

# KNOCKING DOWN WALLS AND BU FURNITURE?

What are Innovative Learning Environments in NZ schools really about?

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**ARE WE FACING** a learning revolution through Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs) or are we merely recycling the ‘open barns’ of the 1970s? Migrating from the notion of ‘Modern Learning Environments’, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (online) term ILEs as ‘the complete physical, social and pedagogical context in which learning is intended to occur’. It is an environment that is ‘capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change – thus remaining future focused’. The Ministry of Education has clearly signalled strategic intentions for 21st century learning practices through the provision of infrastructure targeted in their ‘Four year plan 2015–2019’.

## Is it old wine in new bottles?

At risk of sounding long in the tooth, we both remember teaching in the ‘open plan’ classrooms of 1970’s construction. Back then the success of open plan classrooms depended on the willingness and capabilities of teachers to work flexibly with like-minded others. In working with teachers in ILEs and in clusters of schools in schooling improvement contexts, we consider that ILEs offer great potential for reconceptualising what we understand about content, resources, learners and teachers.

Nevertheless, it is important to be mindful of the politics behind any educational innovations associated with 21st century schooling rhetoric. Since the 1970s there have been a range of moves: the de-privatisation of classrooms, outcomes based curriculum; learners themselves individualised (measured, monitored and taught to self manage); the scrutiny of student achievement (data-driven practice); appraisal systems as intensified performance management; ubiquitous technologies; and Education itself framed as an ‘ecosystem’ rather than an isolated event. The current epoch is definitely *not* old wine in new bottles. School leaders seem to be paddling permanent ‘white water’.

With the signalling of so much change, we surveyed over 200 Primary and Secondary teachers and principals to learn more about their perceptions of ILEs. We are also appreciative of the thirty-one principals who additionally agreed to in-depth interviews<sup>1</sup>. A range of perspectives were voiced. Although the financial and managerial concerns of remodelling the physical environment is a considerable issue for many principals, there is a very clear emphasis on pedagogical concerns. Principals are thinking about what the changes mean for learners in their schools.

I think it’s about doing things different ways and having the flexibility to really put the focus back on the learner. So many people are at the moment around me turning it into a commercial commodity where the starting point is focusing only on the physical environment and the furnishing you’ve got, and the acoustics in your room, the access with devices and technology and internet . . . Innovative learning environments have to start with the pedagogy and what you are doing with your children. (Natalie)

It is also pertinent to highlight that ILEs are not just about localised learning, the notion of de-privatisation is scaling up beyond the classroom to schools as networks or ecosystems.

## Learning ecosystems

Most of us are familiar with the common-place biological term ‘ecosystem’ as an interaction between a local community of organisms and its environment. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) incorporate the concept of ‘ecosystem’ into the vernacular of schooling by adding the term ‘learning’. They define ‘*learning ecosystems*’ as ‘interdependent combinations of different species of providers and organisations playing different roles with learners in differing relationships to them over time and in varying mixes’ (OECD, 2015, p.13). The notion of an ecosystem where learning is personalised across a range of institutions and spaces (physical and cyber), is articulated by Lynette.

I think what I got from it was a move away from the mindset of school as a ‘be-all’ and ‘end-all’ – that education only happens in one school, in one classroom between the hours of 9 and 3. Students should be entitled to many ways of learning and many different inputs into that learning. So it could be that they’re enrolled in this particular school, but they also have this online thing going on. Or they’re enrolled in different courses at different schools and the learning is tailored to the child, rather than the child to that school – and the school is there to provide everything . . . It is all at system level, you know. (Lynette).

Thus, as a learning ecosystem, Education can take place anywhere, anyhow and arguably be delivered by anyone. For many years now, school leaders have been challenged to think about learning at three levels – at, across and beyond their school. This is intensified with the perceived need to network with other organisations and individuals beyond the school and in the

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# YING NEW



Jennifer Charteris



Dianne Smardon

globally connected context. The OECD identify that networks, communities, chains and initiatives that extend beyond the school are critical in the building and sustaining of innovative learning. Examples in the NZ context include 'Investing in Educational Success', 'Networked Learning Communities' and now, 'Communities of Learners'. These initiatives are central policy levers for ILE development.

Principals we spoke with incorporated their conceptual understandings of learning ecosystems with the education system that currently exists in many schools. Mel describes how each aspect of the system influences and impacts upon others with a 'flow-on' effect where resources, content, learners and teachers (the pedagogical core) interact in a systematic way.

The learning ecosystem is where each thing has a flow-on effect that affects the different aspects of what's happening in the classroom. So, for example, if you have a class with no laptops, introducing computers or laptops into that classroom would have a flow-on effect as to how the students can learn and how the teacher has to teach and what opportunities the kids have, you know, what further things are going to open up for them. (Mel)

It can be unhelpful to construct a binary 'either/or' argument between physical changes to classrooms and pedagogy. Pedagogy and design are interrelated and co-produce learning. Raleigh, as a learning leader, sees the underlying philosophy for learning as of paramount importance.

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I think ILEs are really about the pedagogy as well as the physical space. We have just finished spending 2 million dollars on changes to our property, to bring it more in line with the Ministry's guidelines. One of the things that I talked about with the staff, and we talked it about an awful lot, was 'how does space influence learning?' The critical part is the learning. It's not the space. Space does influence what you can do, but the pedagogy you adopt can be utilised in any space. (Raleigh)

### Challenges for principals

By making the physical changes to school environments, as maintenance and scheduled changes are timed, it is hoped that these moves will positively impact on teaching and learning. Rather than merely changing the shape of classrooms, ILEs signal a profound shift to the nature of schooling in Aotearoa/New Zealand. With the pending Education Reform Act, Investing in Education Success policy and moves to reshape schools into ILEs we now are facing some of the most pervasive shifts in the education system since 'Tomorrow's Schools' in 1989.

ILEs pose a pivotal challenge for 'white water' leadership where principals, as learning leaders, critically navigate the topography of proposed change. As a significant shift in schools and schooling, teacher preparation and professional development are of profound importance. Grant highlights the importance of brokering the relational dynamic and philosophy for 21st century learning.

Right, I get the challenge – that it's all very well to put in furniture and create an ILE but it's the practice that goes on there . . . Our plans have just been finished now before it goes out to tender. I want two teachers working in there who have the right philosophy and mind, who like working together and they like learning together. And so, you know, I think the philosophy is the most important thing, not the type of furniture we dump in there. (Grant)

### Structural support

The structural support provided for this initiative is far more significant than changing the size of the learning space. It includes prioritising targeted support for principals who, as learning leaders, empower teachers to also lead and innovate. Pedagogically, what may need to alter is the philosophy and beliefs held by teachers about learners, learning and how learning happens. How might teacher professional learning and development be broadened to broker this space?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ms Dianne Smardon led professional development projects for teachers and school leaders in New Zealand, between 1998 and 2013. She worked with school leaders and teachers as a consultant in Hong Kong. In researching teacher education in New Zealand and the Pacific, she has contributed to a range of research teams. She has published research articles on school leadership and systemic improvement through collaborative peer coaching practices. Based in Hamilton, Dianne undertakes contract work for the University of New England as a teacher educator in Nauru.

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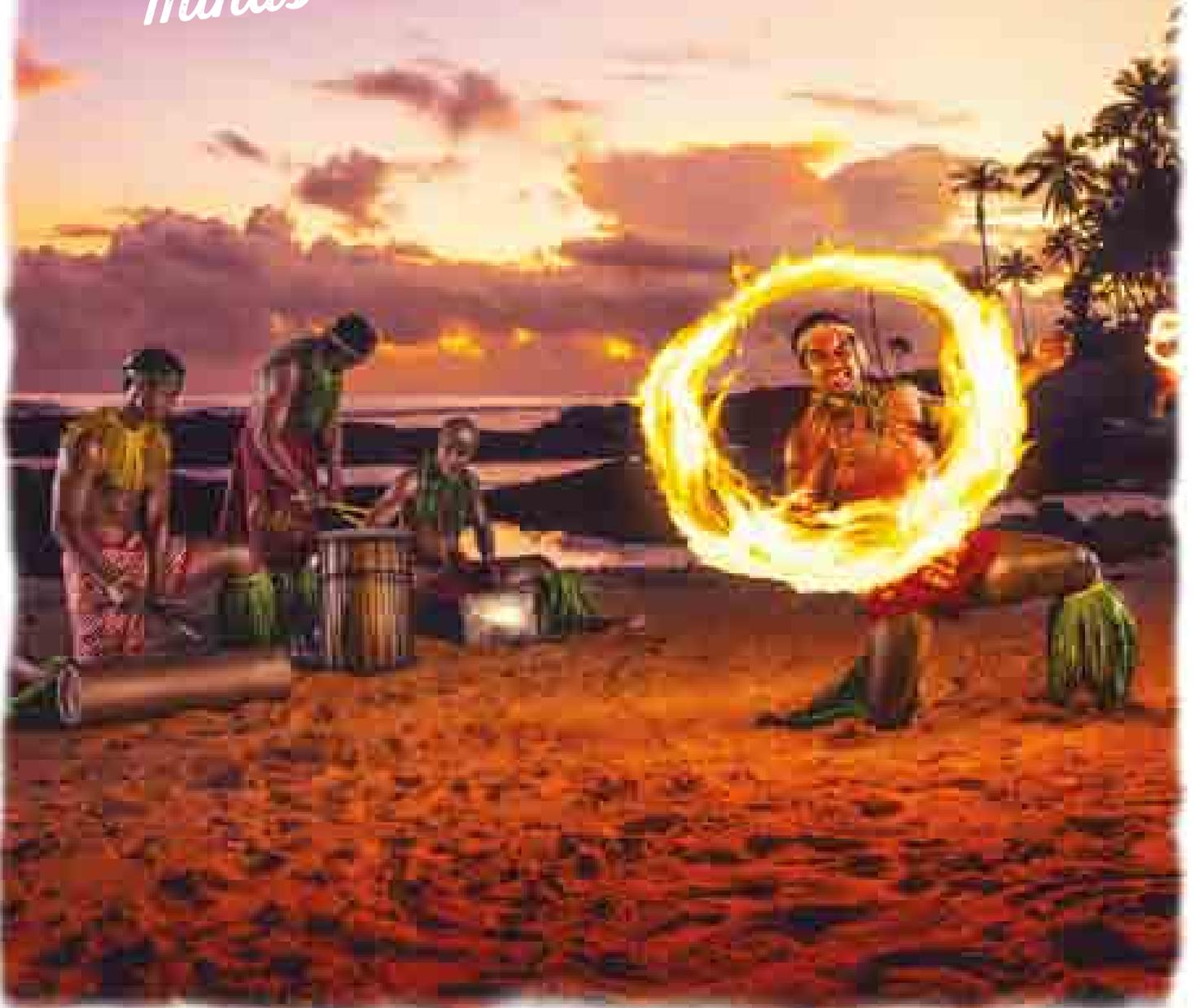
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# THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE BREAKFAST:

## The Cost of Marketing in Schools



Robert Aitken



Leah Watkins

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**SANITARIUM'S RECENT DECISION** to sell Up&Go in vending machines in schools has drawn public criticism about the growing commercialisation of our schools and the increasing consumerisation of our children.

In an environment where education is increasingly expected to seek alternative sources of funding, schools are beginning to rely more heavily on corporate support and financial assistance. The increasing concern raised by this blurring of the lines between education and business is recognised in a recent United Nations report (2014) which addresses the concerns that marketing practices have a detrimental effect on the well-being of children, and impinge on their educational and cultural rights. The Report states unequivocally that, 'the prohibition of advertising should be applied in both public and private schools' (UN Report 2014 p.16). Further, a recent US Report on the commercialisation of the 'schoolhouse' found that advertising to children in schools presents serious threats to children's education and to their psychological and physical well-being. They further recommend that, 'policymakers should prohibit advertising in schools unless the school provides compelling evidence that their intended advertising programme causes no harm to children.' (Molnar, Boninger, Harris, Libby and Fogarty 2011).

In the academic literature, marketing to children in schools has been heavily criticised as unethical and unfair. It is considered unethical because it targets vulnerable consumers who are highly impressionable and unable to recognise the persuasive intent of commercial messages, and unfair, because children in-school are a captive audience in an authoritative environment characterised by both implicit and explicit institutional endorsement.

### Children as Vulnerable Consumers

Concerns about children's vulnerability to marketing messages are based on their limited cognitive ability to understand these messages and thus the fairness of targeting them. It is assumed that when adults experience marketing, their understanding of its persuasive intent prevents them from being unfairly exploited (Gunter, Oates and Blades 2004). For adults, the recognition that a given piece of marketing content is an advertisement triggers a cognitive filter that takes into account the following factors a) the source of the message has other perspectives and other interests than those of the receiver, b) the intention is to persuade, c) persuasive messages are biased, and, d) biased messages demand different interpretive strategies than unbiased messages (Roberts 1982). When these considerations are understood and

applied in the cognitive processing of commercial messages, then the receiver can be described as a competent consumer. However, cognitive research consistently demonstrates that children cannot effectively recognize the persuasive intent of advertising or apply the critical evaluation required to counter it (Graff, Kunkel and Mermen 2012; Marshall 2010; UN Report Article 59 p.14).

If children have a diminished capacity to recognise persuasive intent as a result of their cognitive abilities then they can be regarded as more vulnerable to the effects of marketing than adults (Gunter et al 2004). To achieve mature understanding of marketing messages, children must acquire two key information processing skills. First, they must be able to discriminate at a perceptual level commercial from non-commercial content, and second, they must be able to attribute persuasive intent to it, and to apply that knowledge as a cognitive filter to moderate commercial influence. Each of these capabilities develops over time, largely as a function of cognitive and social development. Estimates of the age at which children can differentiate advertisements from programmes vary from as young as three to up to six years of age (Oates, Blades and Gunter 2002). Conclusions about the age at which children understand persuasive intent also vary. Early studies suggested that persuasive knowledge emerges by the time most children are seven to eight years old (Robertson and Rossiter 1974; Roedder-John 1999), however, more recent studies have suggested that children do not fully understand the persuasive intent of advertising even by the age of 10–12 years (Oates et al. 2002; Chan and McNeal 2002). Studies have found that early adolescents are still in the process of developing knowledge about marketing tactics such as message bias (Boush, Friestad and Rose 1994) and that children do not become sceptical or cynical of self-interested claims made by the source of any message until around the ages of 11–12 (Mills and Keil 2005). Children who lack this understanding and a healthy scepticism towards persuasive messages are more likely to accept the information conveyed in them as truthful and accurate, and are more susceptible to being influenced by advertising than older viewers (Kunkel, Wilcox, Cantor, Palmer, Linn and Dowrick 2004).

### In-School Marketing

Marketing in schools has also been criticised for blurring the line between educational aims such as critical thinking and informed independent choice, and the commercial motives of persuasion

and influence. Molnar et al. (2011), suggest that the values and goals of education are incompatible with the imperatives of business and that the need to foster critical thinking, independent (and freedom of) choice and self-determination do not sit easily with the preferential promotion of particular products:

‘Schools are qualitatively different than other environments in which children find themselves. Children in school are a captive, pre-segmented audience, present in that location ostensibly for the purposes of being guided toward learning and growth by adults who have special training and qualifications to provide them with educative experiences. These unique qualities of the school environment are, frankly, what make it so attractive to marketers.’ (Molnar et al. 2011: 3).

The authors conclude that ‘the potential threat to children posed by marketing in schools is great enough that we believe the default assumption for schools, districts and state and federal policy-makers must be that marketing in schools is harmful unless explicitly proven otherwise’ (Molnar et al. 2011, Executive Summary). Similarly, the UN has recently issued a strong recommendation to ban the practice of in-school marketing. Their rationale for the recommendation is stated as:

‘International human rights standards and national laws on education place a legal obligation on children to attend school. Schools therefore constitute a distinct cultural space, deserving special protection from commercial influence . . . School children offer a captive and credulous audience . . . Marketing and advertising programs are normalised and given legitimacy when embedded in the school context; the strategies deployed lead children to interact and engage with particular brands during school time. Furthermore, the sponsoring of school material and educational content reduces the freedom education institutions have for developing the most appropriate and highest quality curriculum for their students’ (U.N Report 2014: Article 65)

One of the more subtle elements of allowing a commercial presence in schools is the extent to which it normalises the relationship between business and education. For many, schools are seen as public entitlements where children are socialised as citizens rather than as consumers and where ideas should be challenged, and competing and alternative points of view encouraged. In a commercially orientated educational environment, this becomes increasingly difficult. Additionally, it is argued that marketing is a more powerful and pervasive force in the lives of children growing up today than ever before and in-school marketing adds to the commercial pressures that they are already under. Regardless of the particular products being promoted, the wider pro-consumption message has implications for children’s socialisation and their well-being.

Despite this, in New Zealand and other countries, there is increasing reliance on commercial funding in schools. This takes many forms from the provision of ‘free’ breakfasts to the sponsorship of sporting activities.

## Our Research

To examine the perceived vulnerabilities of children to in-school marketing activities we explored the perceptions of the NZ public, parents and educators regarding the Fonterra Milk in

Schools initiative in two research studies. The first study used data from a national online survey of a representative sample of the NZ population. The second study comprised in-depth interviews conducted with primary school principals to investigate their opinions of the scheme.

## Public

Results from the online survey show that the public largely perceived the product itself to be beneficial to children’s health, well-being and, potentially, to their learning. This was particularly so for disadvantaged and lower socio-economic groups. While a minority were concerned about the quality of the product (long-life carton milk), overall, the general view was that the scheme was a ‘good thing.’ However, where respondents referred to the motives underpinning the scheme, opinions were divided between those who perceived it as benevolent verses those regarding it as self-serving. The key reasons given for Fonterra’s actions being perceived as self-serving were to groom future consumers and as a public relations exercise designed to enhance their (damaged) reputation. In terms of children as the target audience many perceived their vulnerability to the marketing of the Fonterra brand as a negative consequence of the scheme. In addition to children’s general vulnerability, specific concerns were raised for ‘uniquely’ vulnerable children such as those with health issues, allergies and weight problems. These issues were in turn linked to socio-economic class as a vulnerability factor. Concerns about the time taken out of the curriculum, social exclusion from a communal activity, the respective responsibilities of parents and schools, and a tension between the imperatives of education and business and state vs private funding of education were also raised. The interaction between each of the key concerns was clearly evident. For example, the perceived harm or good of the product was moderated according to the unique vulnerability and socio-economic status of the child.

In summary, public perception suggests that while the provision of free milk is of nutritional ‘good’ to some children, the potential harm caused by the commercial intrusion in education extends to all children. Further, it could be argued that the strategic benefits to the firm are not balanced by the welfare gains to the children and this creates a tension between the public’s positive perceptions of the scheme and its concern with the negative aspects of its effects on such a vulnerable audience.

## Principals

Six key questions guided the interviews with principals; four of the questions were specific to the Fonterra scheme and were derived from issues raised in the online survey. These questions related to: issues with the implementation of the scheme; concerns about marketing to children in school; scepticism about Fonterra and its motives, and, reflections on the relative roles and responsibilities of public vs private interest. In addition, two general questions asked principals whether in-school marketing was increasing and/or was likely to do so in the future, and, to explain on what basis, and through what processes, their school made their decisions to participate in what are commonly recognised as corporate social responsibility (CSR) related activities.

Overall, school principals were positive about the advantages of the scheme for children and felt that their concerns were outweighed by its benefits. The majority of principals agreed

that a certain level of commercial endorsement was inevitable but were concerned that schools were becoming the site for an increasing number of commercial activities the motivations for which were unclear. A general level of scepticism suggested that while they were personally savvy to CSR's strategic motives, they were both ill equipped and relatively uninformed about the wider issues of the ethics of CSR activities targeting children in school. Interestingly, and perhaps most importantly, none of the schools in the study had a formal policy regulating such CSR initiatives. Decision making about in-school marketing and decision-making approaches ranged widely from individual principal choice to formal school board consideration.

Principals suggested that commercial interest in in-school marketing is increasing and that their support of, or resignation to it, is largely determined by socio-economic factors and resource constraints. Those schools at the lower end of the decile scale that were most in need of financial support were most open to in-school marketing activities and, perhaps pragmatically, least concerned with its consequences. While this may not be surprising, it is concerning, given contributing to a culture of dependency, which is often a characteristic of underprivileged communities, may have longer-term social affects.

Given the concerns raised by school principals and the different priorities that they experience, perhaps the most important implication for schools is the need for the introduction of formal guidelines regulating commercial activities that target children. In countries such as Scotland (Consumer Focus, Scotland 2009), these are provided centrally, and may provide a useful model for more widespread adoption. It may be that school boards in New Zealand can use their discretionary responsibilities to develop more localised and community centred approaches. In relation to the wider and more serious issue of marketing to vulnerable audiences, the role of marketing standards authorities also needs to be addressed. In de-regulated and market-driven political economies an over-reliance on voluntary codes of practice is increasingly challenged by the pervasiveness of corporate influence and the ubiquity of marketing access.

### Conclusions

That Fonterra's Milk in Schools scheme has recently been followed by Sanitarium products in schools suggests that the relationship between education and business in NZ is becoming increasingly aligned economically and at the same time responsibility for children's welfare increasingly detached. While such partnerships may bring economic advantage, the implications of their normalisation need to be discussed. For example, in tax-funded educational environments the responsibilities of governments are clear. Where funding is provided from commercial sources there is the potential for priorities to be aligned as closely to corporate interests as they are to educational ones. Our research, and the recent mandate from the United Nations, suggest it is necessary to establish local policy principles and guidelines, such as those in Scotland, upon which future corporate relationships with schools should be developed.

While there is merit in developing reciprocal relationships with corporate partners, the extent to which schools become complicit in marketing to kids in return for benefits from the company is an important ethical and social issue. One expectation of corporate responsibility is that it should contribute to the public good, including all of those stakeholders affected by corporate actions. Differential school reliance on corporate

funding is, potentially, a serious threat to the autonomy and integrity of both individual children, schools and the educational system as a whole. Normalising marketing activities in schools is problematic, and an understanding of its implications for children's development and learning is necessary to inform continuing educational debate.

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