

The Commodification of Education and the Prevalence of For-Profit Education Stakeholders

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Abstract

The privatization and marketisation of education in Europe has been intensifying in the past decades. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a catalyst for further such processes, considering the indiscriminate reliance on digital tools provided by for-profit organisations during the crisis. As this continues and for-profit organisations are embedded in education policymaking and implementation, there can only be an increase in inequity amongst learners in terms of access to education, academic achievement, and capacity to shape their educational path. This paper argues that the pandemic's transformative nature should rather be used to redesign the governance of education institutions, education policymaking and the educational process to promote social cohesion, holistic and transversal competences, but, most importantly, treat quality, universal education as a public good that receives appropriate public investment. The paper presents different patterns of privatization, exemplifies the expansion of the New Public Management approach, and, based on this, makes a case for the importance of promoting a community governance in education that sees all education stakeholders – teachers, parents, learners, civil society organisations (CSOs), education experts, education support personnel – as part of an inclusive process of policymaking and implementation in education that places the learner at the centre. Upon promoting this vision of education, the paper makes the case for increased public investment in education, to ensure that private interests are not the ones shaping the focus of education delivery but rather that the process is designed to prepare all learners to develop transversal competences and lead a flourishing life as active citizens. The whole-community approach highlighted in this paper is based on evidence from SOLIDAR Foundation's membership, specifically from their participation in processes which see formal, informal and non-formal education providers collaborating in the delivery of education. The policy paper concludes with policy and action recommendations for the EU level, national authorities and CSOs.



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1. Introduction

Quality education as a public good has been under threat for years as privatization limited equitable access to lifelong learning. Recently, inequity was exacerbated as SOLIDAR Foundation research revealed increasing academic achievement, early school leaving and digital resources gaps that frustrated education during the pandemic, especially for those already disadvantaged¹. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic the discourse on the recovery presents a narrative of ‘returning to normal’². However, an increasing reliance on public-private partnerships (PPPs) and an asymmetric position of bargaining between public education providers and tech giants that deliver online tools show that the new normal might be an acceleration of a system that leaves many learners behind while advancing

labour market needs and missing out on what education is about based on the [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [SDGs](#) and the [European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPSR\)](#). The post-pandemic planning should provide instead an opportunity to ‘build back better’, to understand what worsened the pandemic and address this by rethinking the education paradigm. SOLIDAR Foundation promotes a global citizenship education paradigm³, but, in this policy paper, the perspective is on education’s governance since this must be reformed if any educational paradigm is to be changed. In addition, SOLIDAR Foundation promotes a vision in which all education stakeholders, including informal and non-formal education providers, parents, learners, cooperate with formal education providers, ensuring that all participate in policymaking

¹ Frank, Andrei (2019). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2019. Lucie Susova and Elisa Gambardella (eds.). SOLIDAR Foundation. Available at:

https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/121/original/Citizenship_and_Lifelong_Learning_Monitor_2019_-_online.pdf?1587973552. Last accessed: 31 August 2021 ;

Frank, Andrei (2020). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020. Mikael Leyi and Elisa Gambardella (eds.). SOLIDAR Foundation. Available at:

https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/310/original/CLLL_Monitor_2020

[EuroOverview SOLIDAR Foundation online.pdf?1617695521](#). Last accessed: 31 August 2021.

² European Commission (2020). *Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Peter Piot, Special Advisor to the President, on additional measures for the EU’s response to coronavirus*. Available at : https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_1997. Last accessed 31 August 2021.

³ Frank, Andrei (2020). Global Citizenship Education. SOLIDAR Foundation. Available at: https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/148/original/GCE_Policy_Paper.pdf?1594110914. Last accessed 23 August 2021.

and governance, and ensuring that they reach all learners with lifelong and lifewide learning.

The paper will clarify its scope, explaining types of privatization in formal education, given that this is what is being privatized, while considering their implication on non-formal and informal education providers. After, there will be an assessment of actors entering education and forming the EdTech sector, especially in light of the pandemic and of new digital education action plans at national and EU level. However, the narrative of commercialisation is not limited to pandemic or EdTech, but has older roots into practices such as school choice and private tutoring, which will be treated as case studies to show the manifestation of business-like mindsets entering public education. The idea is to capture the spread of New Public Management (NPM)⁴ in education and highlight how the governance of education institutions changed. This will be addressed, considering what role informal and non-formal education providers should have in education governance. The paper will provide recommendations for European and national policymakers, and for SOLIDAR Foundation membership.

2. Endogenous and Exogenous Privatisation in Education

Stephen Ball and Deborah Youdell's seminal work exposed privatization creeping into education under the guise of education reforms for modernization. They distinguished between endogenous and exogenous privatization. The former refers to a transfer of business-like practices into education via the emergence of education quasi-markets and the creation of competition across education

institutions⁵. School choice, an element discussed later here, is provided by Ball and Youdell as an example of how competition entered education in some countries, creating a responsibility for education institutions to cater to parents' interests and attract them via marketing. This changes the roles that teachers/trainers and learners have, with one side becoming consumers and the other technicians evaluated by strict benchmarks. Calls to the 'so-called' need for efficiency that private business management offers has ushered a re-envisioning of what education is, creating rankings across education institutions, conditioning funding to quantitative indicators such as results in standardized examinations or number of enrolled learners⁶. The latter form of privatization, the endogenous one, refers to private actors directly managing education's delivery. This was common for catering, transport, cleaning but it expanded to the provision of educational services, such as private actors running education institutions, either public ones that they were outsourced to run or ones owned by them⁷. Beyond this, production of curricula, education materials and tools, which were built up by practitioners and public authorities, have been outsourced to private companies specializing in this. Ball and Youdell highlight the few companies that crowd out this market, explaining how widespread their services have become⁸.

This initial introduction on privatization in education ensures that the terminology is clear and that the understanding of privatization covers both NPM practices as well as the overt presence of private actors in education's delivery. **Though the conversation is shaped around public education, this is impacting the**

⁴ Hood, Christopher (1991). A Public Management for All Seasons?. *Public Administration*, 69 (1), pp.3-19. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9299.1991.tb00779.x>. Last accessed 24 August 2021.

⁵ Ball, Stephen and Youdell, Deborah (2007). Hidden Privatisation in Public Education. *Education*

International. Available at: https://pages.ei-ie.org/quadrennialreport/2007/upload/content_tr_sl_images/630/Hidden_privatisation-EN.pdf. Last accessed: 30 August 2021. Pp.16-21.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ball, Stephen and Youdell, Deborah (2007). Hidden Privatisation in Public Education. Pp.21-32.

⁸ Ibid. Pp.21-32.

informal and non-formal education providers, since any process of privatization that boosts inequity, implicitly creates communities which are disadvantaged and need the support of informal and non-formal education providers to compensate what they lack from formal education. However, the Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitors show that though this is the case, these education providers are not recognized and invited to take part in policymaking, while experiencing serious funds-slashing across the EU⁹. Moreover, as **education's marketisation and privatization impacts curricula and what is viewed in society as education's aim**, this affects the work of informal and non-formal education providers who have to strongly promote topics such as citizenship education, socio-emotional competences, or digital citizenship, among many others, which are neglected by private interests that push an education aligned to labour market needs. The focus of private interests also impacts CSOs' capacity to access funding to promote social or ethical educational perspectives. **The holistic education that learners need, the one fully covering socio-emotional development and is lifelong and lifewide is threatened by commodification.** As education stakeholders are excluded from policymaking and governance, they must come together and reassert the education's role and push towards limiting its commodification.

3. EdTech: Pandemic privatisation

The pandemic shed light on inequalities existent in education while exacerbating gaps due to online learning barriers. **SOLIDAR Foundation research revealed regional gaps across Europe, with over 40% of Europeans**

lacking basic digital competences, with people from a disadvantaged socio-economic background or with a migrant background being less likely to own a computer, have space for online learning in their household, have access to the internet compared to affluent or native peers¹⁰. The increased competition in education contributed to this, as certain groups are segregated and resources are pooled in high-performing academic institutions. One would expect that post-pandemic rebuilding would tackle this but, unfortunately, the crisis reaction of welcoming tools from EdTech during this period boosted national and European public authorities to promote more PPPs. Online alternatives were needed and ensured that many learners continued to access education. However, positive implications of using digital tools in class came together with an indiscriminate approach to what was introduced in education, with a reliance on tech giants known for privacy issues, profit-maximising behaviour and with many concerns of how this process will continue post-pandemic. The first aspect is the growth of EdTech markets during the pandemic and the emergence of new actors which act as intermediaries between teachers/parents/education institutions and private companies developing the online tools. Such specialist intermediaries, with prominent examples in the UK, Denmark or the US, have been assigning badges of quality to various companies/products, providing studies to legitimize 'efficient tools' for education, and relying on subscription fees from private companies which paid to ensure that their products were part of verified reviews and legitimized products. **This excluded many providers or experts who did not provide large-scale solutions or did not pay to receive these 'badges of confidence'¹¹, creating an**

⁹ Frank, Andrei (2019). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2019; Frank, Andrei (2020). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020.

¹⁰ Frank, Andrei (2020). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020.

¹¹ Williamson, Ben and Hogan, Anna (2020). Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of COVID-19. *Education International*. Available at: <https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/20>

oligopoly and taking away decision-making capacities from those actually impacted by the tools: teachers/parents/learners.

This is coupled with a growing presence of venture capital and private equity investment in education, and specifically in EdTech, which was observed for years, but more venture capital investors, EdTech market intelligence companies and impact investors capitalized on the pandemic. Most come from the US, China or India, with one such actor, HolonIQ, predicting over \$80 billion in venture capital investment entering EdTech between 2020-2030¹². Even though these actors are not widespread in Europe, they are vouching for worldwide providers, which impacts what education institutions in Europe receive. Companies such as Pearson or Education Outcomes Funds establish metrics to evaluate EdTech trends, determining investment in the long-term and working in partnerships with governments to change the priorities they have in education¹³. This becomes less about venture capitalism and more about new forms of PPPs while embedding EdTech in education for the post-pandemic years. **The targets of investment for private equity have been mostly models that challenge public education, with online private schools and online learning platforms gaining traction** and providing people with opportunities to access education outside the mainstream¹⁴.

In these developments, Microsoft and Google grew rapidly, changing their position from perennial providers of online tools for education institutions, to policymaking nodes while socializing more users from a young age into using their tools in the long-term. Microsoft upscaled its partnerships with UNICEF, developing together the Learning Passport and effectively positioning itself as a legitimate education actor. This Passport maps

[20_eiresearch_gr_commercialisation_privatisation/?fr=sZDJkYjE1ODA2MTQ](https://20.eiresearch.gr/commercialisation-privatisation/?fr=sZDJkYjE1ODA2MTQ). Last accessed: 22 August 2021. Pp.29, 35-37.

¹² Ibid. Pp.37-41.

local curricula and sets it up against global benchmarks and global curricula for visually arresting analytics for the purpose of standardizing curricula through targets and benchmarks that EdTech sets up, replacing practitioners, education experts or state authorities in this role¹⁵. The roll out of Office 365, and its free interconnected applications and significant tech support for customers, creates a buy-in for tools during the pandemic that might become costly in the future and hard to give up to. The soft power that Microsoft exerts in policymaking was built up by its position papers on education's future, which are done without consulting those impacted by education, but in partnerships with organisations supported by the OECD, positioning Microsoft in alliances of actors that define education expertise and standards¹⁶. Such practices of blurring lines between education experts and the for-profit organisations have been pointed out by SOLIDAR Foundation partner, [School with Class Foundation](#), which has witnessed a raise in trainings for teachers provided by for-profit actors. These actors promote their services through consultants hired from formal education or from NGOs, building up an image that legitimizes their role in education. Such trainings would be of lower quality as public trainings for teachers, they would favour quantity over quality and would introduce many new tools and gadgets which then create a profit-making opportunity. [School with Class Foundation](#) raises the alarm of how teachers become less aware of the underlining goals of such trainers because of these blurred lines between for-profit providers and the actual education authorities offering ITE and CPD.

Similarly, Google Classroom was offered for free, reaching 50 million users, while education professionals and learners became socialized to rely on Google to provide education during

¹³ Ibid. Pp.38-40.

¹⁴ Ibid. P.40.

¹⁵ Ibid. Pp.42-43.

¹⁶ Ibid. P.43.

the pandemic. Whole schools enrolled to the programme and then created individual user accounts for each student, thereby increasing Google's customer base. Moreover, third-party apps can be integrated into the system, storing more of what learners do online and allowing Google to collect more data to use commercially, even if Google is frequently accused of unauthorized collection, maintenance, use and commercialization of student data, with G Suite being a worst-performer in relation to GDPR¹⁷.

Beyond these examples, EdTech actors offered literacy and numeracy resources, planning tools, games, activities and assessment, and home schooling curricula, taking away this development role from education experts and state authorities. The overload of online resources inserts learners and practitioners into asymmetric bargaining relationships as they spend significant efforts on mastering tools and integrating them in education, which makes it more difficult to give up on them if they became pay-per-use subscriptions. Outschool, K12, Schoology, Kinteract and others extended free trials beyond the beginning of the pandemic, however, it is unclear what will happen with schools returning to in-presence education that becomes more digitalised. Khan Academy used a 'support now, sell later' model, raising alarms about how privatization and profit-making develop post-pandemic¹⁸. Furthermore, policy networks expanded to include EdTech businesses, as they were seen as quick and financially-reliable reactors during crises. Therefore, this variety of actors with own agendas over public education cemented its place in international and national policy networks, while the EU pushes for an even

more structured presence of such actors in policymaking and policy implementation¹⁹. Pearson, Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Gates Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg are putting forward curricula and products tailored on promoting skills and a labour-market oriented vision. These actors change also how in-person public education institutions are run, considering that education infrastructure is now less about physical aspects and more about digital ones²⁰.

SOLIDAR Foundation members and partners, mainly from Germany, Poland, Spain, France, Serbia, the UK, detailed their usage of digital tools over the pandemic. The range of tools extended from videoconferencing ones, to project management ones and even to tools creating visual content or to survey tools. Though risk assessments have been made and the staff members of these organisations have received training on these tools, members and partners admit that they are not fully aware of the risks related to their data being managed by the EdTech actors providing the tools. However, [CEMEA](#), from France, has been promoting the usage of open source tools. They used [zourit.net](#) to build a cloud-based solution that provides teachers in various French municipalities the same tools that Microsoft and Google would, but without data collection and learners' commodification. More about this case study can be read in the 2020 Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor. However, there is also a **need to ensure governments promote more actively open source tools and support learners in developing competences to use them**, since they are less socialized to rely on such tools given the overexposure to EdTech sector tools. SOLIDAR Foundation member, [Willi Eichler](#)

¹⁷ Williamson, Ben and Hogan, Anna (2020). Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of COVID-19. Pp.44-46.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pp.59-60.

¹⁹ European Commission (2020). *Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files>

[/document-library-docs/deap-communication-sept2020_en.pdf](#). Last accessed 31 August 2021. P.8.

²⁰ Williamson, Ben and Hogan, Anna (2020). Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of COVID-19. P.62.

[Akademie](#) from Germany, expressed this concern as many of their beneficiaries have difficulties operating with tools other than the commercial ones unless they are trained to use such platforms over a longer period of time. [CEMEA](#) and [La Liga Española de la Educación](#) explain that the Spanish and French governments are promoting open source tools, but on an equal footing to the EdTech tools, which is not genuine considering how much resource the EdTech sector is already pumping into advertising its own tools.

The ad-hoc pushes for increased digital infrastructure are an example of private interests entering education and maximizing profits while cutting costs. [The Digital Education Action Plan \(DEAP\)](#) loosely promotes the idea of increased PPPs in education to ensure the process of digitalization post-pandemic. This vague illustration of PPPs in the DEAP is problematic as it does not set a clear process in which this can happen, with boundaries for the encroachment of private interests over education²¹. **The EdTech's increasing role requires more scrutiny and a judicious approach to their entering in education. It is worrisome to see their increased importance as civil and social dialogue in education are attacked.**

4. School Choice and Private Tutoring: aspects promoting NPM

Beyond EdTech's own brand of privatization and commodification, it is worth looking at examples of school choice and private tutoring, seeing how certain processes were set up poorly, leading to widening socio-economic gaps and academic underachievement that are

proof of the risk of NPM in public education. School choice is a more apparent aspect of privatization and marketisation in education. The existence of school choice across Europe varies, with different histories regarding how this got established and with different actors operating in this context. The late emergence of wide-spread school choice in the UK, during the Thatcher years with a strong consolidation during Tony Blair's New Labour, is counterbalanced with a long history of school choice existent in Netherlands, Belgium or Denmark since the 1800s. However, even in countries that historically opted for school choice there are discrepancies, as religious organisations insisted for private schooling in Netherlands and Belgium, whereas for Denmark, this was established to secure parents' capacity for choice²². Over the 20th century the motivations for why and how to provide school choice changed, but it is broadly acknowledged that countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Spain have not been, initially, an example of market interests taking over education, as opposed to the UK case. However, in all cases attention must be paid into the implications of continuing this process, seeing that since the 1990s this process grew while sometimes market interests took center place.

As of 1992, Sweden uses a voucher system, by which schools, whether public or private – free schools –, receive state funding based on enrollment rates, which manifested itself by having 15% of Swedish pupils in free schools in 2017²³. The issue is that for-profit providers can also open schools or acquire public schools, so the system of private schools run by faith-based organisations, parents or staff cooperatives transformed into a full-blown

²¹ European Commission (2020). *Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)*. P.8.

²² Verger, Antoni; Fontdevila, Clara and Zancajo, Adrián (2016). *The Privatisation of Education: A Political Economy of Global Education Reform*. New York: Teachers College Press. Available at : <http://download.ei->

[ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/The Privatization of Education.pdf](http://ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/The_Privatization_of_Education.pdf). Last accessed 31 August 2021.

²³ Verger, Antoni; Fontdevila, Clara and Zancajo, Adrián (2016). *The Privatisation of Education: A Political Economy of Global Education Reform*. Pp.66.

market in the 2010s, with limited companies and equity firms forming 80% of actors on the market. This defeats the purpose of education, seeing as the two largest education companies in Sweden were listed on the stock exchange in 2016, while cases such as the bankruptcy of a private company in 2013 led to thousands of learners losing their school overnight. This precarity is coupled with segregation since 30% of free schools are located in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, and they profile themselves, compete and try to attract parents, launching a process of causing inter-schools differentiation²⁴. **Research shows that school choice is a main driver for increased school segregation in Sweden**, which in the period 1998-2011 led to more inequality between schools in terms of achievement²⁵. This worsened as our latest Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor revealed Sweden as a worst-performer in Europe in terms of the academic achievement gap between native and migrant background learners²⁶. In 70% of Swedish municipalities the proportion of students with a migrant background is higher in public schools than in free ones, while in 86% of municipalities students whose parents have a university degree are in a higher proportion present in free schools compared to public ones²⁷. If left unchecked, this becomes less about parental choice and more about segregation, inequity, profit.

The Danish case sees 17% of students in private schools, which were regulated since 1855. However, regulations on these schools were removed during the 1980s NPM wave,

with municipalities gaining control over resource allocation and local school structure management, abiding by governmental benchmarks for schooling quality, and publishing yearly results²⁸. Therefore, even if these schools are not-for-profit, they enforce a market ideology based on their management while relying on tuition fees, making them less accessible than in Sweden. They seem to be more prominent in large cities, reinforcing the same type of inequity as in Sweden, that goes even further considering that affluent families can choose schools even beyond their municipality. Within Copenhagen, research revealed that when migrant background learners formed 35% of the student body in a school, native families would start moving their children to other education institutions²⁹. This is one element that impacts the findings of our 2019 Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor, from which it was seen that migrant background learners in Denmark are 3.5 times likelier than native peers to underperform academically³⁰.

School choice exists in Spain as well, a country with a long history of private schooling administered by the Catholic Church, but that has been devolving more power to its autonomous communities³¹, establishing a system of managing education similar to federal states. This implies that the level of privatization in each region depends on the regional authority, with many regions using the historical PPPs to push for more marketization. In Madrid, the authority is promoting competition among schools by eliminating

²⁴ Dovemark, Marianne et al. (2018). Deregulation, Privatisation and marketisation of Nordic Comprehensive Education: social changes reflected in schooling. *Education Inquiry*, 9 (1), pp.122-141. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/2004508.2018.1429768>. Last accessed 25 August 2021.

²⁵ Ibid. P.133.

²⁶ Frank, Andrei (2020). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020.

²⁷ Dovemark, Marianne et al. (2018). Deregulation, Privatisation and marketisation of Nordic Comprehensive Education: social changes reflected in schooling. P.134.

²⁸ Ibid. Pp.127-135.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Frank, Andrei (2019). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2019

³¹ Verger, Antoni; Fontdevila, Clara and Zancajo, Adrián (2016). *The Privatisation of Education: A Political Economy of Global Education Reform*. Pp.112-116.

catchment areas and publishing rankings based on school results. In Andalusia, private schools become more corporate-like with teachers receiving merit-based pay that fluctuates based on academic performance or school climate or participation of families in schools³². Spain emerged in the Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor as having serious regional inequality, and its private schools threaten to deepen this³³.

SOLIDAR Foundation members and partners, [CEMEA](#) (France) and [School with Class Foundation](#) (Poland), expressed their concerns related to school choice and marketisation, especially from the perspective of segregation, of preventing learners from socio-economically disadvantaged environments to have the same right to education. As reported by [School with Class Foundation](#), the recent changes in education administration policy pointed towards an NPM approach, with a more prominent role given to school heads and with funding in education being decentralized and dependent on local administrations. Though [School with Class Foundation](#) presents examples where they collaborated successfully with schools heads and administration, this depends on the good will of these actors, which implies that **not all learners in Poland would benefit of the same willingness of their institution to engage informal and non-formal education providers in the learning process**. Similarly, points that private schools in UK would also retain control over the curriculum, and in some instances decrease the importance of citizenship education. This becomes problematic not only because of the importance of this topic but also because of the inequality it creates among learners in terms of the type of education they receive.

³² Ibid.

³³ Frank, Andrei (2019). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2019; Frank, Andrei (2020). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020.

³⁴ Bray, Mark (2020). Shadow Education in Europe: Growing Prevalence, Underlying Forces, and Policy Implications. *ECNU Review of Education*, pp.1-34.

The examples of school choice are replaced by other behaviours that welcome privatization and inequity in countries where private schooling is not widespread. Other parts of Europe are confronting with ‘shadow education’ that is defined by private tutoring – fee-paying lessons in academic subjects outside of formal schooling hours for the purposes of succeeding in final or entry examinations. The processes expanded in the 21st century across Europe: Eastern and Southern Europe experience it prominently, numbers increase in Western Europe and incremental steps exist in Northern Europe³⁴. The marketisation of education in Europe penetrated private tutoring as well, and research is highlighting that **if left to market forces alone, private tutoring can exacerbate social inequality and provide unfair advantages to those from most privileged backgrounds**, which is counterintuitive to where supplementary tutoring should be directed. Various surveys revealed around 50% of learners in Croatia engaging in private tutoring, around 14% of learners in France receiving it, 60% in Hungary, 45% in Ireland, 40% in Italy, 52% in Poland, 27% in the UK, with higher numbers than these averages in larger cities³⁵. The phenomenon affects both public and private education, and is at odds with governments’ stances on free education for all, as many learners engage in fee-paying to supplement their education. The research shows that those in need of tutoring due to poor academic results are not the ones mostly receiving it. Affluent families that can afford tutoring push their children into shadow education to maintain a competitive edge over peers and ensure that they pass examinations. In Ireland, most tutored learners are coming from higher professional backgrounds, while

Available at:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2096531119890142>. Last accessed 31 August 2021.

P.3.

³⁵ Bray, Mark (2020). Shadow Education in Europe: Growing Prevalence, Underlying Forces, and Policy Implications. Pp.4-6.

those coming from working class background represent the smallest numbers of tutored learners. In Poland, over half of tutored learners come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Most of tutored learners in Ireland, Malta and Spain come from fee-paying schools, contradicting the idea of a free, universal right to quality education³⁶.

Drivers of shadow education in Western Europe are linked with education's commercialization, as competition fueled by standardized testing and benchmarks based on academic results pushes families into it. Belgium is an example with researchers coining the idea of 'performance society' as a significant driver for the boom that the private tutoring industry is experiencing³⁷. Initially driven by the decreased purchasing power of teachers' wages in post-Communist countries, private tutoring starts to be influenced by 'performance society' syndrome even there – see the duplication of final examinations by entry examinations in higher education in Poland or Romania. At the same time, due to the unregulated manner in which the process is left to markets, private tutoring blossomed into an industry with giant players taking advantage of learners by charging them but enlisting tutors that lack minimum pedagogical qualifications. Educadomo, in Belgium, hires university students to provide tutoring, with a very opaque process for their selection but with a strong advertisement component³⁸. At this point, it becomes clear how education was commodified and how private tutoring joins education markets as another tool within a diffused, sophisticated system of goods, services, experiences, routes transforming education into a business and preventing free, universal, quality education. **There needs to be significant regulation over private tutoring**

companies, ensuring that they are registered and subjected to checks on their tutors' credentials, they provide more support to disadvantaged families to access their services since the purpose should be closing academic gaps. Partners are needed, such as CSOs that can support disadvantaged learners through free tutoring that closes gaps in Europe. In Greece almost all learners engage in private tutoring, however, those most disadvantaged receive it for free from CSOs, while tutoring occurs in large classrooms, mimicking formal education systems³⁹. This model is less likely to fuel inequalities and can transmit a more holistic approach to education compared to one-to-one tutoring model.

5. Community vs Corporate Governance

The changing privatization in education due to the growing presence of EdTech is fueled by how governance in education is envisioned. Policymaking pushed NPM over education in many European countries and the consumerist and competitive model of education promoted by neoliberal ideologies led to privatizing education and impinging on the right to free, universal and quality education. The ideological assumptions that 'mismanaged public education needs business elites in charge to fix this' have been pushed for decades even in the absence of evidence for these claims. Commodification served personal interests ahead of community ones, diminishing education's traditional role as a public good that builds social cohesion and generating unsustainable patterns of social inequality⁴⁰. **The time is now to preserve education's traditional purpose of community building and working towards social cohesion**

³⁶ Ibid. P.12.

³⁷ Ibid. P.20.

³⁸ Ibid. P.16.

³⁹ Ibid. Pp.5, 9, 22-23.

⁴⁰ Rizvi, Fazal (2016). Privatisation in Education : Trends and Consequences. *Education Research*

and Foresight Series, no.18. Paris: UNESCO.

Available at : [https://www.sel-](https://www.sel-gipes.com/uploads/1/2/3/3/12332890/2016_unesco_privatization_in_education_trends_and_consequences.pdf)

[gipes.com/uploads/1/2/3/3/12332890/2016_unesco_privatization_in_education_trends_and_consequences.pdf](https://www.sel-gipes.com/uploads/1/2/3/3/12332890/2016_unesco_privatization_in_education_trends_and_consequences.pdf). Last accessed 26 August 2021.

and solidarity, preventing global markets to encroach on a universal right.

If education is viewed as a tool to develop skills, the governance cannot be more than corporate, however, the role of education must be reframed seeing the eroding European democracies. Education should develop critical thinking and the capacity of learners to lead a flourishing life while being active citizens. Once education is viewed for this, it becomes clear that such a public good can be delivered only by consulting those receiving it. **The civil society must mediate the relationship between state and learner⁴¹, since involving parents, learners, teachers, civil society in the governance of education makes citizens active participants that undergo a process of learning and of taking action within a democratic society.** The current movements, such as in the UK, to reduce the school boards' size, professionalise them and aim towards more efficient decision-making is conducive only to commercial interests in education⁴². The deliberation, active participation and co-decision-making processes are part of what education is supposed to be. For this reason, community governance, of the type of the whole-school approach that is promoted by the European Commission⁴³, is necessary. The last two editions of the Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor advocated for the whole-school approach, ensuring that informal, non-formal and formal education providers collaborate with education experts, educational support staff, learners, parents and CSOs to create a learner-centred educational environment more focused on promoting a holistic approach to the socio-

emotional development of learners⁴⁴. Such actors should be on education institutions' governing boards, involved in education policymaking, based on their experiences on the ground. Education business and donors on school boards preclude stakeholder representation, done by electing people in school governance positions, and install an opaque process in which those investing in education set up corporate leadership structures⁴⁵. This bypasses accountability and prevents changes to the course of education institutions in ways incompatible with democratic processes, with public good provision but also with what the educational system is teaching learners about democracy.

As it is becoming abundantly clear that formal education by itself cannot address all 21st century challenges, such as teaching sustainability, interculturalism and digital responsibility, among many others, this is a moment to acknowledge the importance of informal and non-formal education providers working on these topics and of learners as co-creators of a co-learning process. The solution is not increasing dependence on markets, and, effectively, on the same approach that led to rising inequality gaps, multiple economic crises, consumerism that fueled the climate crisis and that has subjected people to loss of privacy and agency online. Trade unions, parents' associations, student unions, volunteering associations, popular education providers, NGOs and CSOs must collaborate and reinforce each other to provide a community-based governance of education.

⁴¹ Ranson, Stewart (2012). Schools and Civil Society: corporate or community governance. *Critical Studies in Education* 53 (1), pp.29-45. Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/189584625.pdf>. Last accessed 27 August 2021. Pp.29-30.

⁴² Ranson, Stewart (2012). Schools and Civil Society: corporate or community governance.

⁴³ European Commission (2015). *A Whole-School Approach to Tackling Early School Leaving*.

Available at : https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/schools-policy-a-whole-school-approach-to-tackling-early-school-leaving_en. Last accessed: 27 August 2021.

⁴⁴ Frank, Andrei (2019). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2019; Frank, Andrei (2020). Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020.

⁴⁵ Ranson, Stewart (2012). Schools and Civil Society: corporate or community governance.

6. Impacts of Funding and EU Economic Governance on Commodification

Due to the pandemic, the [European Semester](#), the EU's framework for economic policy planning, was suspended and replaced by National Recovery and Resilience Plans. However, it is worth looking at how the Semester influenced education policymaking and privatization even if its impact on the socialization of policymaking is still hard to measure⁴⁶. Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) coming out of it have been a mix of fiscal responsibility policies and social policies in education. The concern, however, is that many times CSRs were at odds with each other, with countries seeing examples of pushes to rein in public investment in education while being required to expand education provision. When tensions came head-to-head, the Semester, an economic governance mechanism, resolved this by giving primacy to austerity CSRs, while social ones had to be achieved differently⁴⁷, through privatization that decreased education's quality.

The latest CSRs iteration covered the period 2020-2021 and it was striking how little education was mentioned compared to previous CSRs but also how each country received CSR on managing the current crisis,

but ensuring that '[w]hen economic conditions allow, [they will] pursue fiscal policies aimed at achieving prudent medium-term fiscal positions and ensuring debt sustainability'. At the same time, investment into twin transitions and the health system were required of each state, again showing this tension that ushers in private investment. Italy, Ireland, Czechia, Croatia and Lithuania had seen references to education but either linked to labour market needs or to developing digital competences. Austria, Sweden and Portugal were the only countries to receive recommendations on closing inequality gaps in education⁴⁸. The latest issued Country Reports pointed out the need to strengthen links between education and labour markets, to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in education⁴⁹. The Commission's choice of language and the current state in which Member States find themselves yet again reveal how privatization in education crept in under the encouragement of EU institutions. This trend is even more worrisome when considering how EU bodies advise reining in public investment when the economic uncertainty of the pandemic's magnitude becomes apparent. Though the upcoming review of the Stability and Growth Pact is aimed at preventing a new period of little public investment as it happened after the

⁴⁶ Sabato, Sebastiano and Corti, Francesco (2018). 'The times they are a-changin'?' The European Pillar of Social Rights from Debates to Reality Checks'. In *Social Policy in the European Union: state of play 2018*, Bart Vanhercke, Dalila Ghailani and Sebastiano Sabato (eds.). Available at: https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/Chapter%203_8.pdf. Last accessed 31 August 2021.

⁴⁷ Stevenson, Howard et al. (2017). *Education and Training Policy in the European Semester: Public Investment, Public Policy, Social Dialogue and Privatisation Patterns across Europe*. Brussels: European Trade Union Committee for Education. Available at: <https://www.csee-etu.org/en/resources/publications/2042-education-and-training-policy-in-the-european-semester-public-investment-public-policy-social->

[dialogue-and-privatisation-patterns-across-europe-2017](#). Last accessed 26 August 2021. Pp.16-22.

⁴⁸ European Commission (2020). *Country Specific Recommendations 2020*. Available at : https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-commission-recommendations_en. Last accessed 31 August 2021.

⁴⁹ ETUCE (2020). *ETUCE Thematic Overview of the Country Reports 2020 of the European Semester in the Education and Training Field*. Available at: https://www.csee-etu.org/images/attachments/2020_Country_Reports_Education_Training_final.pdf. Last accessed 31 August 2021.

2008 crisis⁵⁰, this latest set of CSRs seems at odds with this process. This is why the Semester needs to receive increased scrutiny, especially as the European Education Area was tied to it⁵¹. **There is a need for all education stakeholders to participate in the Semester process to ensure that CSRs are consistent with meeting the education sector needs.**

The issues presented are influenced by public underinvestment in education seeing as the OECD average of spending on education as share of GDP was below 5% in 2017, while the EU23 average was even lower. Only Belgium is in the world top 10 on spending as share of GDP. Private investment in education within the OECD amounts to 0.8% of GDP showing the trend of reducing public investment, and compensating it with private investment. Though after the 2008 crisis budgets for education were increased, they did not grow at the same rate as the GDP, as education became less of a priority. More and more learners depend on funding from other providers, and though this is widespread outside the EU, it can expand here also⁵². The increasing reliance on private investment, the lagging increases in public investment and all happening when education requires more funding given the challenges ahead, clarify that education needs to rise on political agendas.

Regarding EU funding in education, SOLIDAR Foundation members and partners highlight the administrative complexity of EU funding and how strenuous this process is especially for small CSOs working on education provision, considering their limited personnel. Similarly, the size and history of organisations matter in terms of their

involvement in national policymaking, with members from Spain, France and Germany explaining that their strong stature or broad network and strong personal contacts give them access to policymaking, but explaining that there is a lack of structured process which would open up spaces for a wider variety of education stakeholders.

SOLIDAR Foundation member [Initiative for Development Cooperation \(IDC\)](#), from Serbia, and SOLIDAR Foundation partner, [School with Class Foundation](#), from Poland, pointed out that reliance on private investment for their work becomes essential due to decreased public investment or to divergent perspectives that their governments are having on citizenship education. The reliance of formal, informal and non-formal education providers on for-profit organisations to supplement these lacks or to provide a progressive perspective on citizenship education shows the complex challenges ahead. **The inadequate response that national governments have towards investment in education pushes education providers to rely on organisations that, as shown above threaten equity in education. This situation is similar to the increased reliance on EdTech during the pandemic**, which provided numerous positive aspects, but at the same time traps education providers in a system where they build up the capacity of for-profit organisations to influence education. However, if public investment in education is increased, attention needs to be paid to avoid NPM influences on any increase. SOLIDAR Foundation member, [WEA UK](#), highlighted how accessing funding becomes more competitive for various education providers while the focus on funding labour

⁵⁰ EURACTIV (2021). *EU's Revised Fiscal Pact to Consider 'Golden Rule' on Investment*. Available at : <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/eus-revised-fiscal-pact-to-consider-golden-rule-on-investment/>. Last accessed 31 August 2021.

⁵¹ European Commission (2020). *Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal->

[content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625&from=EN](#). Last accessed 30 August 2021. Pp.25-27.

⁵² OECD (2020). *Education at a Glance 2020*. Available at : <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/69096873-en.pdf?expires=1620377339&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=3BE9835495400958785215B83FE3F64D>. Last accessed 30 August 2021. Pp.284-321.

market oriented education programmes incentivises many organisations to change what training they provide if they wish to access funding. The UK Government's [Skills for Jobs](#) funding programme is restricted to rewarding employment-based outcomes, which impacts the activities on which education providers focus, promoting a view of education which puts employers' needs at the forefront and assumes that learners' needs will be predominantly work-related. An example from **the Greater London Authority shows an alternative to this, as they published a framework which looks at rewarding provision which achieves outcomes in health and community participation.** Public investment in education must be broad enough to cover all competences that learners need in the 21st century and not put education providers in the service of for-profit actors.

7. Conclusion

This paper looked into how commodification manifested itself through NPM's rise, which was exemplified by two practices among the many that describe marketisation and privatization: school choice and private tutoring. As education's commodification advances, the pandemic proved to be a catalyst for hastening the process, with EdTech entering education policymaking and policy implementation at a time of crisis, when people needed access to digital tools. Profiting from this crisis, these companies embedded themselves in education and take a profiting role in the coming decades. **The narrative of returning to normal after the crisis implies a return to neoliberal imaginations that led to the situation in which many learners found themselves during the pandemic: lacking access and skills to continue education.** However, this return to normal is in fact a push for more business influence in education and for more opportunities to profit off of learners while widening inequality gaps. For all its

horror, **the pandemic represents an opportunity to disrupt this process, and 'build back better', with CSOs, NGOs, parents, learners, education experts and educational support personnel, joined by education trade unions in becoming active participants in policymaking and in education governance.** Those directly involved in learning should have their say and the focus of education should be to close inequality gaps and holistically prepare learners for societal participation. SOLIDAR Foundation calls for stronger action to be taken by education stakeholders against education's commercialization and promotes an increased collaboration between formal, informal and non-formal education providers that must form the whole-school approach and take part in education policymaking, through increased advocacy.

8. Recommendations

EU level

- **Involve formal, informal and non-formal education providers in policymaking on education and promote collaboration between formal, informal and non-formal education providers to facilitate the whole-school approach's implementation**
- **Ensure the Stability and Growth Pact provides more flexibility to the golden rule on public investment, excluding investment in education from its shackles, and insist Member States commit at least 10% of GDP for investment in education**
- **Boost research in digital tools' impact on learners and accept only those with an added value**
- **Reinforce the implementation of GDPR sanctions on EdTech**
- **Deprioritise labour market perspective in education and promote developing learners' transversal competences, such as critical thinking, systems thinking, empathy, teamwork**
- **Ensure coherence between future European Semester recommendations on education**
- **Continue simplifying administrative burdens on funding for CSOs and provide them with capacity building opportunities and assistance, supporting a diverse group of beneficiaries**

National level

- **Involve formal, informal and non-formal education providers in policymaking on education and provide frameworks and funding for collaboration among all education providers**
- **Increase public investment in education to 10% of the GDP**
- **Increase funding for CSOs promoting global citizenship education, digital citizenship education and include them in the education institutions' governance**
- **Increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession by ensuring adequate training to and time for training to all, improving remuneration, decreasing workload**
- **Ensure better regulation on the shadow education:**
 - **Ensure that all tutors are pedagogically qualified**
 - **Ensure that all learners access it regardless of their socio-economic background; providing subsidies to ensure that tutoring is free of charge and used as a remedial tool; supporting CSOs providing this type of tutoring for disadvantaged learners**
- **Limit the market forces that impact the school choice:**
 - **Ensure the diversity of the student body in each school**
 - **Provide funding to education institutions based on needs not voucher systems**
- **Limit the usage of NPM logic in the evaluation of education performance**
 - **Review evaluation systems to prevent high-stakes examinations that force learners to prepare for exams rather than develop competences in a holistic manner**
 - **Ensure education resources and curricula are designed, evaluated and implemented by diverse/all education stakeholders and not by private businesses**
 - **Provide digital alternatives to replace tools for which EdTech can start charging, and promote open source tools, encouraging digital literacy and cooperative behaviours**
- **Partner with informal and non-formal education providers for alternatives to formal education (flexible learning paths), compensating EdTech's profit-driven offers**

Civil society level

- **Launch more collaboration with formal education providers to promote lifelong and lifewide learning, and supporting the already overwhelmed formal education providers**
- **Participate in policymaking and build alliances to advocate against education's commodification**



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