
BOOK REVIEW

Hogan, A., & Thompson, G. (2020). *Privatisation and Commercialisation in Public Education: How the Public Nature of Schooling is Changing*. Routledge

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.vlii2.1505>

Something fundamental is shifting in the world of education. Public schooling – long understood as a public good, a cornerstone of democratic societies (McNeil, 2002) – is increasingly permeated by private interests and market logics. This is not a new trend, although its intensification characterises the current global landscape. From charter schools in the United States to free schools in the United Kingdom and independent public schools in Australia, the traditional boundary between public and private is increasingly blurred, reconfiguring what it means for education to be “public”. Even in Finland – a country globally celebrated for its comprehensive public education system – signs of marketisation have emerged. Helsinki hosted the inaugural OECD Global Education Industry Summit in 2015, and its message was clear: governments and private actors should jointly foster an “innovation ecosystem” in education (OECD, 2015).

This changing phenomenon forms the core concern of *Privatisation and Commercialisation in Public Education: How the Public Nature of Schooling is Changing*, edited by Anna Hogan and Greg Thompson. Anna Hogan is a senior lecturer at the University of Queensland, and Greg Thompson is a professor at the Queensland University of Technology. Both are prominent Australian education researchers whose work critically examines the privatisation and commercialisation of public schooling, highlighting how market logics and corporate actors increasingly shape educational policy and practice both nationally and internationally. Through a rich and diverse collection of case studies, the volume investigates the multiple and intersecting processes of privatisation, marketisation and commercialisation in contemporary education systems. A key strength of the book lies in its insistence on conceptual clarity, with the editors offering nuanced distinctions that highlight their respective logics and implications. Although these processes are interconnected, they are not synonymous, and the book’s analytical rigour enables readers to grasp the specificities of each phenomenon. The volume moves beyond the Anglophone world; it brings in perspectives from countries in the Global South, such as India, Chile, and Liberia, as well as from Northern European nations like Finland and Sweden. This transnational scope underscores the complex interplay between global policy trends and localised educational contexts, offering insights into how privatisation and market logics take root in distinct sociopolitical and economic terrains. The central question threading

through the volume is crucial regarding social institutions, democratic functioning, and social inequalities as well: What does “public” education mean when the boundaries between state and market, public and private are increasingly blurred?

Following the book’s analytical structure, this review will explore its main arguments and contributions by tracing the contours of these shifting definitions: marketisation, privatisation, commercialisation, and finally what “public” means in these new circumstances.

The book’s first major conceptual thread – marketisation – is defined as the creation of policy logics that seek to establish quasi-markets in education. Ball (1994) characterizes marketisation as the introduction of market forces into schooling, while Whitty and Power (2000) describe quasi-markets as the confluence of parental choice, school autonomy, and varying degrees of government regulation and public accountability. In this model, schools are not simply service providers but actors competing in an education marketplace, often with parents positioned as consumers making informed choices about their children’s education. Marketisation thus introduces a competitive logic into education, transforming how success is measured and how educational relationships are framed. Two processes can bring market logic into education: privatisation and commercialisation.

Closely intertwined with marketisation is privatisation, which the volume frames as “the development of quasi-markets through institutional and policy structures that privilege parental choice, school autonomy, and venture philanthropy, often with the state regulating for public accountability. It happens *to* schools.” (Introduction, p. 4) These structures often retain close cooperation with national government and state oversight, particularly in the form of accountability measures, but shift core educational functions into the hands of private actors.

The first five chapters of the book explore the incursion of private actors into public education, beginning with the emergence of new philanthropic movements in the United States. (Chapter 1) Christopher Lubienski explores the activity of “edu-philanthropies”, typically driven by wealthy individuals or foundations with corporate backgrounds. They bring with them a managerial ethos rooted in efficiency, competition, and quantifiable outcomes. Charter schools, teacher incentive schemes, and programmes like Teach For America exemplify this trend. Rather than emphasising collective outcomes such as equity or democratic engagement, edu-philanthropists tend to prioritise individual success metrics, such as employability and test scores. Similar trends are observed in New Zealand, where charitable entities play significant roles in shaping educational reforms through public-private partnerships (PPPs).

The volume links these developments to a broader transformation in educational governance. As O’Neill and Powell note (Chapter 2), the rise of private actors in education signals a shift towards a “partnering state”, a more fluid and networked governance form where governments cooperate with private actors to compensate for perceived shortcomings in public service provision. PPPs in education typically involve private organisations operating or managing publicly funded schools, often through vouchers or contractual agreements. This arrangement aims to harness private-sector efficiency and innovation to improve public services yet also introduces new forms of inequality and democratic deficit. The presence of private management in public systems can create disparities in access, curriculum design, and accountability structures.

The comparative breadth of the volume becomes especially evident in its analysis of Liberia and India. The chapter by Radhika Gorur and Ben Arnold (Chapter 4) focuses on the 2009 Right to Education Act, which mandates that private schools reserve 25% of their seats for disadvantaged students in India. While this policy sought to integrate private providers into a broader public education framework, it created a hybrid model of delivering comprehensive education. The chapter reveals that the implementation of the model has been marred by bureaucratic obstacles, resistance from private schools, and unintended exclusionary effects, resulting in the reproduction of existing social inequalities in a new system.

The volume's exploration of commercialisation sheds light on a different yet related dimension of education reform. Commercialisation refers to "the creation, marketing, and sale of education goods and services for commercial gain. It happens *in* schools." (Introduction, p. 5) This includes everything from textbooks and learning platforms to school management software and standardised testing services. In some cases, commercialisation manifests as a full-scale "edu-business" industry that reimagines education as a global commodity. These practices change the internal culture of schools and redefine how educational success is achieved and measured. Chapters 6–9 explore different trends in the commercialisation of schooling.

The Finnish example (Chapter 6) is particularly illuminating. Despite its strong tradition of state-funded, comprehensive schooling, Finland is witnessing increasing involvement from actors such as Microsoft and education start-ups. These entities often frame Finnish education as outdated and in need of digital modernisation, effectively commodifying their products or services tested on the "PISA-branded" Finnish education system for export. Piia Seppänen and her co-authors describe the trend as "edu-ecosystems", a complex network of private companies, investors, and state actors. In contrast, Sweden offers a more explicit case of market-driven education reform. With a long-standing acceptance of private schooling and voucher systems, Sweden has embraced a highly liberalised education model that allows for significant private sector involvement. (Chapter 8) This divergence from Finland illustrates how different policy traditions and societal values shape the trajectories of educational reform. In Sweden, the idea of choice is embedded deeply within the educational system, making it more vulnerable to market fluctuations and corporate interests.

The chapter by Lluís Parcerisa and his co-authors focuses on Chile, where high-stakes accountability systems have created a market for Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) services. (Chapter 7) These services are used by both public and private schools to improve standardized test performance. However, while private schools express greater satisfaction with ATEs, public schools often critique their efficacy and lack of contextual fit. The rise of ATEs reveals how accountability policies can indirectly bolster commercial interests, often at the expense of holistic education. Teachers, in particular, express deep concerns about the commercialisation of education, highlighting the loss of pedagogical autonomy, the commodification of student data, and the erosion of state support. Similar results are shown in the chapter by Greg Thompson and his co-authors (Chapter 9), which is the only chapter in the book that tries to explore the perspective of internal actors: the teachers in New Zealand. It reveals that teachers express generally high levels of concern regarding commercialisation. They report that schools are being forced to operate like businesses, where success is measured through metrics and data collection rather than

meaningful learning. Teachers especially worry about student privacy, particularly regarding the sale and usage of digital data by commercial providers and are much less concerned about private tutoring and the quality of commercial products than about other aspects.

The final parts (Chapters 10–12) of the volume turn to the conceptual implications of these developments. The contributors argue for a more nuanced understanding of “publicness” in education. Rather than adhering to a rigid public/private binary, Nicole Mockler and her co-authors propose a typology that considers multiple dimensions – such as control, access, funding, and curriculum – across different contexts. (Chapter 12) This framework enables a richer analysis of how education systems are structured and governed in practice. It also challenges researchers and policymakers to rethink the language used to describe education systems.

Privatisation and Commercialisation in Public Education: How the Public Nature of Schooling is Changing is an essential contribution to ongoing debates about the future of schooling. It provides a comprehensive, empirically grounded, and theoretically sophisticated account of how private and market forces are reshaping education across the globe. It does not offer a nostalgic defence of the public system but instead invites readers to critically reimagine what a public education system might look like under marketising contemporary conditions. In doing so, it calls for renewed attention to the emergence of educational inequalities within nations and globally, the imperative to redefine public services in the competitive state model, and the new forms of governance in an increasingly marketised education system.

As promised, the volume attempts to look beyond the Anglophone context, but the core material is still largely drawn from case studies in those countries. I missed inquiries into the inner functioning of schools, the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents, and research into the everyday life of different types of educational institutions. I believe that micro- and meso-level analyses would greatly enrich the conceptual rethinking of publicness. Additionally, studies on how the marketisation of education affects social inequalities and the fabric of society in the long term were also absent from the volume. Although concerns about these issues are often expressed, such research could also open up new perspectives for further investigation on educational privatisation, marketisation and commercialisation.

SÁRA SZABÓ

ELTE Centre for Social Sciences Institute for Political Science,
ELTE Doctoral School of Sociology
szabo.sara@tk.hu

References

Ball, S. J. (1994). *Education reform*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

McNeil, L. M. (2002). Private asset or public good: Education and democracy at the crossroads: Editor's introduction. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(2), 243–248. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312039002243>

OECD (2015). *Global Education Industry Summit*. <https://www.oecd.org/education-industry-summit> (Accessed 29.03.2025).

Whitty, G., & Power, S. (2000). Marketization and privatization in mass education systems. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 20(2), 93–107. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-0593\(99\)00061-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-0593(99)00061-9)