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Between Open and Internal Privatization: the Argentine Educational System from 1940 through 2010

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Between Open and Internal Privatization: the Argentine Educational System from 1940 through 2010

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Abstract

The educational system of Argentina has undergone a process of decentralization along with a steady growth in private schools enrolment. This complex process is usually subsumed under the general concept of ‘privatization’. We have considered it necessary to provide a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions this process of privatization encompasses. In this article we intend to analyze and reflect upon the transformations of the Argentine educational system and to understand the specific levels and aspects where privatization has taken place. We note that the public and the private sectors seem to have experienced divergent trajectories with compromising effects in terms of equity and social cohesion. We argue that the uneasy coexistence of a deregulated independent private sector and a hyper-regulated public sector is the result of a partial and inadequate implementation of a public-private partnership scheme.

Key words: privatization, inequalities, public-private partnerships, Argentina

Privatización Abierta e Interna del Sistema Educativo Argentino entre 1940 y 2010

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Resumen

En las últimas décadas, el sistema educativo Argentino ha experimentado un proceso de descentralización acaecido en paralelo de un proceso de crecimiento de la matrícula en las escuelas privadas. Este complejo proceso ha sido usualmente subsumido bajo fenómeno demasiado general de ‘privatización’. Para obtener un conocimiento cabal de estos cambios, consideramos necesario presentar y distinguir las múltiples dimensiones que el proceso de privatización engloba. Este artículo pretende analizar y reflexionar sobre la transformación del sistema educativo argentino y entender los niveles y aspectos específicos en los que se llevó a cabo la privatización. Advertimos que tanto el sector privado como el sector público han experimentado trayectorias divergentes con efectos negativos en términos de equidad y cohesión social. Argumentamos que la difícil convivencia entre un sector privado independiente desregulado, y un sector público hiper-regulado ha sido el resultado de una implementación parcial e inadecuada de una alianza público-privada.

Palabras clave: privatización, inequidades, alianzas público-privadas, Argentina.



The consolidation of national States and especially the strengthening of its disciplinary and cohesion power at the end of the XIX century created the conditions for the establishment of educational systems. These educational systems, modeled on the guidelines of the XVII century, reached its proliferation peak in the mid XX century. The statalization of corporative educational practices during the first half of the XX century was not an easy path (Archer, 1979; Foucault, 2009; Narodowski & Báez, 2006). Far from the relative autonomy characteristic of the previous corporative model, the new paradigm of education as a ‘common good’ set up the stage for a scaffolding of epistemological discipline and state control over the underage population. The resulting configuration of these educational systems allowed for the centrality of the State in terms of provision, administration and financing.

However, since 1960s this educational scenario dominated by the State started to experience a slow process of change. In the context of the fiscal crisis of the State (O’Connor, 1973) and of its weakening legitimacy, governments started to evidence serious difficulties to provide free education for the whole population. The educational utopia of equality was undermined by the financial constraints of the State to realize its ever expanding welfare policies, thus reflecting a growing contradiction between its basic functions of accumulation and legitimation. It is in this sense that the state fiscal crisis and the deep cultural shifts associated with post-modernism posed a constant challenge for the traditional closed configuration of educational systems (Narodowski, 2005).

Educational systems underwent major transformations consistent with the development of new logics of organizations. The resulting outstanding features were the sustained growth of non-state agents and the restructuring of functions traditionally attributed to the State. This de-statalization process (Jessop, 2002) has certainly not been uniform, even when all the consequences of its polymorphic nature are usually subsumed under the quite general notion of ‘privatization’. In fact, the privatization policies and processes that shape the current transformation of national educational systems result from and in turn create trajectories that are much more

heterogeneous and multifaceted than those that characterized its configuration in the XIX century. It is actually to a great extent its own heterogeneous nature that poses complex challenges to the fundamental premises of equity and social cohesion (Levin et al., 2013).

Several studies have tried to analyze the phenomenon of privatization of education as a necessary consequence of the emergence of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2005; Ball & Youdell, 2008; Klees, 2008, among others). However, considering the cultural-historical dynamics that have determined the prevalence of privatization processes, neoliberalism appears as the expected and trivial discursive correlate of a process that responds to deeper consensus and networks of significance. As such, the privatization processes would appear as inevitable while demanding the States ad hoc coordination efforts to avoid decomposition and fragmentation as proven negative consequences (Narodowski & Moschetti, 2015a).

Therefore, the general and frequent use of the concept of privatization calls for the construction of theoretical frameworks that allow to disassemble its components and to comprehend its nature, variants and implications for each national context. In this vein, based on the original conceptualizations of Belfield and Levin (2002) and Ball and Youdell (2008), Bellei and Orellana (2014) have tried to build a framework that we consider extremely valuable since it affords a basis for understanding the transversality and multipolarity of privatization processes. In this article, we have attempted to reflect upon the transformations that the Argentine education system has been subject to, and to analyze its resulting configuration in light of the categories offered by this theoretical framework. The complex nature of the process of privatization of education in Argentina makes it an interesting case study since it has been the scenario for governed and ungoverned processes, driven and occurred by default, which have brought about serious consequences in terms of equity and social cohesion (Tiramonti, 2003; Gasparini; Jaume; Serio; Vázquez, 2011). The de-statalization of the once monolithic educational system has engendered heterogeneity without precedents. It is this heterogeneity that demands a thorough analysis in view of producing further improvements to regulatory frameworks that would mitigate the dynamics of segregation.

A Comprehensive Framework for the Evaluation of the Privatization of Education

From a Dichotomous Approach to a Gradual Perspective

The traditional and mutually excluding public-private distinction that has characterized a vast majority of research work on privatization appears to have become less and less operational (Burch, 2009; Robertson et al., 2012). The growing complexity and sophistication of both educational policies and the answers provided by different actors -either to the policies themselves or to the lack of them- make it compelling to reconceive the public-private dichotomy from a gradual and multi-level perspective.

In a first approximation, Ball and Youdell (2008) distinguish between two forms of privatization. On the one hand, the authors state that exogenous privatization or privatization *of* education involves ‘the opening up of public education services to private sector participation’. On the other hand, endogenous privatization or privatization *in* education involves ‘the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector in order to make the public sector more like businesses and more business-like’ (2008, p. 74). Even when this first distinction manages to conceptualize the complexity of the phenomenon, it is still trapped within the original dichotomous approach. Therefore, and without disregarding the dynamics of the categorization of Ball and Youdell (2008), Bellei and Orellana (2014) highlight the value of the definition of privatization as stated by Belfield and Levin (2002) based on the grounds that it offers a wider perspective to understand the current public-private scenarios in the field of education. According to this approach, ‘privatization is the transfer of activities, assets and responsibilities from government/public institutions and organizations to private individuals and agencies’ (2002, p.19). The general nature of this definition makes it more flexible to understand the complex forms of privatization. Besides, it is also of much help to differentiate between what happens at the school level, and at the educational system level.

Based on both these definitions and a discussion on the inherently public-private meanings of education, and the many ways in which education can be ‘privatized’, Bellei and Orellana (2014) build two complex categories that

allow for a characterization of the specific levels and aspects where privatization takes place. In the following section, we will briefly discuss these two categories that we use in our analysis.

Internal Privatization of Public Education

As stated by Bellei and Orellana (2014), public schools can remain being formally public even after incorporating resources or services from private agents. This perspective allows for identifying the internal dimensions that may be privatized. On an organizational basis, the importance of each of these dimensions for schools and the degree to which private agents are involved would bring about schools either more or less privatized. Likewise, an educational system would be more or less privatized depending on the extent to which the presence of private agents in these dimensions is more or less widespread and institutionalized.

The authors identify three internal dimensions where private agents can be involved:

- i. Inputs and services: these include the control and maintenance of the schools' infrastructure, alternative sources of financing, acquisition of non-educational services and educational materials, and the introduction of private professional services.
- ii. Management: it implies distinguishing between 'who' makes the decision and 'what' decisions are made regarding, for example, teacher hiring, the definition of school curriculum and teaching method, decisions about enrolment and students' admission process, the decision to open or close a school, among others.
- iii. Relationship with families: the type of relationship between schools and families can be considered a dimension for privatization in that schools may or may not adapt to the preferences and interests of their 'customers'. Ultimately, this relationship is given by the way in which three key issues are resolved: the degree of school choice, the need to pay for school, and the degree of control that families have on the functioning of schools (Bellei & Orellana, 2014, p.16).

Open Privatization of Education

In contrast to privatization within public schools, open privatization implies ‘the complete transfer of control and management (and eventually ownership) of a public school to a private agent’ (Bellei & Orellana, 2014, p.18). As pointed out by the authors, this has not been a widespread practice in Latin America, with the exception of a few cases. However, several countries in the region have experienced a similar large-scale phenomenon which has produced analogous results: the increment of the proportion of students in private schools. Some governments have supported this phenomenon with the implementation of incentives for the creation of private school provision. The cornerstones of these policies have been the transfer of public financial resources to private schools, and the establishment of legal requirements for the beneficiary institutions. As in the case of internal privatization processes, absolute categories are not valid for open privatization either. In fact, the interplay between these two elements - public resources and regulations- give rise to multiple variants of the open privatization general scheme. Below, we provide a brief description of the nature and central aspects of these two elements.

- i. Resources: (a) Free-disposition financing that private agents can use according to their own interests and needs; (b) Categorical funds: restricted-use resources that private agents can use but following governmental requirements stated beforehand (for instance, for buying teaching materials or books, or for contracting professional services for teacher training); (c) Provision of materials and services.
- ii. Public requirement for private schools: governments may not impose additional requirements on schools receiving public resources. However, this is not generally the case apart from some exceptions. Additional requirements usually concern: admission policies (increase accessibility, unrestricted access, among others); adoption of rules that operate for public schools (teaching the official curriculum, hiring of teachers following the public sector labour law), and educational achievements (schools must attain a defined level of educational

achievement as measured in standardized evaluations) (Bellei & Orellana, 2014, p.18).

In Figure 1 we outline the conceptualization described above and present two ideal types of configuration for each category. These two ideal types only define the two analytical extremes of each continuum (‘privatized public education’ and ‘State public education’; and ‘independent private education’ and ‘integrated private education’).

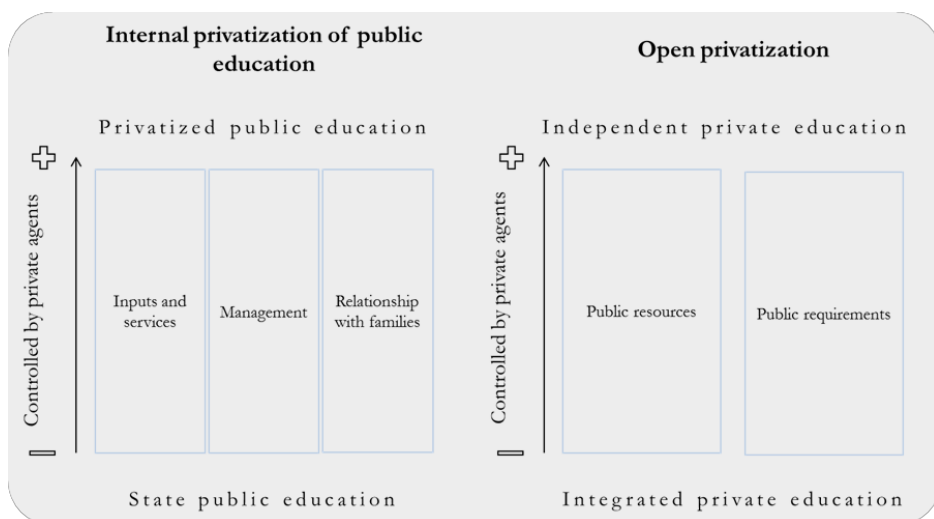


Figure 1. Internal privatization of public education and open privatization
Source: Own preparation based on Bellei and Orellana (2014).

Internal Privatization: between Bureaucratization and Informality

The Argentine educational system is currently federally organized. The origins of its federal structure can be traced back to a gradual decentralization process initiated in 1960s, continued in the 1990s and reaffirmed in 2006 with the sanction of the National Education Law (N° 26,

206) (Andrada, 2001). However, this decentralization process was in fact a process of ‘provincialization’ and presents differences regarding other decentralization processes on municipality or institutional level implemented in other countries. Accordingly, each of the 23 provinces and the City of Buenos Aires are responsible for the provision, administration and financing of their educational systems (Candia, 2004; Rivas, 2004). In a context of marked socioeconomic and demographic differences among provinces, this decentralization process has widened the achievement and coverage gap among the provincial educational systems (Rivas, 2010). The richest provinces even triple or quadruple public expenditure per student as compared to the poorest (CGECSE, 2015).

By the mid-1950s, the public sector accounted for 95% of enrollment in compulsory schooling; the remaining 5% corresponded to private institutions that had no official recognition. The early development of public education made it possible that by 1950 the schooling rates were the highest for the region. By 1955, 79% of the population between 14 and 17 years of age had completed primary school and by 1960s the net schooling rate for primary school was 85% (Morduchowicz et al., 1999; Rivas, Vera & Bezem, 2010; Siteal, 2014). The 1960s were, however, a turning point regarding the re-organization of the governance structure of the system. Demand-side pressures, chronic fiscal crises, de-regulation policies, and new funding schemes gave rise to a process of expansion of private schooling that continues nowadays (Morduchowicz et al., 1999; Narodowski & Moschetti, 2015a). This transformation will be analyzed in detail in the following section, nevertheless, a systemic comprehension of the privatization processes requires bearing in mind the link between internal and open privatization. Even when for analytic purposes we use a sequential approach, it is worth noting that there is a strong interdependence between the processes that take place in the public sector and those in the private sector.

The Federal Education Law (N° 24,195) was passed in a context of intense national and regional debate centered on the need to redefine the role of the State. In the 1990s, the economic policy of most Latin American countries had a strong influence of free market arguments, the privatization of State companies and services, and the implementation of large-scale

market mechanisms in diverse areas of economic and social life. For the case of Argentina, during the Peronist administration of Carlos Menem (1989-1999), many State companies and public services were privatized as stipulated by Law N° 23,696, known as State Reform Law. Water companies, gas, electricity, communications, postal service, ports, transport, among others, all were transferred to the private sector. In addition, salaries were kept virtually frozen throughout the decade and the unemployment rate peaked to unprecedented levels. As regards monetary policies, the Convertibility Law N° 23,928 established a US dollar-*peso* parity for all transactions that fostered the entry of goods and capital (Kiguel, 2002). In spite of the drastic changes introduced in 1990s, the educational system seemed to have remained outside of the scope of the so called State Reform. Based on the magnitude of the changes implemented in the provision and financing of other public goods, it was rather expected that the government would foster the substitution of the central bureaucratic educational governance structure for another one more in line with the ‘new public management’ agenda. The introduction of a new law of education could have been the driver of that change. However, as we shall see later, the Federal Education Law passed in 1993 did not subvert the structural organization of the Argentine educational system.

The Federal Education Law took the discursive form of the time and introduced terminology that was so far unfamiliar to pedagogical thought (Cosse, 2001). The new discursivity included a technocratic framing and appealed for the participation of expert knowledge to achieve education quality, as measured by academic achievement standards. Standardized evaluations were thus implemented for the first time, and primary and secondary school cycles were modified in duration. Some provincial governments also launched some very modest initiatives of internal privatization relative to the ‘inputs and services’ dimension. Some school cafeterias and education advisory services were outsourced in line with the discourse of operational efficiency (Vior & Rodríguez, 2012).

In the following decade, a new education law was passed replacing the Federal Education Law. The new National Education Law (26,206) changed the length of primary and secondary school cycles again and tried to dispense with the pro-market rhetoric introduced by the previous law. However, these changes did not lead to deeper structural changes in terms of

regulation, administration and financing of the education governance structure. The public-private scheme was revalidated under the new categories of ‘State-run public education’ (public schools) ‘privately-run public education’ (private schools). State subsidies to private schools remained unmodified and no changes were introduced in terms of regulation, thus widening the gap between the hierarchical and bureaucratic model of the State sector, and the autonomous school-based management scheme of the private sector (Narodowski & Moschetti, 2015a; Narodowski & Andrada, 2001).

These national laws tended to crystallize the decentralization processes of the previous decades. As for the national State, it centralized the activities concerned with the formulation of (very) general guidelines regarding educational policies and common core school contents while it made financing, planning and administration of education subject to definition at the provincial level. In fact, the major changes involved the transfer of national bureaucracies to the provincial level (Narodowski & Andrada, 2000). However, from the perspective of school management, it was only about a jurisdictional transfer: the institutional practices remained substantially unaltered.

When analyzing Bellei and Orellana’s (2014) dimensions of ‘management’ and ‘relationship with families’ in the case of public schools, we note the persistence of a combination of bureaucratic and informal mechanisms that have tended to polarize or even further disassemble the system. This is reflected in various dimensions of the institutional praxis: a) funding; b) curricular definition; c) teacher hiring; and d) students’ enrollment. We will now analyze these dimensions sequentially even though in fact they may overlap or even be causally connected.

As regards funding, public schools autonomously manage very limited resources. Each provincial administration centralizes teacher wage payments, which typically represent about 90% of the budget of each school. The remaining 10% that is managed by each school does not offer scope to carry out actions beyond the purchase of consumable supplies. The structurally limited nature of these resources is worsened by the fact that budgetary possibilities are unequally distributed among provinces.

Additionally, this macro-level disparity also replicates at the micro-level as a consequence of the growing role of parents' associations (*cooperativas*) in the economic sustainability of each establishment (Veleda, 2005). Naturally, schools serving socioeconomically advantaged families will have more resources available than those in working-class contexts.

With regard to curriculum definitions –which are closely bound to the nature of funding mechanisms–, public schools' pedagogical proposals rarely expand or go beyond the general curricular guidelines formulated at national or sub-national level. The regulations and budgetary constraints these schools are subject to make it virtually impossible to implement any type of innovation or to provide extracurricular activities (Scialabba, 2006).

As for teacher recruitment processes, public schools are not entitled to select their own staff or set teacher salaries. The allocation of teachers follows bureaucratic criteria. Teachers enroll in an official list whose ranking is determined mainly by seniority as a proxy for merit, and then assigned according to the job vacancies through official job placement calls. Consequently, teachers with more seniority have greater decision-making power regarding the schools they want to work in, and the heads of the schools are left with no voice in the definition of their work teams. As evidence has shown, teachers with more seniority usually choose the 'best' schools and leave 'second-best' schools, i.e. schools with vulnerable population, for the less experienced teachers (Poliak, 2004). However, and in spite of the regulations in force, school practices show the existence of informal mechanisms that tend to subvert the rigid bureaucratic structure. Certain middle-class schools with management teams that have greater knowledge about the interstices of the central bureaucratic administration are better positioned to informally introduce greater leeway (Narodowski & Andrada, 2000).

Regarding student enrollment procedures, all jurisdictions implement some kind of restriction in order to balance supply and demand for schooling. These regulations include zoning, internal articulation of school levels offered by a single school, and priority given to family groups (Andrada, 2001). However, several authors reveal that in some cases both parents and school authorities have managed to develop informal strategies to avoid these regulations. Among the diverse strategies deployed by parents are: charging a high fee for the parents' association (*cooperativas*) –thus

building social class representations even when payment is not compulsory–; not providing free meals so as to exclude the vulnerable population; and the assessment of academic background in order to select high-performing students, among other discretionary practices (Veleda, 2005; Andrada, 2001; Narodowski & Andrada, 2000; Krüger, 2012). As for families, particularly in the case of those belonging to the middle and upper-middle classes, strategies are diverse and rooted in their advantageous social position. Even when these sectors have largely abandoned the public school, some have tended to strategically ‘colonize’ certain public schools and exclude the vulnerable population. These strategies, which reveal the existence of *de facto* market mechanisms, usually evolve into certain families making private use of public goods. In this vein, the equality of opportunities theoretically granted by the public school system seems to become gradually permeated by informal processes of internal privatization (Veleda, 2005; Narodowski & Andrada, 2000; Gottau, 2014).

Open Privatization: between Default and Incentives

As we mentioned above, there have not been direct transfers of public educational institutions to private entities in Argentina. Notwithstanding, the 1960s opened a complex process of enrollment ‘drift’ to private institutions that continues today (Morduchowicz, 2005). The public-private subdivision and re-articulation of the Argentine educational system has been understood as a viable answer to the financial restrictions imposed by decline of the welfare State and the need to expand school coverage (Narodowski, 2008). This process of expansion of private school provision has been in constant growth since its beginning in the 1960s. The private enrollment rate for common education (kindergarten, primary, secondary and tertiary-non university) reached 28.9% in 2013 (DiNIECE, 2014), the highest peak in the last 100 years. In order to see similar private school rates it is necessary to go as far back as the decades previous to the consolidation of national educational systems in the XIX century.

The post-1960 expansion of private education took place as a series of new regulations and de-regulations for the sector were passed. The governments’

intense ‘regulatory activity’ throughout the period could be seen as the consequence of a combination of demand and supply-side pressures, i.e. families and private/religious agents (Morduchowicz, 2005). However, there are reasons to believe that the State had itself its own structural reasons to allow –and even foster– the expansion of the private sector (Narodowski & Moschetti, 2015b). The resulting regulatory framework, which was later countersigned by the 1993 and 2006 education laws, guaranteed the continuity and stability of private schools, the official recognition of private school teachers as stated by the Teachers Statute, the validity of the certificates issued by private schools, and the allocation of State subsidies (Morduchowicz et al., 1999).

The allocation of public funding to private schooling has been a key factor to its expansion. The system was created in 1947 under the first presidency of Juan D. Perón (Law 13,047). Originally, it had at least two purposes: to provide financial help to private schools that did not have the resources to pay for teachers’ salaries, vacations and social security expenses, and to ensure that these schools, which usually served very vulnerable population in places where there were no public schools, remained open. Even though it was first designed as a temporary policy, it later became more and more systematic and clarified in successive decrees (Nº 15 of 1964 and Nº 2,542 of 1991, among others) (Mezzadra & Rivas, 2010). Currently, each province may finance between 40% to 100% of private schools’ expenditure on teachers’ salaries and the majority of private schools are in fact subsidized to some extent. Every province has a similar regulatory framework that establishes a series of criteria so as to define which schools are eligible for receiving the subsidy and in what proportion. These criteria usually include the SES of the pupils’ families, and the proximity and availability of a similar State schooling alternative. However, these criteria are neither comprehensive nor thoroughly operationalized in the legislation. In this vein, some studies note that the decisions finally rest on the good judgment and discretion of the State bureaucracy, and suggest the existence of a series of informal practices (Morduchowicz 1999; Mezzadra & Rivas, 2010).

According to the latest data available, 65% of private institutions in the country benefit from State funding to some extent. In the case of the Province of Buenos Aires, this percentage reaches 73%, and in the City of Buenos Aires, 74% (Rivas, 2010; Mezzadra & Rivas, 2010; Moschetti,

2015). Research on this matter suggests the inexistence of any formal equitable mechanism to assess school eligibility. In the case of the Province of Buenos Aires, for instance, research has shown that while there is some overall progressivity between the amount of subsidies that schools receive and the income level of the families they serve, there are also evidences significant inconsistencies: ‘17% of schools within the poorest tercile receive less than 50% of State subsidy. In turn, 16% of schools within the highest tercile receive more than 75% of State contributions’ (Mezzadra & Rivas, 2010, p. 58).

Regarding the functioning of non-State schools, some studies suggest that the high level of autonomy and flexibility derived from current regulations, makes it possible for some of these schools to provide an educational offer in line with class-related representations of quality, thus creating, to a certain extent, their own demand. Unlike public schools, private schools have complete autonomy in the process of hiring (and firing) teachers. Private-school owners or principals usually conduct business-like recruitment and selection processes that allow them to build more consistent pedagogical teams (Andrada, 2001; Narodowski & Andrada, 2000; Morduchowicz, 2005).

As for students’ enrollment, catchment areas do not apply for private schools. Parents are free to send their children to any private school –with or without State funding– regardless of their residence or chosen school location. However, this freedom is conditioned by each family’s economic capacity to afford schools fees, which can vary significantly from low fee to elite private schools, totally or partially subsidized, or non subsidized at all (Narodowski, 2002; Narodowski, Moschetti & Gottau, 2016).

The de-regulation of the private sector and the hyper-regulation of the State sector (Narodowski, 2002) have led to the configuration of a disintegrated system: an ‘independent’ private subsystem coupled with a ‘State’ public subsystem. As regards the first one, de-regulation applies to the private subsector as a whole, regardless of the State subsidies. In the case of the State public sector, hyper-regulation is, however, no barrier for some well-off families who resort to informal practices and make a private use of some ‘prestigious’ public schools. Nonetheless, this phenomenon is

quantitatively insignificant: there is conclusive evidence regarding the virtually unanimous exit of the middle and upper- middle classes from public schools, especially in urban contexts (Narodowski, Moschetti & Gottau, 2016). The widely spread perception of private schools as of ‘better quality’ (Scialabba, 2006) has pushed middle and high-income families out of the public subsector. The prevalence and permanence of low-income families in the public subsector evidences a highly segregated educational system (Narodowski & Nores, 2000; Gasparini, Jaime, Serio & Vázquez, 2011).

Conclusions

In this article we have tried to describe all the major transformations that the Argentine educational system has undergone especially during the second half of the twentieth century. More specifically, we have presented a characterization of the different forms adopted by the underlying education governance structure as from the reconfiguration driven by pro-privatization and de-regulation policies. Drawing on the conceptualization offered by Bellei & Orellana (2014), we have observed the multiple aspects and levels where privatization processes have taken place and the inter-relation and bonds among them. Likewise, we have noted that these privatization processes can originate either as a consequence of concrete educational policies or *by default*, i.e the lack of them.

Reaching a thorough comprehension of the dynamics between the sectors of an educational system is essential to ensure equitable provision and better quality education for all (Bangay & Latham, 2013). The disassembling process that we have described for the Argentine case stems from the fact that the public sector and the private sector seem to have gone through very divergent trajectories, with compromising effects on the system as a whole in terms of equity and social cohesion. On the one hand, the private sector has evolved into a relatively independent structure where schools are not refrained from acting according to the general guidelines of a ‘school-based management’ scheme. On the other hand, the public sector is subject to pedagogical and administrative regulations as stated by the central State bureaucracy. In comparison, we describe the private sector as de-regulated and independent and the public sector as hyper-regulated and State-bound.

The consequences of these divergent trajectories have been quite drastic. The de-regulation of the private sector has advantaged private schools to develop greater capacity, flexibility and room for innovation in terms of curricular design, teacher training, team-building and collaboration networks. To a great extent, private schools have managed to provide a pedagogical offer more in line with the interests of their communities, and as such, much more attractive than public schools, at least in a customer satisfaction sense (Scialabba, 2006). It is partly as a consequence of the rigid regulatory framework that the public sector has become a ‘*second best*’ option. As observed, this practice and discourse decoupling process seem to have been powered by two distinct general types of behavior with strong segregational effects. First, a virtually unanimous exit of the middle and upper-middle classes from public schools made possible by means of the creation of a large-scale private subsidized subsector (Narodowski & Moschetti, 2015b). Second, research has evidenced the proliferation of certain informal practices inside the public subsector that end up, paradoxically, turning public goods into an arena for unfair competition and internal privatization.

In general terms, the Argentine educational system seems to be experiencing the consequences of an inadequately implemented and poorly regulated private/public partnership. In line with Woodhead et al. (2013), this type of configuration raises the risk to the achievement of equity and therefore requires structural reforms in the State sector and greater regulation among private providers, especially those strongly subsidized by the State.

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