

# Public Education in a Corporate-Dominated Culture

HEATHER-JANE ROBERTSON

*Professional Development Services, Canadian Teachers Federation*

*In this chapter, Heather-jane Robertson critiques the growth of corporate interest and involvement in public education. The chapter pulls no punches. It critiques the trend towards the corporalization of everything, including education.*

*With extensive exemplification, Robertson describes how the corporate community has dramatically redirected educational policy, reshaped the discourse and language in which policy is conducted, intruded into the curriculum, redirected resources, influenced the standardization and testing movement, developed partnerships seeking to influence the practices of many individual schools, engaged in sponsorships, and other things besides. There is nothing necessary or inevitable, Robertson concludes, about the influence of the corporate sphere on educational change and she urges us to choose, for democracy, how or whether that influence should persist.*

In 1936, G.K. Chesterton denounced business education as a subject of study in schools, claiming:

... that it narrows the mind; whereas the whole object of education is to broaden the mind; and especially to broaden it so as to enable it to criticize and condemn such narrowness . . . If he [the student] is immediately initiated into the mysteries of these institutions themselves, if he is sworn in infancy to take them as seriously as they take themselves, if he becomes a trader not only before he becomes a traveller, but even before he becomes a true citizen of his own town, he will never be able to denounce those institutions – or even to improve them. (p. 75)

Judged by modern standards, Chesterton was lamenting a very modest intrusion of commercialism into public education. Today's schools accommodate "traders" with little protest: corporate sponsors place their logos on new schools, boards of education sell advertising space on school buses and the media praise the inspired corporate leadership that forces schools to operate more like businesses. Yet, on the whole, the discourse surrounding school reform is dominated by technicist and strategic concerns, and silent on the increased power and visibility of corporations. Chesterton's comments would seem peculiar if they were published today; it is taken for granted that childhood preparation for a world overrun by traders is unavoidable in a corporate-dominated culture.

The shadow of the private sector is being cast over all aspects of school reform,

from how we think about learners and learning to how schools should be governed and financed; from who produces curriculum to who (or what) “delivers” it; from whether public education is viewed as a remarkable accomplishment or an anachronistic failure. One of the purposes of this paper is to call attention to the nature and consequences of corporate influence on public education. The other is to call attention to how little we seem to worry about it.

## EDUCATION IN CORPORATE TIMES

It is not just education that has been invaded by the logic of “traders.” Recently Canada’s Justice Minister defended an impartial justice system by arguing “it was good for global competitiveness.” Two weeks later, the Prime Minister announced that Canada would send peacekeepers to Haiti because that country “is an important trading partner.” In Alberta, a politician proposed disbanding that province’s human rights commission, asking “if the marketplace doesn’t want it, then why should government fund it?” (Nikiforuk, 1995) Key elements of democracy, justice and human rights are thus reduced to levers of commercial interests.

This confusion between the public good and private interests is one of the dislocations of post-modernity, and perhaps its most perilous. While the marketplace has been an exceedingly effective mechanism to generate wealth, on the whole its success has been achieved because of, not despite, its lack of a moral core. This is not a character flaw but a characteristic. Markets are not moral; they are necessarily preoccupied with self-interest and advantage, and, as such, are unfit arbiters of what constitutes our collective well-being. The best of Canada’s public policies have recognized that public interest cannot be measured – or determined – by private profit.

But Canada is changing. The ascendancy of neoliberal ideologies to the status of conventional wisdom has transformed the accommodation between private interest and public good that has marked modern democracies (Brooks, 1995). The corporate sector is prescribing the exact dimensions of the level playing field of public policy it desires, marked by less government, rapid deregulation and low corporate taxes. In Canada, despite an allegedly oppressive level of public debt, corporate tax rates have fallen to well below both American and OECD averages (Jorgenson, 1996). The not-for-profit sector, including public education, is coming to understand that its role is no longer to negotiate its space inside a mixed economy, but to justify its existence in terms of how well it serves the for-profit sector. Under these rules, cherished educational goals, such as attempting to reduce the social and economic marginalization of certain groups of students, are allowed to proceed only if they can be shown to be good return-on-investment propositions. Goals formerly defended from a moral framework must be redefined as serving the priorities of the corporate sector or risk being discarded.

If necessary, much of what public education attempts to accomplish can be put in utilitarian terms – a task made less difficult by the vacuity of some of the