

# **A Framework for Evaluating Public-Private Partnerships in Educational Contexts**

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## **Abstract**

Educational contexts have witnessed the emergence of new public-private partnerships (PPP's). The values and metrics associated with public interests may alter when private philanthropies and corporations enter the public-sphere of educational contexts. As private interests partner with public educational organizations, changing perspectives of the purposes and aims of education in the United States require that an evaluation of PPP's be grounded in democratic principles. This article offers a framework for evaluating PPP's in a civil society.

## Introduction

What do American schools, prisons, welfare agencies, and social service programs have in common? Traditionally, each of these institutions has been publically funded. Yet, they are now facing major experiments in privatization as “public dollars flow through contracts with private corporations, nonprofit organizations, and religious groups to run public schools and prisons, and to deliver welfare-to-work and other social services” (Minnow, 2003, p. 1229). At an increasing rate, the world of education has witnessed the emergence of new public-private partnerships (PPP’s). Gradually, more public funds are used by private companies for the business of managing public schools, creating new charter schools, and funding privately held interests and agendas in education. In 2002, only a few private philanthropies—including The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation—contributed more than 25 percent of all private funding to public education, leading Ravitch (2011) to title wealthy philanthropists who are influencing and participating in the public sphere of education as “The Billionaires Boy’s Club”; and when the Broad Foundation is included in the mix, they were termed “The Big Three” (Schneider, 2014) for their grant-giving potential to influence educational policy and practice.

With the entrance of private interests in educational contexts, the issue of accountability to the public must be problematized. The values and metrics associated with public interests may alter from traditional expectations when private philanthropies and corporations enter the public-sphere of educational contexts. While governments work to serve the public in capital investment projects, private partners are understandably “focused on recouping [their] investment and on generating a profit” (Buxbaum & Ortiz, 2007, 8). Consequently, accountability for those partnerships formed with private influences requires “the creation of safeguards to ensure that public services are not compromised for the sake of private profit” (Forrer, Kee, Newcomer &

Boyer, 2010, p. 477). As Ravitch (2011) noted, the money offered by private foundations prompt public school boards to reorder their priorities and values to be in line with those private foundation's motives and agendas, leading to the essential question: "What happens to the scope and content of public values when public commitments proceed through private agents" (Minnow, 2003, p. 1229)? In this article, I will investigate the background of PPP's. As well, I will propose a structure for evaluating PPP's in educational contexts through a framework of democratic qualities to address the issue of whether PPP's can coexist within public-spheres that should demand accountability informed by democratic principles for a civil society.

### **Background of Public-Private Partnerships**

There is ambiguity regarding a common definition of a public-private partnership. According to Reich (2002) who investigated partnerships in public-private health, the definition of a public-private partnership includes a for-profit and a not-for-profit organization with shared objectives in the social domain, with shared efforts and benefits. According to Savas (2000) a public-private partnership is "any arrangement between government and the private sector in which partially or traditionally public activities are performed by the private sector" (p. 4). Yet, these definitions result in further questions. What is public? What is private? Who is a partner and what rights and responsibilities do each have? Each question demonstrates the complexity of the problem of defining public-private partnerships.

PPP's are not new despite their expansion in current-day contexts. Historical examples of PPP's include the creation of roads in Roman occupied countries; the hiring of privateers to harass the British navy during the American Revolution; and the creation of transcontinental railways during the expansion of the United States to western territories (Forrer, et al., 2010). In modern day, there are PPP's in the form of private toll roads, such as Trans Suburban; security companies, such as Backwater (now known as Xe); privatized prisons such as Corrections

Corporation of America; and Sodexo, which provides food products to public domain institutions. In educational contexts, a partnership between schools and private organizations could be fiscal, instructional, and non-instructional or research-oriented in nature. For example, PPP's can be used to build infrastructure in schools and provide facility operations; administer custodial services; provide curricula and classroom instruction and management strategies; provide data management; or investigate student success. An example of a publically managed PPP in education is K-12, Inc., a cyber-school which receives public funds, and in 2013 took in \$848.2 million, with \$730.8 million coming from their "managed public schools," a service financed from public tax dollars (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2013).

Arguments for expansion of PPP's in education are multiple. These include that PPP's increase the creation of competition in education markets; that flexibility of contracted personnel increases options for custodial work, cafeteria work and for other employees traditionally met within school district hiring and human resource procedures; that an open process for bidding leads to more transparency and better outcomes for public funds; and that risk-sharing between public and private entities improves outcomes for the public (Patrinos, Osorio, & Guáqueta, 2009). Arguments opposing PPP's in education are equally convincing. Some suggest that an increase in the privatization of education will not lead to positive outcomes for stakeholder in education; that increased segregation is a realistic outcome; and that poorer students or students with special needs may be "left behind" in less desirable public schools (Patrinos et al., 2009) with less public funding to meet those students' needs. When public spaces for civil discourse are diminished, students become less integrated and separated into geographical and socio-economic groupings, leading to the question—can truly democratic principles coexist with public-private partnerships in educational contexts?

### **A Framework for Evaluating PPP's in Educational Contexts**

Consideration of the public good and public mission is a central value when reflecting upon the above question. Civil society is inextricably related to democracy. The goals of civil society demand a reliance on democratic values. A civil society acknowledges the centrality of a public-sphere—the notion that the common good must be deliberated in a democratic way (Edwards, 2009) and participation in the public-sphere is vital to a strong civil society (de Tocqueville, 1839). The creation of civil society requires an ongoing democratic consideration of those values common to the public-sphere of education and the ways that PPP's align or are divergent to the notion of public education in a civil society.

The qualities of democracy are numerous but may be summarized within Diamond and Morlino's (2004) framework. This framework is drawn from political science, but with its emphasis on democratic principles, it may have implications for evaluating PPP's in educational contexts. According to Diamond and Morlino (2004) there are eight qualities that are evident in democracies. They are:

1. Rule of Law: According to this democratic quality, all citizens must be considered to be equal under the law.
2. Participation: This democratic quality requires stakeholders to have an active voice in decisions affecting their lives.
3. Competition: In democracies, regular, free, fair electoral processes are required.
4. Vertical accountability: This quality requires that elected officials must be held accountable for their decisions to public.
5. Horizontal accountability: Regulation of elected officials answer to other officials and state institutions that have monitoring capacities is necessary in democracies.

6. Freedom: Citizens must have political, civil and socioeconomic rights.
7. Equality: Rights must be protected equally under the law.
8. Responsiveness: This democratic quality measures if stakeholders view the institution as valid and legitimate.

The idea of a civil society suggests that when conflicts between market or private interests and public values emerge, a “pre-set normative criteria” (Edwards, 2009, p.4) may mediate the conflict. Diamond and Morlino’s (2004) framework of democratic qualities serve as this set of criteria for an analysis of PPP’s. With reference to these dimensions of democratic qualities, PPP’s may be evaluated in educational contexts by applying the modified framework to reflect partners in PPP’s, rather than citizens in general, and decision-makers in place of elected officials. Table 1 demonstrates this framework with modifications for application to PPP’s.

Table 1. Framework to Evaluate PPP's in Educational Contexts

<b>Democratic Qualities for Public-Private Partnerships in Educational Contexts</b>
<i>Rule of law:</i> Each partner must be considered an equal stakeholder in the partnership and all stakeholders must be equal under the law, policy and partnership agreements.
<i>Participation:</i> Each partner requires agency in partnership decisions. Partners collaborate to make partnership agreements.
<i>Competition:</i> Stakeholders within the partnerships at multiple levels have input into partnership creation and ongoing processes. Partners may seek other partnerships when stakeholders' needs are not met. Partners provide options for services.
<i>Vertical Accountability:</i> Partners are accountable to the public sphere.
<i>Horizontal Accountability:</i> Partners are accountable to local, state and national regulatory agencies and to their stakeholders.
<i>Freedom:</i> Partners must each have rights and responsibilities within the partnership. Partners create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to define these rights and responsibilities.
<i>Equality:</i> Partners adhere to the MOU. Partners have due process procedures in place.
<i>Responsiveness:</i> Partner stakeholders view the partnership as valid and legitimate.

Modified from Diamond & Morlino (2004)

Individual qualities within this framework may be used to evaluate the health of the private partnership with public educational organizations through these democratic principles. For instance, the edTPA may serve as an example of for this type of evaluation. In a partnership with Stanford University, Pearson Education created the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA, now known as edTPA) which is a national instrument for assessing beginning teaching performance currently being piloted in 25 states (Cochran-Smith, Piazza & Power, 2013). At the

University of Massachusetts Amherst, the secondary education coordinator expressed discontent with edTPA, and suggested that the lack of input by university personnel and students into the creation of the Pearson assessment should be questioned. This discontent by the University of Massachusetts professor can be viewed through the democracy framework quality of *participation*, that when decisions are made regarding her students, that those stakeholders should have input into those decisions. When she brought her concerns to her students, they demanded they be given informed consent for the pilot study investigating the TPA (Hayes & Sokolower, 2012-13). Of course, informed consent in research is an implicit value in a democracy (Flory & Emanuel, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2010) and research collecting data about people requires their knowledge and consent about that collection and use of the data. Not gathering informed consent for collection of student's performance without their consent represents a basic denial of the qualities of *participation*, *freedom* and *equality*. After several months, the University of Massachusetts finally allowed students to opt out of the assessment. "Opting out" of the TPA does demonstrates *horizontal accountability* in that the university chose to recognize the regulations of the regulatory agencies, in this case, the Institutional Review Board and international guidelines for informed consent.

The framework may also be used to evaluate the partnerships between private entities and public universities which are becoming more widespread (Patrinis et al., 2009). Teacher education programs affiliating with Junior Achievement (JA) to provide early field experiences for their candidates are an example of this type of partnership. Early field experiences within methods courses that prepare students to work with diverse populations encourage varying forms of instruction, and position pre-service teachers in learning spaces where they can practice classroom management skills may benefit pre-service teachers (Godt, Benelli, & Kline, 2000;

Curtner-Smith & Sofo, 2004). By providing clinical placements of pre-service students in local schools for early field experiences, JA partnerships with education units may promote the transfer of pre-service students' skills learned in the university classroom to the real world of teaching (Von Scotter & Van Dusen, 1996; Piro & Hutchinson, 2009; Piro, Anderson, & Fredrickson, 2015). Within the framework of democratic qualities, JA partnerships maybe viewed within the criteria of *participation* and *equality*. Having an active voice in partnerships is crucial, for all parties. Without mutuality of participation and equality within the development of the partnership, PPP's are one-sided, with one partner making all the decisions. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between JA and the teacher education unit defines each party's roles and responsibilities and ensures mutual participation by both parties (Piro, et al., 2015). Pre-service units may further support the principles of democracy when they offer class choices for their pre-service teacher candidates that offer alternative field placements. These placement options reflect stakeholder students' choice to opt-in or opt-out of classes that partner with JA for early field experiences—reflecting the democratic qualities of *equality* and *competition*.

Each democratic quality in the framework may not apply when evaluating a PPP; however, the framework is a starting place for evaluating the presence of democratic principles and the fidelity of those principles in a public-private partnership in educational contexts. For example, charter schools which are funded by public monies have been criticized for having populations with fewer students with disabilities, fewer ELL students, and more students who are poor (O'Conner & Gonzalez, 2011; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010). The framework's qualities of *freedom*, *equality*, and *rule of law* may be used to evaluate charter schools' fidelity to democratic principles. Naturally, private partners bring agendas and interests that support interests that have traditionally been outside of the purview of the public-sphere.

Yet, the public should demand accountability informed by democratic principles within a civil society in these new experiments with private partners in educational contexts. This framework offers a lens for that evaluation.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of PPP's in educational contexts may be related to expanding globalization and with that dynamic, an increase in interest in how U.S. students are competing on that international stage. This increased focus on educational outcomes has prompted stakeholders invested in global outcomes and markets to engage with the public sphere of education. As monies in the public domain constrict, public educational organizations look to private partners "to support each other by leveraging, combining, and capitalizing on their complementary strengths and capabilities" (Lasker, Weiss & Miller, 2001, p. 189). In this article, I have considered whether PPP's in educational contexts can co-exist with democratic principles in a civil society. Using a framework of elements central to democracy, I modified Diamond and Morlino's (2004) framework to reflect democratic qualities and evaluated several educational PPP's through that framework. Private partners enter into these arrangements for different reasons than governments (Posner, 2002) and the value of democratic principles in civil society must be regarded as integral elements of any successful PPP. Citizens must scrutinize PPP's within the framework of democratic qualities to sustain a healthy public-sphere and to maintain democratic principles.

Beneath controversies about PPP's are the varying perspectives on the values, purposes and aims of education in the United States. Varying ideologies suggest differing sets of truths inherent in education and the spheres of influence, both public and private, that intersect with PPP's may command differing outcomes and metrics. Choices of metrics in educational

accountability are determined by the essential views of the purposes of education (Piro, 2013). How public and private organizations view these perspectives lead to varying metrics concerning the benefit of educational PPP's. These differing metrics lead to divergent definitions of what factors constitutes a PPP and what outcomes for education should be achieved.

I have suggested that foundational values that measure educational goals and outputs must have grounding in frameworks of democratic qualities for public institutions in a civil society. Making the PPP's in educational contexts accountable to a diverse public should be the central and unrelenting demand of all stakeholders (Minnow, 2002). The framework I used has its establishment in political science's view of democratic qualities which was modified to reflect partners within educational contexts. In regard to education and PPP's, a framework devoted to ensuring individual freedoms and mutual respect help to frame these new experiments in educational partnerships. An analysis of PPP's in educational contexts requires the ongoing consideration of public values and private interests. Social interests in the outcomes of education and the resource allocation dilemmas that arise with serving public interests in PPP's require an accountability lens that acknowledges the centrality of democracy in a civil society. PPP's in educational contexts may have more sustainability by addressing the varied perspectives of public and private interests in an enduring democratic framework.

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