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Public-Private Partnerships as an Education Policy Approach: Multiple Meanings, Risks and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are increasingly perceived as an innovative approach to provide education for all. Nonetheless, PPP arrangements cover a broad range of policy options and follow diverse rationales, some of which are not necessarily novel within education reform agendas. In education, there are open disputes about the key principles and arrangements that PPPs should have. Overall, PPPs are an ambiguous policy category that allows for a flexible and, sometimes, over-simplified use of the concept. In fact, some important stakeholders narrowly associate PPPs in education to long-known market (or quasi-market) policy solutions. This paper seeks to unpack PPPs both as an analytical category and as a policy generation tool in the education sector, and to reflect on its different translations and implications in key areas such as quality, equity and accountability in education. This paper reviews the origins, core principles and different rationales of PPPs, as well as examines the main challenges and difficulties stemming from the transposition of such arrangements to the field of education policy.

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Education 2030

INTRODUCTION

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can be broadly defined as arrangements between public and private actors for the delivery of goods, services and/or facilities. In many different settings, PPPs are increasingly perceived as an innovative policy approach to provide education for all, and especially to provide the most vulnerable population with new educational opportunities. Many governments, international organizations and other key education stakeholders consider that, by partnering with the private sector, countries can expand their education systems in a more efficient, flexible and effective way (Robertson *et al.*, 2012). Nonetheless, PPPs are demanding, sophisticated, and challenging forms of governance both for private agents and, especially, for governments (Hodge and Greve, 2010). In addition, PPP frameworks might cover a broad range of policy options and follow diverse rationales, which places PPPs in an ambiguous policy category. According to Klijn (2010), in both academic and practitioner circles, PPPs are a confusing policy approach: it is not clear *what PPPs exactly mean*, for which *reasons* countries should adopt them, and what is the *best form* they should take.

This paper aims to shed light over these and other grey areas of the PPP debate –namely, meaning, rationales, policy options and effects– with a focus on educational provision.[2] It also aims to unpack PPPs as a complex policy category and to reflect on its different translations and implications in education. Finally, the paper argues that PPPs are a challenging policy category in education, and that not all PPP policy options are equally appropriate to achieve the expected goals (including cost-effectiveness, equity, innovation and so on) in all types of educational settings. The paper is organized in four main sections. The first section presents the origins of PPPs as an emerging policy paradigm for public services delivery, and outlines the main rationales behind the adoption of PPPs. The second section reflects on the main principles that are supposed to structure the democratic governance of public services (deliberation, accountability, impartiality, equity, etc.), and how PPP interventions relate to them. The third section focuses on the specific implementation of PPPs in education and on how PPPs have adopted particular market connotations in this sector. The fourth section explores the multiple effects, risks and challenges of PPPs in the education sector, with a focus on equity and accountability concerns.

PPPs IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: ORIGINS AND RATIONALES

Before becoming a popular policy approach in education, PPPs have been implemented in other policy areas of intervention such as infrastructure and urban renewal, local economic development, water supply and transportation (Wettenhall, 2003). In an initial stage, the PPP policy programme had a strong managerial bias. Essentially, the main objective of PPP advocates aimed to bring the public sector's organizational culture closer to private sector's in order to address perceived inefficiencies in direct state service provision. In the 1980's in the United States, mixing the public and private sectors was a proposal that resonated well with the Reagan administration's ambition of re-structuring the government sector to make it more efficient and cost-effective (Linder, 1999). However, PPPs were also supported by progressive political actors who saw partnerships as an opportunity to counter-balance market forces and revert the more drastic commercialization of public services (Kooiman, 1993; Wettenhall, 2003). Since then, PPPs have been seen as an intermediate approach (or a compromise) between "too much state (Keynesianism) on the one hand, and too little state (privatization), on the other" (Robertson and Verger, 2012, p. 26).

Currently, "partnerships" is still a term with multiple meanings in public policy. This is one of the reasons why many actors across the political spectrum feel comfortable with it. The ambiguity of the PPP concept is highly functional in terms of policy adoption, and explains, to a great extent, the high level of dissemination of this policy idea across different policy sectors and territories. Undoubtedly, the PPP term's positive "emotional connotation … conveys an image of egalitarian and conflict-free decision-making" (Schaeffer and Loveridge, 2002, p. 185), which provides an interesting language game for policy-makers. However, it is also true that –despite the general adhesion generated by the partnerships label– the more the PPP programmes and designs are specified, the more likely it is that disputes and disagreements arise (Klijn, 2010).

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2 For a matter of clarity and focus, the paper focuses on PPPs for the delivery of schooling services, and does not look at the debate around infrastructure PPPs or PPPs for the delivery of cleaning, security or other types of non-core educational services. For the same reason, the paper focuses on the basic education level, and does not look at PPPs in higher education, vocational training, adult education or early childhood education.

In the 1990s, PPPs acquired high levels of popularity in many developed countries and in relation to a broad range of social sectors. Numerous associations, research centers, and international conferences, as well as consultancies and scholarly activities, were organized around the PPP idea. Even international academic journals such as the *International Journal of Applied PPPs* and the *International Journal of PPPs* were created during this period (Wettenhall, 2003). Also in the 1990s, international organizations and aid agencies became increasingly interested in PPPs, and saw these arrangements as an important tool to enhance their 'good governance' in service delivery strategies (Miller-Adams, 1999; Miraftab, 2004). These organizations, under the intellectual leadership of the World Bank, adopted the PPP framework to conceive public sector reform and the implementation of infrastructure projects, particularly in developing countries.

According to its proponents, there are different reasons to embrace PPP schemes in education and in other public services. To a great extent, these reasons can be grouped within two broader policy paradigms or rationales of public sector reform: New Public Management (NPM) and Public Governance (Klijn, 2010). NPM is "an approach in public administration that employs knowledge and experiences acquired in business management and other disciplines to improve efficiency, effectiveness and general performance of public services in modern bureaucracies" (Vigoda, 2003, p. 813). The NPM approach considers the following as rationales for PPP adoption:

- to increase the level of financial resources committed to public services such as basic education, and to provide better value for money.
- to allow governments to focus on those functions where they have comparative advantage (planning, policy, quality assurance, and curriculum development), whereas the private sector is in charge of service delivery.
- to allow for greater innovation by focusing on outputs and outcomes, rather than processes.
- to allow governments to bypass operating restrictions (especially those related to unionization and regulations seen as 'unnecessarily restrictive employment laws and outdated government pay scales'[3]).
- to introduce competitive pressure on the provision of public services, and thus innovation and efficiency gains.

In contrast, the main focus of the public governance approach is to promote transparency, stakeholder engagement and sustainability in public administration (Bovaird, 2010). The public governance approach thereby contemplates the following reasons for strengthening public and private collaboration through formal arrangements:

- to allow the public education sector to leverage private sector knowledge, skills and innovation through network collaboration.
- to reduce the politicization of schooling and the degree of corruption in the education sector.
- to make costs more transparent through contracts, explicit costing schemes and accountability measures.
- to promote stakeholder participation –including civil society– in public services delivery and related decisions.

Governments could be guided by one of these two broad public sector reform approaches (NPM and public governance) when embracing PPPs. Nonetheless, in real situations, most governments probably combine the two approaches in one way or the other. In fact, there are elements and reasons for PPP adoption that both approaches share. For instance, innovation in public services delivery is a factor contemplated both within NPM and public governance. However, these two approaches do not necessarily agree on the specific mechanisms that may lead to innovation. In this respect, NPM sees competitive and market pressures as drivers of innovation (Lubienski, 2009). In contrast, public governance reformers do not consider competition as a central driver of innovation and improvement in public services, and rather focus on cooperation and stakeholder networks. Furthermore, NPM assumes

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3 See Latham, M. n.d. *Hope or hype?* Available at: http://www.india-seminar.com/2011/627/627_michael_latham.htm, or, as stated elsewhere: "In those countries where public sector staff is paid high wages as a result of belonging to strong unions, [in PPPs] there is a cost saving associated with the contractor being able to hire nonunionized labor" (Patrinos *et al.*, 2009, p. 11).

that private institutions are intrinsically superior at developing and delivering services, whereas public governance reformers do not necessarily share this assumption.

In some contexts, however, the adoption of PPP frameworks does not follow the NPM/public governance schemes so simply. For instance, in countries with a longstanding tradition of private provision in education (such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain), PPPs have emerged as a way to formalize historical ties between the public and the private (usually religious) sector in the delivery of education, and as a way to respond to political pressures coming from highly influential religious institutions (Vandenberghe, 1999). Another different rationale can be found in low-income and fragile states, where the guiding rationale for PPP adoption is usually no other than 'pragmatism', with PPPs seen as an intervention intended to overcome structural government default stemming from a lack of resources and capacity (Rose and Greeley, 2006). In this type of contexts, the rationale for PPP adoption is to supplement government schools' limited capacity and expand educational access by incorporating private providers into the public sector. In low-income countries, administrative capacity issues and pressure on government budgets usually makes contracting-out schemes prevail over more balanced, long-term and accountable forms of PPPs.

PPPs AND PUBLIC SERVICES DELIVERY: CORE PRINCIPLES

Many public sector reformers expect PPPs to bring together the best of the private and public worlds: the state's presumed orientation towards equity and social cohesion, together with the alleged innovation, dynamism, and efficiency of the private sector, and the compassion and social commitment of the private not-for-profit sector (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). These qualities are presented as being able to achieve a balance in the partnership context. Beyond a zero sum, public and private partners are expected to follow a mutual learning rationale and, by doing so, to adopt values, norms, and perspectives from each other. For instance, openness to public scrutiny and awareness of social cohesion are some of the values that private partners could adopt from the public sector within a partnership scheme; whereas the public sector could learn from the adaptability to emerging social demands and creativity often associated to the private sector (Linder and Rosenau, 2000; Wettenhall, 2003).

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In practice, however, PPPs may give rise to different and complex hybrid organizational forms[4] that may not always meet such a 'balance' (Borys and Jemison, 1989). To be sure, public-private hybridization entails a fundamental tension between public accountability and commercial orientation (Skelcher, 2005; Wettenhall, 2003). Skelcher (2005) identifies three questions stemming from this tension. The first question concerns the degree of legal constitutional oversight of PPPs. As most forms of hybrid organization, PPPs usually emerge from executive decisions based on technical feasibility, cost-efficiency and appropriateness, as opposed to legislative deliberation regarding public policy ends. Hodge (2004) notes that because PPPs often imply substantial disbursements of public funds, and contracts usually exceed government terms, it is crucial that partnerships are not only technically optimal but that they are accompanied by democratic debate, transparency, and clarity.

The second question concerns accountability. While democratic governments operate "through public deliberation and the regular testing of authority through elections" (Skelcher, 2005, p. 362), PPPs are not subject to the same kind of public scrutiny and may operate outside the guarantees of access to public information and to public control mechanisms (Minow, 2003).

Finally, the third question focuses on the potential loss of impartiality of governments engaging in partnerships, especially while simultaneously undertaking a regulatory role. Overall, the weakening of the public sector in many countries –resulting from increased private sector involvement or the state's increasing legitimation difficulties– makes this balance particularly challenging (Wettenhall, 2003). Schaeffer and Loveridge (2002) illustrate the dilemma:

> For example, a government that enters into a PPC [public-private cooperation arrangement] with a private firm and makes a significant financial investment (or invests significant political capital) may be reluctant to pursue suspected violations of rules and regulations by its private 'partner' if this would endanger the success of the

4 Hybridity refers to organizations combining both public and private orientations, i.e. elements, action rationales, values, and so on (see Skelcher, 2005).

> cooperative project. In other words, the government may lose, or be perceived of having lost, its impartiality when it assumes a large tangible interest in the success of private projects (p. 171).

Somehow paradoxically, government guarantee tends to reduce market and competitive incentives in PPPs and consequently more government regulation –and related public spending– is needed to ensure that public policy goals are being attained (Moe and Stanton, 1989; Skelcher, 2005).

Risk and responsibility-sharing are important features of PPP schemes. However, balanced risk and responsibility-sharing are constrained by the fact that the state always remains the ultimate provider of certain social goods and services, for which it has the obligation to fulfill a certain right, such as health or education (Schaeffer and Loveridge, 2002). When partnerships fail, states have to deal themselves with fulfilling unmet goals and responsibilities. This is often an underlying 'unspoken consensus' between public and private partners in every partnership (Rosenau, 1999), which tends to uneven the field against the state. Furthermore, having the state as a last resort provider, private partners may engage in 'cream skimming' and cost shifting in order to minimize risk and maximize profit while leaving the burden of unprofitable activities to the state (e.g., schooling of vulnerable populations, medical treatment of the elderly). The latter, as we develop further below, would challenge the realization of equity as one of the core principles of public services organization.

Nevertheless, generalizations on the potential implications of public-private hybridization in the governance of public services are difficult because the final form that PPP arrangements take depends on a broad range of variables. These include the type of relation between the public and private actors (whether this relation is more or less horizontal), the type of organizational form of the partnership (whether it is more or less tight), the duration of the arrangement (for a specific task or for the development of a long-term strategic), and so on (Klijn 2010). The final effects of PPPs will also depend of other variables that are more difficult to control such as the specific qualities and 'comparative advantages' of the partners, and their incentives and motives to engage in partnerships. Overall, as we show for the case of education below, evidence on the performance of PPPs in providing social goods and services as compared to traditional state provision is highly contradictory and, ultimately, context-specific.

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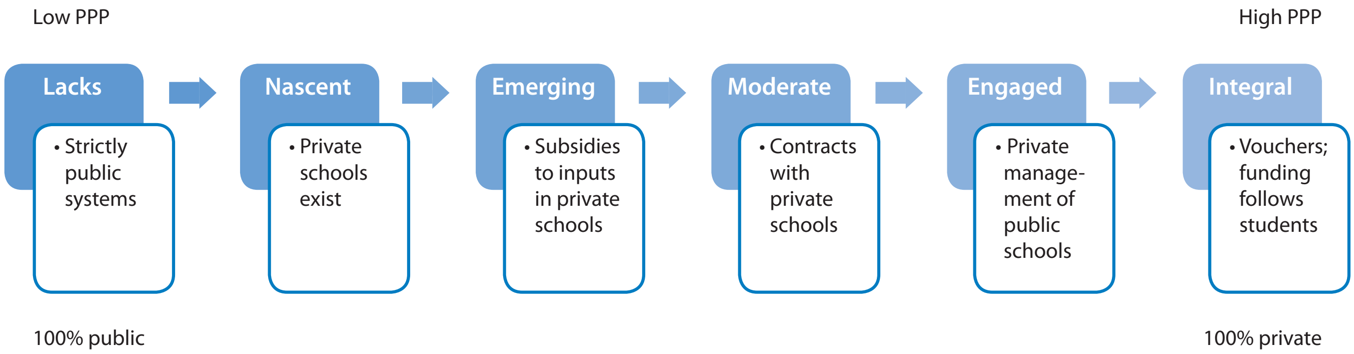
THE EMERGENCE OF PPPs IN EDUCATION AS A MARKET-ORIENTED APPROACH

In comparison with other sectors such as energy, water supply, transportation or even health services, public education has been a somewhat late adopter of PPPs, but an increasingly important one. The first published reference to the term "PPPs for education" is found in the 2000 World Bank and the Asian Development Bank joint report *The new social policy agenda in Asia* (Marshall and Bauer, 2000). Then, throughout the 2000s, several other publications, policy briefs and toolkits were produced on PPPs, especially by a network of experts, scholars and consultants working in the context of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the World Bank Economics of Education Thematic Group. The World Bank report *The role and impact of PPPs in education* (Patrinos *et al.*, 2009) is an influential piece of this series of publications dealing with alternative forms of education provision (Verger, 2012). In these publications, PPPs in education (ePPPs) are basically portrayed as cost-effective policy solutions to the access and quality issues that many education systems currently face, especially in low and middle-income countries (LaRocque, 2008; Patrinos *et al.*, 2009).

The way PPPs have been transposed to the field of education deserves, however, thorough discussion and careful consideration. According to the World Bank, ePPPs cover different policy arrangements that may be categorized as part of a *continuum* ranging from *low* to *high* levels of engagement between the public and private sectors (see Figure 1). This continuum is framed in an evolutionary way, from a *nascent* stage– in which private schools exist independently of the state, to an *integral* stage– in which education is entirely provided by the private sector under a voucher scheme. In this categorization, school choice and competition are presented as the most desirable mechanisms, and voucher and voucher-like schemes as the corresponding policy interventions of an ideal partnership framework. Drawing on public choice theory, the rationale behind this particular understanding of ePPPs is that "parents choose the best school for their children on the grounds of quality, which in turn puts pressure on schools to compete to attract students and to achieve better academic results at a lower cost" (Patrinos *et al.*, 2009, p. 61).

Figure 1. The World Bank PPP continuum concept



Source: Adapted from Patrinos *et al.* (2009)

Despite its influence in the field of education for development, the World Bank conceptualization can be considered problematic for at least two reasons. First, this conceptualization could arguably be considered tendentious in that it uses the PPP framework to support market solutions in education –with voucher schemes being portrayed as the "integral" PPP model– despite the fact that, by definition, PPP arrangements do not need to follow a market model or a NPM rationale. In fact, as shown above, PPPs can also follow public governance or "pragmatic" rationales. Actually, the level of integrality of PPPs does not depend on the degree of market dynamics, school competition or freedom of clients' choice, but rather on the level of horizontality of the relationship between the public and private sectors (Schaeffer and Loveridge, 2002). The level of integrality of a PPP can also be defined by whether the partnership fulfills clear conditions of knowledge transfer, mutual learning and risk-sharing. These conditions are hardly represented in the World Bank continuum and within its broader conceptualization of ePPPs[5].

Second, despite the fact that PPPs in education are promoted as an innovative policy framework, the specific policy programmes suggested in the World Bank ePPP categorization –namely subsidies, out-contracting, charter schools, vouchers, etc.– hold many resemblances to those proposed by public choice theorists in the 1980s under the 'quasi-markets' and privatization umbrella (Chubb and Moe, 1988; Le Grand, 1991). Moreover, the proposed categorization is general, thereby and does not highlight significant differences *within* each of these policy programmes. For instance, voucher schemes can differ significantly according to whether they are targeted or universal, provide partial or complete funding (i.e., with or without add-on payments; level of public subsidy; etc.), according to the territorial scale of the intervention, or whether their primary aim is to promote school competition or to promote more opportunities for the poor (Levin, 2002; Moe, 2008). Charter schools can also be quite diverse depending on the degree of autonomy, innovation or competition that different charter legislations pursue and thus emphasize at the administrative level (Bulkley, 2005). Defining the type of private partners –i.e. religious or non-religious organizations, local or transnational school chains or single providers, for-profit or not-for-profit– is also crucial both for voucher and charter frameworks. Different types of partners –and their corresponding motives, ethos, incentives– have different political and educational implications in the context of ePPPs (Rosenau, 1999).

CHALLENGES AND EFFECTS OF PPPs IMPLEMENTATION IN EDUCATION

Cost reduction, improved quality, greater participation, and risk-sharing are allegedly some of the desirable main benefits of PPPs (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Nonetheless, PPPs face different challenges and difficulties in meeting these goals, particularly in the education sector. Many of these issues arise from, as shown above, ePPPs being generally designed and implemented following market (or quasi-market) frameworks, but not only.

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5 Interestingly, Schaeffer and Loveridge (2002) distinguish PPPs from other three less intense forms of 'public-private collaboration', namely, 'joint ventures' or more general 'buyer-seller' or 'leader-follower' collaborations, according to the different levels of engagement between the public and private actors in each case.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is, in all types of PPP arrangements, a key component, but also a key concern. The main areas of accountability and state control in educational PPPs are: the transmission of a national curriculum, quality of school facilities, teacher training and development, teachers' qualifications, teachers' salary and working conditions (including students-teacher ratios), gratuity (ensuring that schools do not charge uncovered fees to families), democratic school governance (guaranteeing participation of teachers, families and other stakeholders at the school level), as well as transparent students' admission processes (controlling against discriminatory student selection). For governments to monitor and enforce adequate performance in all of these intrinsically different areas, strong regulatory and management capacity is needed.

As argued by Schaeffer and Loveridge (2002), PPPs ideally imply that "all partners share in the rewards and decision making and assume full responsibility for the risks of their joint activities" (p. 180). However, this mutual or network accountability (Eyben, 2008; West *et al.*, 2011) –understood as a horizontal accountability relationship between the state and the private partners– is not always an appropriate accountability model for education. In practice, as shown above, balanced risk and responsibility-sharing are constrained by the fact that the state always remains the ultimate provider of certain social goods and services, such as health or education, for which it has the obligation to fulfill a social and human right. When partnerships fail, states have to deal themselves with fulfilling unmet goals and responsibilities.

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While horizontal accountability is not appropriate in ePPP frameworks for above-mentioned reason, other forms of administrative principal-agent accountability are extremely challenging, especially in developing countries. It tends to be administratively difficult and resource-consuming for governments to control whether the private sector engages in core public regulations such as free education and non-selection of students. The lack of state capacity and pressure on government budgets may create unintended opportunities and incentives for private providers to take advantage and invert the principal-agent relationship (Gauri and Vawda, 2004). This difficulty is arguably higher in ePPPs promoting school-competition and school choice, where private schools have economic incentives to compete for the most academically skilled students or for students from wealthier families.

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND EQUITY GOALS

ePPPs' growing popularity contrasts with the fact that existing research on the effectiveness of these interventions in the improvement of different aspects of the educational system is still scarce and far from conclusive (Day Ashley *et al.*, 2014; Verger *et al.*, 2017; Waslander *et al.*, 2010). Despite its proponents' general descriptions of the benefits of educational PPPs in terms of expanding access, improving quality and equity, or promoting educational innovation (LaRocque, 2008; Patrinos *et al.*, 2009; Pavon, 2008; Tooley and Dixon, 2006), existing academic evidence suggests not so clear results across these and other dimensions– i.e. learning outcomes, education inequalities, efficiency, parental satisfaction, innovation and teachers' work. This is especially the case when considering the most emblematic ePPP policies in the World Bank categorization –vouchers, contract and charter schools, and more general school choice and competition schemes– for which evidence is more abundant (Verger *et al.*, 2017).

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In this vein, while some studies find positive effects of these interventions on learning outcomes (Di Gropello, 2006; Hoxby, 2003; Patrinos *et al.*, 2009; Witte *et al.*, 2007; Wolf *et al.*, 2013), others argue that the impact is marginal or non-existent (Bettinger, 2005; Bifulco and Ladd, 2006; Cullen *et al.*, 2005; Gauri, 1998). Differences in student learning outcomes are less likely to be attached to the inherent quality of the providers, but tend to be related to their socio-economic composition[6] (OECD, 2012), or to the fact that they are subject to more intense hours of teaching in privately managed schools (Termes *et al.*, 2015).

6 We should take into account that, in most countries, publicly funded private schools have, on average, students with a higher economic, social and cultural status than public schools (Boeskens, 2016).

Evidence regarding dimensions such as educational equity is, however, not so balanced. For instance, most studies suggest that ePPPs involving demand-side funding schemes tend to increase educational inequalities and school socio-economic segregation (Alegre and Ferrer, 2010; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2014; Alves *et al.*, 2015; Byun *et al.*, 2012; Elacqua, 2012; Saporito, 2003; Sikkink and Emerson, 2008). Research on the topic observes that the competitive environments that many ePPP frameworks generate provide incentives for schools to recruit the best and 'cheapest to educate' students, as well as to discriminate against those less academically skilled or with special educational needs (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Jabbar, 2016; Jennings, 2010; van Zanten, 2009; Hsieh and Urquiola, 2003). Discrimination is not necessarily restricted to rejection during the school admission process, but also includes selective expulsion practices from the school (Boeskens, 2016). The loss of positive peer-effect resulting from greater school discrimination and segregation contributes to an increasing achievement gap between schools.

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Negative externalities on equity arise especially from the combination of private partners who are oriented toward profit-making or prevailing deregulation in the education system, and governmental inaction in guaranteeing democracy and equity in public services. As elaborated below, these externalities can be extremely costly in the long-run. Partnering with not-for-profit providers may address part of the equity concerns and contribute to align the goals of the private partner with those of the governments more smoothly (Mendel and Brudney, 2012; Rosenau, 1999).

EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION AND EFFICIENCY

EPPPs contribute to the diversification of education by bringing different types of providers into the system. However, education diversification is not necessarily equivalent to educational innovation. In fact, rather than innovation, ePPPs might in practice promote more uniformity and standardization in educational processes than predicted by its promoters. After a thorough revision of many international experiences with market-oriented ePPPs, Lubienski (2009) finds that private providers tend to favor traditional education approaches over experimentation. In the private sector, innovation generally focuses on symbolic aspects -such as school marketing- and on management practices, but not necessarily on pedagogy and classroom practices (Lubienski, 2009). This may be related to the fact that for schools that pretend to target specific types of families, symbolic distinction strategies are more effective than profound pedagogical rethinking (Zancajo, 2016). Furthermore, standardized evaluation systems embedded in many ePPP accountability schemes tend to provide schools with the incentive to narrow the curriculum and teach to the test.

Overall, the competitive pressures that PPPs are expected to generate in both public and private schools do not necessarily translate to substantive educational change, or in the public and the private sectors learning from each other, but on the promotion of school marketing and students' screening practices. It is not clear whether school responses to competition contribute to quality education and innovation; clearly, some of these responses (such as competing for the best or easiest to teach students) do not contribute to guarantee the equity principle in public education systems.

Furthermore, there is some evidence on budgetary efficiency associated to ePPPs which is the result of, for instance, private partners contributing to the educational system with their own school facilities, teacher training systems, and so on. Nonetheless, cost-effectiveness gains are not clear in the long-run, at least for two reasons. First, the entrance of private providers in the system might introduce educational planning challenges and produce an oversupply of schools (Boeskens, 2016). Secondly, in PPP settings, cost-effectiveness might be undermined given the need for states to compensate for unwanted externalities comprising equity and quality aspects (Romero, 2015; Rosenau, 1999). The Chilean quasi-market is a good example of the increasing need for state regulation and monitoring of private providers, which has proven extremely time and resource-consuming (Bellei and Vanni, 2015).

Moreover, the efficiency gains of ePPPs usually come at the cost of worsening teachers' working conditions (Termes *et al.*, 2015). This has clear implications on quality of teaching and learning considering that, in education, service quality is mainly determined by human capital investment (Iossa and Martimort, 2015; Rosenau, 1999). Cost-efficiency gains might come also in the form of PPP where schools charge add-on user fees (or co-payments) to families.7 In this case, this "efficiency gain" via charging add-on tuition fees has obvious equity and access implications, since fees work as a *de facto* selection mechanism (Boeskens, 2016).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF EXISTING EVIDENCE

While ePPP interventions cannot be thought of as a monolithic category and much more context and policy-sensitive research is needed to assess the extent to which these interventions actually work, market-oriented ePPPs do seem to be, as argued, particularly problematic in many aspects. Overall, a partnership approach could, however, represent a step forward in many developing contexts where public education provision is insufficient, inadequate or even non-existent and/or where the state is fragile and not able to serve its population. Nevertheless, in these and other contexts, partnering with the private sector should not be seen as a diversion from the necessary improvement of the public school sector. It should not be assumed neither that private sector participation nor market forces will generate a spillover effect in the education system that will, axiomatically, activate and improve public schools. Given that the state is the ultimate provider and guarantor of the right to education –and taking into account that even the most integral PPP systems include a majority of public schools– organizing an ePPP should neither mean the state disentangling from public education nor go against efforts of public education improvement and capacity building in the public sector.

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In this respect, governments in low-income countries facing a range of educational problems could explore alternative ePPP approaches to those focusing on the private provision of schooling services. The privatization of school provision, whether it happens under a PPP framework or not, is a process that is difficult to revert (Bellei, 2016) and introduces, as argued, important challenges to equity and quality goals in education. In contrast, other forms of partnerships could focus on improving the educational system by contributing to train policy-makers and other key educational stakeholders, support teachers' work-force, or create networks of mutual support and knowledge transfer between schools, teachers and other stakeholders. These alternative (or multi-stakeholder) partnerships could bring different state and non-state partners to the system –including universities, local and international NGOs, international aid agencies, etc.– and promote capacity building in the state sector without generating dependence with the private sector. Both in developed and developing contexts, capacity-building and service-support partnerships could deliver results without undermining social cohesion in education and the future development of public education systems.

CONCLUSION

Discussing the potential benefits and disadvantages of PPPs in the education sector is not an easy endeavor. Neglect of context specificity and frequently inaccurate generalizations have produced rather normative frameworks that close-up the debate. As argued in this paper, PPPs are becoming a catch-all concept in the field of education. Many different forms of private-public relationship are generally labeled as PPPs, even if they do not imply a proper *partnership* (in terms of risk sharing and mutual learning), as tends to be the case with many forms of contracting out services. Furthermore, market and pro-school choice solutions (such as vouchers or charter schools) are often seen as the ultimate PPP model in education, although in essence PPPs do not necessarily need to be adopted as a way to promote market competition. Overall, however, and despite the fact that ePPPs are portrayed as innovative solutions, the most well-known PPP policy instruments in education tend to replicate long-standing privatization and quasi-market interventions widely advocated for since the 1980s. In fact, many of the reasons put forward to adopt PPPs –especially under the NPM approach– are based on public choice theory (i.e. school competition as

7 This is a well-documented practice in countries with high levels of publicly funded private provision. It is however more common in ePPP settings where private schools do not receive as much funding as government schools.

a source of school effectiveness and educational opportunities), but not supported sufficiently, or even discouraged, by existing evidence.

In this vein, evidence regarding different dimensions (learning outcomes, education inequalities, efficiency, etc.) seems to challenge too straight-forward conceptions on the expectations and successes of ePPPs. Moreover, as noted, ePPPs raise accountability concerns that are both democratic and administrative in nature. Several externalities stemming from the private sector's inherent orientation toward market-positioning may arise when combined with a government's restrained capacity to control that equity and quality goals in education are achieved. State regulation and monitoring of private providers in an attempt to revert unwanted externalities comprising equity and quality aspects have proven extremely time and resource-intensive, and require strong state management capabilities.

So, while many countries are exploring the adoption of PPPs as a way to strengthen and improve the performance of their educational systems this paper suggests that, as an alternative to PPP schemes for service delivery (i.e. schooling), multi-stakeholder partnerships for capacity-building and support services could be explored. The latter type of arrangements could deliver results at the same time that do not necessarily undermine the core principles of public education and the future development of educational systems.

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