Framing and selling global education policy: The promotion of public-private partnerships for education in low-income contexts

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**Abstract**

Public Private Partnerships in Education (ePPP) are acquiring increasing centrality in the agendas of international organizations and development agencies dealing with education affairs. They are drawn as an opportunity to correct inefficiencies in the public delivery of education and to mobilize new resources to increase education access and effectiveness in low-income contexts.

This article explores the emergence of ePPP as a ‘programmatic idea’ and, in particular, the semiotic strategies through which this idea has been located in the global education agenda and promoted internationally among practice communities by a network of policy entrepreneurs. The analysis is informed by extensive fieldwork and by a new approach to the analysis of the framing and mobilization of new policy ideas, which integrates literature on agenda setting, policy entrepreneurs and policy frame analysis. The approach reveals the complex way in which policy ideas, political actors, institutions and material factors interact to strategically advance new policy alternatives in developing contexts.

**Keywords:** globalization; frames; policy entrepreneurs; international organizations; public-private partnerships; education change

**Introduction**

Once they became independent, former colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America were eager to nationalize education and build new public education systems. The construction of public education systems was considered a political strategy with many virtues, since it was expected to contribute importantly to the legitimation, nation building, modernization and economic development of the young nation-states (Williams 1997).

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To a great extent, public education became the crown jewel of the new independent nations and the private sector was perceived as an opponent or, at least, as an impediment to build public education systems. Thus, a sort of zero-sum between the public and the private categories prevailed in the education policy discourse.

However, with the pass of time, the situation changed importantly. In the eighties and in the nineties, education privatization policies of a very different nature were adopted in many low-income countries. Very often, these policies were introduced as aid conditionality and, this way, perceived as an external imposition of international financial institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF. In other cases, privatization happened by default and, specifically, due to the lack of capacity of the state to respond to the education demand in a context of structural adjustment. Some privatization policies, such as the introduction of school fees, had negative effects for the expansion of education, and affected especially the poorest (Colclough 1996).

The international aid community learnt many lessons from the structural adjustment period and, currently, does not openly support radical privatization policies in the education sector. However, at the same time, many donors consider that the public sector cannot face the challenge of education expansion by itself and are exploring new ways of education provision in which public and private actors can collaborate. They argue that governments should perceive private agents in education, rather than as a threat to the state, as a potential partner. For this reason, the global talk on partnerships between the public and the private sector has intensified in recent years. Specifically, the so-called Public-Private Partnerships in Education (ePPP) have become a new programmatic idea (i. e. a technical idea that provides the interpretation of a policy problem and prescribes a precise course of action to solve it - Campbell 1998) that has acquired centrality in the agendas of most important multilateral, regional and bilateral
aid agencies specializing in education including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, USAID and UNESCO. These agencies perceive ePPP as an opportunity to correct inefficiencies in the public delivery of education and to mobilize new resources to increase education access and effectiveness, above all in those countries where the Education for All (EFA) goals are still far from being met. In fact, in a range of developing countries, such as India, large-scale education reforms to introduce, strengthen and recreate public-private partnerships are currently being discussed (Srivastava 2010).

This article analyzes the emergence, and quick dissemination of the partnerships talk in the field of education, as well as the political implications of the global trend towards the promotion of ePPP in public education in low-income countries. Specifically, it is concerned with the reasons, agents and processes through which ePPP are settled in the global education agenda, and the way this programmatic idea is framed and disseminated among practice communities. To discuss about these issues, the article is structured in three main sections. In the first one, a theoretical and methodological framework aimed at studying the construction and mobilization of global education policy ideas is developed. This framework, which integrates literature on agenda setting, policy entrepreneurs and policy frame analysis, reveals the complex way in which programmatic ideas, political actors, institutions and material factors interact to strategically advance policy alternatives in developing contexts. The methods of the article are also presented in this section. In the second one, the emergence of the ePPP programme is contextualized and the way it has been theorized, framed and mobilized - and by whom - is explored. Specifically, it is shown how this programmatic idea is being conceptualized in terms of education problems, policy tools and argumentation strategies. The last section reflects on the ideational and constitutive power of the ePPP idea. Policy
frame and semiotic analysis techniques are used to analyze, among other properties, the resonance, consistency and clarity of ePPP and, therefore, the potential of the programme to be adopted by practice communities.

The article shows that the ePPP idea has been formulated and disseminated by a transnational policy network of education experts, which is not especially wide, but strategically placed in influential international organizations. It also shows that the ePPP talk is very sound in the current political and ideational context, but counts on important framing limitations that may inhibit its selection and retention in national education systems.

**The construction and mobilization of global programmatic ideas: a semiotic approach**

Programmatic ideas are technical ideas that provide the interpretation of a policy problem and its causes and prescribe a precise course of policy action to solve the problem. They also provide critical tools that can be used by policy-makers to de-legitimate alternative interpretations, approaches or solutions (Blyth 1997; Campbell 1998).

The study of the emergence of new programmatic ideas is important due to the constitutive powers of these ideas, and their capacity to last in time. When programmatic ideas are adopted and implemented in particular territories, they act like cognitive locks that restrict decision-makers to certain intellectual paths, reduce uncertainty among policy-makers and constitute broad cognitive constraints on the range of solutions that they perceive and deem to be useful for solving problems. The influence of programmes, once institutionalized, also lasts in time due to reasons not directly related to the quality of the ideas behind them, but because they generate constituents who defend them if alternatives are suggested (Campbell 2004).
However, before implementation and institutionalization happen, programmatic ideas need to penetrate policy agendas and be selected by particular practice communities. The study of programmatic ideas at the level of agenda setting and dissemination requires of the adoption of a multi-scalar approach to the policy process. This is due to the fact that, in the globalization era, agenda setting happens more frequently at the supra-national scale, whereas most important decisions regarding the adoption and translation of new agendas and policy ideas in particular contexts are taken at the national scale (Dale 1999; Rhoten 2000).

The penetration and impact of new programmatic ideas is contingent on the presence of - and affinity between - a range of factors of a very different nature. The framework I present here focuses on *semiotic* factors, which refer to the production of intersubjective meaning around policy alternatives, to the properties of the ideas behind the policies in question, as well as to the strategic action of the political actors proposing and mobilizing these ideas. In the political analysis literature, the political actors advocating for the advance of new programmatic ideas are usually known as policy entrepreneurs. Policy entrepreneurs prompt practice communities to pay attention to certain problems, to promote particular policy prescriptions and to link elements from separate policy streams such as political events, problems, and solutions (Kingdon 2002). Among other functions, policy entrepreneurs contribute to building the causal beliefs that constitute the cognitive basis of programmatic ideas, packaging the programmatic ideas in a way that makes them appealing to a range of audiences, disseminating these new ideas among practice communities and pushing for their implementation in particular contexts.

Policy entrepreneurs are based in a range of knowledge-based organizations, such as international organizations, think tanks, universities or big consultancy firms, which
are located at the interstices of business, governments and academia or in what Horne (2002) calls the parapolitical sphere. In the institutional contexts where entrepreneurs operate, there exist strong material and normative incentives to promote policy innovation to address new, but also old problems. However, policy entrepreneurs do not necessarily build new ideas or policy solutions from scratch. As most knowledge workers do, they rather innovate by building on previous ideas and by doing some type of bricolage with existing practices. Transposition and translation are thus common mechanisms in policy innovation. The former means importing and applying a practice from one field to another (for instance, from the health to the education sector), whereas the latter means the adaptation of a global or foreign idea to a local context (Boxenbaum and Battilana 2005).

Theorizing, framing and mobilizing policy ideas

To be appealing to policy-makers and other audiences, programmatic ideas need to be theorized consistently, but also framed and mobilized strategically. At the theoretical level, the causal beliefs that constitute new programmes need to be coherent, solid and convincing (Kingdon 2002, Benford and Snow 2000). They also need to be empirically credible and well worked out at both the diagnosis and prognosis levels. The diagnostic dimension of programmes consists of the interpretation of problems and of its causes. To be more effective, a good diagnosis requires of the construction ‘causal stories’, i.e. explanatory frames that move situations away from the realm of fate and introduce human agency in the interpretation of social problems (Stone 1989).

The prognosis dimension of programmes contains the policy prescriptions that should contribute to solve the diagnosed problem(s). Policy prescriptions, as happens with the problems stream, need to be consistent and empirically credible. At the core of
the prognosis dimension, a more or less explicit basic theory about how the programme works can be identified. This theory refers to the way the new policy strategy will influence the actions of agents and will, ultimately, achieve their expected outcomes. This theory, ideally, should be contingent on the specificities of the locality and the subjects involved in the implementation of the programme. Thus, policy prescriptions, beyond blueprinted solutions, should first and foremost inform policy-makers about the necessary conditions (contextual, material, regulatory, etc.) under which a certain policy mechanism would trigger certain effects (Pawson and Tilley 1997). This is certainly the most challenging aspect for policy entrepreneurs that ambition to prescribe global education policies that aim at fitting in a broad range of time-place situations. Finally, it should be acknowledged that causal stories and the formulation of policy prescriptions, apart from being consistent by themselves, need to be consistently and coherently connected among them (Stone 1989; Gasper 1996).

Once programmatic ideas are theorized, policy entrepreneurs frame them in a way that aims at generating public support. Frames are not policy ideas in the strict sense, but “a discourse that helps political actors sell policy choices to the public” (Béland 2005, 11). At the framing level, programmatic ideas have more chances of being considered by practice communities if the policy ideas they contain are clear, concise and easily understandable (Gasper 1996). If we take into account that regulators and policy-makers are usually risk-adverse, new ideas must be framed in a way that makes them familiar, feasible and perceived as a superior policy solution. To the familiarity purpose, policy entrepreneurs may work on recombining new ideas with tried and tested practices (Boxenbaum and Battilana 2005). The mechanisms of bricolage, transposition and translation described earlier may be activated for this purpose. In terms of feasibility, new
policy ideas are most likely to be taken up if they are perceived as technically workable, and fit within budgetary and administrative constraints (Kingdon 2002).

On the other hand, policy entrepreneurs need to frame their ideas in a way that resonates positively with the broader ideational environment. This implies making programmatic ideas echo within the policy paradigm and the public sentiments that are prevailing in society at the time they are formulated (Campbell 2004; Hay 2002). To this purpose, policy entrepreneurs strategically frame and reframe issues and construct convincing arguments in order to make them normatively and theoretically acceptable for the relevant constituencies in the field they aim to provoke policy innovation or policy change (Mintrom 1997). However, in order to sell their ideas and frame them in a more convincing way, policy entrepreneurs may on occasions need to, more or less explicitly, simplify reality and resort to different types of logical fallacy (fallacies of ambiguity, fallacies of unwarranted inferences, etc.), pitfalls or argumentative shortcuts (Gasper 1996).

In terms of mobilization, new programmatic ideas are launched and disseminated through highly distributed policy briefs, position papers, reports or advisory memos, and in public and private events (seminars, workshops, report launches, etc.) that are usually well attended by national political leaders and policy-makers (Ball and Exley 2009). In these and other domains, policy entrepreneurs strongly advocate for their proposals and are enthusiastic about them. In Mintrom’s (1997: 45) words, they need to say something like “I’ve seen the future and it works”. However, at the same time, the audience will attribute more authority to their views if they present their ideas and themselves as neutral and impersonal (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Being perceived as apolitical technocrats, for instance, by using scientific argumentation, is essential for the credibility of policy entrepreneurs. This way, science, although law as well, is an institution to
which policy entrepreneurs usually turn to frame programmes and related causal stories and to sell a particular vision of reality, all while portraying themselves as simply describing it (Stone 1998).

The mobilization of policy discourses is important because very often, beyond their argumentation strengths, they maintain their credibility through their repetition. Another element that contributes to the credibility of policy ideas is the prestige and inter-personal skills of the people backing them (Ball 2007; Fairclough 2000). This is why, usually, the most successful policy entrepreneurs are based in institutions that count on certain authority and credibility, and are located at the interstices of a range of influential social and policy networks (Béland 2005, Campbell 2004).

It should be acknowledged that the equilibrium between theorization, framing and mobilization is a necessary condition for new programmatic ideas to acquire political centrality. For instance, a programmatic idea can be very solid theoretically, but framed in a way that is not appealing to practitioners. On other occasions, a programme could be well constructed and adequately framed, but not enough resources are invested in its political mobilization. In both cases, the chances for the programme to penetrate policy agendas or to provoke policy change would be restricted.

The framework presented here focuses on semiotic factors and contemplates semiosis as the entry-point to understand policy change. However, it also acknowledges the importance of non-semiotic factors (material, power relations) and structurally-inscribed selectivities (historical, institutional or legal) that may privilege or discriminate against certain ideas, actors and strategies over others (Jessop 2001; Robertson 2008). For instance, a new policy alternative - independently of its inherent logic, framing qualities or argumentation strengths - is more likely to resonate and to be selected in a sector that goes through a crisis, or when the policies being implemented do not fulfill the
expectations that society has pinned on them (Walsh 2000). In this sense, periods of crisis typically lead to cognitive and strategic disorientation and, consequently, encourage policy innovation and variation in policy practices (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008).

Methods

This article is based on the triangulation of three main methods. First, document analysis of the main reports on operational partnerships in education (see Table 1) to understand the way the ePPP idea has been constructed, both in terms of definition of problems and prescribed solutions, by their main theorizers.

Second, interviews with ten proponents of the ePPP idea that are located in the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Economic Forum, UNESCO, The Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) were carried out. The main aim of the interviews was to inquire these actors about the specific model of ePPP they are promoting and to make them reflect on the challenges for their implementation in low-income contexts.

Third, I carried out observation in events where the ePPP proposal was presented to practice communities. In this case, the interaction and discussion between the ePPP entrepreneurs and the practitioner community was the focus of the observation. The events in question were the following: International Seminar “Public Private Partnerships for Education: new actors and modes of education governance in a globalized world” (Amsterdam, January 2009); presentation of the World Bank report *The role and impact of PPPs in Education* at a World Bank book launch (Washington DC, April 2009); 2nd National Consultative Meet on PPPs in Education (IL&FS, Delhi, November 2009) and

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2 The IFC is the agency of the World Bank group specialized in lending to the private sector.

3 CfBT is a UK charity that provides a wide range of education services internationally, including school inspection, teacher training or curriculum design.
Seminar “Challenges of financing basic education: revisiting solutions involving the private sector” (IIEP-Paris, September 2010). All data have been retrieved between January 2009 and September 2010.

**Partnerships for education: context and content**

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are a form of relational contracting between the public and the private sector for the organization and delivery of services that involve risk sharing and mutual learning between the parties involved (Glendinning et al 2002; Rosenau 2000). PPPs have attracted much attention from policy-makers and public administration scholars since the eighties and have been promoted by international organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD (Seddon et al 2004; Wettenhall 2003). They have been traditionally implemented in a range of sectors such as energy, construction or water supply. However, more recently, this managerial practice has also become popular in the educational field.

The core of the network of education experts that has been responsible for the transposition of the ePPPs idea to the education for development domain is located at the interstices of a range of international organizations such as the World Bank, the ADB, the IFC and the CfBT. In the nineties, representatives of these organizations came together in the World Bank Economics of Education Thematic Group and opened a research and deliberation line on private and alternatives forms of education provision. They started thinking about partnerships in education as an evolution of the privatization agenda. As one of its members explains:

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4 James Tooley was initially part of this network. However, he became a very “uncomfortable ally” due to the radicalism of his proposals (Tooley has a libertarian approach to education), but also due to the perceived lack of rigor of the data sources he uses to build his arguments (Interview ePPP expert 03). As a consequence, he became gradually displaced from the ePPP network.
I think originally we started to think about PPPs in education and the role of the private sector as part of the privatization agenda … which was also unfortunate because we aren’t thinking about privatization as a goal, the goal would be improved outcomes, and if getting the private sector involved would be useful then it’s useful. Also we weren’t thinking of privatizing, but rather partnering, so I guess it kind of transferred from the privatization agenda to the partnership agenda, which we think is more appropriate. But I think it’s quite recent that we’ve been using this [partnership] term … (Interview ePPP expert 02)

This network of education experts is behind the most well known publications, policy-briefs and toolkits on ePPP. The highly disseminated World Bank report “The role and impact of PPPS in education”, released in 2009, has become the pinnacle of the series of publications they are responsible for (see Table 1). The network is also behind the organization and development of a range of events (conferences, courses, seminars), mostly held in the World Bank headquarters, where the ePPP idea has been discussed among policy-makers, donor agencies, international organizations staff and scholars (see Box 1). The network is quite narrow in scope, but very cohesive. As observed in the publications and events identified, their members write and speak at each other’s initiatives (publications, seminars, courses, etc.). In the following section, I develop how the ePPP programmatic idea has been theorized and framed in these spaces.6

Table 1. Corpus of documents on ePPP (chronological order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADB and WB</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The New Social Policy Agenda in Asia</td>
<td>Y. Wang (editor)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 The media impact of the report can be consulted in [http://go.worldbank.org/B5NIVIGXN0](http://go.worldbank.org/B5NIVIGXN0) [last retrieved 07/07/10].
6 It should be acknowledged that other international actors, such as UNESCO (including IIEP-UNESCO) and the World Economic Forum have been theorizing and promoting partnerships with the private sector for education purposes, but from a very different perspective. They focus on the so-called Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, which conceives the private sector as a philanthropic funder of education, rather than as a school services provider (Draxler 2008).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IFC</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td><em>Handbook on PPPs and Education</em></td>
<td>N. LaRocque, J. Tooley and M. Latham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CfBT</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td><em>Toolkit on PPPs and Education</em></td>
<td>M. Latham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CfBT</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td><em>PPPs in basic education. An International Review</em></td>
<td>N. LaRocque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WB and IFC</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td><em>The evolving regulatory context for private education in emerging economies</em></td>
<td>J. Fielden and N. LaRocque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFC-Edinvest</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>Public-Private Partnerships in Education</em></td>
<td>M. Latham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>The Role and impact of PPPs in education</em></td>
<td>H. Patrinos, F. Barrera-Osorio and J. Guáqueta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF and ADB</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td><em>Non-State Providers and Public-Private Partnerships in Education for the Poor</em></td>
<td>N. LaRocque</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Box 1. Events on ePPP (chronological order)

Source: author

- *Public Private Partnerships in Education*, Washington DC, April 11, 2002
- *Mobilizing the Private Sector for Public Education*, Harvard University, October 5-6, 2005
The ePPP programmatic idea

EPPP are defined as contractual relations between the government and private providers to acquire education services of a defined quantity and quality at an agreed price for a specified period (CfBT 2008; WB 2009). EPPP, as any other programmatic idea, can be dissected in dimensions such as problems to be addressed, policy stream of solutions (and, in particular, the role of the state in the implementation of the programme) and supportive arguments for policy-makers.

Education problems

Many international organizations support the introduction of partnerships in education systems due to their potential capacity to address a range of education problems that are common in developing contexts. The first problem is education access. The ePPP promoters consider that governments need to take the private sector more seriously if they want to meet the Millennium Development and the EFA goals, but also new challenges such as the increasing demand in secondary education (IFC 2001). Specifically, they consider that governments do not provide enough political, economic and legal support to the private sector to face these challenges.

Those promoting ePPP also point out the fact that the education expansion objective is not sufficient, and that low levels of learning outcomes need to be urgently addressed as well. However, this second problem arises within a context of budgetary constraints, reason why governments need to think about more cost-effective and alternative solutions to conventional public provision (IFC 2001, CfBT 2008).

A third problem that, actually, crosscuts the above-mentioned problems is the lack of competition and incentives existing in conventional public education systems. The
ePPP discourse also blames the government for this problem and, specifically, due to its persistence of providing education directly. The fact that governments run schools directly undermines open competition between providers and makes it more difficult for private education entrepreneurs to emerge (CfBT 2008).

Summing up, the core education problems that the ePPP proponents identify are not problems in public education systems, but problems of the public education system. Thus, they advocate for drastic changes in the way governments operate in the educational field and support the private sector when it comes to the organization of education systems.

*Policy principles and tools*

EPPP can cover different areas of collaboration between the private and the public sectors, as well as a broad range of activities: from the building of schools (similar to what the UK Public Finance Initiatives establish) to the delivery of non-core services (books, school transport, meals). However, the emphasis of the ePPP programme is on the delivery of core education services (i.e. management of the schools, teaching, etc.) (WB 2009).

EPPP involve a *contract* between the public and the private sector, which needs to be formalized and based in performance outcomes. In terms of the delivery of core education services, the private sector can be contracted under the following formats: delivery of education (*a la* charter schools), private operation of public schools (contract schools) and education vouchers (IFC 2001). However, the limits to what forms of engagement with the private sector can be categorized (or not) as an ePPP are not always clear. The documents analyzed rather consider that there is a continuum of ePPP models, which go from low to high partnerships. Actually, this continuum is framed in an evolutionary way, departing from a “nascent” stage, in which private schools exist, but
not necessarily interact with the state, and reaching an “integral” stage in which 100% of education is provided by the private sector under a voucher framework (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The ePPP continuum

Source: adaptation from WB (2009: 16)

As I will develop below, school choice is drawn as the preferred policy principle, and vouchers as the corresponding policy tool, that policy-makers should prioritize when trying to introduce competition in education systems through partnerships frameworks. However, the ePPP programme also considers other policy tools and ideas, some of them being very similar to those included in other established education programmes such as education decentralization, contracting education services or School Based Management (SBM). For instance, similarly to SBM, ePPP promoters push for the devolution of as many as possible education management activities at the school level. Specifically, they place a substantial emphasis on giving schools the capacity to manage teachers labor and to make schools and teachers more accountable and responsive to the community and family demands (IFC 2001; CfBT 2008). Indeed, teachers - and teachers unions in particular - are usually drawn as a major constraint for the introduction of competition dynamics in education and advancing partnerships. Teachers usually aim to protect the public service employment system, which is perceived as inaccurate due to the lack of incentives and its high costs (IFC 2001; WB 2009). To overcome this, the ePPP
promoters do not aim at reforming the public employment system, but to bypass it. In particular, they propose to generate a framework that would allow the contractor to hire cheaper and non-unionized labor, reward teachers according to their performance, or fire them if they underperform (CfBT 2008, WB 2009). One of the interviewees made this point clear:

The real impact comes when you get the problem, which is the terrible, terrible teachers, terrible incentive structures; the teachers themselves may not be terrible but the incentive structures are horrible to do a good job. When you get rid of all of that and bring the private guys in they’re on the line for delivering good education. And that’s kind of in our opinion the real core of this. (Interview ePPP expert 04)

Another policy associated to the construction of ePPP consists of the liberalization of the education sector. Liberalization is intended to generate a regulatory environment conducive to the emergence of a more vibrant private sector in education and to help private education entrepreneurs to flourish. Liberalization crystallizes in the removal of regulatory barriers for private sector development such as the prohibition of foreign-owned private institutions, tariffs to repatriating surpluses coming from education activities, and limits on the ability of private education institutions – both national and international – to set tuition fees at market rates and to operate as for-profit entities (WB and IFC 2008, WB 2009).

At the implementation level, the ePPP tools and procedures are very detailed. First, it is suggested the creation of a quality education assurance agency. Among other functions, this agency should specify what are the outcomes that schools should achieve, and elaborate the corresponding performance indicators, but without prescribing how
they should be achieved. In parallel, a “partnerships contracting agency” should be formed. This agency would be in charge of managing the dialogue between the private and the public sector and of the creation of a system of incentives for the agents involved in the partnership, in particular the service providers. Afterwards, a bidding process for private providers must be organized. This process should be open, transparent and competitive, and the entry requirements for the private providers should be clear. Once the ePPP is at work, providers may receive higher or lower payments according to their performance. In case they underperform, they can be punished with the termination of the contract (CfBT 2008, IFC 2001, WB 2009).

The new role of the state
ePPP imply the state moving away from direct education provision and focusing on funding, regulation and evaluation activities. Most ePPP experts consider that the public sector lacks the accurate incentives to operate services, and that public provision undermines competition and affects negatively the quality and the cost of education services (IFC 2001; CfBT 2008). However, they do not support the pure marketization or privatization of education. They consider that the state should keep on regulating and funding education – although preferably through demand funding formulas. Actually, regulation is the main tool states count on to generate an environment conducive to partnerships generating the expected outcomes (CfBT 2008). Moreover, under partnership frameworks, states should evaluate and control the performance of schools, and reward or punish them according to their results. Finally, some suggest that the states should publish the school evaluations to allow informed school choice by families. This way, providing information (i.e. developing an effective communication strategy to

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7 Decisions about staffing, curriculum, didactic, etc. should be taken by the schools in the exercise of their autonomy (CfBT 2008; IFC 2001).
inform parents about schools quality) would become a sort of new state education function under ePPP frameworks.

The ePPP proponents also expect the state modifying its organizational culture by learning from the private sector at the managerial level. Specifically, they consider that public sector organizations should take advantage of their participation in partnership frameworks to learn from the organizational culture, qualities and values of the private sector, such as flexibility, openness to societal demands, incentives for innovation and efficiency, among others.

Despite the appearances, the ePPP proponents do not mask an anti-state discourse or, at least, does not portend to challenge the state authority in education. According to them, through the partnership process, the state should become thinner, but actually more powerful. In other words, and paraphrasing the well-known metaphor of Osborne and Gaebler (1993), the role of the state should focus on “steering” rather than on “rowing” educational services. By getting rid of “nitty-gritty” responsibilities, as one of the interviewees qualified direct education provision, the state could focus on the strategic control and planning of the education system. Summing up, ePPP are not anti-state interventions, but they require the redefinition of the state functions in education. The ePPP proposal looks paradoxical in this respect. On the one hand, it strongly supports market solutions in education, but, on the other, state interventionism is seen as a crucial tool to generate the conditions to make education markets work.

Arguments

Programmatic ideas also provide critical tools, in terms of ideas and arguments that can be used by policy-makers to legitimate policy reform and, at the same time, de-legitimate alternative solutions or critiques from potential opponents. In this respect, the texts on
ePPP are rich in arguments on the benefits of involving the private sector in public education. There are two different sets of ideas being used to support ePPP, one being theoretical and the other more empirical in nature.

The theoretical ideas behind the programme are grounded on economic theory. Following economic theory, the ePPP proponents predict that partnerships will unchain a complex set of interconnected events that contribute to raising the levels of competition within the education system and, consequently, the quality of education. Figure 2 reflects the expected ‘education production chain’ under ePPP frameworks, specifically, under the so-called “integral partnerships” (WB 2009). The chart shows, in a visual way, the programme ontology of ePPP, i.e. the way policy tools and the actions of the subjects within the education system are causally connected (specifically, the squared boxes contain the main state policies under partnerships, and the circles refer to the expected behavior of families and schools). As can be observed, the central mechanism in the theory of action behind partnerships is that of school choice. School choice, according to its advocates, can contribute to break with an excessively centralized education system by giving more freedom and power to families when it comes to choose the school where they want to enroll their children. As most consumers do in market situations, parents are expected to maximize their benefit by choosing the best school available. At the same time, school choice (and exit) become effective political tools on the hands of families to express their levels of (dis)satisfaction with the existing schools. This way, school choice becomes a de facto quality control and accountability mechanism, and schools feel a more competitive pressure to produce a better quality service (WB 2009).
A second set of arguments to support ePPP is based on *empirical evidence* coming from impact evaluations, quantitative studies (most of them using regression analysis techniques) and case studies of a number of experiences. Of the analyzed documents, the World Bank (2009) is the most complete in this respect since it reviews 22 academic studies and 92 practical experiences. Learning outcomes are usually the dependent variable in these studies, which is normally measured by standardized tests scores. Most studies reviewed by ePPP proponents show that raising the role of private provision and the implementation of vouchers systems contribute, more or less modestly, to improvements in students results (WB 2009). The piece of research that is more often cited to justify the provider to funder shift in the role of the state in education is
Wößmann (2006), which based on PISA data shows that, in OECD countries, education systems with high levels of public funding and high levels of private provision are those that perform better. On the other hand, qualitative studies and experiences in countries such as Chile, The Netherlands or Pakistan are also reviewed to highlight a range of successful practices on private sector engagement for the delivery of public education.

**Semiotic analysis: the strategic selectivity of ePPP**

The ePPP programmatic idea has been enthusiastically mobilized by a number of international players. Among them, the World Bank support is especially relevant since, in the last decades, it has become a sort of intellectual leader within the international development community (Miller-Adams 1999). However, for new global policies to have an impact, apart from being supported by powerful organizations, they also need to consist of powerful ideas. According to the semiotic approach previously presented, they need to fulfill a set of internal conditions such as resonance, familiarity, innovation, clarity, feasibility and consistency. In this section, we analyze the framing of the ePPP idea in relation to each of these dimensions, with a focus on the way they resonate within practice communities.

**Frame resonance**

EPPP resonate very positively within the policy development paradigm and the sentiments that currently prevail in the international development field. First, ePPP rise in a critical juncture in which the international community is concerned with how far away from achieving the EFA goals they are and with the growing constraints in aid for education as a consequence of the global financial crisis. The feeling of urgency is
greater than ever in a high number of low-income countries and new policy solutions, such as those proposed under the ePPP programme, are welcome by many.

Second, ePPP resonate very positively within the managerial discourses that predominate today in the education for development field and, particularly, in the context of the so-called Post-Washington Consensus (PWC). The PWC, which does not alter the core macro-economic prescriptions of the Washington Consensus, seeks to broaden the understanding of development by introducing a new focus on governance and participation of the private sector. It encourages the states to explore non-bureaucratic ways of coordinating economic and social activities, in a similar way that New Public Management does, and to create an environment conducive to the private sector acquiring a more dynamic role in economic and societal development (VanWaeynberge 2006). Within this development paradigm, managerial proposals that involve the state partnering with the private sector, as well as the rethinking of the role of the state in the provision of public goods, resonate very positively.

Third, in many countries, the partnership discourse engages better with the dominant public sentiments on education than the privatization one. Privatization policies have lost their appeal and legitimacy in many developing contexts after the excesses of the structural adjustment period. In fact, as the ePPP proponents themselves acknowledge, privatization, as well as contracting out, are expressions that have become pejorative and generate opposition quickly (IFC 2001). In contrast, expressions such as public-private partnerships invite more people and organizations to join the debate and, consequently, more easily enable private organizations to get market share of public service provision (Hodge and Greve 2010; Linder 1999; Savas 2000; Teisman and Klijn 2002). Actually, the “partnership” concept is very appealing and seductive by itself (Cardini 2006); many education stakeholders associate it to values such as policy
dialogue, participation and democracy. As one presenter in one of the seminars on ePPP that I attended said, “partnerships is a lovely word, working in partnerships is a beautiful objective. So, who can be against?”

**Familiarity & Innovation**

New policy programmes are more likely to be acceptable to policy-makers when a balance between familiarity and innovation is met. On the one hand, new policies need to contain elements that sound familiar to the adopters, but on the other should provide a new solution to existing problems. Convincing policy ideas are unlikely to be brand new and usually contain already existing ideas. This is clearly the case of ePPP. First, ePPP are constructed as the transposition of a practice that has been implemented in other policy sectors for decades. So, many policy-makers, regulators and international aid workers in the educational field have heard before about public-private partnerships in relation to areas such as transport, energy, housing, etc.

Second, ePPP are, to a great extent, the result of the recombination of very familiar policy ideas in the education field such as school choice/vouchers, SBM or decentralization. In this sense, ePPP do not represent a rupture with previous educational debates, such as the privatization debate. Actually, as I could observe in various events, a number of policy-makers problematized the fact that they did not perceive many differences between partnerships and traditional privatization. Being aware about this ‘confusion’, ePPP theorizers try to disassociate their ideas from previous programmes and, specifically, from conventional privatization. They normally do it by saying that, in contrast to privatization, in partnership frameworks, the state is the “ultimately responsible agent for the service being delivered” and “keeps its regulatory powers” (Interview ePPP expert 01). However, it should be acknowledged that the privatization
debate on social public services, due to their social returns, does rarely contemplate privatization in absolute terms and in all the associated policy areas. Education privatization has almost never resulted in a complete transference of education provision, funding and ownership from the public to the private sector. It has rather meant the establishment of public-private mixes (vouchers, charter, contract schools, etc.) that are actually similar to those solutions presented in the ePPP documents. Moreover, the fact that, under partnerships, the state keeps its regulatory power does not automatically make them different from privatization. In fact, privatization does not necessarily go together with deregulation, but with regulatory changes that contribute to more private sector involvement in certain policy areas. As Wettenhall and Thynne (1999, 159) put it “only the naïve believed they could privatize and deregulate at the same time”.

Third, by focusing on competitive rules and norms in education systems, and by constructing competition as a superior moral value in educational management, ePPP proponents seem theoretically anchored in the past. They are still loyal to the theory of ‘competitive advantage’ that dominated the management literature in the eighties and, by doing so, clash with the more novel theory of ‘collaborative advantage’ that, in fact, lays the foundations of the idea of partnering between the public and the private sector (Bovaird 2010).

To sum up, the magnetism of the partnerships concept, together with all the institutional diffusion backing the programme, creates the illusion of an education policy innovation. However, the specific policies behind ePPP still sound too familiar to previous education practices and, specifically, to the privatization agenda. This fact, apart of undermining the novelty factor, makes some policy-makers skeptical of ePPP because think that, as Teisman and Klijn (2002, 197) observed once, they may think that
partnerships are a new “language game” to advance traditional contracting-out and privatization policies.

**Clarity**

In relation to the clarity premise (i.e. new policy ideas need to be clearly formulated to be taken out by policy-makers), frame analysis shows lights and shadows. On the one hand, the ePPP programme is consistent in terms of diagnosis and prognosis. The relation between these two dimensions is well worked-out since the policy solutions formulated are coherent with the problems and the causes of the problems identified. However, on the other, the scope of the policy stream and the definition of ePPP itself is not so clearly formulated. The programme covers too many areas of collaboration between the public and the private sectors to the extent that it seems that any kind of public-private mixing, as far as it takes place under a contractual form, can be considered an ePPP. The fact that the rhetoric around ePPP merges many policy ideas that do not always fit in a single and coherent policy programme is something that often confuses policy-makers and, consequently, undermines the focus of the debates on the topic. In most of the events observed, policy-makers mixed up ePPP with conventional contracting out policies or, above all, with the “multi-stakeholders partnerships” proposed by the World Economic Forum (which is a type of partnership of a very different nature to the more operational ePPP discussed in this article).

Another aspect that is not clearly defined in the ePPP programme, and that also raises the concerns of a group of policy-makers, is the role of the for-profit sector in partnerships frameworks. The nature of for-profit private schools is very different to the one of non-for profit private schools (such as those run by religious groups, community
organizations or NGOs) (Fennell 2007). The ePPP experts say to be aware about this difference, but, at the prognostic level, they refer to the “private sector” as a monolithic category. Therefore, the particularities of partnering with the for-profit sector are not specified. This irresolution can be problematic at the moment of building partnerships due to the limitations of the for-profit sector to provide services to vulnerable population and, in general, to deliver public goods in a non-discriminatory way (Ball 2007; Rosenau 2000).

However, in strategic terms, some scholars do not consider ambiguity in the partnership discourse as an inherent weakness. Actually, playing with ambiguity is a common discursive strategy adopted by political actors to advance their policy preferences. Accordingly to Klijn (2010) ambiguity is an asset when it comes to motivate different actors; in fact, as he observes, “the more you specify the partnership construction beforehand, the more likely it is that disagreement will arise” (p. 70). In any case, ambiguity may result in an effective strategy at the agenda setting moment, but may be problematic at the policy implementation one (i.e. at the time the policy idea needs to be translated into specific policy measures). Lack of clarity also affects negatively, as observed, the quality of the policy debate on partnerships and makes reaching conclusions difficult.

**Feasibility**

Apart of clearly formulated, new policy ideas also need to be perceived as technically feasible. In this respect, the ePPP proposal has also pros and cons, but the balance falls on the side of the cons. On the pros side, the analyzed documentation details what are the regulatory conditions that will contribute to partnerships having the expected effects. Most countries that count with the required legal expertise can effectively implement the
necessary regulatory changes that ePPP require. However, on the other side, the implementation of partnership models, particularly those involving choice, require such a level of human and material resources that can hardly be met in many developing contexts. It should be considered that ePPP advocates expect that governments will be technically and economically able to deploy a very complex set of support services and procedures (including bidding, quality assurance, public information, etc). Furthermore, if the for-profit sector is to be included in partnerships, the incentives that the state should provide to them to reach the neediest population could be very costly. Paradoxically, despite the fact that budgetary and administrative constraints are one of the basic aspects of the ePPP justification, one of the main barriers for its implementation could be found on its high cost. Actually, although not openly reflected in the analyzed documents and interviews, the main source of cost-saving under ePPP would come from a more intensive exploitation of teachers’ labor. It should be acknowledged that teachers’ salaries account for the bulk of recurrent expenditure, above all in less developed countries (Lewin 2007). Thus, by bypassing the public employment regulations and through the payment of much lower salaries for teachers, ePPP could drastically reduce public expenditure in education. Actually, the World Bank is very open about this idea when says that “in those countries where public sector staff is paid high wages as a result of belonging to strong unions, there is a cost saving associated with the contractor being able to hire nonunionized labor” (World Bank 2006, cited in WB 2009: 11).

The latter raises a second feasibility problem for the implementation of ePPP, which is that of the political support/opposition of teachers. Despite teachers are strategic allies to achieve the EFA goals (UNESCO 2005), the ePPP proponents usually conceive
them, and specifically teacher unions, as a major constraint for advancing partnerships. Teacher organizations are a powerful constituency in most countries and not counting on them could make implementing reforms based on the partnerships idea difficult.\textsuperscript{10} It should be acknowledged that, in general, public-private partnerships are conceived as a corporatist development strategy that aims at bringing together three non-state constituencies, i.e. the private sector, labor and civil society, in governance activities (Mitchell-Weaver and Manning 1991). However, the proponents of partnerships in the educational field tend to privilege the private sector as the key partner, while exclude the other constituencies, especially labor.\textsuperscript{11}

Another feasibility issue is related to the fact that the ePPP discourse is deeply critical with the public sector capacity of running public services. The ePPP proponents emphasize the qualities of the private sector (efficiency, competition, outputs-oriented culture and so on), but neglect the qualities or potential qualities of the public sector. In fact, they go further and insinuate that the private sector should be teaching how they should proceed in the education business. In this sense, the ePPP programme undermines the \textit{mutual learning} principle, which is a policy principle usually highlighted in the literature on partnerships (Linder 1999, Wettenhall 2003, Woods and Woods 2004), and it resembles more to a uni-directional mentoring relationship.\textsuperscript{12} This can be problematic in the sense that, the audience that should take the programme out and implement it may feel attacked. In fact, as observed in some of the events, particularly in the one organized by UNESCO-IIEP in September 2010, this is something from the ePPP talk that dislikes

\textsuperscript{10} The ePPP promoters are aware of this ‘political economy problem’ and suggest that, to prevent opposition, policymakers should consult with education stakeholders when designing partnerships. They also suggest that it may be “useful for policymakers to recruit leading figures in the politics and business communities who understand the potential benefits of PPPs and can use their influence to help to overcome any resistance” (WB 2009: 5).

\textsuperscript{11} More recently, CIBT has been working on a “three legs” partnership model that includes government, private sector and civil society. They claim for the importance of the latter (Interview ePPP expert 03), but still exclude organized labor from the model.

\textsuperscript{12} Mutual learning means that the different parties involved in partnerships should adopt values, norms and perspectives from the counterparts.
education ministry representatives and even generates indignation among them. In fact, some of the ministry representatives that attended this event complained by email afterwards to the organizers because too many speakers with a pro-market bias and with a discourse that, they felt, scorned the public sector were invited (Interview ePPP expert 09).

A final element affecting the feasibility of ePPP, but also its consistency, is related to the risk sharing principle. Risk sharing means that both the private and the public parties need to face risks, principally capital risks, when working together under partnership frameworks (Thomson et al 2005). Similarly to mutual learning, this is a policy principle very much present in the PPPs generalist literature. However, the education narrative on partnerships barely develops how this principle should be translated into concrete procedures and rules. Actually, in the way ePPP are currently defined, most of the capital investment risk falls on the public sector side. As the World Bank admits, “risk-sharing plays a minimal role” in operational ePPP such as those including private management of schools, vouchers and/or subsidies (WB 2009: 35).

Empirical credibility

Finally, new ideas need to contain convincing and consistent cause and effect arguments to have a greater impact. The ePPP proposal looks sophisticated in this respect. Most of the literature and interviews analyzed show the benefits of partnerships for education using scientific and technical arguments. The scientific style seems far from the moral or principled-based discourse that predominates the education privatization debate. However, the arguments used to prove ePPP benefits in a causal way, count on some methodological and analytical limitations.
First, as the analyzed documents themselves warn, the evidence on the topic is not
conclusive and, despite there being a high number of studies on the topic, only a few of
them yield robust conclusions (WB 2009). Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that
the methodological strategies that are usually deployed to evaluate the impact of
education quasi-markets are not robust enough, or do not count on data of enough quality,
which conducts to contradictory results and, therefore, to endless debates on the
costs/benefits of this kind of policies (Klees 2008). In many occasions, the research
cited in the ePPP reports is based on bi-variable regression analysis that attributes too
much explanatory weight to the “private provision” variable, when other variables
affecting schools systems such as collective identity or the existence of central
management structures, which also intervene significantly in students achievement, are
omitted (see Jaimovich, forthcoming).

Second, the expected benefits of ePPP are based on unwarranted inferences and
rationalistic assumptions (such as the perfect information or the maximization of benefits
one) that may be challenged by the existing conditions in most developing contexts. On
the one hand, empirical studies show that, although the right to choose, and even
information on the quality of schools are given to families, many of them, above all those
affected by poverty, will not exercise this right as the ePPP model would expect (i.e.
choosing the highest quality school). Rather than on school quality, families may choose
school based on criteria such as proximity, social relations, religion preferences or
discipline in class (Nieuwenhuys 1993, Härmä 2009). Moreover, in poor, rural or
unpopulated areas, families may not count on enough providers in their zone to choose
properly. Facing this constraint would require, for instance, of an expensive and complex

13 In the US context, methodological issues around education quasi-markets studies have even raised heated debates. See Hernandez (2005).
system of information and transport that, among other effects, would undermine the cost-saving potential of partnership frameworks. On the other hand, ePPP stipulate that those schools that underperform will be expelled from the partnership framework and will be substituted by others. But, again, many governments from low-income countries may not count on this option because the private education offer in their country is insufficient. To sum up, based on economic theory, ePPP proponents claim that quasi-markets in education should work, but, as Lewin (2007) warns, they are too often inspired by experiences and models coming from well-developed, professionalized, regulated, and partly marketised education systems (in countries such as the US, the Netherlands and the UK), that may not be transferable to partly developed, poorly professionalized, largely unregulated systems as, those existing in many low-income countries.14

Last but not least, the ePPP proponents use evidence selectively to highlight the benefits of quasi-markets in education. Some of the documents analyzed repeat insistently the same ideas on the potential benefits of partnerships15 and refer to the research of related scholars, whereas they misrepresent and omit important pieces of research pointing at the neutral or even negative effects they can have, above all in terms of education inequalities, such as Braun et al (2006), Easterly (2001), Gibbons et al (2006), Levin (1999), Lubienski (2003), Whitty and Power (2000), etc.16 On occasions, critical authors are quoted in the ePPP documents. However the essential arguments of these scholars are usually misrepresented or their work is simply used to provide

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14 The Netherlands case is revealing in this respect. It is used to demonstrate that high levels of private provision, choice and school autonomy correlate with high levels of students’ performance (WB 2009). This argument emphasizes the qualities of the Dutch school management system, whereas omits the importance of the extraordinary amount of resources that the Dutch government puts in education - 5,350€ per student year at primary education, and 7,110€ at the secondary level (Ministry of Education – The Netherlands, 2009).

15 In WB (2009), a similar set of benefits is exposed until six times. Moreover, a very different emphasis is given to the potential costs or negative effects of ePPP that, when mentioned, are immediately followed by recommendations on how to ameliorate them. In fact, instead of using the concept “costs” (as the antonym of benefits), the ePPP literature usually makes use of softer wording such as “concerns” or “challenges”.

background data.\textsuperscript{17} In contrast, the ideas of like-minded scholars, such as Hoxby, Hanushek and Wößmann are more properly developed.

This type of argumentative shortcuts and selection bias can be explained by the aspiration of policy entrepreneurs to convince their audience on their preferences. However, in the case of the ePPP promotion, the fact that, first, evidence is inconclusive, second, most evidence comes from a reality whose conditions are far from being met in many low-income countries and, third, arguments are based upon a biased selection of the evidence may undermine the chances of partnerships being seen as a superior policy option.

**Conclusions**

Public-Private Partnerships for education are a bricolage between new policy ideas and a number of managerial practices previously debated and implemented in the educational field, such as SBM, contracting education services and school choice. Partnerships in education are being promoted as a cost-effective and fast solution to bring ‘Education for All’ in developing contexts. However, the ambition of ePPP goes beyond the introduction of a new policy solution, of a technical nature, in a number of countries. EPPP should be also understood as a political project that aims to alter the current paradigm of education reform in low-income contexts. On the one hand, this programmatic idea generates a new interpretation schema on what the new role of the state in education should be, and why and how governments should engage with the private sector for the provision of educational goods. On the other, it attempts to move the focus of education reform further away from an inputs rationale to a reform agenda with outputs, governance and managerial solutions at its core.

\textsuperscript{17} This can be observed, for instance, in the way scholars such as Molnar or Hatcher are quoted in WB (2009).
The ePPP programmatic idea has been formulated and disseminated by a transnational policy network of education experts, which is not especially wide, but is strategically placed in influential international organizations. The policy entrepreneurs involved in this network share a similar meaning system on the relationship between education and privatization and agree on the importance of private sector development in education. Using Mundy’s (2002) terms, they consider that bringing the private sector in educations is, rather than unfortunately necessary, inherently desirable. Despite their ideological preferences, the members of this network advocate for the advance of ePPP mostly through a scientific and technical style.

The ePPP talk resonates very positively in the current political and ideational context and counts on, what Linder (1999) calls, an accomodationist effect (i.e. a range of political ideologies feel comfortable with the ‘partnerships’ frame). However, ePPP count on some weaknesses when it comes to other frame dimensions such as clarity, feasibility and empirical credibility. In relation to the latter, the arguments supporting the ePPP advance are very selective and misrepresent an important part of the evidence on the topics of school choice and quasi-markets in education. Even then, they cannot present conclusive evidences on the benefits of ePPP over other forms of educational delivery. Policy entrepreneurs would like to say “partnerships work”, but they cannot do it in a very convincing way. In this sense, they seem to be trapped between two semiotic orders: the scientific one, governed by rigor, and the political one, ruled by incentives to innovate and to spread new policy ideas internationally. This unresolved tension is especially obvious in the 2009 World Bank report.

The above-mentioned aspects may inhibit the selection and retention of ePPP in particular contexts. Policy-makers may be reluctant to adopt a practice that does not come with sufficient guarantees of success and whose implementation may turn out to be
technically complex and costly. However, the education crises and the low learning outcomes experienced in many countries (which predisposes policy-makers to find new policy solutions), together with the dissemination machinery and the loans of the international organizations backing the proposal, could compensate the ideational weaknesses of the proposal.

The scope of this research has been restricted to the agenda setting moment of the policy process. To have a more complete picture of the implications and impact of the ePPP idea, more research is needed. Future research, on the one hand, could analyze the dissemination, selection and retention of ePPP in particular territories and among specific practice communities such as ministries of education from low-income countries and international aid agencies. These studies should look at broader contextual political and institutional conditions, as well as to the enablers and drivers of individual practitioners when it comes to transpose and implement partnerships in their education context. On the other hand, new research could analyze the implementation and the effects of ePPP in developing countries and, in particular, in the schooling experience of the most vulnerable population. Quantitative and qualitative methods should be combined to have a comprehensive understanding of the impact of partnerships, but also of the strategies and strategic selectivities of different groups, from deprived groups to elites, in the context of education quasi-markets.

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