

# Lighting the Fires of Entrepreneurialism? Constructions of Meaning in an English Inner City Academy

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## ABSTRACT

*Entrepreneurialism and entrepreneurial leadership are increasingly viewed as essential to improving the capability of organisations to innovate and improve performance. This article aims to refine the conceptual understanding of entrepreneurialism in the context of public education, drawing on data concerning constructions of meaning around entrepreneurialism in an inner city Academy in England. The authors highlight effects of power in forming the discourse and meanings around entrepreneurialism, the layers of meaning in these constructions, and the presence of both business entrepreneurialism and alternative groundings for entrepreneurialism. The article concludes by refining the typology of entrepreneurialism, placing it in the context of levels of meaning and suggesting three implications for schools and educational policy. The association the authors found of enterprise with relational motivations and with public and community-orientated aims suggests a general appetite exists to forge a more radical entrepreneurialism than that prescribed solely by a private, competitive business view of the world.*

*Keywords: Academy, Business Entrepreneurialism, Entrepreneurialism, Generic Cultural Entrepreneurialism, Public Education, Social Entrepreneurialism, Typology of Entrepreneurialism*

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## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to refine the conceptual understanding of entrepreneurialism in the context of public education. The focus is on entrepreneurialism as a feature or symbolic idea in the dominant educational policy discourse which, through reactions and the interpretation work of agents (like school staff and students) is given

multiple facets. Following a brief outline of the policy context in England, entrepreneurialism is discussed and a typology of entrepreneurialism set out which we have developed and are further refining (Woods & Woods, 2009). The main purpose of the article is to examine the meanings of entrepreneurialism in an inner city Academy in England by analysing (in the section ‘Constructions of Meaning in the Academy’) how staff and students explained their approach to entrepreneurialism and the examples, practices and materials in the Academy’s symbolic

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environment which they highlighted; and utilising and testing the typology as an interpretative framework. This is followed by a discussion drawing together issues emerging from the analysis and conclusions where the typology is refined by placing it in a broader context.

## **POLICY CONTEXT**

Entrepreneurialism and entrepreneurial leadership are increasingly viewed as essential to improving the capability of organisations to innovate and improve performance in the face of 21st century demands and turbulent times, with innovation 'fast becoming the core capability for organizational success' (Gratton, 2007, p. 5). Organisational trends in the public sector, including education, are towards bureau-enterprise culture and post-bureaucratic organisation (Maravelias, 2009; Woods 2007a), characterised by organisational members 're-imagined' as a hybrid of 'employee' and 'entrepreneur' (Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009, p. 185). Governments pulled by these trends and perceived pressures of global economic competition are concerned to enhance enterprise. Creating a more enterprising society has become an integral part of the dominant policy discourse in the UK concerned with a perceived 'enterprise gap' (HM Treasury, 2004, 2008), reinforced by the new Coalition Government's clarion call to 'light the fires of entrepreneurialism in every corner of our country' (Prime Minister Cameron, 2010).

This concern with enterprise impacts upon educational policy and the organisation, leadership and curriculum of schools. Efforts 'to build a deeper and wider entrepreneurial culture' 'must begin in schools' (HM Treasury, 2002, p. 33). Schools are being called upon to respond to a 'new enterprise logic' which values 'creative entrepreneurial risk-taking leadership' (Caldwell, 2006, p. 76, p. 194) and to engage in 'daring and disruptive changes' (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 109). Critics, however, see current policy as contributing to pressures towards 'the colonization of cultural activities [like education] to serve economic activity' and

the commodification of services like schooling (Bottery, 2004, p. 45).

Schools in England have been encouraged to give more attention to education for enterprise (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). Students of enterprise education are expected to address more open-ended problems, to take more responsibility for their actions and to be given greater autonomy in taking decisions<sup>1</sup>. Their educational experience is to model the expectations of flexibility, personalised action and distributed leadership characteristic of bureau-enterprise culture. School leadership is charged with fostering a school ethos and curriculum that develop entrepreneurial attitudes and skills<sup>2</sup>. Equally, in line with norms and practices of distributed or shared forms of leadership (Harris, 2009; Woods et al., 2004) leadership of schools is intended to spread beyond senior school leaders.

The creation of new types of school is at the forefront of moves to facilitate innovation and the blurring of the public/private boundary. In 2002, the first batch of a new organisational type of school in England – known as Academies – opened, of which there are 203 open at the time of writing. Academies are state-funded schools, established and managed by independent sponsors, such as businesses, faith groups, educational institutions (including universities and colleges) and charitable organisations. Outside the local authority system, they are intended to be innovative and entrepreneurial. Originally, the Academies programme was aimed primarily at increasing the educational attainment of pupils in socially and economically disadvantaged areas<sup>3</sup>. The Coalition Government has extended the opportunity to all state schools to adopt Academy status, presenting this as the chance to have greater freedom and as a part of 'system-wide reductions in bureaucracy' (Department for Education, 2010).

## **ENTREPRENEURIALISM**

Defining the concept of entrepreneurialism is not a matter of straightforward agreement - ei-

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