least of which is happiness.

A second possibility for the reconsideration of the purpose of schooling is to more broadly conceive of democracy in education beyond that of holding a government accountable by voting for a political party every four years. Anderson and Cohen (2015) contend that when a parent, a teacher, a student, or a member of the public is "encouraged to think, not as a citizen, but rather as a consumer, making choices among an array of products … an ethos of democratic political decision-making and the skills that are acquired in the political arena atrophy" (p. 4). This potential atrophy is a result of the oversimplified and reductionist language used to prepare easily digestible, brand-worthy policy snippets. It encourages snap decisions of agreement or disagreement rather than nuanced debate, and it results in a loss of skills and confidence that comes from participating more fully in the democratic process.

In school settings, democracy as a way of living means that space for deliberation is created for citizens from the community to become a significant part of ongoing policy discussions (Winton, 2010). For students, a policy-shift to a more democratic classroom means that they are empowered from a young age to participate in their learning as a collective, co-constructed process (Shanklin, 2010). The move from teaching democracy as a political process in Social Studies classes to teaching through democratic practice would also give students a model of participatory decision-making that they can apply to roles within family, work, and community settings. For parents, teachers, and administrators, democratic schooling invites the voice of the many back into education. It gives parents and stakeholders an opportunity to state concerns, and allows schools to adapt policies according to local needs and reinforce important practices across many contexts. For society, the shift to democratic schooling would lend itself to higher participation levels in the political system of democracy and a commitment to social justice that transcends the value placed on paycheques or grades as a measure of achievement (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). The spaces for democracy and the nuanced discourses they afford debunk the myths of a simple promise sometimes offered in service of political agendas and supported or decried by news media.

Recuperating Ethics: The Distinction between Accountability and Responsibility
I suggest, finally, that a distinction needs to be made in rejoinder to neoliberalism and its narrow conception of a voter as a consumer of simple brand promises. There is a difference between accountability and responsibility. The former is affiliated with the ethic of individualism that grounds neoliberal thinking (Apple, 2005; Biesta, 2004; Gledhill, 2007). Accountability excuses our lack of participation in democratic spaces by offering scapegoats and shallow policy solutions. It connotes a sense of authority: that there is someone to compel action and to punish for failures. It allows citizens to think that there is someone who is supposed to act, to be responsible, and to blame. It pretends at transparency while obfuscating complexity and excluding diverse voices from the discussion.

Responsibility, on the other hand, links us to one another in ways that are complex and humbling. This reading of responsibility is rooted in the work of Levinas (1989), who proffers a way of thinking about ethics that acts in counterpoint to the neoliberal ethic of individualism. He suggests that we are each inherently responsible to one another based on the fact of our existence. A person—not as a consumer, taxpayer, voter, or citizen, but simply by virtue of being together in the same place and at the same time—is called upon by the other, all others, to listen and to be humble. It is through this act of listening and through an unflagging responsibility for the other that one can find freedom and meaning. There is an inescapable sense of obligation, commitment, and humility that informs this perspective. It suggests that we are called into interaction with others in ways that are in tension with the neoliberal supposition of competition as a means of progress.

This is relevant to the discussion of education policy reform in two ways. First, because it implicates us as participants in society in ways that extend beyond voting and working; it forefronts the kind of deliberation that tends toward deeper democracy discussed above. And second, this reading of ethics is a rejection of neoliberalism because instead of being a means to secure individual financial gain, schooling becomes a space for the discovery of our responsibility for the other. The classroom becomes a place of interaction and meaning-making that is rooted, not in the desire for economic wealth, but in the hope of meeting our responsibilities to listen to one another with humility.

In this way, we replace accountability with responsibility. We replace economic and individual freedom from obligation with responsibility to consider the interests and perspectives of our fellow citizen. To deny this responsibility is to permit politicians and the media to set the agenda for policy in the interests of dominant hegemonies and to propound a host of false promises under the guise of accountability.

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