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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

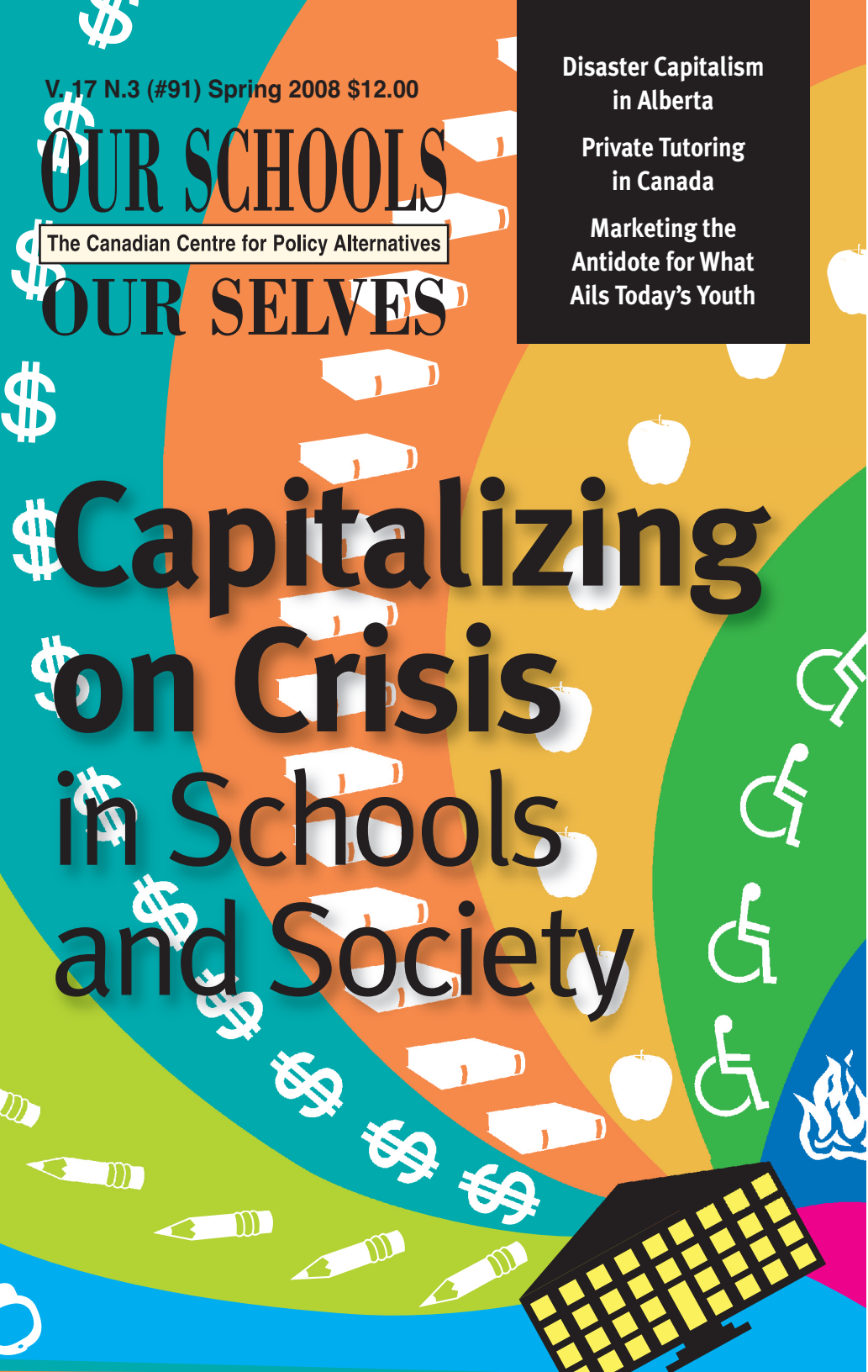
OUR SELVES

Disaster Capitalism
in Alberta

Private Tutoring
in Canada

Marketing the
Antidote for What
Ails Today's Youth

Capitalizing on Crisis in Schools and Society





OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES



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Capitalizing on Crisis in Schools and Society

BY ERIKA SHAKER & BERNIE FROESE-GERMAIN

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* takes a look at the ways in which various crises in education or the wider society (whether occurring through natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, or manufactured, such as the crisis in Ontario education ‘created’ by the Mike Harris administration) are taken advantage of — for financial, political or ideological gain.

In an article last year in *Harper’s* magazine (Oct. 2007), Naomi Klein lays out the disaster capitalism thesis as put forward in her recent book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*:

After each new disaster, it’s tempting to imagine that the loss of life and productivity will finally serve as a wake-up call, provoking the political class to launch some kind of “new New Deal.” In fact, the opposite is taking place: disasters have become the preferred moments for advancing a vision of a ruthlessly divided world, one in which the very idea of a public sphere has no place at all. Call it disaster capitalism. Every time a new crisis hits — even when the crisis itself is the direct by-product of free-market ideology — the fear and disorientation that follow are harnessed for radical social and economic re-engineering. Each new shock is midwife to

a new course of economic shock therapy.

She sums up the underlying philosophy for this thesis by quoting free market fundamentalist, the late Milton Friedman, who believed that, “Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” And the ideas “lying around” for the past three decades or so have been neo-liberal ideology and policies.

Clearly public education has not been immune to this phenomenon.

Hurricane Katrina provides one of the more blatant examples of how a natural disaster was exploited to move the education privatization agenda forward. Satu Repo’s essay takes us through the process by which the massive destruction of the New Orleans public schools was seen as the “perfect” opportunity by right-wing reformers to introduce a large-scale voucher program as well as convert the majority of schools to charter schools (described by some observers as the hurricane’s “silver lining”). As she notes, the concept of the hollowed-out state “has made the New Orleans school system inherently vulnerable to this kind of take-over” — a state hollowed-out through decades of neglect of the levees and wetlands, as well as the school system, through a regime of “tax-cutting and infra-

structure starving which had eroded government capacities.”

On a personal note, the editors would like to express our great pleasure at being able to work more closely with Satu on this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* — her wisdom and humour have, as always, been much appreciated.

The neo-liberal agenda so painstakingly documented by Naomi Klein and Kenneth Saltman (a contributor to this issue) on an international scale has been felt in varying degrees across Canada. In his article examining the impact of the neo-liberal driven “Common Sense” revolution on public education in Ontario, York University student Christopher Olakanmi, who experienced the revolution first-hand as an elementary school student in the 1990s, explores the impact of Disaster Capitalism on his province, and how it impacted his time in the public school system.

Similarly, David Flower examines the legacy of Disaster Capitalism on Alberta — specifically on Alberta’s public education system — in the manufacturing and exploiting of a perceived crisis, with respect to the provincial deficit in this case, by the Tory government of Ralph Klein (no relation to Naomi). A disturbing part of that legacy as Flower says “were the attempts by these Friedmanite neo-liberal reformers to build in legislative safeguards to prevent their plans from being changed easily should they lose political power. Such

legislative changes deliberately hamstringing future governments — but we must remember they can never be permanently enshrined.” The role played by Alberta’s Provincial Achievement Tests (the province’s standardized testing program) in contributing to the “creation of a useful crisis” in education is the focus of a piece by Alberta Teachers’ Association staffperson J-C Couture.

Carlo Ricci and Kara Kingston have provided a case study of a school in Ontario currently in the midst of the “Turnaround” program designed to provide provincial resources (financial, diagnostic and structural) to “struggling” schools in order to improve their EQAO test scores. It is a thoughtful examination of how initiatives of this nature often have unintended results that may not be in the best interests of schools, students or education workers.

Kenneth Saltman, who has been sounding the alarm about the impact of disaster capitalism on the U.S. education system for several years, examines how the neo-liberal agenda has been played out through the No Child Left Behind Act and Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 project. Ken’s work on these issues is extensive — readers are encouraged to check out his book, *Capitalizing on Disaster*; Richard Kahn’s review of which also appears in this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.

In an excerpt from his book, *The University in Chains*, Henry

Giroux discusses how neo-liberalism is dramatically re-shaping the post-secondary sector through privatization, and the impact on academic freedom, job security, access and affordability, and ultimately the quality and kind of education provided by institutions of higher learning.

Janice Aurini at the University of Waterloo probes credentialism and the new breed of “uber-involved” parents, and their relationship to the growing use of private tutoring in Canada.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* also explores the role schools are playing — or have been told they must play — in order to address a number of “crises” (created, perceived or actual) in the broader society. Of course, this often has a number of implications, predictable or unintended, for the school and its relationship with students, teachers and the community.

For example Jessica Yee, a youth activist and organizer, looks at the consequences of a lack of access to accurate information about sexual education, particularly in remote or small communities or communities at risk. She presents a number of views from youth about the consequences of this lack of information, and how the current situation might be changed.

Rick Salutin and Grace-Edward Galabuzi explore the pros and cons in the debate over the recent decision by the Toronto District School Board to establish

an Africentric Alternative School as a first step in “[dealing] with the implications of disproportionately high levels of disengagement and non-performance among African-Canadian youth,” in a society that, in the words of Grace-Edward, only provides “the illusion of inclusion.”

Katherine Reed examines various programs in Nova Scotia intended to ensure access to higher education for low-income students, demonstrating how the failure of these initiatives has resulted in serious consequences, particularly for single mothers.

Graham McDonough, a former Catholic teacher, has put together an article looking at the “crisis” in the Catholic Church (specifically, but not limited to, a declining population) and the role publicly-funded Separate schools play in this equation. “Some might argue that the role of the Catholic school should be to echo ‘faithfully’ the words of the Church’s bishops — its official teachers on doctrine — and, it is hoped, restore a climate of faith and ‘identifiably’ Christian community by restoring an atmosphere of greater devotion and discipline,” he explains. “Others might say that it is difficult to speak of faith and a faith community when matters of social justice for women and queer persons within the Church are left publicly unchallenged. And in the midst of all this controversy is the matter of the school being asked to undertake socializing

students in the faith, because this is not being done adequately at home.”

Shannon Hogan, Executive Assistant in the Professional Development Department at the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association examines some of the ways in which OECTA is helping its members directly address a number of social justice issues in the classroom.

Mike Corbett explores the tensions between schooling and migration in Atlantic Canada, and the perhaps contradictory role the school plays in coastal communities: “Definitions of ‘success’ current among contemporary school promoters may be at odds with those found in traditional coastal communities. In rural and coastal places, community success stories are often simultaneously stories of school failure; dropouts typically stay and contribute to the community.”

Haydée Davis-Spinks, a grade 5/6 teacher in an inner-city school in Toronto, and several of her students have created a project exploring what “being Canadian” means to each of them. Students interviewed family members who emigrated to Canada and learned about their stories, both as citizens of another country and culture and as immigrants to a new country. The result is a remarkable class journey examining what immigration, assimilation, diversity and understanding mean to these students, and how they interacted with their family

histories and then taught their own classmates about what they had learned. The students described their project in this way: “We are the world! 30 students....16 countries....5 continents....1 class!”.

The editors look at a range of well-publicized “crises” facing youth today — violence, inactivity, apathy, poor health, low self-esteem — and the various “magic pills” that have been manufactured and promoted as cures...often using the school as a sort of educational Pez dispenser to administer these highly profitable antidotes.

And of course there’s the ever-popular *Education Roundup* in which Larry Kuehn casts his eye over the educational landscape and reports back on a diverse range of stories and issues.

Meera Sethi, a Toronto-based artist and designer, provided the cover illustration. Readers are encouraged to learn more about Meera’s work at www.meerasethi.com

“Capitalizing on Crisis in Schools and Society” is an attempt to examine some of the ways in which the language of crisis — and the marketing of crisis

— have become a highly profitable cottage industry. The proponents of education privatization have certainly benefited, offering their private “solutions” to parents who are looking to buy an escape from schools — or at least an escape from how schools are portrayed.

But there is another aspect to this discussion — how the school is increasingly looked to as the institution primarily responsible for solving problems in wider society. Insufficient economic productivity or high unemployment? It’s up to the school to fix it. Political apathy, or violence, or obesity? What’s the school (with a little help from a few “reformed” fast food companies or video game manufacturers) going to do about it?

This is not to say that there should be no connections between schools and society — on the contrary, the ties (and the mutual responsibilities) are profound. This is precisely why the debates about what is taught in schools, to whom, with what, and where, continue to resonate. And these are the very questions so many of the contributors to this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* have explored in such detail.



ERIKA SHAKER AND
BERNIE FROESE-GERMAIN

Reading, Writing and Re-branding Maybe (“educational”) toxic sludge *is* good for you

Haven't you heard? Youth are in crisis. A steady diet of junk food, cell phones, YouTube, TV, and video games has resulted in a veritable epidemic of poor nutrition, worse health, minimal activity, insecurity, violence, zero discipline, and a thorough lack of appreciation for political involvement, culture and the arts among the younger generation. But don't worry — a number of (possibly) well-meaning but (definitely) profit-conscious corporations have been busy concocting magic pills to solve the “crisis” of youth. And, although some of these products aren't explicitly for classroom use, the school often plays the role of Pez dispenser (remember those pocket-sized mechanical candy dispensers?), bestowing educational legitimacy on a whole raft of products that promise to keep kids fit, healthy, attentive, safe and, *of course*, smart.

There's nothing particularly new about the process of creating and marketing products designed to make consumer's lives easier — or at least that's the excuse for the seemingly ceaseless stream of “convenience-based” devices from appliances to cleaning products to small electronic items that beep reminders to harried parents: “pick up eggs”; “pick up milk”; “pick up your child.” Products to “reduce the signs of aging,” abound.

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Commercials instruct potential patients to self-diagnose a range of “symptoms” from the common (are you ever tired? sad?), to the obscure (could you possibly be suffering from “Restless Leg Syndrome?”), and then to ask your doctor for <insert drug here> at your next visit. So consumption as solution to the problems that ail us is not new.

Of course excessive consumption is of *itself* also *the* problem. The Center for the Study of Commercialism describes commercialism as “ubiquitous product marketing that leads to a preoccupation with individual consumption to the detriment of oneself and society.”¹ This process perpetuates itself with new products and services being marketed to youth among others to address problems that may have been caused or at least facilitated by rampant commercialism in the first place. Business as usual in a free market society economy.

But what we would like to look at in this article is how a segment of society — youth — synonymous with the process of “becoming” and in a perpetual state of development is increasingly the focus of a highly profitable range of “solutions” for its unfinished, imperfect state — and how the school is often enlisted as the primary vehicle to administer, legitimize and in some cases promote these quick fixes.

Within this framework, virtually every aspect of youth existence — from the biological realities of puberty to the most unfair and unflattering generalizations and misperceptions — is a matter that can be “fixed,” “cured,” “camouflaged,” or “minimized.” And the school, properly enlisted in this campaign to beautify, embolden and health-ify, can ensure that this is no mere marketing campaign — if it’s not explicitly educational, at the very least it’s “good for you.”

So here we have a list of some of the latest products intended to take the average awkward (read: acned), apathetic (doesn’t listen to the news), inactive (plays too many video games, eats Doritos, drinks pop), unhealthy (ditto), unsafe (young offenders, cyberbullies), uncaring (self-explanatory) and unscholarly (video games and TV) youth, and transform him or her into...well...a sort of Stepford kid. What kids have never been. Not even in the good old days.

Health and healthy living

Nutrition

Nutrition is a topic that is consistently on the radar, in part because it's visible. Rising rates of obesity, type II diabetes and general poor health have generated significant public attention. Toronto health officials recently called for a ban on food and beverage advertising to kids under the age of 13, presumably similar to Quebec's legislation. Advertising Standards of Canada, which encourages industry self-regulation, has proposed the Canadian Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, which focuses marketing communications on consumers over the age of 12. However, the Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) has pointed out that the "Advertising to Children" guidelines are so narrow that even companies like Coca-Cola can claim to have not advertised to kids, and commercially-based definitions of "nutritious" allow Frosted Flakes and Kraft Dinner to be passed off as good for kids.

CSPI has also documented the degree to which certain provincial governments and ministries of education are encouraging or facilitating healthier food choices in cafeterias and vending machines, particularly in elementary schools.² Now, we're not so cynical as to think this is a "bad" thing. Regulations that ensure healthier food choices for kids — for everyone — are certainly positive. But there have been some unintended consequences (not entirely unpredictable when readers consider the heavily biased self-regulation language that permeates the food and beverage industry as indicated above).

So perhaps we shouldn't have been surprised when Nesquik began promoting its eight ounce, ready-to-drink (RTD!) servings of "flavoured milk" products (chocolate or strawberry!) as meeting the newly clarified American school nutritional standards. (The 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization clarified [!] that schools must sell "fluid milk," not "fluid milk products" which only need to be 51% fluid milk.) According to the American Dietetic Association (or at least how the Association was quoted by Nesquik), "children and teens that drink flavoured milk consumed more milk overall and fewer sodas and sugary fruit drinks.....The nutritional benefits of milk more than offset any additional fat or calories in flavoured milk."³

And when Coca-Cola and Pepsi were banned from elementary schools (or agreed to stop “targeting” these soft drinks in schools, in self-imposed guidelines developed in 2006), someone who was feeling particularly wicked might point out that since both soft drink giants also have their product lines of juices, energy drinks

or drinks with “health benefits” (also known as “value-added beverages”), and bottled water, that perhaps their sales weren’t going to be too negatively impacted.⁴ In fact, the new corporate emphasis on their “healthier” options might actually turn out to be

The new corporate emphasis on their “healthier” options might actually turn out to be quite an effective marketing tool, slotting nicely into the “Corporate Social Responsibility” model.

quite an effective marketing tool, slotting nicely into the “Corporate Social Responsibility” model. Which could be why we’ve seen such an onslaught of beverage and bottled water companies launching “healthier” alternatives targeted to kids, and pacifying parents who will buy or at least approve of these ‘new-tritious’ drinks.

The branded bottled water market deserves some mention unto itself, especially since it was not so long ago that the prospect of paying for water instead of just turning on the tap to pour a glass of the stuff was unimaginable. But what a difference a decade and a half makes, especially against the backdrop of concern for the health of our kids...and their academic achievement (yes, there is a connection, apparently found somewhere between Aquafina and Dasani).

Product or movie tie-ins help cement relationships with the kindergarten set, but so do special kid-sized versions of grown-up bottles, or bottles that are also toys.⁵ Kids Only Bottled Water — which gives kids the option of “water of their very own” (presumably because the bottles come in the shapes of Scooby-Doo, Bratz dolls, Marvel Heroes, and Superman and Batman) — promotes itself as giving kids “a healthy drink option without sacrificing the fun of being a kid.” Who knew plain, unbranded water was such a drag?

Or so educationally *unfriendly*? After all, according to Public Health Professional Jacey Greece (a researcher and doctoral student at Boston University’s School of Public Health), kids drink

less water on a weekly basis than they should and are therefore under-hydrated while school is in session. If kids choose a sugary drink, the rush is only temporary. “But if they correctly hydrate themselves with water throughout the day, they will have more energy and higher concentration levels....Kids care about ‘what’s cool’, so ... kids can make healthy decisions when they have products to which they can relate.” It seems that the effect of having water kids can’t “relate” to may not only translate to under-hydration, but a failing grade in Chemistry.⁶

Inactivity

The other component of the health and healthy living twist to Corporate Social Responsibility campaigns is activity — or rather, combating the inactivity that is so often associated with sofa-riding, video-game playing, TV- or computer-addicted youth. Much in the same manner that corporate images are being reinvented through the lens of “health”, a number of companies, often on the receiving end of criticism about sedentary lifestyles, are clamouring for the opportunity to don their metaphorical running shoes and prove just how cool exercise can be — with a little help from the right sponsor.

Take gym class — or not. Physical education is less and less of a requirement for schools across the continent. And while a lack of student interest is often blamed, we have to think that a lack of adequate funding for equipment might have something to do with it, as well as a de-emphasis on PhysEd in a standardized testing-crazed culture where time spent in gym class means time not spent on test prep.

The solution? Make gym cool again. Which is why video games (they made you fat, but now they can make you fit!) like Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) have literally become gym class in schools across the U.S.⁷ It’s a trend called “exergaming” (get it?), and several fitness centres across North America have opened, using video games as a major form of cyber “activity”. DDR promotes itself as a “relatively cheap addition to any PhysEd program. As opposed to shelling out a small fortune for 25 basketballs or 25 baseball gloves, schools can use their existing TV sets, and then purchase an Xbox or PlayStation console for roughly US\$149 and the game software for US\$60.” West Virginia signed a state-wide deal with Konami Digital

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Entertainment to put DDR and Xbox consoles into all 765 public schools to be used in PhysEd class and, (wait for it) DDR curriculum has been developed.

It's never too early to instill a love of fitness and learning in the next generation, apparently (particularly when it's proven to be such a profitable marketing tool), and this has resulted in the creation of several products that belong in the "you can't make this stuff up" category. Take Fisher-Price's "SMART CYCLE Physical Learning Arcade System," a self-described combination exercise bicycle/learning centre/video arcade toy for pre-schoolers (three to six years old) that plugs into the TV, perfect for that chubby, exercise-averse, multi-tasking youngster (Fisher-Price is careful to note that the TV set is not included). According to the toy company's website, in addition to motor skills it teaches everything from counting and spelling, to problem-solving, creativity and spatial reasoning.⁸

In an earlier article we looked at McDonald's very unique attempt to combine fitness, "healthy choices" and fundraising in the Go Active! Program (which may or may not feature Ronald, depending on the degree of commercial blatancy).⁹ As part of its campaign to reinvent itself in the wake of "Supersize Me!", McDonald's has introduced, alongside the more traditional Big Mac, "nutritious options" like apple slices with caramel dipping sauce. A new addition to McDonald's play areas are Kidz Sports Bikes: exercise bikes hooked up to Playstation 2 software, replacing traditional video games and demonstrating just how much McDonald's is really all about healthy living.¹⁰

Principals have been brought on board, too, as part of the corporation's education strategy. The fast food giant sponsors an award for the "most distinguished school principal in Canada". The Canadian Association of Principals solicits nominations for award recipients and McDonald's pays transportation and accommodation costs for the winner to attend the principals' annual convention.¹¹

As another part of their re-branding campaign, McDonald's has decided to court their harshest critics — mothers — by developing a "Mom Panel." On their TV debut (where McDonald's handed out \$5 Arch cards and free samples of its Fruit and Walnut salad), the Panel gave a (surprise!) "thumbs up about the new things they are learning about the fast food giant." What

sorts of things? Panelist Gilda McHenry was “surprised to learn McDonald’s is the No. 1 purchaser of apples in the country.” And Joanna Canizares said she was “satisfied to hear the chain uses the same ‘real food’ she buys at the grocery store.”¹²

Recruiting everyday moms as part of a PR campaign, and demonstrating through sponsored assemblies in schools across North America (and beyond) McDonald’s recent discovery of nutrition, health and fitness as powerful marketing tools, are two masterful initiatives designed to remake the image of a company synonymous with Texas-sized servings of deep-fried food-like products.

Even fundraising can be part of a fitness strategy — and have educational, curriculum-related benefits, too.

Of course, McDonald’s is not alone in this. Lobbying for daily PhysEd classes in U.S. schools, Nike (clothing and sports equipment “by kids, for kids”) has long tried to associate itself with school-sanctioned fitness (no self-interest there). In collaboration with Spark (Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids), Nike has developed (a standards-based) PE2GO — “fun, interactive and constantly moving” — to replace “existing, outmoded” PhysEd classes.¹³ The program was launched in 2003 in six American cities, reaching over 6,000 elementary school students.

Wonderbread has also gotten in on the action — the “Move to Your Groove” contest promises to make the school with the highest average minutes of exercise famous by printing the school name and photo on a package of Wonderbread. The winning school will be featured in *Kidsworld* magazine, an in-school ad-driven publication, which also promotes the program to schools across Canada.¹⁴ And Presswood Entertainment, a company that schools can hire to manage fundraising events — dance-a-thons, for example — suggests to potential clients that through these events, “teachers may appreciate having the opportunity to assess student learning toward the ‘dance’ strand on the Ontario Provincial Report Card.”¹⁵ Even fundraising can be part of a fitness strategy — and have educational, curriculum-related benefits, too.

But activity, as we know, goes beyond what’s mandated as part of the curriculum. Free play, otherwise known as recess, has been an undeniable casualty of the high-stakes testing agenda.

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A decade ago, elementary schools in Atlanta, Georgia eliminated recess (otherwise known as “a waste of precious time”) in a district-wide measure as part of an effort to raise test scores.¹⁶ According to some sources, roughly 40% of U.S. school districts have eliminated or are considering eliminating recess¹⁷ for academic, staffing or safety reasons. Not surprisingly, this has caused some concern, ranging from the “cruelty” argument to the (perhaps more predictable) educational one. Recess helps eliminate the “fidget factor” among students, allowing them to concentrate better in class, and it’s where kids learn “important social skills” — so there are “measurable benefits” to having time to run around in an unstructured setting and let off steam.¹⁸

The debate has created yet another way for certain companies to reinvent themselves. In the U.S., Cartoon Network has taken the plunge, and teamed up with the Parent Teacher Association for a “Rescuing Recess” program (part of CN’s “Get Animated!” [get it?] campaign). Seems Cartoon Network thinks it can use its “emotional connection with its audience and go to bat for it in the national fight to save recess.”

And it’s a thorough campaign, too: letters from CN’s target audience (sorry — kids), a web presence (www.rescuingrecess.com), a PTA survey validating the need for recess, public service announcements, recess kits with game instructions (really necessary for jump-rope and duck-duck-goose?) and volunteer recruitment information, and grants to local schools (who handed in the most letters) and the Florida PTA (the state with the highest participation).¹⁹ What a great way for a company that makes millions of dollars by encouraging the most sedentary of activities — watching TV — to reinvent itself as advocating for a child’s right to play. And it appears to have been well worth the effort:

Rescuing Recess is the most successful community relations program in Cartoon Network’s history. National Recess Week is proclaimed in an additional 28 cities by mayors across the U.S. The program has also received more than 15 different industry awards and honors including the US Chamber of Commerce Community Service Award, the Public Affairs Council Corporate Grassroots Innovation Award and The PR News Platinum PR Award that further underscores its contribution to the cause marketing, community relations and public affairs.²⁰

Caring for kids, or appearing to, certainly makes good business sense. Especially when it improves the bottom line. And with lawmakers, parents and media outlets having declared war on the poor health of youth across the continent, it's no secret why companies, associated with the stereotypical views of video game/Doritos-addicted kids, are taking the opportunity to remake themselves in a way that not only increases their profits and creates new markets, but can claim to boost the educational performance of their target market.

But we need to ask ourselves: are “value-added” drinks or a leaner, roller-blading Ronald McDonald really about companies reinventing *themselves*, or is it rather a case of reinventing how they're *perceived* — largely by associating themselves with the influential and trusted setting of the school, or with the act of facilitating educational development?

Academic and extracurricular activities

Among the findings of the 2004 survey of school commercialism in Canada²¹ was that the majority of elementary schools reported using Scholastic educational materials. Most of us can probably recall bringing those familiar book order forms home in our school bags.

Juliet Schor, author of *Born To Buy*, describes Scholastic as a prime example of a corporation that gains access to schools and students by “gliding in under the wholesome halo”. In her critique of the corporate giant she notes that

[i]t has a longstanding reputation as a quality educational enterprise and represents itself as the ‘most trusted name in publishing, education and entertainment.’ While it enjoys a reputation as a benign, educationally based company, Scholastic is a \$2 billion giant that has been one of the leading and most aggressive forces for introducing corporate influence into schools through its sponsored curricula, licensed products at fairs, and sales of toys and other products on its book order forms.²²

This may come as a surprise to more than a few parents. Some Canadian parents expressed shock at a series of questionable Valentine's cards being promoted in a recent Scholastic Canada flyer — cards with messages like, “When you think back on what we had, I hope that you'll be: kind; happy; (or) floating face down

in a river.” This comment from one parent who ordered the cards for her daughter underscores Scholastic’s enduring wholesome image: “I just assumed that anything she could order in that book order was all right. I didn’t know I had to look for PG- or R-rated.”²³

Schor provides numerous examples of products and promotions — with Nickelodeon, Disney, Hershey’s and other corporations — flogged through the book order forms which were “once a cheap and convenient way of getting books to children, [but] they have become a bonanza for media and toy companies.”²⁴

Disney Corp. may also glide into schools on the wholesome halo and, in this case, on the premise that it can boost boys’ interest in reading. “Comics in the Classroom” is a Disney-sponsored pilot program in Maryland which uses classic Disney comics to teach reading and writing skills to over 500 students in grade 3, with the state department of education planning an expansion of the program.²⁵ A growing concern within the educational community, improving boys’ literacy (with boys preferring “nontraditional reading materials like comics”) appears to be one of the objectives of the program. Molnar and Boninger cite this program as an example of a general trend in the advertising and marketing industry in which the “boundary between advertising and editorial content [be it TV programming or school curricula] is becoming less distinct.”²⁶

Disney’s association with boys and reading surely won’t hurt its corporate image. Schor notes that corporations, recognizing the educational legitimacy conferred by the school’s mission on anything associated with it, actively recruit teachers to promote their products or act as a conduit for the company’s message — for example, Crayola viewing teachers as “brand ambassadors”, or logging company Weyerhaeuser compensating teachers to attend a summer program it offers on science and the environment. Then there was the short-lived marketing campaign by General Mills, makers of Reese’s Puffs cereal, to pay teachers in Minnesota to have ads for the product painted on their cars, and “instructed them to place the cars next to where the school buses parked,”²⁷ did we mention the campaign was short-lived?

Catherine Price, writing in the *LA Times*, says that, “When it comes to product placement masquerading as education, junk foods dominate the market.” And proceeds to illustrate her point by listing several examples of corporate-sponsored math curriculum materials: “Reese’s Pieces: Count By Fives”, “The Oreo

Cookie Counting Book”, “Hershey’s Kisses Addition Book” (apparently available through Amazon.com), “Hershey’s Kisses Subtraction Book”, “Hershey’s Kisses Multiplication and Division Book”, “Hershey’s

Fractions.” Not to be outdone by Hershey’s, other companies have jumped on the bandwagon giving us “M&Ms Addition Book”, “Skittles Riddles Math”, or the “Twizzlers Percentages Book” — in the latter,

Catherine Price, writing in the LA Times, says that, “When it comes to product placement masquerading as education, junk foods dominate the market.”

“space aliens descend on a classroom and, in an unexpected plot twist, demand Twizzlers in exchange for lesson plans.”²⁸ Price observes that, “until we refuse to buy junk food that masquerades as lesson plans — a political statement that is very easy, personally, to make — our kids’ health problems will be too numerous to be counted with one package of Oreos.” Easy only if enough of us recognize that this is indeed junk food marketing thinly veiled as a lesson plan, and that the problem with this lesson is that “encouraging children to learn with junk food also encourages them to eat it”.²⁹

In 2003, McDonald’s Corp. partnered with Scholastic on a marketing campaign designed to foster reading among young children, in which McDonald’s would mail a small lending library of Scholastic books to U.S. pre-school and kindergarten classrooms. Under-resourced schools regard this as a windfall, especially given the poor state of many school libraries. Oser writes that “McDonald’s intent is to associate its mascot, the clown Ronald McDonald, with preschoolers’ emotions toward learning to read, and to raise awareness of Ronald as a brand icon among kids.” According to the campaign’s media director, “Ronald embodies the positive qualities of what education and reading stand for.”³⁰ Of course the importance of reading is the first thing that pops into our minds when we see the popular mascot.

One Florida school board went so far as to issue report cards in envelopes bearing the cheery image of Ronald McDonald “promising a free Happy Meal to students with good grades, behavior, or attendance”.³¹ The controversial in-school marketing program was halted following a campaign led by the Campaign for a

Commercial-Free Childhood that resulted in nearly 2,000 parent complaints, parents who clearly did not make the positive connection between the corporate clown and their childrens' learning.

No doubt Pizza Hut, through its popular Book it! program — in which students receive free pizza in exchange for meeting reading goals — would like parents and teachers to think of literacy every time they see the Pizza Hut logo or visit the restaurant chain.

Marketers recognize that children spend large amounts of time in front of digital screens of various types (TV, video games, computers, mobile phones, etc.). They're also well aware that brand loyalty is strengthened by reaching children as early as possible, and that children have enormous purchasing power. As such marketers are increasingly targeting the youngest and most vulnerable of children — babies and toddlers — with a range of products: computer software, “educational” videos (e.g., Baby Einstein), television programs for babies (e.g., BabyTV). Much of this is promoted as being educational, presumably to give pre-schoolers that “competitive edge” parents feel their kids need to enter and succeed in school. This is despite the lack of evidence of educational value of many of these products, and the warning by the American Academy of Pediatrics urging parents to avoid exposing children under the age of two to television.

Insecure? Apathetic? Anxious? Otherwise imperfect?

A litany of other “flaws” that are inherent in youth — in all of us, for that matter — have provided a range of unique marketing opportunities that also make use of the school environment to provide added legitimacy. Some of these initiatives mesh with the classroom about as seamlessly as a square peg in a round hole, but we leave that for the reader to judge.

Concerns over youth and school violence have created another growing market.

When BusRadio³² promoted itself to school districts in the U.S., part of its pitch was that the program would actually calm kids down and curb rowdiness, improving safety on the drive to school.³³ The music is “appropriate” and market- and age-targeted. “Besides offering safety messages, the programming also leads to more silence and order as students sit and listen.”³⁴

Using the school bus as an advertising vehicle (pun intended) has other ramifications. Last year a school district in Colorado was trying to raise money to pay for a GPS tracking system to pinpoint bus locations. So the district decided to sell ad space on the buses themselves and installed 3'x5' print ads on the exterior of 150 of the district's 220 vehicles. It raised so much money that not only can the district launch the GPS system, it can install video cameras in the buses to monitor student behaviour.³⁵

School yearbook photos — not the act of taking the pictures, but of digitally altering them and how we want to be remembered — have created another marketing opportunity. This one goes beyond airbrushing acne and birthmarks: photo studios can de-frizz hair, eliminate sunburn, digitally remove braces, piercings and tattoos, even shave off 10 pounds. And as for what might be considered changing reality, that's not it at all, explains the owner of one photo studio. "Those braces are coming off, and hopefully, those blemishes are clearing up. So that's not going to be who you are a few years from now, anyway." (At least) one student agrees: "It's a picture you'll have forever in your yearbook or hanging up in your house. And down the road, you want to be remembered as perfect as possible."³⁶

It's not all about appearances, though. Some companies have taken a distinctly different, social responsibility route. Tetra Pak, for example, launched "Get your creative juices flowing" in January 2006 to teach students about recycling. Well, sort of. According to Tetra Pak president Evelyn Watson, "We are committed to environmental responsibility and the goal of this program is twofold: to challenge students' creativity and to raise awareness of environmental issues in waste reduction and diversion. Using art and creativity as a tool, we hope to educate Canada's youth on the importance of preserving the environment". Lofty goals. So, how is this being accomplished? Students must use a minimum of 500 empty Tetra Pak cartons and other recyclable materials to create "innovative and creative" art projects. Tetra Pak also provides curriculum (it is educational, after all) to support this challenge, focusing on waste management and recycling.³⁷ Thumbs up to Tetra Pak for finding an educational way to highlight its green image, particularly when concerns are raised about whether the product can even be recycled.³⁸

We couldn't resist including this next example, one that has been soundly panned. Japanese drug manufacturer Takeda Pharmaceuticals ran a TV commercial promoting its sleeping drug, Rozerem, directly to students. The commercial was allowed in the U.S. under the "direct to consumer" law, and used images of a blackboard, school books and a school bus while the voice-over intoned: "Rozerem would like to remind you that it's back to school season. Ask your doctor today if Rozerem is right for you."³⁹ For this, Consumer International bestowed the title of "world's worst product" on the company and its drug.

Instead of automatically slotting commercial "but it's about enhancing education!" initiatives into the Corporate Social Responsibility category, perhaps we should start with a healthy dose of skepticism. Does it even make sense that Alpha-Bits breakfast cereal has a pen pals program to educate kids about writing letters? Or that Twizzler really wants to help students learn how to study?

Perhaps the association between Indigo Bookstores and their "Love of Reading" program, which allows schools to win money to augment their libraries, is a more logical connection — but maybe what we should be asking is, if literacy is such a priority, should we be leaving its promotion to what amounts to a corporate lottery, rather than ensuring all students have access, as a fundamental right, to books?

Conclusion

Although much of this article is written with tongue firmly in cheek, and with a healthy dose of irony, we do not mean to imply that all is perfect, or that everything is a subject for derision. Henry Giroux eloquently and forcefully describes the current situation with regard to youth:

...youth have been separated both from the discourse of the social contract and from any ethical commitment to provide young people, through the public sphere, with the prospects of a decent and democratic future.....Youth increasingly have come to be seen as a problem rather than as a resource for investing in the future....Youth now constitute a crisis that has less to do with improving the future than with denying it. As Larry Grossberg points out, "It has become common to think of kids as a threat to the existing social order and for kids to be blamed for the prob-

lems they experience. We slide from kids in trouble, kids have problems, and kids are threatened, to kids as trouble, kids as problems, and kids as threatening.” No longer “viewed as a privileged sign and embodiment of the future,” youth are now increasingly demonized by the popular media and derided by politicians looking for quick-fix solutions to crime and other social ills.⁴⁰

Youth in marginalized communities — or marginalized youth — deal with realities that some of us can only imagine. Too many children live in poverty. Bullying — online or in person — is a reality for many young people. The influence of a media-saturated culture has only intensified many of the pressures inherent among youth. Feelings of isolation or of being misunderstood must not be minimized or ignored. But neither should these (often) media-driven perceptions define a generation of youth, or society’s expectations of them.

Schools, too, are dealing with serious realities that require solutions — does adherence to a standardized idea of what schools should teach and the ways in which schools and students are evaluated change expectations of education, or change the nature of education itself? Who suffers as a result? What happens when schools have less and less money for basics and turn to private funding sources? Is it solely the school’s responsibility to keep kids engaged, healthy and active? What are the results of constantly referring to education as “outmoded,” something that needs to be made “relevant” to youth?

These are important questions and they deserve consideration and consultation. But the solutions that are required are clearly not those manufactured as part of a re-branding campaign by corporations looking to increase market- and mind-share. The only effective way to begin to confront crises (perceived or actual) in schools and society is to ensure that the process of examination is inherently democratic, and infused with critical thinking, not with quick fixes.

* * *

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This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* examines some of the ways in which various crises in education (whether legitimate or manufactured) are taken advantage of — for financial, political or ideological gain. This provides an opportunity to explore versions of “disaster capitalism” from the perspective of education and educational institutions. How has the neo-liberal agenda played out in the education systems in Canada and the U.S.? How is it reshaping universities and academia? Does it have implications for the rise of private tutoring, the Turnaround initiative implemented in “struggling” schools, or the prevalent testing and standardization agenda? This issue also explores the role schools are playing—or have been told they must play—in order to address a number of “crises” (created, perceived or actual) in broader society. Of course, this often has a number of implications, predictable or unintended, for the school and its relationship with students, teachers and the community.

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