

Let's reclaim our language!

By Ingrid Piller | August 21, 2011 | Language & consumerism

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Corporate double-speak is plummeting to ever lower depths and is insinuating itself into every aspect of our lives. Many see through this sustained assault on our collective intelligence, no doubt. Mike Carlton, for instance, nicely picked apart a corporate message that Qantas sent around to all their frequent flyers this week [in yesterday's Sydney Morning Herald](#). However, seeing through corporate double-speak doesn't necessarily mean that you are free to reject it. Woolworth's current *Earn and Learn* campaign

is a case in point.

If you haven't got a child in an Australian public school, you might have escaped this affront. So, let me fill you in: both the nation's largest supermarket chains are currently running promotions whereby for every 10\$ you spend at their outlets, your school can receive one "point" and the collected "points" can then be redeemed for sports gear (in the Coles promotion) or all kinds of plastic learning aides and stuff that it might be good to have in a school (in the Woolworth promotion).

Public schools in Australia, as elsewhere in the neoliberal world, are a cash-starved lot. The reason for that sad state of affairs in a wealthy nation goes something like this: Corporations (and the rich, more generally) don't like to pay taxes on their profits and the corporate tax rate has fallen from 49% in the 1980s to 30% now. Public services including public education have borne the brunt of the much-reduced public funding base. Coupled with a punitive ranking system whereby more public funding flows to better-performing schools, schools are desperate to make a buck and to get any additional resources they can. For many, fund-raising is the way to go – but don't picture the baking sale of yesteryear. Educational fund-raising, too, has gone corporate. If you've ever been roped in to sell Cadbury chocolate eggs to your colleagues, friends and family with the promise that a percentage of the profit would go to your local school, you'll know what I'm talking about.

So, it comes as no surprise that public schools are enthusiastically participating in the current supermarket fund-raising effort. Drive past a public school and look out for the Coles banner ("Sports for Schools") and you'll get the

idea! Inside schools, I've seen newsletters exhorting parents to "start shopping" because "every docket help support our school." I've heard principals talk during assembly about the "opportunity" of shopping at both Coles and Woolworths. If you don't have access to directly observe how children and parents are pressured to shop, just go to the Coles website and read through their "[how to promote your school's voucher collection](#)" advice. When my child brings home the origami envelope (there's a helpful lesson plan for that) to collect the docket during the school holidays, I'll scream!

The whole project is grossly unfair: why should children at schools with higher parental spending power have more educational opportunities than the children whose parents can't afford so much consumption? Why should the children of parents who shop at other stores (say ethnic stores that are not part of the big chains) have fewer opportunities than the children of parents who shop at Coles and Woolworths? And why should educational opportunity be linked to consumption in the first place?

The project is not only unfair, it's also stupid. Who wants their child to learn that "spending" means "earning"? Schools who participate in these promotions have been maneuvered into a position where they need to accept and promote that "spending" equals "earning" and that "consumption" equals "learning." Unfortunately, that means they have also been maneuvered into a position where "education" equals "market-fundamentalist indoctrination."

The only way to get education back and to escape from this Orwellian dystopia is to claim our language back. So, let's start by getting a few things straight:

- Education is a public good and not a corporate charity case.
- It's impossible to have a fair society if the quality of education is subject to the tyranny of consumption.

Whoever claims that "spending" is the same as "earning" is trying to pull a swifty on all of us. Are we really such dills to buy it?

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