

Edtech and COVID-19

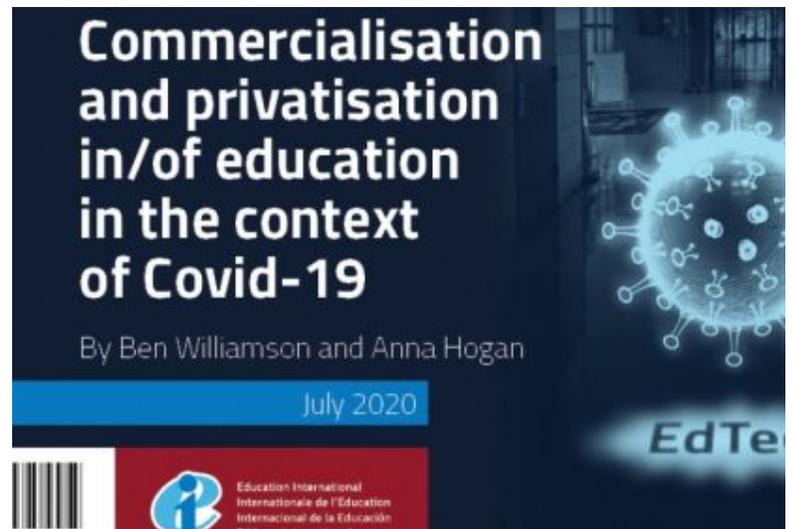


Angelo Gavrielatos
President
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Almost as insidious as the disease itself, multinational corporations, international coalitions and education technology businesses have seized the opportunity of the COVID-19 disruption to extend their tentacles into public education systems.

While the profiteers have been creeping up on public education for some time, the door was figuratively flung wide open for them at the height of the outbreak when, around the world, face-to-face teaching was disrupted in what has been a confluence of health, economic, social and political crises.

A [new report](#) prepared for our global union federation, Education International (EI), has revealed the pandemic has been the catalyst that commercial interests and organisations with an agenda to profit from education have been waiting for.



Never let a good crisis go to waste.

In the scramble to ensure a level of continuity of learning during the pandemic, schools and teachers rapidly adopted distance learning using resources from global actors — including opportunistic edtech start-ups — who have offered themselves as “emergency respondents”.

To these edu-businesses, our students are gold they can mine by inveigling their way into public education systems. While we all recognise public education as a fundamental public good and key driver of a prosperous future, they see it as a source of profit.

Having identified the lucrative nature of the education market — valued at approximately \$US4.9 trillion per annum in 2015 and predicted to grow to \$US6.3 trillion through 2020 — and in particular how much the limitless, sustainable resource of children — our students — and their education represents, global education corporations and edu-businesses have set about trying to influence and control education in order to satisfy their profit motives.

The switch to remote learning during the pandemic lockdown has allowed private actors to position themselves at the centre of essential education services; not just as a response to the crisis and the need to resource emergency remote teaching. It is facilitating their long-term goal.

The EI report — *Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of Covid-19* by Ben

Williamson of Edinburgh University and Anna Hogan from Queensland University — posits that the coronavirus has offered “a natural experimental opportunity” for edu-business to demonstrate the effectiveness of online education over face-to-face teaching.

“It is clear many actors both within academic research and commercial edtech see the pandemic as a significant period for rolling out, testing, and proving the beneficial value of digital learning services, platforms and products,” the researchers wrote.

Of course, this is not to say that technology, when properly used in the hands of qualified teachers, doesn't enhance teaching and learning — particularly when teachers lead in the policy, design and training of technological educational innovation. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, noting the scale and the extent of the entry of edtech in education, questions need to be asked about the long-term implications for public education and the motives of global corporate actors.

Disaster capitalism

In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein wrote that natural disasters, wars, economic crises, (and now, it seems, pandemics) and their aftershocks are fertile ground for what she called “disaster capitalism”.

As she states, the private sector often steps up with calculated, free-market “solutions” to problems arising from a crisis. As we have seen in our schools, the pandemic has exposed glaring inequity and, as Klein warned, the commercial solutions often “exploit and exacerbate” existing inequalities, as their primary drive is to make a buck for themselves and shareholders.

In education, specifically, this played out in New Orleans, Louisiana, where in the wake of devastating Hurricane Katrina in 2005 the state began rebuilding the school system, albeit under plans devised before the disaster in response to consensus the city's education system was broken.

It was described as “perhaps the most revolutionary attempt at education reform in modern American history”. It meant a seismic shift from a democratically controlled urban school district to a system run by technocrats where “charter” operators were given autonomy over schools they ran, from curriculum to discipline. About 100 “failing” schools were initially “taken over” under the plan.

Charter schools are essentially government-funded, privately managed schools that are a central element of the neoliberal mantra that kowtows to the education reform agenda promoted by billionaires and corporations.

Charter schools now make up more than 90 per cent of the city's public schools. They are not required to employ qualified teachers.

Reorganising public education

One frightening aspect identified by the report prepared for Education International is that edu-businesses had been planning for the long-term and used the pandemic as a testing ground for their commercial ambitions.

Most remote teaching resources were shovel-ready. “These are not changes that Pearson and its competitors are simply offering up, opportunistically, in response to sudden coronavirus measures,” the authors said. “Instead, they are part of a concerted long-term strategy by the edtech industry to actively reorganise public education as a market for its products, platforms and services.”

It is difficult not to form a dystopian view of the future for education if this commercialisation is allowed to continue unchecked, especially if we become more complacent, accepting of a “new norm”.

Artificial intelligence (AI) technology has already made significant inroads promoting the provision of “personalised” education in the absence of teachers. AI has also delivered student surveillance systems to monitor students' virtual attendance, assess social-emotional learning and wellbeing, and a range of other “services”. Will this be extended beyond this crisis?

Of course, the underlying theme to all of these scenarios is the replacement of the teacher with technology

with a view to maximising profits.

Teachers may not generate an immediate dollars-and-cents profit, but their value to our future is immeasurable if we are to remain a rich, diverse, civilised and, above all, human society.