P126 / Rethinking Education Privatization : Conceptual and Contextual Challenges

Topic : Policy Change/Continuity/Dynamics

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Context of the panel

The privatization of education on a global scale has become a central object of study in educational policy research, mirroring the growth of the private sector since the 1990s (Ball, 2012). While early research focused primarily on North American, South American, and British contexts—where educational markets emerged as a key issue in the 1960s for the former and at the end of the 20th century for the latter—studies have since expanded to other national and international contexts. This evolution reflects both the advancement of theoretical frameworks and the increasing reliance on market mechanisms within education, in the context of the worldwide implementation of neoliberal policies. Across primary, secondary and higher education, many countries are experiencing changes that are reshaping the boundaries between the public and private sectors. These transformations take a variety of forms, including the expansion of private schooling, the diversification of funding sources, the delegation of responsibilities to private actors, and the introduction of market-oriented and managerial practices within public institutions (Ball & Youdell, 2007; Verger et al., 2016; Zancajo et al., 2025).
However, privatization is not a homogeneous process. It takes different forms depending on national contexts, levels of education and institutional arrangements. The term may refer to the transfer of certain activities to private actors, changes in funding and governance arrangements, or the development of market mechanisms within public education systems. Comparative research highlights the diversity of privatization trajectories and the importance of political and institutional contexts in understanding them (Chevaillier & Pons, 2020; Zancajo et al., 2022).

Research question

This diversity raises a fundamental conceptual and methodological question: how can a single analytical category encompass phenomena that differ in both their underlying characteristics and their historical trajectories? To what extent does the concept of privatization help us understand these transformations without artificially homogenizing the configurations under examination? More broadly, what does it mean to compare education systems through a category whose manifestations and uses vary across contexts?

Objectives

This panel seeks to explore these questions through three main lines of inquiry. First, what characterizes privatization processes across different education systems and levels of education? Second, what are the contributions and limitations of the concept of privatization in analyzing this diversity and developing meaningful international comparisons? Finally, how can observed variations be explained considering the historical trajectories of education systems, political ideas, and competing understandings of the role of the state in funding, organizing and regulating education?
Bringing together historical, sociological, geographical, political and comparative perspectives, the panel welcomes theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions focusing on different spatial contexts and levels of education. It aims to deepen our understanding of national configurations of privatization, the conditions under which they emerge, and the conceptual tools through which they can be compared. Ultimately, the panel seeks to contribute to a context-sensitive analysis of the changing relationships between public and private actors in education, while critically examining the analytical scope of privatization as a concept in international research.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites contributions that critically examine the processes of privatization in education and the conceptual and methodological challenges they raise.
We gently invite submissions that address the following research questions:

1-Convergence vs. Divergence: Is there a global convergence towards a standardized model of the "educational market", driven by neoliberalism, or do privatization trajectories remain deeply rooted in national histories and administrative cultures? To what extent have the prescriptions of organizations such as the World Bank or the OECD contributed to standardizing privatization processes in the Global South and in certain Northern countries?

2-Commodification vs. Privatization: Is the commodification of education necessarily synonymous with privatization? Conversely, can privatization occur without any form of commodification? How do privatization processes vary across education systems and levels of education? What does the concept of privatization help us understand, and what are its limitations when applied to different institutional and political contexts?

3-Rupture or Governmentality: To what extent does the privatization of education represent a break with welfare state models, or does it instead constitute a new mode of regulation through which public actors use the private sector to maintain control?

4-Comparative Policy Research: How does comparative policy research contribute to our understanding of privatization dynamics? Particular attention will be given to contributions examining diverse contexts and different levels of education.

We welcome theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions addressing these questions. Papers may focus on specific national or local configurations, cross-national comparisons, particular educational sectors, or the conceptual frameworks and research methods used to study privatization. Contributions examining the boundaries of the concept itself, including alternative analytical approaches, are also encouraged.

This panel follows several theoretical discussions regarding the meaning of privatization through school markets (IWPP5 Education policy Panel, Ottawa 2026) and the changing role of the State in educational systems (14th Euredocs International Conference, Paris 2025). It seeks to bring research from foster dialogue across diverse geographical and institutional contexts, bringing together research on both the Global North and the Global South into dialogue. By encouraging comparisons across different educational traditions, political systems and institutional settings, we aim to explore both the diversity of privatization processes and the possibilities and limits of a shared analytical framework.

The panel welcomes contributions from researchers at all career stages and encourages dialogue across disciplines. Hybrid participation will be possible. While remote participation is welcomed, in-person participation remains encouraged.

References

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Zancajo, A., Fontdevila, C., Jabbar, H., & Verger, A. (2025). *Research Handbook on Education Privatization and Marketization,* Edward Elgar Publishing
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