

The giant in the playground: investigating the reach and implications of the corporatisation of child care provision

Frances Press and Christine Woodrow

Prologue

This paper is a case study of an Australian corporate child care provider, ABC Learning Ltd, when the corporation was at its height. In the months after this paper was first completed, ABC Learning was dramatically affected by a volatile financial market. In March 2008, a financial crisis involving calls on margin loans held by the directors of the parent company quickly resulted in a massive sell-off of international holdings, including 60 per cent of US kindergartens, to Morgan Stanley Private Equity (Korporaal 2008), in a context of tumbling share prices for the company. Margin calls resulted in stock sell-off by members of the board of directors, three of whom have now vacated the board. These include the previous chair of the board, Sallyanne Atkinson, as well as Martin Kemp and William Bessemer. The CEO, Groves retained only 3,186 of his previous 20 million shares. It is understood that the major shareholder of ABC Learning is now Singapore-based Temasek holdings, and that one of the remaining directors, LeNeve Groves now holds no shares in the company.

Several months after this turn of events, ABC Learning once more hit the Australian headlines in August and September 2008. Its shares were suspended from trading and a shareholder class action was prepared against the company on the basis of misstated earnings over previous years (John 2008).

Although the financial structure and wellbeing of ABC Learning and its current and former directors has significantly changed, ABC Learning's domination of the landscape of child-care provision in Australia is a worthy case study. According to the ABC Learning website, 'ABC is the largest publicly listed childcare operator in the world, based on centre numbers' (ABC Learning Centres 2007a). Some of the information presented in this paper has been superseded by events. Nevertheless, the analysis continues to be relevant to the policy context of children's early education and care both in Australia and internationally, because of its illumination of the development, role and potential impact of commercial relationships in the framing and delivery of education and care for young children.

Introduction

Increasingly the landscape of child care service provision in Australia is characterised by the dominance of a large, publicly listed for-profit corporation. Whilst corporations are well placed to respond quickly to shortfalls in child care supply and position themselves through their marketing as caring, trustworthy organisations, there has been little public debate about what is at stake in this changed landscape. We argue, however, that the ascendancy and apparent entrenchment of corporate child care is a phenomenon with far-reaching implications related to the positioning of the care and education of young children in the social policy landscape.

In previous papers (Press & Woodrow 2005; Woodrow & Press 2007) we have traced the rise of privatised and corporate provision and the ways in which it has commodified and transformed child care, creating a discursive space in which the care and education of young children has become an act of consumption. This paper extends these previous analyses by investigating how corporatisation has not only reshaped how we view child care (its purpose and how it is situated within the community), but also diminished the space for discussion, contention and articulation of what society wants

for, and from, young children's care and education. By locating and cross referencing an extensive range of documents relating to Australia's largest child care provider ABC Learning (annual reports, prospectuses, court cases, newspaper articles, company websites, et cetera), the paper traces the impact of corporatisation on the shaping of children's services and the professional identities of the teachers and carers who work in them. Encompassed in these considerations are questions concerning what counts as knowledge (curriculum) and what knowledge counts (what curriculum is).

However, we are mindful that discussion of corporate child care within Australia is dominated by one major player, ABC Learning. Its domination of the Australian child care market is such that corporate child care and ABC Learning have almost become synonyms and the company's activities colour our understanding of corporatisation's nature and impact. ABC Learning may, or may not be, a typical child care corporation. However, its market share means that its impact cannot be considered an aberration, and its once rapidly increasing international reach gives rise to implications that extend beyond Australia. Nor is it possible to discuss the impact of corporatisation as if it sits disentangled from issues concerning privatisation. Previously, we have referred to corporatisation as a consolidation of child care privatisation (Press & Woodrow 2005), with the latter giving rise to corporate provision. Nevertheless, the interests of the corporate sector and smaller private providers are at times divergent, for example, as they compete for market share. Thus, the corporatisation of child care is also a distinct phenomenon, the effects of which require particular attention.

The giant in the playground of the paper's title illustrates our contention that corporatised child care, literally and metaphorically, encroaches upon the space of other child care providers and our imaginings of what child care might be, and overshadows alternative policy arrangements to the point that these are rendered almost invisible. This paper traces the resulting diminution of the space available for the maintenance and development of other approaches

to early childhood care and education, and speculates upon its existing and possible ramifications. In doing so, we explore the literal engulfing of space by the geographic dominances of ABC Learning and its takeover of other players; the whittling away of the mainstream policy discourse; the attempted containment of government policy instruments; the marginalisation of alternative voices and perspectives; and the creation of a conglomerate which manages and/or excludes outside influences upon its internal functioning through a highly sophisticated vertical and horizontal integration strategy.

Market domination

Despite the exhortation of ABC Learning's Chief Executive Officer, Edmund Groves, that he didn't set out to get rich: 'all I ever wanted to do was pay off my house' ('Playtime's over, says Groves' 2007, p. 9), there is no doubt that ABC Learning has aggressively set out to be a big player in the child care market. Yet Groves presents ABC Learning in an altruistic light, almost as the saviour of child care:

People struggling with legislation and regulation from all different areas started calling us up saying "we want to sell our centre" ... My fear was that there would be 300–400 centres in the group that would go broke. If that had of happened the effects could have been catastrophic. Fingers would have been pointed at the Government for letting ... corporates into the industry ('Playtime's over, says Groves' 2007, p. 10).

This quote shrewdly positions ABC Learning in a number of ways. Firstly, it places the blame for smaller corporations exiting the field on their 'struggle' with legislation and regulation (many of which are designed to protect children from harm, and at best, facilitate children's wellbeing and development), and not on factors such as increased competition or poor planning choices. Secondly, rather than acting out of self-interest, ABC Learning staves off the 'catastrophic' consequences of market failure. Thirdly, in preventing

this potential catastrophe, it becomes the defender of all corporate child care and safeguards a government policy which directs a large proportion of federal child care funding, via subsidies to parents, to for-profit child care through the Child Care Benefit Scheme (Rush 2006). Thus the fairytale of neoliberalism is embodied and secured: governments should stimulate, not regulate business, and leave the market to effectively respond to consumer demand.

In its Prospectus however, ABC Learning's continued expansion is presented as less ad hoc and is attributed to 'organic growth and strategic acquisitions' (ABC Learning Centres Ltd 2007b, section 3.1). To get a tangible sense of its market growth and dominance it is worthwhile outlining the companies that ABC Learning has acquired. In Australia these include: Peppercorn Child Care Centres Australia; Just Little People; Kids Campus Ltd; Universal Group; and Hutchison's Child Care. In the United States, it purchased the Learning Care Group and, under the umbrella of the latter, acquired Tutor Time Centres, La Petite Academy, Montessori Unlimited and was contracted to buy Children's Courtyard. At its height the company owned over 1,000 centres in the United States (ABC Learning Centres Ltd 2007c). In the United Kingdom, ABC Learning acquired the Busy Bees group which is the United Kingdom's fifth largest provider, and following this, it obtained the Leap Frog Nurseries Group (Moore 2007). In 2004, it gained a foothold in New Zealand-Aotearoa when it bought ten centres, consolidating this in early 2007 with the purchase of New Zealand's Forward Steps. It now owns over 100 centres in New Zealand-Aotearoa, and its 2007 Annual Report proclaimed its intention to increase its New Zealand and Australian holdings by 40–50 per cent (ABC Learning Centres Ltd 2007b). According to its 2006 Annual Report, the company acquired 192 centres in small groups or individually during the preceding year, but this list excludes the individual centres bought previously (ABC Learning Centres Ltd 2006). Given this list, it is not surprising that ABC Learning is the biggest single player in the Australian market, and the self-proclaimed largest corporate child care provider in the world.

Although these figures give some sense of its market domination, it is the local level that gives a real sense of what this control means for communities. In her study of child care in the Townsville region, Harris estimates that ABC Learning provides 50 per cent of child care (Harris 2007). In regional NSW its presence is also significant. Bathurst, with a population of just under 32,000 people has three ABC centres; Orange, with a population of 40,000 has five centres; Dubbo, with a population of 40,000 has three; Albury-Wodonga, with a combined population of 90,000 has nine; and Wagga Wagga, with a population of just under 57,000, has eight. Other centres, both non-profit and private, do exist in these areas. Bathurst for instance, has six other long day care centres. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that in some regions the choice of provider has been severely diminished. In a number of regions ABC Learning provides more child care centres than the other centres combined (for instance, Orange and Canberra) and in centres such as Wagga Wagga and Dubbo, ABC Learning's market domination is almost total, with each township having only two other long day care centres (National Child Care Accreditation Council 2007).

This reach within the Australian context has a number of implications both for families and the shape of early childhood policy. Despite the rhetoric of choice espoused by the then Minister for Families, Communities and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, it is clear that in many regions families have no choice, and place their children in the centre that is available to them, even though this may not be their preferred option ('Caring for Kids' 2006; Harris 2007). The strategy of opening up a number of centres in a particular locality increases the likelihood that, for some regions at least, ABC Learning may be the only provider in the immediate area, or the only provider with a vacancy. Further, by saturating a local market with child care places, ABC Learning can threaten the financial viability of other, already existing centres (Birnbauer & Dowling 2004a). Smaller stand-alone centres find it difficult to underwrite the increased vacancy rates that can result from increased competition—and as these centres

become vulnerable to takeover, the range of providers is further reduced. Additionally, ABC Learning has at times aggressively tried to defend its market share through court actions designed to prevent the establishment of other child care providers. For example, in *ABC Developmental Learning Centres Pty Ltd vs City of Tea Tree Gully & ORS, 2004*, the company appealed against the granting of a development application to another child care provider in an action which the judge ruled to be solely instituted for the purpose of delaying or preventing the latter being set up in competition with ABC Learning. Such market control then creates its own momentum. Domination of the market leads to more domination as its relatively comprehensive reach places it in a highly strategic position to secure contracts to provide child care for government departments and corporations. Thus ABC Learning has contracts for the provision of child care for the Defence Force, the Commonwealth Bank, TYCO, OPTUS, ANZ Corporate Care, WESTPAC, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, and Homes Glen Institute of TAFE (ABC Learning Centres Ltd 2006).

Interrelationships

Equally significant for understanding the corporation's capacity to reshape the provision of child care is its control of, and links with, other entities and its development of new markets. It wholly owns the National Institute of Early Childhood Education (NIECE). NIECE is a Recognised Training Organisation which provides training to ABC Learning staff up to Diploma level. ABC Learning has a multi-business agreement with the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) for NIECE Diploma graduates to receive two years credit into its Bachelor of Education. The former Dean of Education at USQ, Professor Frank Crowther is on the board of Independent Colleges Australia (ICA), keeping company with Le Neve Groves and Martin Kemp, who until recently, were both on the board of ABC Learning. As well as being on these boards, Le Neve Groves is the Principal of NIECE.

Other relationships are less directly traced but equally cosy. For instance, IdeaLogical states that it is the online department store for 'ABC Families' and in partnership with ABC Learning provides Too cute! Photos (IdeaLogical—About us 2007). Brendan Riley, the Managing Director of TooCute! Photos, was formerly the National Brand Manager for ABC Learning (Too Cute! Photo Co. 2007). ABC Learning appears to be IdeaLogical's only client. Similarly, the Recruitment agency, '123Careers' is the 'key recruiter for ABC across Australia and NZ', and again, ABC Learning appears to be its only client (Welcome to 123careers 2007).

In 2005 ABC Learning bought Judius, a toy and equipment supplier to early childhood services and schools. In late 2006, ABC Learning sold Judius to Funtastic (Funtastic Limited 2006). However, it did not divest its interest completely, as the sale involved the transfer of 29 million shares to ABC Learning, making the latter a significant shareholder in the company (17.99 per cent) with an additional 1,000,000 shares owned by Edmund Groves. In addition, Funtastic negotiated a twenty-year exclusive global supply agreement with ABC Learning, describing this arrangement in its message to shareholders as a 'truly transformational opportunity' (Funtastic Limited 2006, p. 5).

ABC Learning has, in the past, also expressed its interest in schools. In 2004 it attempted to establish a school in Queensland in the hope of channelling children from its centres into the school (Birnbauer & Dowling 2004b). This bid failed because of ABC Learning's for-profit status and so it set up the not-for-profit subsidiary Independent Colleges Australia (ICA). This arrangement also generated controversy (Norrie 2005). Although ICA now publicly distances itself from ABC Learning (Patty 2006), both organisations shared two board members (Le Neve Groves and Martin Kemp). ICA currently has a registered primary school in Casey, Victoria, and is applying for registration in Victoria for a school it has established at Melton. Its website features proposals for schools in Penrith and Kurri Kurri (Independent Colleges Australia 2007).

Although such arrangements may be read as business savvy, they also have other ramifications, including cementing the construction of child care as both an act, and point of, consumption. Whilst our previous analysis of corporatisation drew attention to the way in which child care is now marketed to parents as a consumer item through which they can express their love and aspirations for their children (Woodrow & Press 2007), companies such as IdeaLogical and Funtastic establish the corporation as a major point of sale.

Here we see the creation of an almost self-contained corporate entity. Training, professional development, equipment supplies, annual photographs, and toy catalogues are either developed 'in house' or obtained through organisations commercially linked to the provider organisation.

Such mutually beneficial corporate arrangements take on wider public significance because of their possible implications for children's and families' experiences of child care, and the very real possibility that decisions about young children's learning and wellbeing are conflated with financial interests in returning the strongest possible dividends to shareholders, and particularly principal share holders. Additionally, many parents may be unaware that their consumption (purchasing) of goods and services is being manipulated to serve the interests of the companies and their shareholders. Under its commercial agreement with Funtastic, ABC is entitled to a percentage of revenue on sales made to and through ABC centres. A recent parent newsletter advised parents of an upcoming opportunity to purchase toys and other items from a catalogue, with 20c from every \$1 spent going to the centre. We wonder to what extent parents are aware that their purchasing power further subsidises the business through its shareholdings.

Professional identity

Across the world, the discourses of early childhood professionalism have been strongly characterised by values related to caring,

collectivism and collegiality. Evidence for these values consistently recurs in research accounts of early childhood teachers' work, and can be found in curriculum planning documentation, conference programs and other professional development activities, and in codes of ethical practice. These dominant values may simultaneously be strengths and weaknesses of the profession and the problematic nature of these 'caring' discourses has been well discussed (Petrie 1992; Moyles 2001; Grieshaber 2001; Woodrow 2002). Nevertheless, also evident in the literature is a search for more robust frameworks for caring, collective activism and collegiality (Sumsion 2006). In the context of corporate provision of early childhood care, we ask whether discourses of private benefit, individualism, competition and entrepreneurship place these values at risk.

McWilliam, Hatcher and Meadmore explore two distinct understandings about 'enterprise' culture. The first is about the 'paradigmatic status' of the market in relation to the provision of goods and services, which is thus understood as the best way to 'achieve effective organisational arrangements' (1999, p. 2). In keeping with this paradigm, ABC Learning's reach and relationships are described in its Prospectus (n.d.) as providing it 'with scale benefits and, importantly, with the opportunity to offer an enhanced choice of centres for corporate business'. The second understanding revolves around wealth as a marker of success, achieved by highly individualistic orientations to work, in which industriousness though hard work and competitiveness to achieve are fundamental. ABC Learning's maxims—'our "spirit of fun" runs as deep as our "spirit of competition"' and 'Australians Bettering their Children (ABC)' (ABC Learning Centres 2007)—are symptomatic of such orientations.

In previous analyses of the impact of privatisation and corporatisation upon child care, we noted practices reflecting a marketised approach emerging across the sector influenced by commercial practices (Press & Woodrow 2005; Woodrow & Press 2007). This is evident, for example, in an increasing trend across some larger non-

profit early childhood providers towards investing heavily in brand identification and marketing, typically expressed through logos and branded clothing for staff. In such ways, practices derived from commercial discourses become normalised and unquestioned, rather than subject to scrutiny about whether they represent the best use of resources. This invites consideration of what other practices might be implicated in shifting understandings of professional identity. Noting the strengthening infusion of commercial discourses in education policy and practice, Sachs (2000; 2001) observes the emergence of a new kind of professional identity that she calls the 'entrepreneurial professional'. Drawing on Casey's (1995) depiction of the designer employee, Sachs (2001) contends that such identity is aligned with elements of standardised procedures, efficiency and accountability, rather than with knowledge-building differentiated across contexts and the exercise of professional autonomy. What professional identities might emerge in the corporate world of child care?

With the establishment of NIECE, ABC Learning has quickly developed the capacity to train a significant proportion of its 17,000-strong work force 'in house', and to integrate another profit-generating element into its operation. Ongoing staff development for employees is facilitated through the college. Such positioning builds the capacity of the entire enterprise to 'authorise' the attributes, dispositions or capacities which professionals should have (McWilliam et al. 1999). Further, the corporation also offers a 'Carers' Share Plan' which, according to the Prospectus, issued 357,905 ordinary shares to carers employed by ABC's licensees in Australia (ABC Learning Centres Ltd 2007b, section 5.4). Thus the professional identity of staff is embedded through in-house training (for example, NIECE), practices such as branding (logos and uniforms), the loyalty program and the 'ABC Carers Share Plan'. In this way, staff are symbolically identified with the organisation, thereby encouraging a shared or collective identification with the company rather than the profession. The consumption and utilisation of products and services also owned by, or affiliated with, the organisation might serve to reinforce this

identification. Will such measures privilege privatised concerns over communal and collective discourse, and will a 'culture of production and profit' replace a culture of community (Ball 1994, cited in Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002)?

Curriculum

During the time that corporate long day care has been expanding in Australia, there has also been a strengthening discourse of early childhood programs as platforms for early intervention, based on the recognition of the early childhood years as foundational to children's subsequent developmental wellbeing (Press 2006). Of significance to this discussion is the policy attention this has generated, with the question for Australian governments being how best to develop a comprehensive approach to children's early education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2006; Press 2006; Elliott 2006). A related issue has been the role and nature of early childhood curriculum. In Australia and internationally, curriculum has been a highly contested space, and has been cast variously as a potential vehicle for social transformation, as a means of maintaining the status quo, or as a platform for social mobility and facilitating private benefit. As a recent OECD study of early childhood policy internationally identified, great diversity exists in approaches to pedagogy and what counts as knowledge within curriculum frameworks (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2006).

ABC Learning makes strong claims, through its marketing material, about the strength of its educational orientation. One way in which this promise is delivered is through the 'Life Smart Curriculum' developed by the company's self-proclaimed 'Education Department'. The existence and promulgation of this curriculum, which strategically incorporates selective elements of various state-initiated early childhood curricula across Australia and New Zealand-Aotearoa, locates the ABC Learning brand within contemporary

discourses of early years provision, and communicates images and notions of 'education', 'quality', and 'professionalism'. However, the complex web of varied relationships between ABC Learning and other companies invites closer consideration of what counts as knowledge in the Lifesmart Curriculum, who 'owns' and produces that knowledge, and what values and interests are privileged or at stake in its ownership, promulgation and implementation.

For instance, in Funtastic's global supply agreement with ABC Learning, the key commercial terms include an ongoing arrangement with Judius supplying toys, furniture and learning and development products, covering 'the complete spectrum of children's development, including literacy, maths, motor skills, arts & crafts and music', on an exclusive basis to all of ABC's child care centres (Funtastic Limited 2006). In 2006, ABC Learning introduced BroadLEARN, an online software program for young children into its centres. In 2007, ABC Learning Centres acquired a 25 per cent share in Mediasphere Holdings, the company that produces BroadLEARN (Certification and training programs 2007).

Such arrangements invite particular kinds of questions about the curriculum. What might be at stake when corporate agreements privilege the use of particular materials and when curriculum ideas emanate from the organisation's web of shareholder relationships? How might curriculum developed centrally, within corporate organisations with strong commercial links to other profit-making organisations, shape and define what counts as knowledge and what knowledge is worth knowing? What risks accompany the commodification of curriculum through these commercial relationships, and how might the resulting education 'product' reflect and privilege populist anxieties about the advancement of one's own children, rather than considerations of collective benefit, citizenship and nation-building (Wong 2007)? 'In an education system where the consumer is king ... education ... is a private good that only benefits the owner, an investment in my future, not yours, in my children, not other people's children' (Labaree, cited in Giroux 2000, p. 90). A

further issue to arise from this commodification of curriculum relates to an apparent lack of transparency and contestability. Whereas curriculum devised by the state is public and open to debate and contestation, the curriculum of ABC Learning does not have such transparency. Further, it is reasonable to expect that many parents do not understand the commercial relationships that are embedded in or underpin the curriculum, and its enactment through the various resources such as toys and software.

Policy impact

In the preceding sections we have posed a number of questions pertaining to the possible impact of corporatisation on early childhood professional identity and pedagogies. In this section we examine existing and potential influences upon the broader child care policy context.

In an exploration of the nexus between business and social policy, Farnsworth and Holden trace the ways in which corporate power can be exercised to shape policy. In relation to the provision of welfare services (in which they include child care) they observe: 'Once a corporation is involved ... a private interest is created, at the heart of the welfare state, whose primary goal is the accrual of profit' (2006, p. 479). Once they become a provider of welfare services, corporations then have open to them an array of 'means of political engagement and institutional involvement ... in order to defend and extend their interests' (2006, p. 479).

Structural power, as well as processes of formal and informal political engagement, becomes the means by which social policy can be subject to the influence of corporate power. Farnsworth and Holden assert that businesses with high structural power are able to influence policy outcomes without resorting to overt action because the decisions of policy makers 'are structurally framed by the imperative to induce companies to invest' (2006, p. 475). The

actual influence of structural power is a product of the 'size and relative importance of the business organisation concerned' (2006, p. 476). Direct and overt influence upon social policy can be exercised through the structures of government once the corporation is recognised as a significant service provider. Indirect influence may be exerted through mechanisms such as political donations.

The risk of early childhood policy being shaped by concerns related to business profitability is illustrated by a comment by the previous federal Minister for Families, Communities and Indigenous Affairs that the Australian Labor Party's policy proposal to open child care centres on school grounds was 'a threat hung over the head of every childcare operator today' (Brough 2007, p. 9). Private providers are well aware of the way in which a changed social policy landscape might impact upon their financial viability and/or profitability. Some private child care providers have previously identified the introduction of paid maternity leave as a risk (Brennan 2007, p. 220). In its Prospectus, some of the risks ABC Learning identifies include changes to regulatory regimes, and changes to government subsidies and rebates (section 6.2).

As a major player in child care, and legitimated as an appropriate provider of child care (for example, through government subsidies), ABC Learning earns a place on formal advisory structures. Hence, Le Neve Groves was one of only eight members on the Stronger Families and Communities Partnership established in 2004 by the Commonwealth Government and she was on the National Advisory Group of the National Child Care Accreditation Council. When ABC Learning was in the United States, its annual report referred to its US-based Learning Care Group having a government relations department which 'continues to strengthen its legislative relationships and raise awareness on the issues affecting early education providers' (ABC Learning Centres Ltd 2006, p. 15). ABC Learning has donated to the Queensland Liberal Party (Allen & Ludlow 2006, cited in Brennan 2007) and contributed \$50,000 to

the National Party, following the appointment of former Nationals minister with portfolio responsibility for child care, Larry Anthony, to its board (Baker 2006).

In addition, the sheer size and scale of the company operations and its financial resources allow it to purchase expensive expert advice on capturing hearts and minds—of parents, of prospective employees, and of policy makers. The 2006 Annual Report records a 12-month expenditure of over \$8m on advertising and promotions. This included spending on a highly effective advertising campaign developed by a high-end marketing organisation, focused around the theme of love, which yielded a 300 per cent increase in telephone enquiries over the period of the campaign (Depasquale Advertising 2007).

The size and reach of the company, and its dominance of the sector, affords it a 'positional advantage' (Hirsch 1977, cited in McWilliam et al. 1999) and inevitably leads to normalisation, such that corporate provision becomes entrenched and hard to turn back (Farnsworth & Holden 2006). Giroux (2000, p. 86) writes that market-based approaches to schooling

share a faith in corporate culture that overrides defending public education as a noncommodified public sphere, a repository for nourishing the primacy of civic over corporate values, and as a public entitlement that is essential for the well-being of children and the future of democracy.

His observations strike a chord with the apparent acceptance of child care corporatisation in Australia. Although it might be overstating the case to say there is a shared faith in corporate child care (for instance, the work of Harris (2007) indicates an active dislike of corporate child care on the part of some parents), there is a sense of its inevitability that moves the policy discourse away from a discussion of the civic values and civic spaces that should be embedded in such provision for young children. This sense of the inevitable (they are here to stay) leads to an unwillingness to debate the rights and wrongs of reliance on corporate provision, and further cements the view of children's

earliest education as an act of private parental consumption, rather than as a reflection of collective aspirations for the public good.

Conclusion

Our review has outlined some of the myriad of ways that ABC Learning has legitimated its identity as a responsible child care provider, including its ready capacity to incorporate emerging contemporary language into its promotional and curriculum material. In summary, the corporation presents itself as an authoritative, responsive and caring organisation by deploying sophisticated marketing strategies which appeal to families, governments, potential investors and employees.

Nonetheless, we contend that there are a number of 'signposts' that indicate a need to be less sanguine. International research evidence indicates that the non-profit sector tends to provide higher overall quality than the for-profit sector (Cleveland et al. 2007). Similarly, research in New South Wales indicates that the non-profit sector is more likely to go beyond the minimum regulatory standards in relation to staff-to-child ratios (Fisher & Patulny 2004). In addition, there are a number of Australian reports on parent and staff dissatisfaction with at least some ABC Learning centres (Rush 2006; Harris 2007; Background Briefing 2004), and the *Choice* survey indicated higher levels of parent dissatisfaction with commercial child care ('Caring for Kids' 2006). At the very least, this indicates a need for rigorous research within Australia on the quality of child care and whether levels of quality can be correlated with the type of provider.

Much of the corporation's presentation of itself via its prospectus, annual reports and marketing materials, paints a picture of the apparent success of corporate child care in supplying high quality, safe and responsive education and care for young children. However, our research has illuminated relationships that, although not hidden,

are not immediately obvious. The complex web of the corporation's commercial relationships shields much from public view, and demands a new kind of literacy from educational researchers. The interrelatedness of areas such as ABC Learning's staff development, curriculum and equipment supplies have ramifications for the daily decisions and interactions that shape the nature of children's and families' experiences within child care. We are led to ponder—in whose interests are these relationships supported and sustained? Who are the winners and losers from the current arrangements?

Our research to date documents how what previously might have been considered 'public space' has now been taken up and over by commercial interests. This engulfing of space has the effect of residualising institutions that have traditionally been established on principles of community benefit and collectivity. Just as disturbingly, engulfment combines with normalisation to constrain the individual and collective policy imaginings of how provisions for children and families might be 'otherwise' (Moss 2007). By identifying and naming this colonisation of space, we aim to stimulate debate that might resuscitate previous visions related to early childhood provision as a public good and stimulate the production of new ones.

Rather than yield to what Giroux (2001, p. 1) asserts is a 'growing disinterest on the part of the general population in such non-commercial values as empathy, compassion, loyalty, caring, trust, and solidarity that bridges the private and the public and gives substance to the meaning of citizenship, democracy and public life', we want to claim a right to public space in which to insert alternative understandings and imaginings.

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