

Education NZ – NFS

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It is time to rescue public education in New Zealand from the merchants of the marketplace.

Many chapters in this issue of the Review Arotake reveal the risks we are taking as a country by putting a price tag on a process that by its nature should be free, as it has been in New Zealand's recent past. In the last several years we have allowed forces outside public education to confine it in a framework which ill fits it.

The market and education make odd bedfellows. The former lives by competition, competitor defeating competitor. The latter, by its nature, is about the individual learning to live with him/herself and society. One is about the individual against society the other about the individual in society. The market is essentially selfish and about profit, balance sheets, profit and loss. Education is the social process by which society enables or empowers its members in order that it, society may survive.

The relationship between education and the merchant should be one of two complementary providers: one the provider of people adequately prepared to inhabit society, the other the provider of goods or services for the use of society. Each has its essential place and language. However, the relationship is becoming one in which educators are the providers of material as required by the merchant, using the language of the merchant and being, themselves, graded according to the weights and measures of the merchant.

The merchant philosophy, honourable and vital in its own sphere of activity, has done what religion did in past ages. It has invaded the sphere of public education. It has colonised it with its laws and language, raped its professionalism and mind-washed it to the point where many educators have lost sight of what were their fundamental points of reference. Economic "realism", simplistic "value" for money judgements, questionable accountability, outcomes gauged by irrelevant measures and the demand for economically tangible results are struts of the current governing framework. It is a framework that has obscured the real foundations of education: inspiration of the human spirit, the

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knowledge of self and (to quote Kelsey (1994) from Bryan Tuck's article in this issue) "the means of conveying unique identities and cultural values ... an arena of contest and critique and ... a valued activity irrespective of its market demand".

Through the merchandising of education, we have all but lost sight of that fundamental school rule of Peter Fraser, that the state should provide equal educational opportunity for everyone, regardless of their personal wealth or social background. Instead, personal wealth and social background have become determinants of the quality of education available.

When religion and the sign of the cross rule, every standard is established according to its acceptability to the high priests of the church and the consequences of disobedience or failure to accept the ruling structures are dire. Under the rule of the merchant and the sign of the dollar, the consequences of non-compliance or failure in the marketplace are no less disastrous.

This is a dangerous state when the measuring stick itself is questionable. It is a dangerous state when, as a result of questionable measurements of students' "progress", schools are graded in the public perception through highly publicised pass or fail rates. David McKenzie, in his article on Education Review, describes the dangers inherent in a system in which schools, or teachers, are measured by "mechanistic outputs". "Payment by results", success by statistics are the sine qua non of the merchant philosophy. This belittles the professionalism of the teacher. It is becoming the norm in our system of education and so it will continue as long as the merchant buy/sell philosophy dominates.

A measure or grading has been placed on education itself. Far from being a right, a process by which society survives as the body survives through its nourishment, education is becoming a commodity to be bought and sold like any other merchantable good, judged by its immediate economic shelf life. Education, as a purchasable good, is being demoted in New Zealand to the level of a training process for a specific purpose - economic efficiency.

The consequences of the merchandising of education in New Zealand are clear in the pages of this Review Arotake. The free-for-all of the unzoned school marketplace has already polarised "desirable" and "undesirable" schools. Liz Gordon points to research that indicates clearly the improving fortunes of students from well off backgrounds and the downward drift of those not well off. In the article by Bob Stevens and Jonathan Boston we see the marketplace driving up the cost

of the “product education” on the basis of a report that fails “to provide a clear analytical and philosophical framework (giving) rise to numerous flaws and inconsistencies in its recommendations”.

Tony Holmes highlights the marginalisation and under-valuation of the early childhood education sector, the farthest away from the purview of the merchant client waiting at the high school or university door, yet the one sector still capable, if it were given the appropriate status and funding, of greatly reducing the number of casualties that have to be dealt with by educators at later stages of the cycle.

The problems begin at the point where it is accepted that the public education system is for sale, that it is not essential on an equal basis for all, to enable the healthy survival of society. The problems we saw at the end of 1994 were many: a developing poor class of New Zealanders; a continuing Maori and Polynesian predominance among those at the bottom end of the “success” scale in education; a growing polarisation of “winner” and “loser” schools; a curriculum framework favouring the labour market (see Sandra Aikin’s article); increasing strain placed on all sectors of the education community forced to be part of a contest for funds and having to produce economically justifiable results in a marketplace whose ethos bares little relationship to the real task of educating; pointless and expensive competition between the country’s handful of universities which as one sensible academic suggested should reunite into a University of New Zealand, cutting unnecessary competition-generated costs and generating a stronger pool of teaching and researching talent; unconscionable fee levels for undergraduate students, many of them forced into becoming borrowers before they have even begun to live their adult lives; growing tertiary fees making formal education inaccessible to many, particularly mature, and female students.

These were all manifestations of the merchandising of education. They are all indicators of the ruthlessness and the capricious fickleness of the open marketplace where the competitive merchant belongs but where public general education does not.

There were in 1994, however, signs that the tide might be turning on the free market, that the individual as an independent economic unit, representing the apotheosis of human achievement, in market terms, would not stand against a new and strengthening flow. There were signs of resistance.

There was evidence that those in control of the marketisation of education had neglected a fundamental rule of power relations

highlighted many years before *Tomorrow’s Schools* by Giddens (Shilling, 1979), i.e., that a feature of the “dialectic of control” is that power relations are reciprocal and depend on the actions both of the dominator and the dominated. The dominated, hitherto divided and confused, were beginning to stir not separately but together.

There was to be heard the rumble of collective dissent to the deconstruction of an education system which should be based on equity and equality of opportunity. This collective dissent from the ethos and erratic justice of the marketplace could be heard in the growing collective voice of teachers in the primary and secondary sectors; it could be heard coming from the early childhood area, from women, and from that large and largely neglected group of professionals concerned with special education needs, a group that includes special education specialists as well as the normal classroom teacher coping with the effects of mainstreaming (see Lex McDonald); it could be heard particularly through the voice of Maori, of the whanau (see Kath Irwin and Lisa Davies), and the Whare Wananga, an environment based, to quote the Right Reverend Muru Walters, on an aroha philosophy, not money, profit and loss (see Winiata and Winiata).

Is a new capture in the wind? In the 80s, the merchant forces of New Right captured the public disenchantment with an over-bureaucratized education system, and by applying market “standards” were able to attribute to it many of ills of society and enforce change because of these ills. Now in the 90s, are we seeing the capture of a mood of disenchantment with the effects of the merchandising of education and a growing unity of those divided by the method of the merchant?

Public education, in the interests of the society it serves, should be free, and free of the control of the marketplace. Whether it is free or not in New Zealand is not a matter of economics but of attitude. If we decide it cannot be free it cannot. If we decide it should be free, it will be.

There is a perception that it is simply not possible for New Zealand to fly in the face of international trends and return to a free system of public education. This is to deny our capability to exercise international leadership in education or to show that there is another way We have done it before. With the development of a new collective resistance to the merchants, we are at a critical point of opportunity and we should do it again.

The Resistance grows.

Reference

Shilling, C. (1992). Reconceptualising structure and agency in the sociology of education: Structuration theory and schooling. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 13(1).

The editor

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