New book presents chilling evidence of corporate manipulation of children

Contributed by Sharon Beder with Wendy Varney and Richard Gosden
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"A chilling assessment of modern commercial culture and how it distorts childhood, corrupts civic institutions, and endangers the planet." -- Alex Molnar, Professor of Education Policy, Arizona State University

Ecocentric and social justice values are the basis of
This Little Kiddy Went to Market:
The corporate capture of childhood, the new book by
Sharon Beder with Wendy Varney and Richard Gosden.

Few parents are in doubt that their children are being targeted by big business for commercial ends -- advertising, promotions and marketing aimed at children are a constant feature of everyday life. This book provides fresh evidence about the extent of this problem and shows this manipulation goes much further than we imagine.

Analysing school reforms in English-speaking nations such as the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand, This Little Kiddy Went to Market investigates the ways in which business coalitions have persuaded governments around the world into shaping schools to suit corporate ends, rather than the interests of their children.

The authors argue that school reforms, driven by underfunding and corporate needs, have made the education system vulnerable to pressure from big business. The book examines the many prongs of this assault, including the flood of corporate-sponsored classroom materials being offered to teachers and children, and the role of corporations in promoting the privatisation of schooling.

This Little Kiddy Went to Market is an incisive examination of what many parents have suspected -- that the corporate culture is contributing to the decline of childhood.
More info:

http://www.herinst.org/sbeder/Books/kiddy.html

This Little Kiddy Went to Market:
The corporate capture of childhood is published by
Pluto Press, London, UK, May 2009, and by UNSW Press, Sydney, Australia, July 2009.

Contents

- Introduction

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Turning Children into Consumers: Children are viewed by many corporations as first and foremost potential consumers and secondly as primary influences on their families spending. Their lives have become saturated with unhealthy advertising messages. Marketers and advertisers deliberately set out to bypass parents and exploit children's naivety.

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Turning Play into Business: The commercialisation of toys and children's entertainment has resulted in a general impoverishment of play, as children's leisure activities are increasingly determined by the market. The focus of contemporary toys is materialism and individualism rather than socialising and childhood development. A vast interlocking network of commercial interests has developed including television programming, movies, toys, licensed products and games.

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Branding Childish Identities: Advertisers recognise that brand loyalties and consumer habits formed when children are young will be carried through to adulthood and that select children can be used to dictate what is cool and desirable. Advertisers and marketers take advantage of all the insights that psychological and sociological studies can provide them in order to make children feel insecure and inadequate if they don't have their products.

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Teaching Consumer Values: Schools have been seduced into opening their doors to commercialism because they are desperate for funds. A massive infusion of corporate messages bombards school students everyday. Businesses seek to sell their goods to children, develop brand loyalty now and into the future, through sponsorships, competitions, communication technologies, and industry-produced classroom materials.

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Turning Schools into Businesses: Instead of investing as much as possible in education, the new emphasis is to educate as many children as possible for the least investment. School funding cuts, combined with pressures from business groups, have led to an emphasis on productivity, cost-effectiveness and performance evaluation in schools. Education systems have been restructured so that centralised bureaucracies establish the goals of education, core curricula, and resource allocation, while school boards and principals are left to manage schools on reduced budgets.

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Making Schools Accountable: School boards and principals are held accountable through regimes of standardised testing. To ensure that the standardised tests are taken seriously, even though they have little educational value, educational authorities have attached various rewards and punishments to performance in them. Attaching these 'high stakes' to test results is also a way to ensure that schools teach to the curriculum. Standardised testing stresses students, demoralised teachers, and reduces education to little more than memory work.

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Business Campaigns: Businesses have campaigned to get the changes discussed above into schools, particularly the business model with its devolution of responsibility, outcomes-focused accountability, standardised testing, and narrowed curriculum. They have formed powerful overlapping and interconnected business coalitions and advocacy front groups and promoted an atmosphere of crisis to achieve school 'reforms'.

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Made to Order: The renewed emphasis in schools on long hours, discipline, rewards and punishments results employer demands for graduates with a good attitude, a strong work ethic, honesty, loyalty, dependability, trustworthiness and obedience. The rhetoric of international competitiveness has been used to promote these changes but they are turning schools into places of training rather than education.

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Dumbing Down Future Citizens: Around the world, curricula have been narrowed and standardised to emphasise literacy, numeracy and computer skills, and a particular business-friendly view of history and society. This narrowing has been a means of achieving efficiency but also a means of ideological control, a way of undermining alternative views of society and avoiding subjects that develop critical tendencies in future employees and citizens.

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Teaching Corporate Values: Industry-sponsored school materials give students a distorted picture of environmental, health and social issues. They present a corporate view as 'fact' and report the results of corporate-funded studies without saying who financed them. They promote an industry or company and defend it from its critics. Corporate-sponsored economic education, business studies and enterprise education seek to get young people to view the world through the eyes of employers and assume that what is good for business is good for them.

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Privatising Schools: There has been a major move towards the private provision of educational services in many countries. This has included educational services such as tutoring, educational software and after school care but also

core education, such as managing or operating schools and preschools. Many of these privatisations have been damaging for the schools and students involved.

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Turning Schools into Markets: It is not enough for schools to be managed like businesses but business reformers also want them to behave like businesses and compete in an educational marketplace for students. The right of every child to a high quality education has been replaced by the right of every parent to choose the school their child attends. Education, once a public good, has become a private good.

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Privatisation Proponents: In the US several wealthy foundations, which have gained their money from large successful business enterprises, have financed the push for the privatisation of education and free-market reforms in schools. Wealthy businessmen fund private voucher schemes and subsidise charter schools. Think tanks provide the ‘scholars’ and studies to support privatisation.

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Controlling Wayward Children: Children who are naughty, lively, bored, inattentive or depressed as a result of the assaults described in previous chapters, are identified in schools and disciplined through the use of psychiatric drugs. The pharmaceutical industry portrays these ‘medications’ as a way of ‘normalising’ children’s thinking and behaviour and controlling mood variation in children in order to expand the child and adolescent market for psychiatric drugs.

- Conclusion

More info:

Sharon Beder's Publications

Sharon Beder's "Consumerism: an Historical Perspective" is on Culture Change: culturechange.org

Beder also has a fine essay "The Changing Face of Conservation: Commodification, Privatisation And The Free Market" in the 2006 publication Gaining Ground: In Pursuit of Ecological Sustainability.