Business Interests in Education - Commercial interests in my school milieu

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‘Yummy Apple Stickers. Total prize money increased to $50,000. Special prize of $1,000 for the top school (based on per pupil ratio). Competition closing date 14 October-1st week in Term 4. School Total 3380 as at 14 September, 1998.’

This was a small part of our recent school newsletter. The paper for the school newsletter was paid for by the businesses which advertised on the back. Our sports teams look very smart as they go off to play other schools in their jackets sponsored by ‘Bronco’s Bar and Grill’. In October we have Ronald McDonald coming with a police escort, to help the Junior School teachers reinforce the road safety message. As I look around the resource room I find resources provided by Colgate, The Dairy Board, Telecom, B.P. and Carter Holt. As yet our school has not tried to find a major sponsor but as we try to keep the school painted, the furniture repaired, keep abreast of I.C.T. developments, maintain the current levels of teacher development and also prepare to meet the challenges that a new school opening just up the road will bring, the thought of a corporate sponsorship is appealing. This thought becomes more appealing as we have more parents tired of fundraising, and increases in school fees. Recently a website has been set up to help schools develop ‘mutually beneficial partnerships’ (Eduvac. 1998).

New Zealand Schools have a history of being provided with educational resources by the commercial sector, admittedly not to the extent that resources have been supplied to schools in the U.S.A.(in Harris, 1996). For instance, at our school we have resources from The Dairy Board dating back to 1983. Recently however, the amount has increased. The material that is provided is colourful, up to date and appealing. Vegie Kit and the Colgate Dental Health Kit both provide videos. The Telecom Box provides a telephone for roleplaying, and a picture book by well known New Zealand author Margaret Mahy. The Carter Holt Forestry Kits contain a complete teaching package. Starters and Strategies magazine, which was launched in 1993, is full of advertising for commercially produced materials; many of them free and most of them
listing curriculum areas, levels and strands which make them ‘user-friendly’ for teachers.

This paper will discuss some of the reasons why corporate involvement in education has increased. It will be argued that business is primarily involved in education as a means to increase business profits. Examples of business involvement both overseas and in New Zealand are provided. In the conclusion, the important role of the teacher in the protection of children from commercial exploitation via curriculum content is examined.

**Rationale for Increased Corporate Involvement in Education**

The reason for the upsurge in business involvement in education appears to be two-fold. The first is political. We are told that it is part of the New Right ideology to see children as future consumers of a variety of products (O’Neill et al, 1998). O’Neill (1996/97), pointed out that the recent curriculum reforms have been driven by economic principles rather than educational ones. The New Right embraces a vocational or neo-classical ideology of education, which is concerned with preparing children for work. There is an economic thrust behind New Right ideologies. This includes the idea that the free market is to be valued, and that there is a need to curtail state intervention (Dale & Ozga, 1993). Grace (1994), explains that a Treasury brief prepared in 1987 for the Prime Minister, David Lange, stated that education was not a public good, but was a commodity in the market place. The curtailing of state intervention has led to a lack of government funding in schools. Consequently a gap has been opened, and commercially provided educational resources are filling it.

The speed with which new curricula have been introduced in New Zealand has meant that teachers have not had time to reflect on, nor evaluate the changes (Elley 1996). Similarly, teachers’ attitudes to commercially-sponsored resources. There is little time to debate the validity or the ideologies behind the content of these resources. At times, pre-prepared units of work seem like a ‘life-line’ for teachers. The inclusion of an I.C.T element makes resources especially attractive to teachers, as many are still struggling to become I.C.T. literate themselves.
McNeal (1992), explains the other reason for businesses being interested in education. The reason is economic, with children positioned as consumers. Changes in family structure have given children greater spending power. Parents are also choosing to have fewer children. A result of this earlier independence for children is that they become consumers at a younger age and therefore have a form of economic independence sooner. A further economic factor has been the increase in the number of older parents who want their children to have everything and are in a financial position to afford it. The fourth big change in family structure is that often both parents are at work. Research shows that working parents spend less time with their children, but more money on them.

Research into childrens spending has shown that children are a lucrative market (McNeal 1992, Harris 1996). Over 50 papers on children as markets had been published by the 1960s (McNeal 1992). By the end of the 1970s another 300 papers had been published. The 1990s have gone even further where children are considered as primary markets. McNeal (1992), identifies children as consumers on three levels: primary, influence and future. He sees children as primary consumers, because they have pocket money to spend. In 1989, children in the U.S.A. had a disposable income of $8 billion: $2 billion was saved and $6 billion spent. Surveys in the 1990s indicate that children in industrialised nations, including New Zealand, have around $117 billion to spend. In Australia, the school market is thought to be worth $4 billion annually (Harris, 1996). By age 10, New Zealand children are serious consumers. Admittedly they save more than their American counterparts, but this only makes them worthy of attention from financial corporations.

Children are identified as influence consumers in that they affect their parents spending. In 1989, in the U.S.A., this influence market was seen to be worth $130 billion.

Children are also described as future markets. They will one day be earning and spending as they support their own families. A good example of this future market is found in Harty:

Over fifty years ago, Alice Morton, now archivist for the National Education Association was in the fifth grade in North Carolina. She remembers her teacher passing out little bars of sweet-smelling green soap
supplied by a company representative. Illustrated booklets on the history of soap-making were also distributed. ‘I can still smell it now’, Ms Morton reminisced. ‘And I’ve been buying Palmolive ever since (1994).

Packard (in Harty, 1994) refers to experiences such as Alice Morton had, as ‘imprint conditioning’. It will take until adulthood before the children targeted by businesses in schools become big consumers. However, businesses will eventually reap the rewards of their investments.

The Whole Truth

Profit is the first priority of people in business (Barry & Johnstone, 1996). This profit-based attitude leads to the fact that many companies do not tell the whole truth about their products. They only inform the consumer about the positive attributes of their goods in order to ‘sell’ their product. Harty (1994) refers to this company attitude as the ‘sins of omission.’

Giroux (1998), describes a package provided by McDonalds in the U.S.A about deforestation in the world. The contents omit to mention the destruction of rain forest caused by beef cattle ranching. Giroux (1998) also makes note of the educational package provided by Nike about how a sports shoe is made. This package fails to mention the sweat-shop portion of the process. Harty (1994), mentions a parent’s concerns that teachers seem to accept commercial material at face value because it is free.

As has been noted, teachers are inclined to accept material which fits into the curriculum because they do not have time to do the necessary research to locate additional viewpoints to those espoused by the sponsors. By using commercial resources, teachers and schools need to be aware that they are giving their tacit approval to the sponsors and their products.
Profit Driven Initiatives

Business groups have become involved in educational initiatives all around the industrialised world. At first sight this involvement appears benevolent, but many businesses are purely profit driven.

Harris (1996), explodes the myth of the computers for schools programmes organised by Foodtown in New Zealand. He tells us of similar programmes in Australia where children had to take supermarket dockets to school. These were then collated by parents and teachers. Coles in Australia proudly advertised how they had given away $35 million worth of computers. What they did not mention was that the sales from the collected dockets represented maybe as much as $9 billion. In the case of my school, the P.T.A. spent many hundreds of hours flattening and tallying dockets, and highlighting bonuses. As Harris (1996) points out, the continual handling of dockets kept the participating stores at the forefront of the school community’s mind. Foodtown in New Zealand, like Coles in Australia, appeared to be benefiting the school community. In actual fact, Foodtown and Coles greatly increased their respective profits.

Another profit driven ‘educational’ programme, run in both Australia and New Zealand, is the Pizza Hut ‘Book It’ programme. Children who regularly achieved a reading goal were rewarded with a free Pizza Hut voucher, however, the fact that the family usually ended up accompanying the child and paying full price for a meal was rarely mentioned. This programme targeted teachers too, as they were given a free lunch pass if their class participated. Again the company was seen to be supporting education but was, in reality, generating profit for itself.

Even if schools are aware that the supposed benefactors are only out for self advancement, many cannot afford to ignore the corporate schemes. The realities of insufficient funding means that schools have to fundraise however they can, and take what is on offer.
Around the world there are many incidences of exploitation of the school market. For instance there was the cotton bud art contest promoted by Cheeseborough Ponds in the U.S.A. Students had to use the cotton buds to paint with, as glue brushes, or as the construction medium. Prizes were worth $40,000. By encouraging their classes to compete, teachers gained chances of a win in a sweepstake, with a prize of an overseas trip. Teachers chances of winning the trip increased depending on the number of their students who entered the contest (Harty, 1994).

Harty (1994), also reported how Coca-Cola managed to circumvent Sweden’s strict laws against commercial sponsors in schools. The Russell Company approached Swedish schools about a yo-yo competition. Special yo-yos were needed to ensure everyone had a fair chance in the competition. All of the yo-yos had advertising for Coca-Cola, Fanta and Sprite on them, and all competitors were served Coca-Cola.

In 1992, major corporate sponsorship was worth $10 million to education in Australia. Harris (1996), reports how McDonalds sought support from participating schools in return for $800,000 worth of sports sponsorship. The McDonalds programme was organised with The New South Wales Education Department. The sponsorship lasted a three year period and involved spending of only 33c per child per year. Schools were expected to do several things in return, but the most significant was displaying the McDonald’s name and logos in schools. Parents and teachers were outraged. This resulted in a policy statement to schools reminding them that they were there to educate and care for the children, not to provide marketing opportunities for businesses or to allow the students to be exploited. McDonald’s response was to introduce a Happy Hour where local schools were given a percentage of the money spent by their pupils and staff during a certain time of the day.

So far in New Zealand McDonalds have taken a much ‘gentler’ approach in their marketing to school communities. Even though McDonalds products may not fit in with the dietary side of the health programme, they have become involved in the school health programme through their participation with the police in a road safety programme.
Apple (1993), reports that there are currently concerns about Channel One in the USA. In return for showing 90% of their students a programme containing 10 minutes of news and 2 minutes of commercials for 90% of the school year, each participating school was given a satellite dish, 2 central videos and a colour television per classroom. A few states prohibited, or restricted, the use of Channel One. However, in 1991 approximately one third of students in the USA aged between 13 and 18 were watching Channel One. A 30 second commercial slot was being sold by Channel One owners for $120,000. Many businesses, naturally, saw the students as primary, influence and future markets.

Apple states that the concerns regarding Channel One were not only about the commercials, but were also about the news content. The news was a form of cultural hegemony. Minority groups were not represented and it was just one group’s perspective of the news. The television news provided was not about concepts, ideas or processes. The news comprised action. Often the full story was not told. A recent example of this was the mud slides in Italy. While the slides were initially reported as a natural disaster, they were in reality a man-made disaster caused by irresponsible logging.

However, one of the more extreme instances of a multinational corporation marketing to school children was the ‘Tattoo You Too’ programme (New Zealand Listener, 1998). Children could be tattooed with logos such as Nike, Pepsi or Guess, but were not allowed more than three tattoos. One principal described the programme as, ‘a win-win situation...kids get a chance to look hip while earning money for the school’. They went on to say, ‘we’ve been overwhelmed by it’s success’.

To date, commercial involvement in education in New Zealand seems less compared with many other countries. One of the reasons for this could be that in the U.S.A only 1% of the school budget is spent on curriculum resources (Harris, 1996). In New Zealand in 1994, the amount spent by schools on curriculum averaged out at 27.4% (O’Rourke, 1994).
The Positive Side of Corporate Sponsorship

However, not all corporate sponsorship is suspect. One of the most well-known instances of corporate sponsorship in New Zealand is that provided by Mainfreight to Bairds Primary School, now known as Bairds Mainfreight School. This sponsorship has been worth $130,000 over three years, plus $60,000 for a computer suite and an additional $3,000 a year for Alan Duff’s Books-in-Homes project. The sponsorship at Bairds has not only been in the form of goods, but has also involved teacher training (Quaintance, 1997).

Mainfreight have had good media exposure through their sponsorship of the school, but also sponsor 20 other schools through the Books-in-Homes project for which they have received very little publicity. There have been several positive effects from the Mainfreight sponsorship at Bairds Primary: one has been the involvement in the school of other companies who have provided computer furniture to the school; another positive effect has been an uplifting of the standard of education; and a third has been the increase in morale of both teachers and students (Good Teacher, 1997).

This lift in morale from sponsorship has also been noted in the U.S.A. (Dryden & Vos, 1998). In the late 1980’s at the Christopher Columbus Middle School, New Jersey, the absentee and drop-out rates were so high, and the state test scores were so low, that the state was considering taking over the school management. The Bell Atlantic telephone company agreed to help by providing computers linking the students’ homes with the school. All were linked to the Internet. Teachers were trained, who in turn trained the parents. Within two years the absentee rate and drop-out rate were almost zero and the students were scoring three times higher than the average on state tests for inner city New Jersey Schools. Both sponsorships demonstrate how well planned and well communicated extra resourcing can benefit the students. It is interesting to note that in both cases I.C.T and teacher training were components of the sponsorship.

Roberts (1994) gives information about sponsorship in British Schools and also paints a generally optimistic picture. He admits that there are still business initiatives that
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make no pretence at altruism, such as that run by a supermarket giving away vouchers for every 25 pounds spent in the store. Their whole attitude was that they ran the promotion because it was profitable for them. He also details information about the B.P. schools link scheme. Roberts sees the BP scheme as a long term commitment to science and technology education, with no obvious commercial benefits.

I have a few reservations regarding whether a petrol company can be truly altruistic. After all we know they continue to deplete an unsustainable natural resource and they continue to focus on the use of petrol driven transport, which is a major contributor to environmental pollution, rather than being active developers of alternate fuel systems. It appears to me that the B.P. Schools Link Scheme could be an exercise in public relations. Be that as it may, many large companies and charitable trusts in Britain such as the Nuffield Foundation and the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trust have sponsored a variety of curriculum developments and initiatives. These have made a genuine difference to learning. Case studies have been published, learning projects have been evaluated, and this has apparently led to a sharing of effective new ideas in education.

Roberts also reports (in Bridges, 1993), that the attitude of corporations to education is changing. Corporations are sponsoring education from a genuinely charitable viewpoint and the sponsorships are no longer merely profit driven, but are part of a desire to work co-operatively for a better society. It will take a while for this new idea of corporate sponsorship to be accepted. This attitude that the focus of corporate sponsorship is changing is echoed by Don Rowlands, Chairman of Mainfreight’s Board of Directors. He says, ‘The greatest return on our investment is the knowledge that we have in some way assisted in the education of the next generation of citizens for our workforce’ (Good Teacher, 1997).

Thinking Ahead

There are many similarities between the U.S.A. and New Zealand. Apple (1993), articulates some of the reasons behind the levels of corporate involvement in
education in the States. There is a lack of public funding for schools in the USA due to less tax emanating from the business sector. This situation has occurred in New Zealand since a market led economy became the norm in the mid-1980s. The economic crisis is worse for New Zealand’s poor schools than it is for the more affluent. As an example, 46% of the budget needed to run Meadowbank School is provided by locally raised funds, 30% of this comes from school donations and 16% from fundraising activities. In contrast, Mangere Bridge School raises only 6% of their budget from fundraising. The school does not request a school donation owing to the economic situation of the parent community (Hotere, 1996). As Roberts (1994) states, many schools cannot afford to walk away from fundraising schemes, especially when the sponsors pose as benefactors. Poor schools have to fundraise in whatever way they can and take whatever handouts are offered, even if it means using schemes that are not always compatible with educational goals.

In the U.S.A. there has been a decline in discipline and educational standards. Giroux (1998), comments that in the U.S.A. such things as unemployment, racism, poverty and inadequate school funding are not blamed for this fall in standards. Whatever the reason for the so-called decline, the way has opened for corporates to take over some school programmes (Kozol 1993, Blackiston & Sabatella 1996). A similar scenario also applies to New Zealand. Currently teachers and teaching methods seem to be bearing most of the blame for the ‘decline in standards’. In New Zealand we are reading about greater playground violence (Logan, 1998), concerns about education attainment levels (Bennett, 1998), and the failure rates of Maori and Pacific Island children (New Zealand Education Review, 1998).

The combination of the economic situation and the apparent educational crisis has created a climate for corporate intervention to be acceptable in schools in the U.S.A. One wonders if we will follow down the same path? New Right ideology, that education is not a public good but a commodity like any other (Grace, 1994), is becoming as prevalent in New Zealand as it is in the United States.

There seems to be no doubt that ‘corporate involvement, sponsorship, encroachment, invasion, appropriation (call it what you will ) in schooling is a reality’ (Harris 1996).
Giroux (1998), calls for a halt to all commercial involvement in schools and a return to an adequately funded public education system. It appears very difficult to turn back the clock. The suggestion from Poutney (1999), for a 20% education tax on all non-essential items, seems to be more practical.

What matters now are the actions of people involved in education: teachers, principals, boards of trustees, and to some extent the Ministry of Education. Roberts (1994), has some suggestions for encouraging business to sponsor a school. He tells us that commercial sponsors are looking for schools with a clearly defined development plan. Good communication seems to be another essential ingredient for developing a good relationship with sponsors. Mainfreight’s sponsorship of Baird’s Primary began accidentally. It was thank-you notes and invitations to school functions, sent by the students, that encouraged Mainfreight to go further down the road to sponsorship (Good Teacher, 1997).

Harris (1996), reminds us that we need to be vigilant about corporate sponsorship and to consider every initiative separately. We need to keep in mind that schools have a role to play in caring for children, as well as educating them. We need to protect children from being exploited by business interests posing as benefactors. Harris suggests that teachers could use the advertising in Channel One in the U.S.A. against the sponsors by encouraging students to analyse the advertisements to see what they are trying to achieve. However, as Apple (1993) points out, most teachers do not discuss the news segment on Channel One, let alone set aside time to discuss either the products or the presentation of the commercials. The students are just left to interpret the programmes in their own way.

Giroux (1998), suggests that one way to protect children and education from the ruthlessness of market values is to have teachers who are not just ‘technicians who simply implement pre-packaged curriculums and standardised tests’. Teachers must involve children in discussion about values. Education needs to be continued to be seen as a way of social improvement, both for individuals and the community as a whole.
Another way of protecting children at school is to have legal guidelines drawn up, or laws passed. Harris (1996), is disparaging about the laws and guidelines in Australia, explaining that there are so many loopholes that they have been of little use to the school community. In New Zealand, a simple contract was drawn up between Bairds Primary and Mainfreight when the school name was changed to Bairds Mainfreight. This contract ensured that neither party could do anything to bring the other into disrepute, and that the sponsor must keep out of the day to day running of the school (Good Teacher, 1997). Stemming from this sponsorship, the Minister of Education drew up guidelines for other schools which were considering sponsorship deals (Quaintance, 1997). This seems to indicate that the New Zealand Government expects more business sponsorships to evolve.

The individual contract between Bairds Primary and Mainfreight supports Harris’s (1996) idea that each venture should be treated separately on its own merits. Each school has a mission statement, and as Roberts (1994) points out, this can be worded in such a way so as to protect the children from commercial interests.

In conclusion, the role of the classroom teacher is extremely important. The teacher is essentially the gatekeeper for the kinds of knowledge New Zealand children are presented with. Teachers need to be critically aware of all curriculum content, and to question the motives of all providers of ‘free’ curriculum resources.

References

Grace, G.(1994). ‘Education is a Public Good: On the Need to Resist Domination of Economic...


