

Education Privatisation and Commercialisation in the Context and Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Italian EdTech Market in the Making

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Abstract: In this article, we explore how digitalisation, digital education policies and the strategies of the edtech sector are re-crafting education as a site for the extension of the economic form of the market. Drawing on the work of Michel Callon and focusing on the case of Italy, we consider how policy, commercialisation and changes in educational practice contribute to complex, chaotic and incoherent processes that coalesce in the making of edtech

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markets. Using network ethnography, we show how three specific edtech market *agencements* were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Italy: a) the detachment of edtech from profit through solidarity, re-branding and qualification; b) reintermediation, or the work for the stabilisation of the edtech market through networking and meetingness; and c) the soliciting of the edtech market through affection. What emerges is the description of an over-determined market, where a complex combination of crises, policies and business are played out in a network of relationships that serve the interests of government and digital capital through the production of needs and necessities into which schools and teachers are inducted. **Keywords:** edtech market; privatisation; commercialisation; *agencement*; COVID-19; Italy

El mercado italiano de tecnología educativa en ciernes

Resumen: En este artículo, exploramos cómo la digitalización, las políticas educativas digitales y las estrategias del sector edtech están redefiniendo la educación como un espacio para la expansión de la forma económica del mercado. Basándonos en el trabajo de Michel Callon y centrándonos en el caso de Italia, consideramos cómo las políticas, la comercialización y los cambios en la práctica educativa contribuyen a procesos complejos, caóticos e incoherentes que convergen en la creación de los mercados edtech. Mediante la etnografía de redes, mostramos cómo tres *agencements* específicas del mercado edtech se hicieron evidentes durante la crisis de la pandemia de COVID-19 en Italia: a) la separación de edtech del lucro mediante la solidaridad, el cambio de marca y la cualificación; b) la reintermediación, o el trabajo para la estabilización del mercado edtech mediante la creación de redes y el encuentro; y c) la captación del mercado edtech a través del afecto. Lo que emerge es la descripción de un mercado sobre determinado, donde una combinación compleja de crisis, políticas y negocios se desarrollan en una red de relaciones que sirven a los intereses del gobierno y del capital digital a través de la producción de necesidades y menesteres en los que se ven inducidos las escuelas y los docentes.

Palabras-clave: mercado de tecnología educativa; privatización; comercialización; *agencement*; COVID-19; Italia

O mercado italiano de edtech em formação

Resumo: Neste artigo, exploramos como a digitalização, as políticas de educação digital e as estratégias do setor de edtech estão reconfigurando a educação como um local para a extensão da forma econômica do mercado. Com base no trabalho de Michel Callon e com foco no caso da Itália, consideramos como a política, a comercialização e as mudanças na prática educacional contribuem para processos complexos, caóticos e incoerentes que se unem na formação dos mercados de edtech. Usando a etnografia de redes, mostramos como três *agencements* específicos do mercado de edtech foram evidentes durante a crise da pandemia de COVID-19 na Itália: a) o desapego da edtech do lucro por meio da solidariedade, da reformulação da marca e da qualificação; b) a reintermediação, ou o trabalho para a estabilização do mercado de edtech por meio de networking e encontros; e c) a solicitação do mercado de edtech por meio do afeto. O que emerge é a descrição de um mercado sobredeterminado, onde uma combinação complexa de crises, políticas e negócios se desenrola em uma rede de relacionamentos que atendem aos interesses do governo e do capital digital por meio da produção de necessidades e necessidades nas quais escolas e professores são introduzidos.

Palavras-chave: mercado de edtech; privatização; comercialização; *agencement*; COVID-19; Itália

The Italian EdTech Market in the Making

This essay addresses the political economy of edtech markets. We intend to contribute to a better understanding of how digitalisation, digital education policies and the strategies of the edtech sector are re-crafting education as a site for the extension of the economic form of the market into a social domain formerly considered as being “beyond the calculus of profitability” (Foucault, 2004; Grimaldi et al., 2023).

In particular, we are interested in understanding how policy, commercialisation and changes in educational practice involving edtech solutions are part of a set of complex, chaotic, and incoherent processes that coalesce in the making of edtech markets (Callon, 2021). We contend that edtech market-making unfolds through the concatenation of historical circumstances (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic), business strategies for new profit opportunities in education, an ensemble of national and supranational policies for the digitalisation of education and schooling, and a set of economic, social and political interests and responses that arose in relation to those concatenations.

Recently, education policy literature has begun to move from an understanding of the pandemic as a key point of discontinuity in the governing of education (Williamson, 2021), to the analysis of its impact on the form of education (Grek & Landri, 2021). Specifically, the focus has been on the expansion of the edtech market and the related advancement of commercialisation and privatisation in education (Williamson & Hogan, 2020), changes in educational governance (Gulson et al., 2022) and the formation of new powerful heterarchical networks which draw together intergovernmental organisations, the global tech industry, edu-businesses, philanthropies and other public actors (Peruzzo et al., 2022). However, we acknowledge that more research is needed on how policies, corporate strategies, civil society enactments, and historical and contextual factors combine to produce different forms and types of edtech market(s) across time and space.

Here, we attempt to detach ourselves from the tendency in education policy analysis towards “seeing like a state” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016, p. 390), assuming dichotomies as public/private or state/market. Rather, identify some of the economic and political rationalities that regulate the ways in which education is being turned into a lucrative market, and explore how state education is co-opted, transformed and re-cultured as part of it—in other words “seeing like a business” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016, p. 390).

Our focus is on Italy, and a particular timeframe, the years after the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore how collective (global, supranational, state, business, and civil society) actions and the unfolding of multiple relations between the European Union (EU) and state policies, edtech corporations, edu-businesses initiatives, and civil society mobilisations resulted in the establishment and development of a profitable edtech market. We do so by intersecting Michel Callon’s translation of the Foucauldian notion of *dispositif* and the notion of *agencement* (via Deleuze) with policy network ethnography (Ball, 2016) as a method to trace and visualize both the ensemble of relations and associations between heterogenous entities that constitute a market in its singularity and its distinctive capacity to act (Callon, 2021, p. 361).

The choice of the case and the temporal frame of our analysis is not casual. In the past four decades, the Italian education system has been significantly transformed through an endless series of reforms, regulations, policy programmes, experimentations which moved from a problematisation of its welfarist configuration (mostly public, centralized, universalistic, and input oriented) as ineffective and unable to respond to societal and educational challenges. These developments resulted in three distinct trends of so-called modernisation: a) a gradual shift in its organisation towards decentralisation, autonomy, and differentiation and the introduction of market-type mechanisms of

school management and educational provision; b) the introduction of a standardised and platform-based school evaluation system; c) a peculiar mix of endogenous and exogenous privatisation, including both a significant import of private sector cultures, language, and techniques into public schools and increasing incentives to nurture private provision (Gunter et al., 2016). Since the early 2000s, policy initiatives by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU to bring about the digital transformation in education has become a fourth trend for the modernisation of the Italian education system. Through the enactment of a recurrent discursive figure where a problem becomes also an opportunity, Italy was described as Europe's edtech sleeping giant,¹ that is, an education system lagging behind other European countries in terms of digital infrastructure and the integration of technology in education. National policies on digital innovation in schools have been fragmented, underfunded, and hindered by bureaucratic inertia and a lack of coherent long-term strategy (OECD, 2019). Even when the digitalisation of the Italian education system became a policy priority and initiatives such as the National Digital School Plans (see Law 107/2015 for the most recent one) were introduced, implementation has been judged as uneven and failing to generate sustained systemic change. Within this scenario, edtech businesses have emerged as an authoritative voice in Italian education policy, as bearers of the vision, the expertise and the technical solutions needed to modernize an outdated education system. As part of and as a voice in the public debate, edtech businesses have sustained and reinforced the prediction that the future for Italian education was look[ing] brighter if measures to tackle its lack of innovation and investment in the digitalisation of education were taken swiftly. Suddenly, the Italian education system came to be seen as one of the most promising markets for EdTech.

Within this policy trajectory, from the point of view of the making of edtech markets, the pandemic was a moment in history when the encounter between economic and political interests opened possibilities for further and significant shifts in form of education delivery and governance. Several studies have documented other such cathartic moments in which new or existing markets were established, expanded, and stabilised through corporate and business strategies, by taking advantage of social disorder, insecurity, and instability (Atasay & Delavan, 2012). COVID-19 and the edtech market is a case in point, a crisis became an opportunity. In Italy, as in many other countries, global and local edtech businesses have actively worked to open new possibilities for profit. This is done, among other things, by creating multiple economic relations and new dependencies between the State, schools, teachers and families (Taglietti et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis created a particular kind of policy and market hyperactivity, where a specific concatenation of factors served to join up the actions of the state (both to curb the crisis and prove to be effective and responsible) with those of edu-businesses and edtech companies (expanding their consumer base in education services, fostering new profit opportunities, and steering education policy conversation) in a composite set of therapeutic governmental interventions (Foucault, 2004). In such a concatenation, it is possible to observe the chaotic mixing between initiatives of digital solidarity and strategies of brand allegiance and profit-making (Grimaldi et al., 2023).

In relation to all of this, our aim is to disentangle how, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, first, market *agencements* multiplied; second, a functioning edtech market was reinforced, widened, and transformed; and third, a particular kind of edtech market, consisting of goods, buyers and sellers emerged. Rather than treating the edtech market as an abstraction, we attempt to disentangle its multiple mechanisms and functions. These include the mutually constitutive relations between educational technologies as goods, edu-businesses as sellers, schools and teachers as buyers,

¹ <https://dealroom.co/blog/european-EdTechs-sleeping-giant-italy>

civil society as a space of advocacy, and the state as a regulative, market-maker and resistant agent. We illustrate how in Italy a paradoxical process of edtech market-making through crisis management unfolded through a) the detachment of edtech technologies from their producers; b) their liberation from the for-profit economic form; c) their qualification according to the logics of solidarity and education. We also make the point that it is not only private actors that make market; the state is an active and necessary player in the edtech market *agencements*, as well as a node in the enactment of multiple political rationalities that frame those markets. So, we turn our attention to the substance and materiality of market practices, their concatenation and circumstances, and emerging economic forms and relations. We consider also their intertwining with policies and policymaking, and politics, i.e. the discursive making of matters of concern and the ways in which economic forms and market practices shape behaviours.

In sum, our analysis problematises the effects of the complex encounters between the economic nature of edtech providers' claims, the changing political circumstances and political commitment to digitalisation, over and against other priorities and calls upon state funding, the serendipitous but partisan role of local intermediaries, and the agency of educational bodies. The latter is particularly important when it comes to making schools, teachers and educators into buyers/consumers within a regulated market. Ultimately, we aim to ask substantive questions about the threat these processes of market-making pose to the “democratic governance of education” and to question the notion that education technology operates “in service of the common good” (Fontdevila et al. 2021, p. 11).

Markets in the Making: Market *Agencements*, Framings and Qualification

Our analysis of the Italian edtech market in the making draws upon an assemblage sensibility (Ball, 2016; Ong, 2007). Following Callon (2021, p. 53), we see the market as unfolding through a series of market *agencements*, where “supply, demand, and the qualities of products do not drive market activity in any simple sense, but are the outcome of diverse activities” involving state actors, policy moves, edu-businesses, edtech companies and civil society. Following a line of theorising that connects the works of Foucault (1994), Deleuze (1991), and Callon, the notion of *agencement* helps us grasp the combination of a *dispositif*, an arrangement or configuration of elements associated with each other in a particular way, and a type of specific action in play. In fact, we recognize a multiplicity of possible connections between a *dispositif* and various technical, political, or scientific *agencements* that organize collective action in a certain mode. In this vein, we interpret market *agencements* as types of action that coordinate conducts “around a strategic goal” (Callon, 2021, p. 361).

Thus, market *agencements* mobilise meanings and relations, materialise the complexities of the processes of market making, and orient interactions. They are unstable and in a perennial state of becoming, “constantly dealing with forces that provoke them to reformulate and reformat themselves,” and this fluidity of relations can alter and redirect their strategic goals. As Callon (2021, pp. 59-60) goes on to say, echoing Foucault, the analysis of how they function “is therefore not distinct from analysis of their transformations.” In sum, what is of importance here are the co-constructive processes that create edtech supply and demand, paying attention to the diversity, heterogeneity, and plasticity of the agents and entities involved in this co-construction.

Interpreting the making of an edtech market as a series of *agencements* means giving attention to a set of distinctive processes or market practices: “establishing collaborative relations, organizing negotiations, setting decisional processes into motion, structuring and reconfiguring networks” (Callon, 2021, p. 56). Market-making, according to this perspective, organizes a proliferation of relations. Thus, ours is a spatial and temporal analysis, a focus on market-making as *agencements*

requires us to attend to the performative capacity of those processes to re-spatialise education, educational markets and education governance (Ball, 2016) as a part of their temporal and longitudinal unfolding.

An important analytical point in this work is that market *agencements* can be described by untangling their strategic non-subjective purpose, that is by attending to the way in which they organize and promote the establishment of multilateral transactions as well as incite individuals to engage in them through guiding frameworks and motives. As Callon (2021, p. 361) observes:

A market *agencement* is any *agencement* that in practice solves the problem of attaching a good to an agency in exchange for monetary payment. In other words, its function is to institute [multilateral] commercial transactions. This specificity of the collective action (or function) is obtained through a series of interdependent framings.

Here then we outline a series of market *agencements* in order to identify their framings, which are “the devices that orient and structure action toward [a] strategic goal,” and to specify the different operations that, when combined, “prepare and format relations, exchanges and transactions” (Callon, 2021, p. 57) in the edtech market. Framings weave power relations that orient a market action and structure the elementary operations of which it is composed. Moreover, in thinking about the performative effects of market *agencements*, we will not treat goods, supplies, and demands (and thus buyers and sellers) as separate entities but argue that they are intimately connected and co-produced through evolving relationships of adjustment, a process that following Callon (2021, p. 53), we call qualification.

Specifically, using the pandemic crisis as a temporal starting point for our analysis, we will discuss a set of framings and qualification processes in the making of the Italian edtech market including:

- rendering edtech solutions as goods to be marketed (pass(acting)ivation);
- activating particular kind of agencies as those entitled to and capable of evaluating, qualify and transform these goods;
- organizing encounters among qualified goods, qualifying agencies and potential buyers; and
- ensuring the attachment of goods and buyers, obtaining buyers’ consent to pay and setting compelling and combined payment–actions, with possible feedback loops and iterations. (Callon, 2021, p. 60)

These framings and qualification processes entail engaging with, investing in, and implementing an array of devices that structure the various activities that lead to the proliferation of multi-sited, articulated and recursive edtech transactions. Importantly, our analysis moves from the recognition that all *agencements* inherently produce problems, worries and matters of concern that derive from the form that collective action takes. Moreover, they expand through a reconfiguration of their framing, so to absorb the overflows and contestations they provoke.

Methodologically, our research method is a form of network ethnography (NE; Ball & Junemann, 2012). We have used NE to grasp the proliferation of edtech market-making sites, actors and activities and the increasing mobility and flow of economic exchanges—the hows, whos, wheres, and whens of edtech market-making. We take these networks to be a heuristic that enables the display of market *agencements*. That is, they are made up of particular kinds of associations among heterogeneous elements through which (in this case) an edtech market unfolded in Italy. They

represent different types of actions in play among the relations connecting its communities, institutions, procedures, events and forms. Networks can be considered here as “illusionary devices” for representing some aspects of the relations and forms of edtech markets (Peruzzo et al., 2022, p. 5). This methodological choice enables us to capture the details and meanings of market relations, “their multiplicity, their differences, their specificity, and their reversability” (Foucault, 1980, p. 15); as well as the interactions, practices and sensitivities in play, producing a map of the history of networked “efforts” in attempting to create opportunities for a flourishing and profitable edtech market. Moreover, networks allow a spatially dispersed and temporally dynamic representation of the edtech market *agencements* and their overflows. The network graph (described in the next paragraph) is a research tool that supports the “following” and tracking of market developments. We attend to concrete relations as a way of avoiding structural oversimplification in order to portray ‘markets in action’ (Ball & Junemann, 2012, p. 5) and focus on flows and mobilities of people, ideas, knowledge and money.

In our version of NE, we first identified specific market exchanges and policies that regulated and engendered the most significant changes in relation to the Italian education system before, during and post-COVID. Where possible we sought to follow the money; identifying both public sector budgetary allocations and grants and private sector investments and takeovers. Secondly, based on these findings, we carried out extensive online research, including institutional websites, institutional reports, news items, and reports of events and used these to build graphs illustrating the trajectories of market relations and policies. We focused our attention on official business and policy documents, edtech companies, edu-businesses and government announcements, speeches, meetings, conferences and other events, institutional and corporate websites. We also looked at and traced the membership of committees, initiatives and programmes, and organisations with a focus on the network history and its evolution. Thirdly, we carried out data analysis by creating a database on Excel of the organisations, programs, and people identified as network members through document and social media searches called Nodes. We then identified and categorised these affiliations and ‘connections’ (called Edges) and created records and logs on the database, as the basis for the analysis of the work of market-making. We used a network building software (Gephi) to create and display our networks as market *agencements*. There was no direct questioning of actors within the network, nor attendance at network events.

Exploiting the Pandemic Crisis in the Making of EdTech Markets: The *Agencement* of Solidarity

We begin by focusing on how the pandemic provided a window of opportunity to make edtech solutions into goods to be marketed, and how this involved the activation of specific agencies that advocated for these solutions and transformed edtech products in valuable marketable goods. This occurred through a series of detachments, re-brandings and qualifications of digital technologies for education, a paradoxical set of trajectories through which digital educational technologies, became saleable commodities. The result being that they were assigned to a new world of meaning, one of gift and solidarity.

The enactment of the logic of gift and solidarity has been a key force in the process that has led edtech solutions to gain independence from their conceivers/producers, to circulate with a life of their own as marketable goods, and to enter the intimate life spaces of schools, teachers, educators, parents, and students in the Italian education system. This process created the conditions of possibility for different forms of entanglement and co-evolution between edtech solutions, sellers, and buyers into multiple market relations, what Callon (2021, pp. 80-81) calls *singularisation*.

When the pandemic hit Italy in early 2020, authoritative voices from the government, the private sector, and civil society called for rationality, emotional empathy, shared responsibility, and solidarity as the ways to manage the health and educational crisis (see Figure 1). A flagship initiative that embodied and translated this call into action was the Digital Solidarity Initiative (DSI)². Launched by the Ministry for Technological Innovation and Digitalization (MID in Italian) and the National Agency for Digital Italy (AGID, in Italian). DSI was a hub initiative whereby international corporations, national firms, and various associations made 179 e-learning services temporarily available for free to organisations, including schools, teachers, families and students. These ranged from platforms to learning contents, webinars and resource hubs to various apps and on-line courses. The minister, framing digital innovation as a means to maintain societal functions and cohesion during the crisis, remarked how:

Digital and innovation can represent, if used in the right way, precious resources to improve the lives of citizens. Today Italy is called to face an unprecedented moment of health emergency. Even in this difficult context, innovation can make its contribution, if not to rediscover the normality that has been forcibly lost, at least to find a different daily life in which we do not have to give up working, getting information, shopping, socializing and, especially for the little ones, playing, training, education. (Minister Pisano, 12th March, 2020)

Similarly, the Italian Ministry for Education (MIE, at that time MIUR) created a hub to support schools and teachers to make the move to remote learning. As they mentioned,

In these difficult hours, technology comes to our aid, allowing, for example, schools to maintain contact with students, to guarantee the right to study. I thank all the public and private partners who are giving us a hand, supporting the country, the citizens, in this emergency phase. (Minister Azzolina, 12th March, 2020)³

The hub provided Italian schools with a budget transfer (85 million euros) for short term spending, to purchase e-learning platforms, software, hardware and teachers training courses. It also boosted innovation in the use of digital technologies in Italian schools with EU-funded 840 million euros allocated to promote 10 strategic actions related to digitalisation of education⁴.

Solidarity became a keyword in public discourse of crisis management and was also deployed by the private sector. For instance, TIM (an Italian telecommunication giant), in collaboration with WeSchool (the biggest Italian edtech start-up, funded by TIM), promoted the *Operazione Risorgimento Digitale* (ORD)⁵, an extensive EU funded digital education project, which was aimed at expanding the use of digital networks and services to a wider group of citizens. Through ORD, TIM intended to contribute to a sustainable, inclusive and environmentally friendly “resurgence” of the country after the pandemic crisis, promoting at the same time a cultural revolution through digital innovation and attaching to digital technologies feelings of solidarity, proximity, intimacy, optimism, and pragmatism, but also urgency. For example, Salvatore Rossi, President of TIM, emphasised the essential role of digital connectivity and the collective effort required to advance society:

² <https://solidarietadigitale.agid.gov.it/#/come-funziona>

³ <https://www.mim.gov.it/-/coronavirus-si-amplia-la-solidarieta-digitale-pisano-e-azzolina-online-strumenti-utili-per-studenti-famiglie-e-insegnanti>

⁴ <http://pon20142020.indire.it/portale/>

⁵ English translation: Digital Resurgence Operation - <https://operazionerisorgimentodigitale.it/>

The dramatic moment we are going through is revealing how connectivity and digital are essential needs for citizens and, in particular, for young people. With *Operazione Risorgimento Digitale* and having at our side highly capable and reputable partners like Treccani, we want to contribute to making an evolutionary leap in Italian society. As many Italians as possible need to learn to use digital technologies with ease.⁶

Partners of ORD included among others: Google, Cisco, Hewlett Packard, Huawei, Lenovo, Samsung, Nokia, Ericsson, Accenture, Engineering, NTT Data, Dell, Manpower, and PricewaterhouseCoopers, together with the European Commission. Luigi Gubitosi, CEO of TIM, highlighted the shared belief in the initiative, by remarking how “It was promoted by TIM, but it is not an exclusive operation of the Group. It is a project in which we believe but we make it available to everyone, because there are many of us who believe in it.”⁷

So, as we can see, in response to the necessities of the pandemic, a whole ensemble of collateral initiatives and public and private partnerships (PPPs) were launched (see Figure 1), constituting what we call here a market *agencement of solidarity*. Google, for instance, offered a range of state-sponsored initiatives in Italy as well as other countries, requiring schools to subscribe to G-Suite for Education and create Google accounts for students. The most relevant is Teach from Home (later on renamed as Teach from Anywhere), a temporary hub of information and tools (in Italian) to help teachers and parents during the COVID-19 crisis,⁸ launched in partnership with UNESCO’s Institute for Information Technologies in Education (IITE), Italian businesses TIM, WeSchool, C2Group and CampuStore, and the community known as *lascuolacontinua.it*. Like Google and Microsoft, WeSchool offered their Learning Management Systems (LMS) for free, in particular on the government-led initiative *Didattica a Distanza*⁹, a workspace to support schools with remote education. The work of re-branding of educational technology as the solution to the continuation of schooling served two purposes to BigTech and edtech agents such as WeSchool and TIM. First, to represent its providers as savvy and altruistic philanthropists (Grimaldi et al., 2023), second by enrolling schools and students into their digital ecosystems, they produced a new population of loyal consumers, bypassing usual procurement processes involved in edtech purchasing (Williamson & Hogan, 2020).

Looking beyond the Big Tech corporations, many other philanthropic initiatives were launched to promote a “reculturing” of the country and its education system according to the needs, values, and languages of the digital era. Articulating their initiatives in ways that were distinct from corporate/private and political intervention and yet fully aligned with their corporate and political aspirations (Barry et al., 1996, p. 9), edtech corporations and philanthropies, working with the State, sought to permanently integrate digital technology into every aspect of educational life.

⁶ <https://www.gruppotim.it/it/archivio-stampa/corporate/2020/CS-TIM-Treccani-8-maggio-2020.html>

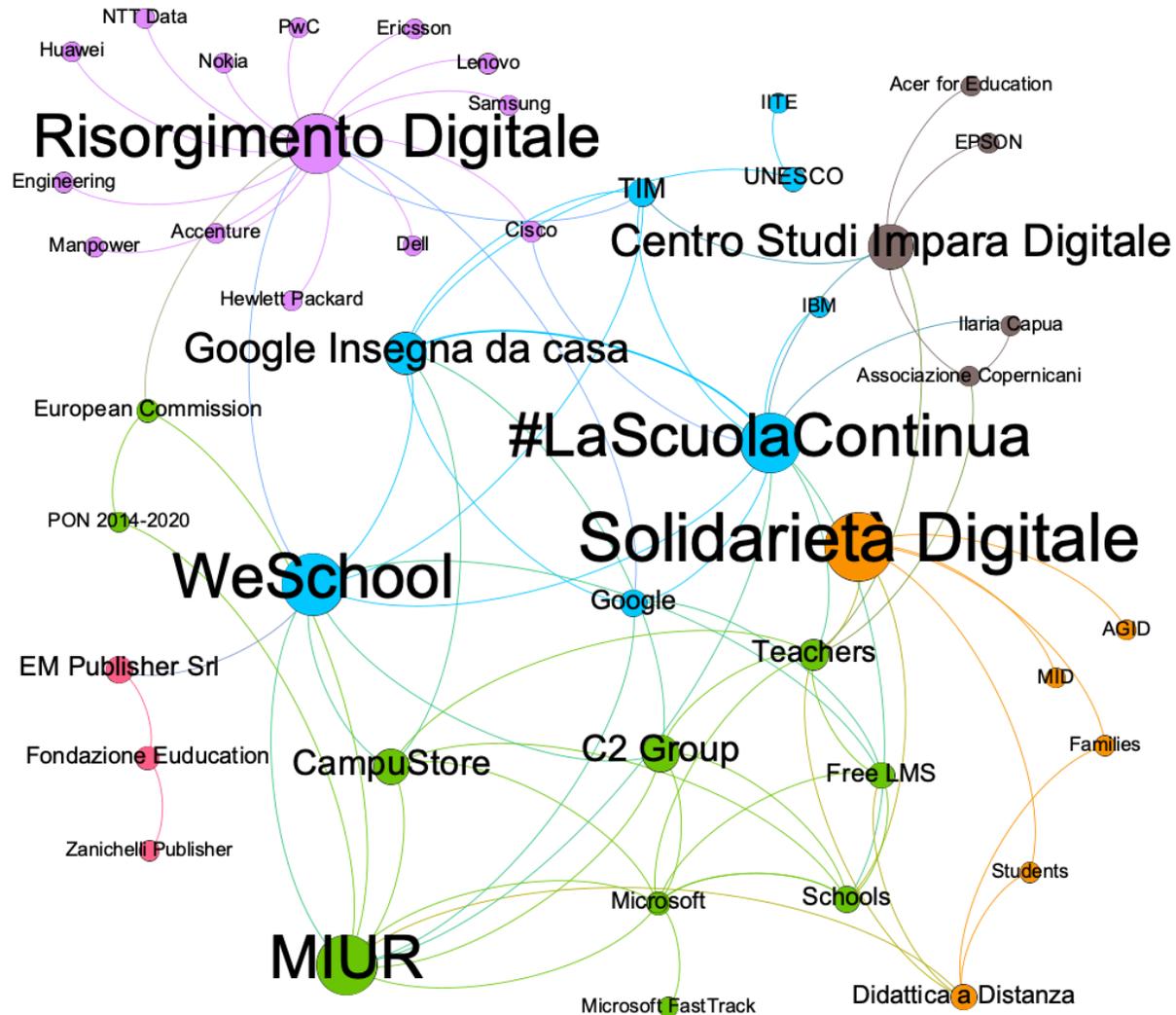
⁷ <https://codacons.it/litalia-si-scopre-piu-digitale-tim-rafforza-progetto-operazione-risorgimento-digitale/>

⁸ <https://teachfromhome.google/intl/it/>

⁹ English translation: Remote Education. The webpage, which was <https://www.istruzione.it/coronavirus/didattica-a-distanza.html> is no longer available.

Figure 1

Market Agencement 1 – Detaching EdTech from Profit: Solidarity, Re-branding and Qualification



An example was the already mentioned hub/community, *lascuolacontinua.it* (<https://www.lascuolacontinua.it>), an interesting example of a civil society mobilisation within the *agencement* of solidarity. *Lascuolacontinua.it* was a sponsored online community and civil society initiative which helped teachers and schools in the transition to remote learning, conceived by Ilaria Capua and promoted by the Associazione Copernicani¹⁰ with methodological support from the Centro Studi Impara Digitale.¹¹ Ilaria Capua is a virologist and one time Parliamentarian, nominated in early 2010s as a revolutionary mind by Seed and she was included in the top 50 most influential scientists in the world according to *Scientific American*. She perfectly represents a civil society

¹⁰ <https://copernicani.it/>

¹¹ <https://www.imparadigitale.it/>

subjectivity, an independent scientist and a techno-educational evangelist, who works from the bottom to tackle the pandemic challenges in education. The Associazione Copernicani is an independent association of students, workers, entrepreneurs, teachers, researchers, and politicians, who present themselves as a social network that seeks to turn ideas into actions, because they “are in love with the future,” and “want to make a contribution to a more participatory democracy closer to the citizens” (Associazione Copernicani’s website)¹². They give their support to technological and software projects of civic utility and the building of technological solutions for improving citizen participation and information. Lastly, the Centro Studi Impara Digitale, funded by TIM and supported by Acer for Education and EPSON among others, provides professional courses for teachers, does research and disseminates results through events, publications, and their platform called Curriculum Mapping. Impara Digitale’s motto is: “Let’s innovate the school! Let’s shape the future.”¹³ Supported by Cisco, Google, IBM, TIM, and WeSchool and operated through initiatives like Google Insegna da Casa and LaScuolaContinua.it was able to offer: a) dozens of guides to support teachers in adopting the best platforms for distance learning, derived from Cisco, Google, and WeSchool and professional development materials on digital teaching methodologies from the experts of the Centro Studi Impara Digitale, and b) recruited a community of teachers who offered methodological and didactic support through a help desk. Again, here there is a blurring of the political, technological and commercial, of business, government and civil society, of innovation, participation, and profit.

While many of these initiatives and partnerships are no longer active, they none the less had longstanding effects. Players like Google, Microsoft, or TIM became key nodes in policy-influencing networks and as well as enrolling thousands of new consumers through gifting and solidarity. Moreover, they established a flourishing market of diverse ‘products’ for a new population of consumers, delivered through a dispersed web of intermediaries who have the tools to qualify and manage the tangle of relations between edtech, sellers and buyers. In fact, besides having had seats on policy committees and providing technical infrastructures and platforms to schools, they also drew institutional, civil society and business partners into new PPPs for the continuation of a technology-based education delivery system.

In all these cases, it was not simply a matter of providing technology. Neither was it simply a matter of edtech businesses assuming and stabilizing oligopolistic positionings in an emerging market. Rather, these big tech players and philanthropies, associations, and civil society groups provided contents and training that were aimed at *infrastructuring* the work of evaluation/qualification of edtech solutions as marketable goods. A dispersed plurality of evaluating agencies (edu-businesses, experts and trainers, associations, local administrators, educational professionals, consumer groups, etc.) presented themselves as equipped with the knowledge and tools to carry out evaluations of edtech solutions and latterly tailor them to localized and specialist market/educational needs. Interestingly, through the *agencement* of solidarity, the agents involved in the creation of edtech and its marketing, like Google, Microsoft, WeSchool, C2Group, and CampuStore became directly associated with state and civil society entities in acting as “provisional and tentative spokespeople” for the educational value and desirability of edtech solutions. They created the conditions for edtech solutions as marketable goods to be widely evaluated and requalified within the frame of an educational rationality.

In this process of re-entanglement, wherein edtech providers became agencies entitled to and capable of assigning meanings, evaluating and transform technologies, a second series of framings was enacted whose focus was the making of edtech sellers and buyers. Google Insegna da

¹² <https://copernicani.it/>

¹³ <https://www.imparadigitale.it/progetto-curriculum-mapping/>

Casa or #LaScuolaContinua were spaces for qualification that enabled certain courses of economic and pedagogical action by teaching schools and teachers how to use new technologies in appropriate and predictable ways (Callon, 2021). This process involved a requalification of those technologies from goods constituting a profit-oriented market to solidary solutions. Notably, within the framing of solidarity, edtech platforms and software and hardware devices became detached from their producers and liberated from their for-profit economic form (*pass(activation)*), to become indispensable solutions guaranteeing the continuity of education. At the same time, they were qualified as tools for educational innovation, responding to the educational needs of the digital generation, and bringing an outdated education system into the 21st century (MacGilchrist et al., 2020).

In sum, this multiplicity of initiatives opened the space of possibility for the making of a flourishing edtech market, populated by tech corporations and edu-business intermediaries, governed through multiple business models that were already well established in the web economy. This enactment of a bundle of relationships and exchange actions between vendors and buyers involved:

- As in the case of the Google G-Suite for Education or the WeSchool platforms, services are offered for free while their users are configured as the end product, since their activities provide valuable information that can be monetized through the enactment of a targeted ads mechanism (what is commonly named as a Free or Hidden Revenue Generation Business Model).
- Platforms like WeSchool allow users to get free access to basic versions of a product/service, but the user is required to pay for more advanced services/products via a permanent or on-demand subscription. Here the encounter between the good/product/service and the user's world is facilitated, while the user is configured at the same time as a future buyer/rentier and is invited to optimize its experience in the market exchange (A Freemium or an On-Demand Business Model).
- Edu-businesses like CampuStore, following the format of giants like Amazon and Uber, sell products and products online acting as third-party platforms that re-intermediate and facilitate the sellers-buyers relationships to trade goods (An eCommerce and Marketplace model).
- As in the case of Google, Microsoft, or WeSchool, the buyer/customer is first enrolled and then locked-into a relatively bounded digital ecosystem and, then, offered various other services across several platforms in the ecosystem (A Digital Ecosystem Model).

In all of this, Italian schools and professionals were re-designated as buyers and subject to a reformatting of their relations to edtech and its producers/sellers. As Callon (2021) argues, the making of an entity into a marketable and profitable good is never irrevocable, neither guaranteed. This active work of market-making created favourable conditions for edu-business, but once up and running this required work of various kinds to stabilize and maintain the newly emerging Italian edtech market.

Stabilising the EdTech Market through Networking and Meetingness: The *Agencement* of Reintermediation

At the end of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, a variety of forces threatened the reframing of edtech solutions as marketable commodities for schools and educators. These included professional cultures and resistance to change, the costs of technology, problems experienced with data and privacy issues, and educational overflows related to difficulties in integrating technological solutions into classroom ecosystems. Thus, more work had to be done to: a) mould, profile, and set digital educational technologies into motion, and b) articulate edtech goods with supplies and demands. As Callon (2021, p. 55) observes, in the making of markets, the stabilisation of such an articulation “involves a series of modifications and adaptations that connect design, production, and circulation activities to one another” or, to put it differently the mobilisation of “multiple agents to collectively engage in the creation, manufacturing, sale, and use” of goods and products. In simple words, it is necessary that certain agencies agree to pay to acquire the goods they are being offered.

In fact, post-pandemic business and policy hyperactivity surrounding educational technologies in Italy reprised, renewed, and intensified pre-existing efforts to orchestrate encounters between educational technologies as process goods (whose form significantly changed after the pandemic re-qualification) and a vast array of agencies involved in the singularisation of those products as marketable goods responding to specific and tailored needs. Those encounters could be interpreted as part of a different market *agencement*, the one of *reintermediation* (see Figure 2). This unfolded primarily through networking and meetingness. In those concatenations, digital educational technologies, as process goods, moved through further displacements and changes of status.

Related to these processes, after the pandemic, trade shows and fairs, conferences, webinars and CPD and training initiatives dedicated to digital technology and edtech proliferated. In each case, mundane actions and exchanges, face-to-face meetings as well as formal and informal relationships between buyers, sellers, goods and intermediaries took place (McCann & Ward, 2012). As spaces of encounters, they worked to create a correspondence between edtech goods, services, schools, and educators’ and students’ expectations.

Recently, in Italy most of these initiatives have converged into one institutionally sponsored national fair called Didacta.¹⁴ Didacta is organized by FirenzeFiera – a public/private company and sponsored by the Ministry of Education, its agency INDIRE and many other public and private partners, including a bank foundation. It has an international format that combines an exhibiting area, involving “the long supply chain of companies working in the school and training world,” and professional development activities and events for teachers and educators on edtech.¹⁵ The aim is to facilitate a multi-sided debate on the future of education that brings together the worlds of education and edu-businesses. In the same vein, since 2016 the non-profit association Impara Digitale¹⁶ has organized an annual national initiative, the Stati Generali della Scuola Digitale, which presents itself as “the most relevant national event” where teachers, educators, administrators and edtech representatives can “share ideas, reflect and debate on the instruction, education and learning in the digital age” (from the Stati Generali della Scuola Digitale’s website).¹⁷ A recent and similar initiative is Learning More, a festival organized by Wonderful Education and Future Education Modena with

¹⁴ <https://fieradidacta.indire.it/en/>

¹⁵ <https://fieradidacta.indire.it/en/thefair/>

¹⁶ <https://www.imparadigitale.it/impara-digitale/>

¹⁷ <https://www.statigeneralscuoladigitale.it>

the partnership of TIM since 2022.¹⁸ Wonderful Education¹⁹ is an edtech-business whose remit is to develop, produce, and offer innovative, technology-intensive high-impact educational formats, projects, and experiences. It claims to have expertise in all domains of the edtech sector, drawing on to a multidisciplinary team/network made of 150 experts, 70 partners and 11 strategic Edu-R&D projects. In 2019, Wonderful Education created Future Education Modena, the first Italian edtech Hub involving hundreds of medium and small edu-businesses and edtech start-ups. Since its creation in 2019, Future Education Modena has organized more than 1500 events, laboratories, seminars, experiments and PD courses for the “whole society,” which they define as teachers and educators, but also children, students, young people and adults who are willing to develop and accelerate their competences for the future. Their festival, Learning More, presents itself as “the only Festival in Italy that explores the learning frontiers and new opportunities of human capital enhancement,”²⁰ including neurosciences, artificial intelligence, creativity, digital technologies, new languages, and new tools for an innovative, inclusive and effective education. Learning More intends to “meet tomorrow’s challenges” through acceleration. Innovation for Education is a fourth relevant space of meetingness and networking in the making of the Italian edtech market. Organized by CampuStore, it offers free webinars and workshops, conferences, laboratories, online events, together with training courses for teachers and educators to become familiar with the most effective and innovative technology-based methods of teaching and learning.²¹

Spaces of meetingness such as the Stati Generali della Scuola Digitale, Didacta, Learning More and Innovation for Education are future-oriented spaces that work to stabilise existing markets. The encounters between educational technologies, agencies involved in their singularisation as marketable goods, and the needs of buyers take place at different stages of the product/good’s career (e.g. the metaverso or educational robots, are promoted in fairs and trade shows long before they are a ready marketable solution; Player-Koro et al. 2018).

These encounters among heterogenous agencies, suppliers, buyers and goods have contributed decisively to “enhance the brokerage capacity of the corporate sector” (Fontdevila et al. 2021, pp. 7-8) and have acted as spaces where discourses and edtech solutions are shared, and market ties are reinforced with regularity and increasing intensity. Because of their heterogeneity, these events can be seen as “key spaces to consolidate, naturalize and spread” a discourse of the desirability of edtech goods and services, and animate “social relations and nurturing trust” (Fontdevila et al. 2021, pp. 7-8) among edtech market agencies. Importantly for the characterisation of this second *agencement*, in those spaces edtech solutions and goods undergo a change of status. The status is no longer that of solidarity and profit-detached solutions in relation to an unexpected education crisis but rather that of market goods within a future-oriented discourse of innovation that “must” be adopted to improve the quality of education and align schools with present and future societal needs.

Within the market *agencement* of reintermediation, fairs, trade shows, conferences, and training initiatives are not the only devices mobilised to organize encounters and translate edtech goods into means for a progressive education to lead to successful edtech market exchanges. Two mechanisms have developed from here. First, multiple edtech-focused networks began to connect educational technologies, agents, and material infrastructures within a dynamic that transforms them within its own evolution. These networks have recently converged into one ecosystem, EdTech

¹⁸ <https://learningmorefestival.it>

¹⁹ <https://www.wonderfuleducators.it/who-we-are>

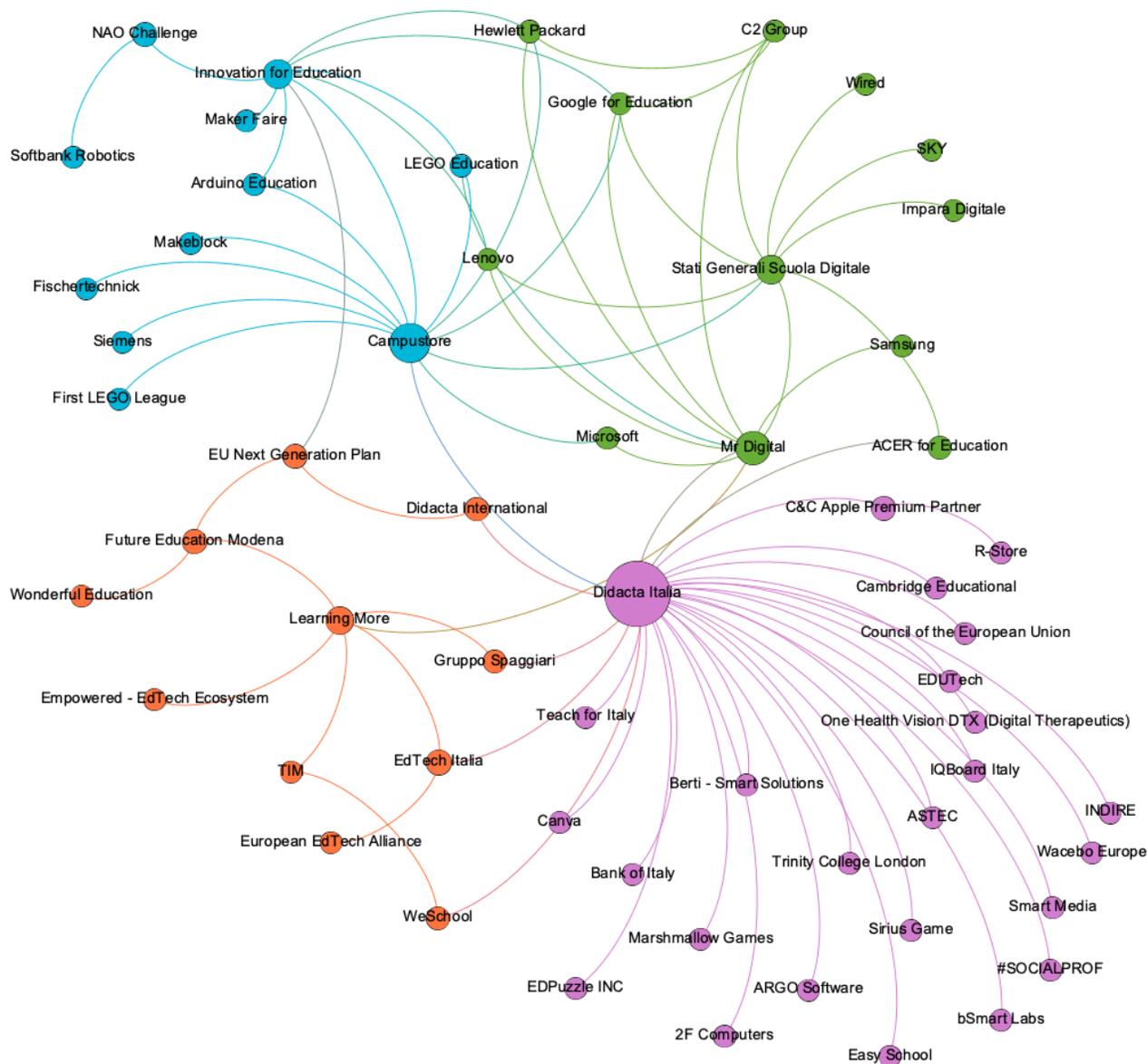
²⁰ <https://learningmorefestival.it>

²¹ <https://www.innovationforeducation.it/eventi/>

Italia²². EdTech Italia is the national branch of the European EdTech Alliance²³ and defines itself as a community of startups, scaleups, businesses, and institutions at the service of learning, with the aims of promoting its sustainable progress and innovations in the how and what of learning.

Figure 2

Market Agencement 2 – Reintermediating EdTech through Networking and Meetingness



²² <https://www.EdTechitalia.org>

²³ <https://www.EdTecheurope.org/>

EdTech Italia intends to: a) connect and create spaces of encounter and exchange among educators and edTech entrepreneurs and businesses; b) promote the edtech Italian ecosystem and increase the visibility of edtech innovative solutions and best practices; c) establish a dialogue among educational communities, the academic world, and businesses in order to test the effectiveness of edtech solutions; d) map trends in the edtech market and identify profitable directions for investments.

Second, the business world coevolved to guarantee continuity in the grassroots work carried out by private-public partnership and civil society associations during the pandemic. In a scenario where edtech giants were continuing to work for the enlargement of the edtech market (Google and Microsoft were still heavily working on teachers and educators training: see https://edu.google.com/intl/ALL_it/ or <https://www.microsoft.com/it-it/education>), at the same time an archipelago of national edtech-businesses established themselves as intermediaries and marketers of tailored and/or mass-oriented composite edtech solutions. Notably, this happened through the adoption of well-established business models in the digital economy, like Amazon's longtail, and the related infrastructures: web-based corner stores and malls, window displays, directories, e-supermarket carts, and chains of intermediary vendors. The most interesting cases in this respect were the already mentioned CampuStore,²⁴ C2Group,²⁵ and WeSchool.²⁶

CampuStore is the flagship example of an evolving edtech market. It unfolds through and in relation to the edtech giants and mobilises a distinctive set of business strategies rooted in the digital economy (see the section above) to exploit the long wave of the pandemic rupture and capture Italian schools, teachers, and families in relations of brand-loyalty, renting-dependence, and consumption. CampuStore is the Italian Amazon of the edtech market and it employs its eCommerce strategy, the Long Tail business model, to realise significant profits by selling all possible edtech items that any school or teacher could be interested in, employing sophisticated mechanism of customised recommendation. C2Group is the main competitor for CampuStore. It also has a diversified portfolio of products and solutions and heavily invests in the edtech market as a new market niche. Finally, WeSchool is active as a platform and has consolidated its role in Italy, extending its partnerships and projects, in the innovation of teaching in schools, universities and companies through digital and challenge-based teaching. Its portfolio of clients currently consists of 2 million students and 230,000 teachers, and it promotes training courses for teachers on new teaching methods, offers content to develop third millennium skills and a collaborative platform to enhance classroom teaching. WeSchool works with the most important Italian companies in the banking, telco, energy and publishing sectors, with which it develops projects for the school world. Its motto is: "To change Italy you need to change the school" (WeSchool's website).²⁷ These examples make clear how the rise of this archipelago of intermediators and marketers also involves the flourishing of relations of reintermediation between edtech goods, their buyers, these new intermediaries and consultants, technology-transfer agencies, salespeople, influencers, or customer service professionals.

In contrast to any understanding of the edtech market as an oligopolistic space controlled by a bundle of few BigTech/edtech corporations, this multiplicity can be read in terms of networking, reintermediation, and the deployment of a variety of selling strategies, which are also modes of co-construction of the buyer: notably, knowledge mobilisation, networking/meetingness, and reintermediation. If this market *agencement* follows different trajectories and combines market and nonmarket activities, it could be interpreted as a composite of attempts to organize "the attachment

²⁴ <https://www.CampuStore.it>

²⁵ <https://www.c2group.it/site/team/team-educational/>

²⁶ <https://www.weschool.com>

²⁷ <https://www.weschool.com>

of the goods to potential buyers in such a way as to obtain the latter's willingness to pay" and carry on a process of singularisation and incorporation of edtech solutions so as to make them and teachers/schools/educators "reciprocally constitutive of one another" (Callon, 2021, p. 59).

Public Funding for the Making of EdTech Markets: The *Agencement* of Affection

In the months after the pandemic, data on the edtech market demonstrated how schools, teachers, and edtech products were still strangers to one another and further meeting strategies and sites were needed for the qualification of goods and agencies. These dynamics manifested in a third *agencement*, the one of *affection*, where EU and national policies had an impact in the making of the Italian edtech market by institutionally shaping the demands/market. In our reading, two policies have played a key role for the singularisation and incorporation of edtech solutions in the Italian edtech market. We are referring here to the NextGenerationEU²⁸ and its Italian translation, Italia Domani²⁹. Through them, a massive public intervention has solicited numerous market exchanges and allowed the fragile competitive mechanisms of the market to play out. We have here two interlocking and interdependent *agencements*, a market-led reintermediation and a public-led affection. Both have multiple feedback loops and iterations in terms of compelling payment–actions. They have contributed to a particular kind of inflection of the business models enacted by edtech corporations and national businesses.

In 2021 the EU launched NextGenerationEU, a policy initiative with a budget of €806.9 billion the aim of which was to ensure that Europe would “emerge stronger from the pandemic, transform [its] economies and societies, and design a Europe that works for everyone,” a “healthier, greener, and more digital” Europe.³⁰ The EU policy initiative moves from the assumption that “the future will be driven by technology” and that digital technologies are the key to realising more efficient, productive, competitive, and inclusive societies. Education is part of that vision, and the NextGenerationEU provides state members with significant resources to re-infrastructure education systems through digital technologies, make e-education accessible to all, let everyone improve their digital skills, and help businesses to develop digital solutions to make all of this happen. To fulfil these objectives, the EU asked the state members to develop National Recovery and Resilience Plans (PNRR, in Italian) to allocate NextGenerationEU funding.

In Italy, the PNRR took the title Italia Domani,³¹ a plan that lists among its main objectives the creation of a more innovative and inclusive education system. As for education, Italia Domani funds a specific policy, called Futura,³² whose budget is €17.59 billion, including €12.1 billion for the modernisation (i.e. digitalisation) of infrastructures and €5.46 billion for competency development. A quick reading of Futura reveals how being innovative most often equates to introducing digital technologies and digital learning in schools. In fact, what Italia Domani seeks to achieve is the creation of a “School 4.0,” a school provided with innovative and digital learning environments and tools “that train citizens in their full awareness, a school resulting to be decisive in the processes of digital and ecological transition for the Italy of tomorrow” (PNRR, 2021, p. 17). A budget of €2.1 billion is dedicated to “supporting and guiding the digital transformation of the Italian school system,” i.e. transforming 100,000 Italian classrooms into innovative learning environments by 2025.

²⁸ https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en

²⁹ <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/it/il-piano/missioni-pnrr/istruzione-e-ricerca.html>

³⁰ https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en

³¹ <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/it/home.html>

³² <https://pnrr.istruzione.it>

What Futura funds is the transformation of school spaces into adaptable, flexible, and digital connected learning environments, with technologically advanced laboratories and a work-oriented learning process. It also supports the digitisation of school administrations. Moreover, it provides funds for the creation, by 2026, of three national digital education hubs (DEHs) to improve the capacity of the higher education (HE) system to offer digital education to university students and workers, but also to improve the teaching and digital skills of teachers in universities and teachers in schools.³³ But, more importantly for us, Futura allocates economic resources (€80,00 million) to be distributed among Italian schools (depending on their students' intake and number of classes) to be spent on the market in education technology, the creation of blended/digital learning environments and school staff training on what is termed as the digital transition. In relation to that, the stated objective is to train 650,000 teachers and school staff over 8,000 educational institutions, through 20,000 active courses with territorial training hubs by 2026.³⁴

This ambitious plan has also a roadmap. In 2022, each Italian school had been assigned a specific budget (from a minimum of €80,000 up to €300,000) to spend on innovative classroom activities, their administration and the training staff. Subsequently, in June 2023, the Ministry of Education published a shortlist of the edtech businesses recognised as having the requisites to act as product and service vendors for schools. By the end of November 2023, each Italian school should have presented to the Ministry a detailed project for innovations in their classrooms, the training of staff, and the purchase of products or services by the businesses included in the list. By the time we are writing this article, schools are expected to complete their projects by the beginning of the school year 2024/2025.

Interestingly, Futura indicates many connections with other EU and national policies on digital education. Notably, it reinforces and is reinforced by other policy programmes and massive EU public funds to: a) improve the schools connectivity and the introduction of the Ultrabroadband in all schools in the country; b) several policies funding teachers professional development and schools networking on digital literacy and the DigCompEU, blended learning, curriculum and teaching innovation, with a specific reference to STEM disciplines; c) the Erasmus+ funding schemes for the promotion of Digital Transformation in education; d) EU-funded innovation in the AI education. Futura, as part of those wider policy *agencements*, contributes to the co-construction of edtech solutions as marketable goods, the making of a specific set of evaluators and sellers, and the re-formatting of Italian schools and teachers as compelled buyers.

These policies are pivotal in the enactment of the *agencement* of affection, which creates relational spaces where edtech products become market goods that trouble school agents and provoke needs that must be met. Through NextGenerationEU and Italia Domani, Italian schools are faced with the need to make a decision on how to spend the unexpected funding to pursue innovation strategies. They must figure out a response and in doing so they have to explore edtech solutions, making choices on the basis of evaluating both their uses and their fit with their aims. A tension arises here between the schools and edtech goods, a tension that builds an inevitable relationship, forces encounters and engagement that can be only resolved through processes of attachment, an “affecting” of the agent and the good that transforms both and attaches them to one another. This gives rise to a proliferation of discourses that motivate the attachment. The building of such a space of engagement and encounter between educational agents and edtech goods reinforces the effectiveness of the *agencement* of reintermediation. As Callon (2021, p. 265) observes, “agents are affected, however, only if they have learned or have been taught to be affected. [...] Attachment is a

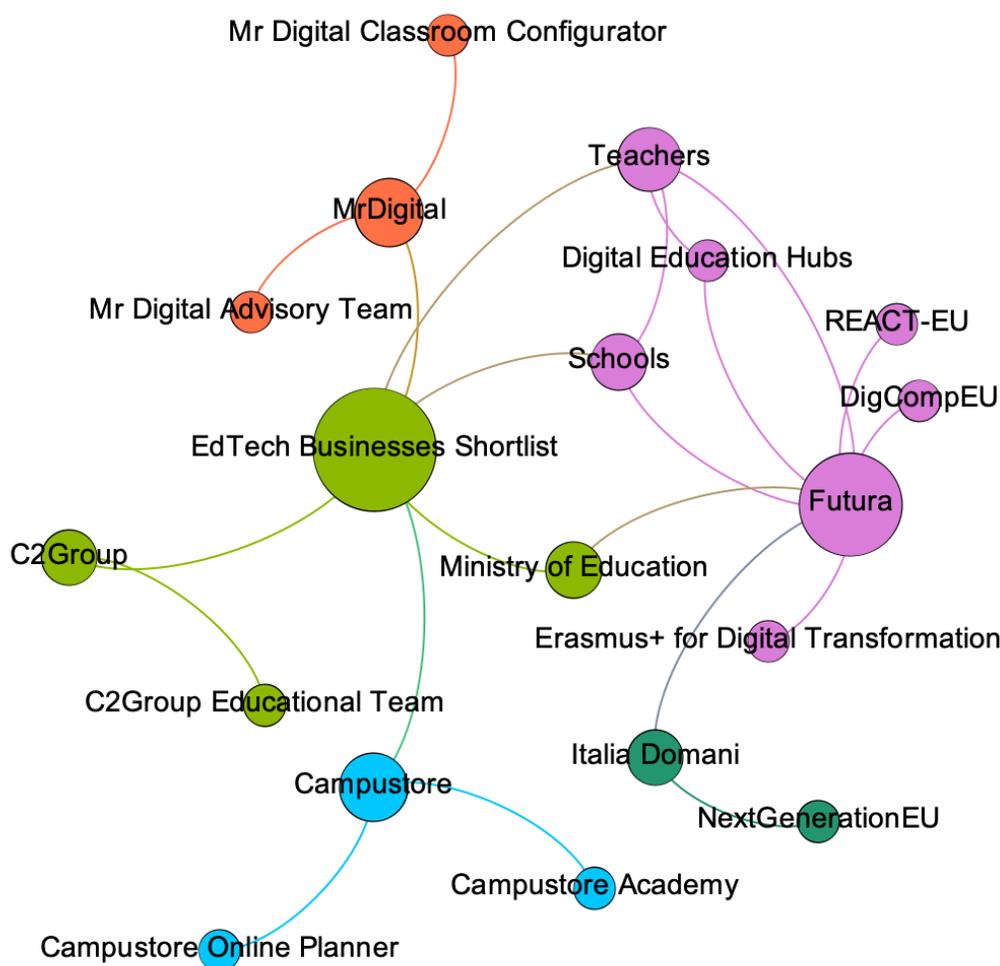
³³ <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/it/home.html>

³⁴ <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/it/home.html>

matter of conversation, [...] it is a matter of know-how.” The need for consideration and response that the NextGenerationEU and Italia Domani creates for schools and teachers represents the condition of possibility for the production of affects, the transformation of identities, and the establishment of durable connections and solid associations between edtech solution and educational agents. The trade shows and fairs, conferences, webinars and CPD or training initiatives constituting the *agencement* of reintermediation are the devices that give edtech products and educational agents the time and space for surprise, attention and curiosity, while providing the discursive and material frameworks within which the singularisation of products can happen, and emotions and affect can be produced that make agents. These affective attachments require legitimation work, i.e. the evaluation of profiles by authoritative calculative agencies, but also a preparatory work, where the space for attachment is cleared through intimate meetings, adjustments and matches. The business strategies enacted by edtech giants and their intermediaries in the wake of the launch of NextGenerationEU and Italia Domani put in play various combinations of these moves.

Figure 3

Market Agencement 3 – Soliciting the Italian EdTech Market through affection



In what looks like a paradox, the stabilisation of the market through public policies has created a favourable terrain for the pluralisation and interlocking of the different digital business models enacted by corporations and national businesses through the *agencement of solidarity*. Public policies allow multiple forms of selling and buying, make possible different modes of attachment based on the *pass(activation)* of edtech solutions, but also create possibilities for encounters among technologies and agents which allow for adjustments and prepare for attachment. Much of this activity has occurred through digital platforms. Three national edtech businesses, CampuStore, C2 Group and Mr Digital are clear examples of how the institutionally driven market *agencement of affection* is co-constitutive of a differentiated set of modes for exploiting the possibilities for market making opened up through NextGenerationEU and Italia Domani.

On the CampuStore platform, buyers can choose among more than 10,000 products and services using a search engine. Mimicking the Amazon e-shop architecture and eCommerce and Marketplace business model, the platform has thematic sections, categories, filters, recommendations, and promos which “guide” the buyer towards the “right choice” to facilitate innovation their school, classrooms, and teaching. At the same time, a set of affective possibilities are available on the homepage to help schools in spending the Futura funding and bring about a successful singularisation of edtech goods. First, a section dedicated to Futura/Scuola 4.0 presents almost 600 ready edtech solutions to help schools that are “looking for ideas” to deal with the institutionally driven request to spend money and innovate education. As the webpage claims:

In this section we propose what schools need right now to consciously respond to the requests of PNRR School Plan 4.0: devices, monitors, software, furniture, laboratory and STEAM tools. Are you looking for ideas and activity ideas? Visit this page designed to offer you everything you need to experience the PNRR with awareness and serenity. You will find lots of materials.
(<https://www.CampuStore.it/didattica-distanza.html>)

Intimate social engagements among edtech solutions and school agents are further promoted through a pluralisation of services. A section of the platform informs potential buyers about funding opportunities for edtech innovation. For any open call/opportunity, schools and teachers can find for free all the necessary information to apply, webinars, ideas for possible proposals, advisory services for developing a proposal, all of that related to technological ready-made solutions to be bought.³⁵ In addition, there is the possibility of planning a new edtech learning environment through the online CampuStore Classroom Planner.³⁶ Finally, the platform offers a section titled “Innovation for Education” where buyers can find articles, news, webinars, and online events dedicated to the use of edtechnologies in schools. They can also enrol to the CampuStore Academy, a section of the marketplace that allows schools and teachers to “buy” easy, clear, and fast training courses in which to learn how to be innovative through edtech. C2Group³⁷ and Mr Digital³⁸ platforms are similar. The enactment of a similar set of affection strategies is evident: a funding opportunity section, an educational team that offers advice to every interested school, digital classrooms online planners, training opportunities and the ‘most suitable edtech solutions for any educational need’.

The *agencement of affection*, as enacted through the policy chain NextGenEU-Italia Domani-Futura, works as a powerful way of co-profiling edtech solutions and schools/teacher that carefully

³⁵ <https://www.CampuStore.it/bandi-e-finanziamenti.html>

³⁶ <https://planner.CampuStore.it>

³⁷ <https://www.c2group.it/site/>

³⁸ <https://education.mrdigital.it>

deals with those uncertainties and risks that threaten the attachment between goods and agents. In fact, within the encounters between educators and edtech solutions that we have discussed, consumers/buyers can be convinced that the edtech solutions on offer correspond exactly to what they need. Furthermore, they are invited to take part in their configuration/customisation, in a situation in which the addition of the buyers to the good is not under threat but rather is institutionally enforced. As a consequence, in the emerging Italian edtech Market, dialoguing and coproducing as ways of engaging edtech goods and educational agents occur within a space in which the consent to pay of the buyer is secured, price formulation is a one-sided and uncontested process and the promise of a successful attachment between edtech and schools is institutionally turned into a necessity.

Conclusion

What we describe here is a paradoxical process of market-making in one setting—Italy—which organizes a proliferation of profitmaking relations but also a re-spatialising of education and education governance. In such a process of market formation, every attempt of stabilisation corresponds to overflows and an intensification of forces that alter, redirect, reformulate and reformat. The complex combination of crises, policies, and business interest are played out in a network of relationships that serve the heterogeneous interests of government and digital capital through the production of needs and necessities that schools and teachers are invited to make their own. Yet, what emerges is the image of an unstable, contingent, and overdetermined market, in a perennial state of becoming. We also offer a mode of analysis of edtech market-making using Callon's conception of *agencements*. These *agencements* are modes of collective action that work to form or fabricate a market and particularly a set of market exchange relations, and the related attachments of goods and agencies. They also, crucially, as one part of these relations, produce a set of needs and necessities that animate particular kinds of consumer. These needs and necessities are multi-faceted; they bring an urgency into play; they require response and engagement; they incite a sense of innovation, forward-thinking and up-to-dateness that conspire to hail a market subject that finds it difficult to resist the pressure to change and satisfaction in the vibrancy and novelty of new digital technologies. Several of the most prominent plans and programme for a future education system were designed in such a way as to activate the teacher/leader as a consumer, specifically by devolving funds needing to be spent (perhaps a dimension of heterarchical governance?), and a producer (of valuable data, first and foremost). In this way different kinds of leaders and pedagogues and classrooms are envisioned, ones that are “valuable” and market “friendly.” As we stress, the consumer/producer/pedagogue is “invited” to participate in a whole variety of networks, events, webinars, and training programmes that address and re-make their professionalism in digital terms. All of this operates to put together a market terrain within which there are multiple opportunities for business activity and profit and in which various and different business models are in play—different sorts of possible profitmaking. Almost all aspects of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment are opened-up to the market and re-defined in relation to a diverse set of “products”—a commodification of education in all its aspects.

Much of this market making activity was stimulated by the specific demands of COVID-19 and lockdown. Digital products offered a ready solution to the enormous problem of educating without schools and without teachers. COVID-19 was, one might say, a game changer, a primary necessity and need. In this sense, with the support of the government and later the EU, digital solutions became obvious and were shifted from an erudite possibility for the technological adept to common sense for every classroom and every teacher. That is not to say that the *agencements* examined were not already evident, but COVID-19 provided an entirely new business opportunity.

Through a combination of partnerships, with government and other players; the deployment of short-term philanthropy; the use of inducements—social and monetary – digital businesses were able to take up a position at the centre of education policy making, and to present themselves as saviours and benefactors (Burns, 2019). However, also significant in the *agencements* of this market is the role of various intermediaries—government agencies, third sector and civil society organisations, professional associations, thought-leaders, and policy entrepreneurs. What we see here is one part of the changing heterarchical landscape of contemporary government and governance. A distribution of policy roles and responsibilities across loose and evolving networks of non-government actors. Indirectly and sometimes directly government is a market maker, although in the COVID-19 interregnum the Italian government, like many others, found itself turning to and beholden to business actors to “save” education.

However, to reiterate, the business opportunities, the policy initiatives, the network relations, and market structures described in this case are neither static nor stable. The digital marketplace is fast changing and sometimes fragile. Like any other market sector there are casualties, business failures, product failures, and inefficiencies. There is a discernible trend toward oligopoly and a constant search for new framings and profit opportunities. Nonetheless, digital education remains central to the conceptions of the future of both the Italian government and the EU. A form of digital citizenship is conjured up, and education is seen as key to its achievement.

What is needed now are further uses and testing out of Callon’s method of market analysis, in other national settings and market settings, to theorise the making and (in)stability of edtech markets, understand their framings and processes of qualifications, the way in which those provide answers to educational questions, problematise their power relations, and interrogate our own compromises with and within the multitude of concerns, proposals and subjectivities involved (Callon, 2021). In our view, such a theorisation has to undertake the difficult task of opening spaces for epistemic and governmental agonism in education, where educationally oriented, rather than market-oriented framings and qualification processes can be invented, tested, and adjusted and the possibility is warranted for schools, teachers, and educators to experiment with modes of being, acting, and thinking that are not over-determined by the tyranny of profit-making.

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