This little kiddy went to market

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In 2007 Joel Klein, chancellor of New York City schools outlined to an overflow meeting of parents his plans to restructure New York schools in the form of businesses. *Nation* magazine reported: “In the calculus of the moment, each of the city’s 1,450 schools is considered an independent franchise. Like a bank outlet or a RadioShack store, any given school is a “key unit” in Klein’s new Department of Education. Schools are headed by branch managers, or principals, whose jobs have been reconfigured as CEOs rather than as educators. Principals are expected to contract out for nearly every core service, from testing to professional development to their own support team. Quarterly returns flow out in the form of tests four times a year. Schools must compete with one another, at their peril. The lowest performers on the bell curve may be sanctioned or shut down.” [1]

Such a bizarre vision for schools might seem to be an outcome of the idiosyncratic thinking of a former businessman turned school chancellor. However the fact that the very same ‘reforms’ have been sweeping the English speaking world for the past three decades points to a broader agenda; one that goes beyond individuals, beyond regional education bureaucracies, and beyond national governments. It is an agenda pushed by transnational corporations around the world and one that Australian governments have embraced. Most recently the federal education minister, Julia Gillard, has been championing Klein’s methods for emulation by Australian schools.

These business-driven school ‘reforms’ have been helped along by a series of media-manufactured education ‘crises’ in North America, the UK and Australasia beginning in the 1980s and continuing to this day. Declining international competitiveness and increasing unemployment have been blamed on schools, in particular the failure of public schools to produce literate and numerate employees for the workforce.

Educational funding shifted from being an investment in the nation’s future to an expense that needed to be justified, rationalised and reduced.

In Australia, payments from the federal government to the states fell and state tax revenues declined in the early 1990s. As a result state governments cut educational expenditure, hundreds of public schools were closed and “over 8000 teaching position were designated in excess of need”.[2] Public spending on school education declined from 5.9 per cent of GDP in the mid 1970s to 2.7 per cent of GDP at the turn of the century, despite the desire of a vast majority of voters that more be spent on schools.[3] As a result class sizes increased, school facilities deteriorated, teachers and students were demoralised.

Governments which cut school funding were naturally subject to criticism that they were harming the quality of education. With the help of government and corporate-funded think tank research the view that what matters is outcomes and that these do not depend on the resources available came to dominate government policy circles in all English-speaking nations. Instead of increasing school resources and interpreting accountability in terms of how funds were spent and what practices were adopted, the emphasis shifted to evaluating student performance without reference to funding inputs.
The need to shift responsibility for performance outcomes from government funding to school management and teaching staff led to the restructuring of the school system, in English speaking nations, so that budgetary and administrative management devolved to schools. Following lobbying by the Business Council of Australia, schools in most states were given responsibility for school budgets. Principals were refashioned as corporate managers and school councils took on management responsibilities.

Individual public schools are now responsible for turning out highly skilled students despite declining resources. More budgetary control does not mean more resources. Yet failure to meet centrally-determined quality objectives is blamed on poor school management and poor quality teaching rather than a lack of resources and funding.

The new emphasis is to educate as many children as possible for the least investment and to do this schools have been encouraged to view themselves as businesses. School principals are now managers and entrepreneurs, teachers are workers, parents are clients or customers, and students are the product.

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. Various Australian states have restructured schools to introduce competition. In Victoria, where ‘reforms’ were the most radical, schools were dezoned during the 1990s and their funding became dependent on enrolments. The conservative Kennett government sought “to reconstruct the public school system as a market of competing firms”.[4]

The right of every child to a high quality education is being replaced by the right of every parent to choose the school their child attends. Education, once a public good and a human right, is becoming a commodity and parental participation in school education has been reduced to consumer choice.

Because businesses depend on quantitative measures they insist schools rely on them also. And in a devolved school system, measurable outcomes are necessary to maintain control of what is happening out in the branches. In this way, test results have become the main way of making schools accountable. For test results to be used as a way of comparing schools, children have to sit the same tests, which means they must have a shared curriculum on which to be tested. A key element of accountability is therefore central control of a standardised curriculum to enable standardised testing.

This form of accountability has meant that education department bureaucrats around the world do not have to judge teaching methods, which would require educational professionals in senior positions, but instead judge outcomes in terms of aggregated scores in tests, sometimes supplemented by other measures such as absentee data and retention data. Test results allow schools to be compared if you ignore the fact that test results more often reflect the resources the school receives and the socio-economic background of their students, than the educational qualities of a school.

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, including merit pay for teachers and bonuses for schools where students perform well. Attaching these ‘high stakes’ to test results is also a way to ensure that schools teach to the curriculum. The publication of school league tables in the UK has increased the pressure on teachers to ‘teach to the test’.
Businesses benefit from reduced spending on schools in terms of reduced taxes as well as the increased access to schools it gives them, under the guise of philanthropy. Schools hungry for funds are more receptive to advertising, marketing, sponsorship, and industry-sponsored classroom materials promoting corporate views and values.

Business leaders are, however, primarily concerned about the work readiness of school graduates and they have campaigned for standardised testing in the belief that it will force schools to focus on basic skills such as reading, writing and mathematics, the subjects that are tested.

Because many business leaders do not understand education they think that learning is simply a matter of students and teachers spending more time and expending more effort. High stakes standardised testing is supposed to provide the rewards and punishments to ensure that students work long and hard on a core curriculum and teachers stick to that curriculum. What business doesn’t want is a curriculum packed with electives irrelevant to the workplace, or worse still subjects that expose children to differing views and values and that promote critical thinking.

This Little Kiddy Went to Market exposes the corporate campaign behind the school reforms, as well as the consequences for students, teachers and the broader society. It also investigates other ways in which corporations are seeking to shape children to suit business goals. The book examines the way that corporations are targeting ever younger children with a barrage of advertising and marketing designed to turn them into hyper-consumers who define themselves by what they have rather than who they are. They have transformed children’s play into a commercial opportunity, preyed on and taken advantage of childish anxieties and insecurities, and reshaped their very identities.

The book also shows how corporations are trying to undermine the whole notion of public schooling with its inherent notions of entitlement, equity and public good. In the US and the UK corporations are already profiting handsomely from the increasing privatisation of educational services.

It is little wonder that so many children grow into youths who are unhappy, stressed, fat, delinquent, or self-destructive, given that corporate messages encourage them to seek happiness in possessions, treat relationships as a means to an end, and incessantly compete with each other. One in ten 13–19 year old Australians reported having mental or behavioural problems.[5] Yet this merely provides an opportunity for pharmaceutical companies to nurture a rapidly expanding child and adolescent market for psychiatric drugs. Psychiatry is now routinely used to discipline naughtiness and inattention, to modify excesses of spontaneity and creativity, and to control mood variation in children.

Sharon Beder’s new book “This Little Kiddy Went to Market: The Corporate Capture of Childhood”, written with Wendy Varney and Richard Gosden, was published in Australia in July by UNSW Press.
References
