

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

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## Introduction to the Special Issue: Education Privatisation and Commercialisation in the Context and Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** While different forms of privatisation and commercialisation of education have existed since at least the 1990s, the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022 created opportunities for the integration of private and commercial interests in public education to be turbo-charged. In this introduction to the special issue, we place its articles featuring country case studies from Italy, Brazil, and the United Kingdom in context, providing some historical and conceptual background to the forms, impacts and pathways of privatisation and commercialisation of education. We argue, based on our reading of the

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three articles in this collection and of the literature more broadly, that the education crisis brought about by the global pandemic swiftly opened the doors to new private actors and new forms of public-private partnerships. Due to the enduring nature of many of the relationships established over the course of the crisis, we observe the longer-term impacts in the form of expanded and intensified reach of the global education industry and more entrenched forms of privatisation and commercialisation of education in many contexts worldwide.

**Keywords:** commercialisation; privatisation; heterarchical governance; COVID-19 pandemic

### **Introducción al número especial: Privatización y comercialización de la educación en el contexto y la pospandemia de la COVID-19**

**Resumen:** Aunque diferentes formas de privatización y comercialización de la educación han existido al menos desde la década de 1990, la pandemia global de COVID-19 de 2020-2022 generó oportunidades para acelerar la integración de intereses privados y comerciales en la educación pública. En esta introducción al número especial, situamos en contexto los artículos que presentan estudios de caso de Italia, Brasil y el Reino Unido, proporcionando algunos antecedentes históricos y conceptuales sobre las formas, impactos y trayectorias de la privatización y comercialización de la educación. Sostenemos, a partir de nuestra lectura de los tres artículos de esta colección y de la literatura en general, que la crisis educativa provocada por la pandemia global abrió rápidamente las puertas a nuevos actores privados y a nuevas formas de asociaciones público-privadas. Debido al carácter duradero de muchas de las relaciones establecidas durante la crisis, observamos impactos a largo plazo en la forma de una expansión e intensificación del alcance de la industria global de la educación y de formas más arraigadas de privatización y comercialización de la educación en muchos contextos del mundo.

**Palabras clave:** comercialización; privatización; gobernanza heterárquica; pandemia de COVID-19

### **Introdução ao dossiê: Privatização e comercialização da educação no contexto e no pós-pandemia da COVID-19**

**Resumo:** Embora diferentes formas de privatização e comercialização da educação existam pelo menos desde a década de 1990, a pandemia global de COVID-19 de 2020-2022 criou oportunidades para acelerar a integração de interesses privados e comerciais na educação pública. Nesta introdução ao dossiê, contextualizamos os artigos que apresentam estudos de caso da Itália, do Brasil e do Reino Unido, oferecendo alguns antecedentes históricos e conceituais sobre as formas, os impactos e os caminhos da privatização e comercialização da educação. Defendemos, com base em nossa leitura dos três artigos desta coletânea e da literatura de modo mais amplo, que a crise educacional provocada pela pandemia global abriu rapidamente as portas para novos atores privados e novas formas de parcerias público-privadas. Devido ao caráter duradouro de muitas das relações estabelecidas ao longo da crise, observamos impactos de longo prazo na forma da expansão e intensificação do alcance da indústria global da educação e do fortalecimento de formas mais enraizadas de privatização e comercialização da educação em muitos contextos ao redor do mundo.

**Palavras-chave:** comercialização; privatização; governança heterárquica; pandemia de COVID-19

## **Introduction to the Special Issue: Education Privatisation and Commercialisation in the Context and Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

This special issue aims to understand the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on education privatisation and commercialisation. In this introduction we situate the articles in the special issue within the trajectory of research on these phenomena in the field of critically oriented educational policy studies, variously referred to as policy sociology in education, critical policy analysis, critical policy sociology, and more (see Molla, 2021). We begin with a brief overview of English-language research on education privatisation and commercialisation prior to the World Health Organization's declaration of the pandemic in March 2020 (Adhanom Ghebreyesu, 2020). We then shift our focus to concerns and warnings of opportunities for enhanced privatisation and commercialisation of public education in the earliest months of the crisis. Next, we review knowledge about the pandemic's impacts on these phenomena, including the findings of the three studies in this special issue, as research emerged throughout the crisis and continues to do so five years later.

### **Privatisation and Commercialisation: Forms, Impacts, Pathways**

Education privatisation is a dynamic phenomenon with myriad forms. Ball and Youdell (2008) proposed two key types: exogenous and endogenous privatization. Endogenous privatisation includes the introduction of ideas, practices, and values of the for-profit sector into public education, including the creation of quasi-markets in education. Exogenous privatisation involves "bringing the private sector into public schools" (Ball & Youdell, 2008, p. 5). Scholars debate the meaning of commercialisation and where it fits in Ball and Youdell's typology, if at all. We understand commercialisation broadly as growing and/or shifting interests in public schools and schooling for commercial gain (Hogan & Thompson, 2020).

Education privatisation and commercialisation are not new (Rosenzvaig-Hernandez, 2024); however, researchers increasingly focused on the impacts of both phenomena in the 1990s as more countries adopted policies that privatized public education or blurred boundaries between public and private systems (Chitty, 1997). Much of this historical work highlights how privatisation has undermined principles of public education including equitable access to public schooling and its benefits, public governance, and education for the common good (e.g., Ravitch, 2020; Winton, 2022).

One body of research focuses on policies that facilitate the creation of markets in education. These policies include vouchers and other ways of funding private schools with public money; the founding of schools that are publicly funded but privately managed, such as charter schools in the USA and academies in the UK; and the establishment of specialized schools and programs within public systems. Studies from around the world show these policies stratify students by race, class, and student needs (e.g., Frankenberg et al., 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2011).

Another line of research examines forms of endogenous privatization. Non-state actors have always been involved in public schooling, but the means, outcomes, and extent of their engagement have changed (Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo, 2016). Policies introduced during the past several decades have supported, if not explicitly required, these changes. Seeking funds from non-state actors is a good example of this shift. Schools have long looked to parents, other caregivers, and local communities for money to pay for trips, graduation celebrations, and other "extras" to enhance their children's schooling experiences. However, new policies that tie funding to enrollment and/or

reduced public expenditures have meant that many public schools now rely on larger amounts of funding from a more diverse group of non-state actors to pay for expenses essential to education. Schools' varying ability to fundraise and competition between schools for private dollars has led to unequal access to opportunities for students (Rowe & Perry, 2020; Yoon et al., 2019).

Seeking private funds to supplement public education extends beyond school communities and national borders through strategies such as selling curriculum abroad and recruiting international students. These and other practices that engage private actors in public education are part of a growing global education industry that conceptualizes education as a globalized sector for profit generation, investment, and management by private organizations (Verger, Lubienski & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016).

Governments and international organizations including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank have encouraged the development of the global education industry through various arrangements, including public-private partnerships ([PPPs]; Morris et al., 2022). PPPs are agreements between governments and for-profit businesses, foundations, post-secondary institutions, other non-government organizations, and/or other actors from the private sector to deliver a product or project wherein all parties are expected to share costs, risks, and rewards. In education, they have been used to pay for private schooling, top up public funding of public schools, provide space for instruction, and to finance, design, construct, and maintain infrastructure (Tilak, 2015). PPPs are often touted as more cost-effective than wholly public processes and lauded for their potential for innovation and productive disruption of the status quo. These supposed benefits for the public often go unrealized (Winton, 2023).

Businesses' involvement in public education is not limited to PPPs. There is an extended history of corporations sponsoring school activities and programs, securing exclusive rights to sell and promote their products, offering incentive programs, appropriating school space for advertising and marketing, supplying branded teaching materials, and fundraising (Gidney, 2019). New and expanding opportunities for businesses to profit from public education are key facets of the commercialisation of public education. Governments increasingly use private consultants to create policy, manage schools, and orchestrate reform (Gunter et al., 2015; Pinto, 2012). In addition, governments contract out more, and a greater diversity of, education services, including cleaning, catering, testing, data management systems, human resources, and school inspections as well as teaching itself (Ball & Youdell, 2008).

Technology companies, in particular, have long aimed to integrate themselves into schools. As computers entered schools in large numbers in the 1980s, corporate leaders recognized schools as a huge market for computer and software sales and offered generous discounts. Critics' worries about unproven claims of technology's educational benefits were dismissed as teachers, caregivers, and policymakers often welcomed technology companies' involvement, believing computers and other technology engaged students, supported learning, and prepared students for jobs of future (Beale, 2014; Gidney, 2019).

As computing and technology advanced, researchers studied how education technologies (edtech) were reshaping education, in part through digital platforms that offered ever-expanding ways for individuals, businesses, and other organizations to interact and exchange information online (Decuyper et al., 2021). In the decade leading up to the pandemic, the OECD, World Bank, UNESCO, technology companies, and others promoted PPPs as the way to increase access for teachers and students to digital technologies, teach "21<sup>st</sup> century skills", and enable the digital transformation of society (Morris et al., 2022). Advocates also positioned edtech as the solution to the perceived "learning crisis" in low-income countries (Morris et al. 2022).

Significantly, the involvement of businesses and other non-state actors in education has changed how education is governed: from hierarchical, state bureaucracy to heterarchy. A heterarchy is a form of governance based on networks of relationships between policy actors and communities, including governments (Ball, 2009). These networks replace bureaucratic structures with diverse patterns of relations between private, public, and civil society organizations, creating new opportunities for non-state actors to influence policy processes, discourses, and enactments (Ball, 2009). Network members increasingly include those operating globally (e.g., OECD, World Bank World Trade Organisation transnational corporations, NGOs), and their discourses and ideas for education gain credibility and legitimacy with national governments (Ball, 2009). While governments remain important, heterarchies shift governments' traditional roles and responsibilities and those of other organizations in the network. Governments accept reductions in their authoritative decision-making power as they engage non-state actors in solving community problems (Ball, 2012). However, heterarchies offer governments new techniques for governing, including through the production of entrepreneurial, self-regulating subjects (Olmedo et al, 2013). For-profit actors, meanwhile, trade their autonomous economic decisions for "political influence and market advantage" (Enright et al., 2020, p. 190).

Ball (2009) pointed to England's academy schools program as an example of emerging heterarchies in education. This arrangement gives non-state actors responsibility for running public schools while the government directs and monitors them indirectly through performance measures. Scholars have described examples of heterarchical governance of education in Australia (Enright et al., 2020), India (Ball, 2012), Tanzania (Phillips, 2011), the USA (Hartong, 2015), Spain (Olmedo & Santa Cruz Grau, 2011) and across Europe (Olmedo et al., 2013), and elsewhere. In describing rising heterarchies in Malaysian and Singapore, Mok (2011) highlights how the governments of these nations accelerated favourable conditions for privatisation as they sought to establish their countries as hubs of international higher education. Other researchers have also demonstrated governments' role in creating markets (e.g., Ball, 2007; Olmedo, 2013).

## **Paths to Privatisation**

Research about emerging forms and consequences of education privatisation has generated knowledge about the different ways in which the phenomenon unfolds, including "by way of catastrophe" (Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo, 2016, p. 11). Naomi Klein (2007) similarly identified opportunities for increased privatisation following a crisis, calling it "disaster capitalism." These authors, following Friedman (2002), explain that crises give external actors increased influence, presence, and chances to try out new ideas or ideas that were previously dismissed. Further, a sense of urgency to address the situation reduces the likelihood of democratic, transparent debates, opening the door for more controversial policies to be introduced (Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo, 2016; Schuller & Maldonado, 2016). Finally, changes introduced immediately following the crisis often extend beyond the location and timing of the event.

Advocates of privatisation have long been aware of the potential of a crisis to create opportunities for major change (Friedman, 2002). Crises may be naturally occurring, such as a weather or biological event, or manufactured through discourse and policy (Molnar, 2018; Takayama, 2008). For example, a former Canadian government official was caught on tape stating his intention to "invent a crisis" to create the conditions for favourable reception of planned education reforms in Ontario (Brennan, 1995, para. 4).

## Early Days of Pandemic

Thus, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, advocates and other observers of education privatisation understood the potential for the global crisis to create new and expanded opportunities for private involvement in public education. Early responses to the pandemic of “major players in the global governance of education” (including UNESCO, UNICEF, OECD, World Bank) and businesses, including Pearson PLC and McKinsey & Company, positioned online learning delivered through PPPs as an ideal response to the immediate crisis and beyond (Morris et al., 2022; Shultz & Viczko, 2021). Their imagined digital future mirrored discourses and visions mobilized by these groups prior to the onset of the pandemic (Morris et al., 2022). Assertions that technology and online learning could save education during the crisis were not supported by evidence and ignored research on negative impacts of both online learning and PPPs on schooling (Morris et al., 2022). Teachers’ and local communities’ knowledge and ideas for addressing the crisis as well as concern for the climate crisis, sustainability, and human rights were notably absent in the organizations’ and businesses’ responses (Morris et al., 2022; Shultz & Viczko, 2021).

The immediate “pivot” to online learning, well documented since the early days of the pandemic, brought “private sector and commercial organisations into the centre of essential educational services” (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 1). In March 2020, UNESCO formed the Global Education Coalition as a way of “mobiliz[ing] support to ensure the continuity of learning around the world” (UNESCO, 2025, A New Model). The coalition, comprised of 200 diverse member organisations, included multinational technology companies (e.g., Google, Microsoft and Zoom), not-for-profit non-governmental organisations ([NGOs]; e.g., Teach for All and the Global Campaign for Education), and transnational organisations (e.g., OECD, World Economic Forum, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). UNESCO’s unofficial endorsements helped edtech companies expand their user base and enhanced their credibility “by associating them with efforts to enhance digital and educational equity during the emergency” (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, pp. 19-20). Unlike these and other actors who saw the pandemic as an opportunity to reimagine schooling (Kiesi & Hogan, 2025), some observers worried about the implications of the accelerated privatisation and commercialisation of education wrought by the crisis in its earliest days.

## During and Post Pandemic

As Ball (2024) notes in his analysis of education policy during the “COVID-19 interregnum of 2020-2021” in England, the pandemic provided opportunities for a broad range of new forms of commercial and not-for-profit involvement in education (p. 139). These opportunities, many of which came about from the urgent need for nation-states and education jurisdictions to find solutions to the problem of overnight mass distance learning, have not receded in the aftermath of the pandemic. Further, Ball (2024) argues that the post-pandemic education landscape “is marked by the stark (re)assertion of ‘old’ and ‘new’ inequalities” (p. 139). For instance, the previously entrenched performance gap between socio-educationally disadvantaged and advantaged students widened during the pandemic years, exacerbated by inequalities related to digital access and exclusion which were critical to continuity of student learning.

In some ways it is still too early to determine the enduring legacy of the pandemic on education policy and practice. Hogan et al. (2022), writing on COVID-19 as “policy punctuation” across a range of social policy areas, warn against a simplistic analysis that rests on the idea that policy and practice were reconfigured by the very presence of the crisis rendered by the pandemic:

Just because there is a crisis, or policy failure, it does not mean change will result. As Mintrom (2000, p. 43) reminds us, for the most part people work with, reframe, and combine old or existing ideas. A better understanding of the different kinds of possible policy punctuations which can affect a policy trajectory, however, enables us to more usefully explain and comprehend the complex public policy dynamics arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. (p. 48)

Hogan et al. (2022) go on to argue that the pandemic served as a “path accelerator” for different education policy trajectories, “removing the legitimacy of blockages (legal, procedural, and otherwise); removing actors who were blocking the pathway (e.g., elections and trade union vetoes); and reinforcing changes already underway” (p. 48). This notion of the pandemic as a “path accelerator” is highly relevant to many of the pandemic-inspired shifts in education that have solidified some forms of commercialisation and privatisation and turbo-charged others.

As discussed above, the turn to online learning throughout the pandemic gave edtech companies and other commercial entities unprecedented access to schools (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). It could be argued that the global pandemic was the catalyst for a shift that has sanctioned and normalised particular forms of commercialisation and privatization, as states looked to private actors to support them in addressing unfolding education crises.

Beyond the immediate circumstances surrounding the pivot to online learning, ongoing conditions both created and exacerbated by the pandemic, such as teacher shortages in many parts of the world, an increased focus on teacher workload and work intensification, and associated crises of burnout and demoralisation (Santoro & Price, 2021), have created new opportunities for commercialisation and privatisation. A powerful example of such an opening relates to moves to respond to teacher workload crises through advancing the use of outsourced curriculum materials is (Cowan et al., 2024). Recent research in Australia, for instance, has tracked the evolution of outsourced curriculum materials solution from pre-pandemic times, when it was posed as a solution to the so-called problem of variations between teachers, to more recent iterations where it is explicitly linked to teacher workload concerns (Mockler & Stacey, 2024).

## Overview and Contributions of Articles in this Special Issue

The articles in this special issue demonstrate the way the pandemic operated as a path accelerator for the privatisation and commercialisation of education in the three national contexts of England, Italy and Brazil. In all three cases, the conditions presented by the pandemic meant that nascent relationships, alliances, and ideas pertaining to education became turbo-charged and solidified in a relatively short space of time.

Jianne Coelho, Breyner Oliveira, Doriana Daroit, and Fernanda Cruz use the concept of *platformization* developed by van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) to think through the work of the Special Regime for Remote Activities (Reanp), a network of public and private actors established by the Secretariat of Education in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais in March 2020. They demonstrate how, in the context of Brazil, pre-existing relationships were leveraged into sociotechnical networks that relied on technologies provided by private entities. They argue that while the platformization of education was underway in Brazil at the outset of the pandemic, emergency measures accelerated and legitimised the associated privatisation of education that followed. They also detail how delayed and inadequate responses to the impending crisis on the part of the state made it preferable for teachers to turn to private solutions to meet the demands of pandemic education.

Emiliano Grimaldi, Francesca Peruzzo, and Stephen Ball chart the emergence of new edtech markets in Italy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They demonstrate how the conditions wrought by the pandemic fed into a shift, where Italy, previously regarded as the “sleeping giant of EdTech” very quickly became a burgeoning market inhabited by a broad range of private actors. This process relied on an acceleration of nascent relationships between public and private entities. The solidarity expressed by edtech providers in the early days of the pandemic, which saw their products offered and taken up as solutions in emergency schooling contexts, was quickly leveraged into the consolidation of expanding markets post pandemic. Subsequent policy shifts have enabled the continuity of education privatisation in Italy in the post-pandemic era.

The first two articles use pre-existing relationships between public and private actors as a jumping off point for considering the expansion of markets during and after the pandemic. The final article from the UK context explores the way that markets can be both created and accelerated by the proliferation of particular ideas about education, including, in this case, private sector efficiency and concerns about learning loss. Bronwen Jones, Patrick Bailey and Alice Bradbury explore the expansion of the private tutoring market through the UK Government National Tutoring Program (NTP), which was established in 2020 and ran until 2024. The program saw the development of a new mass market in private tutoring. The UK Government paid private providers to engage in tutoring of students in the name of remedying pandemic-related learning loss. As Jones et al. argue, this market was enabled by potent ideas about education, informed by neoliberalism. These ideas included not only the perceived problem of learning loss (wherein student learning is seen as a linear and standardised progression), but also historically entrenched questions about teacher quality. Together these concerns authorised policy solutions to learning loss that allowed people other than qualified teachers to teach in state schools. Essentially, the NTP provided an opportunity for private sector actors to position themselves as education experts, contributing to the public good through their support to pandemic-affected children and young people in an effort to make up for time lost learning in school.

In each of these contexts, we see a range of factors working as path accelerators for privatisation and commercialization. One of these was the pandemic itself and the emergency circumstances to which it gave rise; other factors included nascent relationships between governments/ministries/school systems and private service providers, and powerful ideas about education, which, embedded in policy and public discourses of education over time, were leveraged into policy solutions through public-private partnerships around emergency measures.

Together the articles highlight three ways in which these path accelerators supported increasing or transformed privatization/commercialisation of education. First, new private actors became involved in pre-existing educational markets. In Brazil, for example, the embrace of Meta (particularly Facebook and WhatsApp) as means to communicate and share early on in the pandemic, when other systems had failed, led to an on-going integration of this platform. The National Tutoring Program in the United Kingdom involved the development of relationships with multiple new private actors, including the two companies charged with quality assurance, along with myriad providers of tutoring and mentoring services annexed to the program.

Second, the pandemic opened the doors to new roles for private actors in education and a concomitant emergence of privatisation *through* policy. This is evident across all three contexts, including Brazil, where increased platformization during the course of the pandemic has led to a greater and more entrenched dependence post-pandemic on edtech companies such as Alphabet and Meta. In Italy, different forms of PPPs emerged during the pandemic, such as the *Operazione Risorgimento Digitale*, wherein edtech companies, national firms, and other organizations made their e-learning services temporarily available to schools, educators, students, and families for free while

building towards post-pandemic transformations of schooling. In the UK, the appointment of private actors Tribal and Cognition Education as quality assurers of services provided by other private actors in the National Tutoring program amounted to what Jones, Bailey and Bradbury (this volume) have characterised as a new form of “mezzanine governance” in education. In this example, through their oversight of what constituted “good quality” education, these organisations played a new and powerful role in shaping education policy.

Finally, the articles in this collection demonstrate some of the ways in which the COVID-19 global pandemic both expanded and intensified the reach of the global education industry. The momentary detachment of edtech and other private provision from profit motives at the outset of the pandemic, and the overlapping interests of governments, private and commercial interests, and teachers and school leaders at this time meant that some of this expansion occurred, as Grimaldi, Perruzzo and Ball argue in their article (this issue), under the banner of “solidarity.” “Solutions” generated in the early days of the pandemic by collaborations between public and private interests are now entrenched into education systems alongside new heterarchies in the post-pandemic order.

The articles in this special issue contribute to emerging knowledge about impacts of the pandemic on privatisation and commercialisation five years after its onset. This evolving body of research suggests the pandemic accelerated the expansion of edtech in schools and offered new prospects for technology companies and other private actors to influence and financially benefit from their involvement in education (e.g., Avelar, 2025; Jones et al, this issue; Reikosky, 2024; Villobos et al., 2025). Governments actively facilitated these opportunities in some places (e.g., Kiesi & Hogan, 2024; Grimaldi et al., this issue; Jones et al., this issue). Future research will undoubtedly reveal additional forms and impacts of accelerated privatisation and commercialisation enabled by the COVID-19 crisis not yet recognized—or even imagined.

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