Tiptoeing Around Private Schools in the Global Partnership for Education[1]

Francine Menashy
University of Massachusetts Boston

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Abstract

Private sector provision of primary and secondary education is expanding at a rapid rate worldwide, intensifying an already polarized debate on the role of non-state actors in school delivery. Concurrently, international organizations are increasingly collaborating through a variety of arrangements, most notably multi-stakeholder partnerships. This study focuses on the intersection of these two trends in examining collective decision-making on the highly contentious issue of private delivery of K-12 schooling through a case study of the largest and most prominent multi-stakeholder partnership in education: the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). By conducting an analysis of the GPE's historical and current treatment of the issue of private education, I offer findings from an examination of various data sources, including meeting documents, policy reports, developing country Education Sector Plans, and interviews with key stakeholders. The preliminary findings of this study indicate that despite polarized and passionate stances from the perspective of its Board members, the GPE has not substantively engaged with the issue of private education. This lack of discussion may be indicative of a form of avoidance, where the topic is not dealt with in any substantive manner out of concern a debate may destabilize the partnership.

Introduction

Private sector provision of primary and secondary education is expanding at a rapid rate worldwide, intensifying an already polarized debate on the role of non-state actors in school delivery (OECD, 2012; Srivastava, 2013; UNESCO, 2011).[2] Concurrently, international organizations are increasingly collaborating through a variety of partnership arrangements (Bezanon and Isenman, 2012). Many agencies and actors who participate in such partnerships have steadfastly supported this rise in private schooling, whilst others have offered forceful criticisms. It is within the context of these two trends—the rise of private school provision and the increasingly collaborative global educational policy environment—that this study is conducted. In this research, I investigate collective decision-making on the highly contentious issue of private delivery of K-12 schooling through a case study of the largest and most prominent multi-stakeholder partnership in education: the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

Formerly the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (FTI), the GPE is a partnership of donor and developing country governments, multilateral organizations, civil society, private companies and foundations, dedicated to increasing access to quality education worldwide. With a mission "to galvanize and coordinate a global effort to deliver a good quality education to all girls and boys, prioritizing the poorest and most vulnerable" (GPE 2014a), the GPE supports 59 developing countries that lack sufficient funds to provide quality basic education for all children. The constituency-based GPE Board of Directors includes representation from a range of stakeholder groups, many of whom hold staunch yet opposing views on the implications of private education. This study therefore grapples with how a partnership of very diverse actors engages in decision-making on this deeply divisive and increasingly pressing issue.

By first outlining the two trends of private delivery of schooling and the rise of multi-stakeholder partnerships in the international development arena, I stress the importance of examining these trends as concurrent and interrelated forces. I then turn to a description of the GPE and provide a rationale for conducting my analysis through a constructivist lens. By conducting a process tracing analysis of the GPE's historical and current treatment of the issue of private education, I offer findings from an examination of various data sources, including for instance GPE meeting documents, policy reports, public rhetoric, recipient country Education Sector Plans, and interviews with key stakeholders.

Two trends: Private delivery of education and multi-stakeholder partnerships

The past decade has witnessed two concurrent and related trends in the international education policy arena. First, throughout the Global South there has been a rapid growth in private educational provision, including both public-private partnerships (PPPs) and low-cost private schooling (Dixon, 2013; Patrinos et al, 2009; Srivastava, 2013). PPP denotes a very broad category that covers any joining of the public and private sectors in education. This study focuses on PPPs in K-12 educational provision, including such mechanisms as voucher schemes, where parents receive a government-issued credit to pay for private school tuition, or fully publicly financed but privately administered schools, such as charter schools. Such PPPs are argued to

respond to low government capacity to deliver quality education by suggesting a shift in the state's function from a provider of schooling to that of a financier and regulator of private operators (Fielden and LaRoque, 2008; Patrinos et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2012). A rise in the establishment of low-cost private schools in the Global South has also been substantial. Such schools, which can be operated by either individuals or a larger entrepreneurial group, charge what is considered to be a nominal fee to parents. While some low-cost schools are not-for-profit, the majority are for-profit establishments targeting low-income families (Dixon, 2013; Rose, 2009; Srivastava, 2010). Supporters argue that low-cost schools respond to the very low quality of publicly provided education and can meet the demands of parents, including those living below poverty levels (see Dixon, 2013; Tooley, 2004; 2005; Tooley and Dixon, 2006).

Several critics have opposed any support to private education on the grounds of equity and quality. Critics of PPPs and low-cost schools argue that private delivery is problematic due to the creation of an additional tier of education that reduces access to already marginalized students and serves to deteriorate already weak public systems of education. Moreover, many low-cost schools are unregistered and unregulated and therefore the quality of education provided is questionable (Härmä, 2011; Rose, 2009; Srivastava, 2010). Private delivery of education is therefore an enormously contentious issue and has engendered a heated debate in international development circles. In the context of this debate, some of the most prominent international agencies and actors have embraced private provision, while others have offered passionate criticisms (UNICEF & ADB, 2011; Mundy & Menashy, 2014; Robertson et al., 2012).

A second trend in global education is characterized by a rise in transnational coordination, where diverse groups of organizations and actors are increasingly collaborating in the financing, design and implementation of education policies. Emerging against the backdrop of globalization, such collaboration is characteristic of recent trends in international development more generally, where the dominant state-centric model—one that has persisted for the past three centuries—has given way to global governance wherein multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) have been designed to respond to issues that have global implications. Such collaborative partnerships have also been brought about by a widespread criticism that the aid architecture—dominated by bilateral government donors—has been historically fragmented and uncoordinated and therefore inefficient. Moreover, the failure of states to respond single-handedly to problems with global impacts justified coordination between donors, also known as "harmonization," triggering a rise in transnational coalitions (Savedoff, 2012; Severino and Ray, 2010). Many multi-stakeholder partnerships have been initiated to tackle single issue areas, such as communicable diseases, vaccinations, water, and the environment (Bezanon and Isenman 2012). In education, the largest and most prominent MSP is the GPE.

In light of the divisiveness of the issue of private schooling and the growing collaborative global education policy-making environment, there is an urgent need to examine these trends as interrelated forces. The GPE serves as a fitting case study to help in understanding what happens when actors collaborate, dialogue and aim to come to consensus on contentious issues of global importance.

Understanding the Global Partnership for Education through a constructivist lens

In 2002, initiated by the World Bank, the Education for All Fast Track Initiative was launched and described as "a partnership between donor and developing countries to accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of universal primary education" (World Bank 2005, p.2). As will be described in more detail later, the FTI came under intense scrutiny in the late 2000s, and these criticisms led to a major restructuring and rebranding into the current GPE. The GPE came to be governed by a constituency-based Board of Directors consisting of 19 voting members, representing donor countries (6 seats), developing countries (6 seats), multilateral agencies (3 seats), civil society organizations (3 seats) and the private sector and foundations (1 seat) (GPE 2012a, 2012d). Decision-making is therefore split (although not evenly) between public and private sector actors, and representatives from the Global North and South, and all decisions are meant to be consensus-based. The GPE includes 59 developing country partners that receive resources via the GPE Fund, a pooled fund from which disbursements are made and which is financed predominantly by Northern donor country partners of the GPE (GPE, 2014b; GPE 2014c).

GPE grant applications—which include a country's Education Sector Plan—are approved by its Board and grant disbursement at the country level is overseen by a Supervising Entity, a large multilateral organization most commonly the World Bank.[3] The Education Sector Plans (ESPs) which are said to be country-driven and designed, are implemented and monitored by a collaborative country-level forum called a Local Education Group (LEG), ideally consisting of a range of stakeholders including ministry of education officials and representatives from donor agencies, civil society and the private sector. A Coordinating Agency, usually an international organization with a large in-country presence such as UNICEF, coordinates the activities of the LEG. Operational and administrative support is provided by a Secretariat located in Washington DC (GPE, 2012b).

The GPE is therefore a multi-layered arrangement of numerous stakeholders within the education sector, both globally and nationally. It is within this complex context that this study explores how one of the most contentious issues in the educational arena is taken up by such a large and diverse grouping of actors, governments and organizations.

Due to the nature of the GPE as a complex interaction of various stakeholders, this study has been conducted through a constructivist lens. As described by Finnemore and Sikkink, constructivism is a form of social analysis that is rooted in claims concerning interactions and relationships between actors, which are shaped by not simply material resources, but by "ideational factors" or widely shared beliefs that "construct the interests and identities of purposive actors" (2001, p.392-393). A constructivist lens highlights how actors interact to shape the processes by which decisions are made (Risse 2000; Ruggie 1998). I posit that one of the aims of the GPE is to engender consensus on educational issues through "mutual understanding," to decide on policy objectives via a forum comprised of numerous actors representing very different forms of institutions, perspectives and paradigms (Habermas 1981; Schlosberg 1995; Risse 2000, 2004). Such consensus can be reached by what Habermas describes as "communicative action" where discussion and understanding between different actors can allow for debate that leads to agreed-upon decisions. However, Habermas makes clear that

"communicative action is not only a process of reaching understanding; in coming to an understanding about something in the world, actors are at the same time taking part in interactions through which they develop, confirm, and renew their memberships in social groups and their own identities" (Habermas 1981, p.139). Mutual understanding is therefore a process to achieve consensus, whilst also contributing to the evolution of the identities of the decision-makers themselves. Necessary for consensus to occur, however, all actors involved must share what Habermas terms a "common lifeworld," interpreted by Risse as: "a supply of collective interpretations of the world and of themselves. The common lifeworld consists of a shared culture, a common system of norms and rules perceived as legitimate, and the social identity of actors being able to communicate and to act" (2004, p.296).

Risse proposes that a key component to effective communicative action is what he terms "argumentative rationality" (2000). According to Risse, the act of arguing in international forums is "relevant for problem solving in the sense of seeking an optimal solution for a commonly perceived problem and for agreeing on a common normative framework" and allows actors to reach reasoned consensus in order to "overcome many collective action problems"; however, actors "must be prepared to change their own views of the world, their interests, and sometimes even their identities" (2000, p.2).

In the context of understanding how a group of stakeholders within a collaborative partnership make policy decisions on a highly divisive issue, I conceptually examine the GPE as a potential site for communicative action and argumentative rationality.

Methods and Data Collected

In order to understand how and in what ways the issue of private delivery of education has been taken up within the GPE, I have conducted an analysis of the treatment of the issue within FTI and GPE policy-making via a process tracing analysis. Process tracing occurs within a case study and uncovers descriptive evidence in order to understand a sequence of events and their consequences (Bennett 2010; Collier 2011). Process tracing often targets policy-making and policy-makers in order to better understand how and why policies are—or are not—taken up (Tansey 2007; Vennesson 2008). By investigating key historical and recent events along with the perspectives of actors involved, I ask how has this multi-stakeholder partnership grappled with the contentious issue of private delivery of education, and with what results?

A number of data sources have been examined to answer this question. A detailed content analysis has been conducted of documents made publicly available from GPE Board of Directors meetings from 2009 until 2014—14 meetings in total. These documents include minutes of meetings, meeting final reports, presentations and pre-meeting papers. Documents have been coded for any mention of private education and in what context. Moreover, I similarly coded GPE reports, guidelines and publications to determine to what extent and in what ways GPE-produced documents have addressed the issue of private schooling.

A separate analysis was conducted of all FTI Steering Committee/GPE Board decisions since 2009, 189 decisions in total. I thematically coded all decisions to better understand the GPE's

priorities during Board meetings and what topics have been more heavily weighted in final decision-making at these meetings.

In order to determine the policy positions of GPE Board members on this issue, I conducted a content analysis of key publicly available documents—including policies, reports, commissioned research, and websites—of all organizations to which non-recipient GPE Board members belong (including both members and their alternates). In total, sources from 24 organizations, including multilateral organizations, bilateral aid agencies, private companies, foundations and civil society organizations were examined.

In order to separately determine the positions and priorities of GPE recipient countries, a detailed coding was conducted of the Education Sector Plans of the full GPE portfolio—59 countries in total.

To help clarify, corroborate and gain more detail on the findings from the various document analyses, elite interviews have been conducted with key informants associated with the GPE. In total, 19 interviews have been conducted. Respondents include current and former GPE Board members, current and former staff members of the GPE Secretariat, and those from other agencies working within recipient countries who manage GPE grants, such as the World Bank and UNICEF. Interviewees were explicitly selected based on their intimate knowledge of GPE (or FTI) policy-making processes both at the Board level and at the country level. Interviews took place throughout 2014.

Tracing the GPE's engagement with the issue of private education

The Fast-Track Initiative and private education
Before its restructuring, the Fast Track Initiative was essentially a unit of the World Bank and overseen by a Steering Committee, which was primarily responsible for relaying operational directions to a Secretariat office and not initially considered a governing body (Gartner 2010). The Steering Committee was "really a group of donors that contributed to a multi-donor trust fund within the World Bank, and so they provided guidance on how the funds should be spent" but "the Secretariat reported directly to the Bank…" (Interview #5). The Steering Committee was "much more of an informal thing than a Board" where "the Steering Committee had a much looser structure, didn't necessarily have a firm rules of order, rules of voting, rules of decision making, rules of representation" and "if somebody would join the Steering Committee and the person had a very strong character or brought in a lot of money or something, that could shape the direction of the Initiative" (Interview #4). Policy decisions within the FTI were therefore not made by rigorous or formal channels. It was furthermore considered a branch of the World Bank, given that it was categorized as a Bank trust fund and staffed and housed within the Bank headquarters. Significantly, many of the positions taken by the FTI on issues concerning educational provision were therefore made in the context of World Bank policy and by World Bank staff (Interview #5, Interview #6; Interview #17).

The FTI's position on private delivery of education was summarized in a 2004 Framework report, wherein an indicator of 10% was recommended for "Private share of enrollments, % of

pupils enrolled in exclusively privately-financed primary schools" given that 10% was considered the average number in "some successful countries" (FTI, 2004, p.15). This figure generated some controversy within the FTI Secretariat, as a senior staff member at that time described: "I never felt that that was a very well researched or well supported figure" (Interview #17). The recommendation was seen by some as driven by World Bank economists from within the education sector, who "had really been seen as pushing hard on privatization" (Interview #17). The World Bank's internally-driven policies therefore may have in turn resulted in the 10% private school enrolment recommendation to FTI recipient countries.

This Framework, including the 10% private enrolment recommendation, was ratified at an FTI meeting in 2004, becoming "the unofficial constitution of the FTI partnership for the next four years" (Birmingham, 2009, p.4). It is important to note that early drafts of this 2004 Framework promoted pooled funding and local ownership, which caused some dispute within the Steering Committee. In particular, resistance came from the US representative, which among other concerns did not agree with "an assumption that government should be the sole provider of education services" (Birmingham, 2009, p.4). Conflicts around public versus private provision of education were evident early on in the FTI, from both within the World Bank and in its Steering Committee.

Throughout its existence, the Fast Track Initiative frequently came under criticism, most notably regarding its narrowly-defined eligibility requirements and its relationship to the World Bank. For example, in 2008 the Global Campaign for Education stated that "the World Bank has played an increasingly problematic role vis-à-vis the EFA Fast-Track Initiative" and via the FTI provides "ideologically-driven policy advice" including privatization of education (p. 9, 2). Most prominently, a 2010 externally conducted Mid-Term review of the FTI also cited several major shortcomings to its governance, including its over-dependence on the World Bank, and the dominance of donors on its Board: "The FTI began as a donor initiative, and has essentially remained one, with partner countries having only limited voice" (Cambridge Education et al. 2010, p.83). The Mid-Term review moreover highlighted the controversy over private delivery of schooling, stating that "there is a need to further review the potential role of the private sector in basic education, which is still the subject of considerable debate" (p.121).

Resulting from such criticisms was a growing understanding that developing country partners must be included at the Board table, as did a push to maintain a more arms-length relationship with the World Bank. The FTI was therefore restructured into its current constituency-based Board of Directors, along with a revision of its financing mechanisms and its relationship to the World Bank. In 2011, the FTI was rebranded into the GPE. The 10% benchmark for private education has been dropped as a recommendation, and no policy position on this issue has been taken since (GPE, 2012b; Interview #4; Interview #5; Interview #17; Interview #19).

Positions on private education: The GPE Board of Directors
Early critiques of the FTI therefore included concerns about conflicting positions on private delivery of education. And upon examination of the positions held by those represented on the current GPE Board with regards to private education, there remains little consensus. Based on a content analysis of policy documents, knowledge products/research reports, public statements on

websites and corroborated by key informant interviews, I have attempted to determine the positions of each non-recipient GPE Board member and alternate Board member on the issue of private education (recipient developing country partners will be examined below). Findings from this analysis indicate that the spectrum of views on the Board on private education is incredibly wide.

Some Board member positions fall along the lines of constituency, where for instance the Civil Society Organizations can all be characterized as strongly against private participation, where each organization makes explicit that its mandate is to support public education and clearly posits that private schooling is problematic and should not be supported by international agencies. Three multilateral agencies can be deemed supportive of private delivery; in contexts where governments are depicted as having low capacity and little resources to adequately provide education, private delivery is encouraged, in particular PPPs such as stipends or vouchers. Donor country representatives on the Board are evidently split on this issue, with some bilateral agencies overtly supportive of low-cost private schools and PPPs. Other donors, however, may have taken a decidedly political stance, where either there has been little or no discussion on the subject of private education in their organizational rhetoric, or interviewees decline to comment on the issue. The Private Sector/Foundations constituency leans towards strongly supporting private delivery, where some organizations encourage numerous manifestations of private participation, including low-cost private schools. However, the individual Board members from the Private Sector/Foundations seat are not representative of all their constituency membership, where for instance certain private foundations are against GPE support to private schools. Therefore, this debate ensues even within the constituencies themselves.

Statements made in the public rhetoric of organizations highlight this polarization of views. CSO Education International's website clearly states: "Private schools, whether low fee, charity-based or commercially driven, are not the answer to the challenge of achieving universal primary education for all. Education is a basic right and a public good; it must be free and should be – as the responsibility of governments and society to our shared future – publicly financed" (EI, 2014). On the other end of the spectrum is Pearson plc, which pronounces: "Across the developing world the reality on the ground is that students are already attending low-cost private schools… Hundreds of millions of low-income parents have voted with their feet because the public option so often provides such poor quality. As a result there is a huge unmet education and market need to provide high quality, low cost education at scale" (Pearson, 2014). The donor agency split is similarly stark. While a research report produced by Denmark argues that "While private sector involvement in the provision of education is encouraged by some international instruments and bodies, as well as some donor agencies, the paper questions whether this is compatible with a universal right to free education set out in UN instruments and protocols" (Booth & Dyssegaard, nd, p.8), the European Commission maintains "Subject to adequate legislation, management and regulation, the private sector can be an effective way of extending service provision, improve the quality of education and if properly targeted, to address equity issues" (EC, 2010, p.15-16). Similarly, the UK's Department for International Development takes the following position: "The UK strives to get the best possible outcomes for poor people and takes a pragmatic stance on how services should be delivered. In some

circumstances (parts of India, Kenya, Nigeria and Pakistan, for example), this includes developing partnerships with low-fee private schools" (DfID, 2013).

Interview respondents corroborate the divided stances. One Board member states that private schools "are not extending access, they take children from the government schools, if anything and undermine their local government schools, which creates all sorts of difficulties" (Interview #15), with another more forcefully stating that GPE support to low-cost private schools would be "a horrific offense" (Interview #10). On the other end of the viewpoint spectrum, another Board member explains that "education as a sector in low-income countries is… too public sector dominated. That has led to it being sluggish, lacking innovation, often weak accountability. A symptom of that is the massive growth that we've observed in recent years with low cost private schools. It shows that consumers, poor people themselves, are turning away from the public sector because they think it's worth investing in what they perceive is a better education" (Interview #14). Other Board members more cautiously support private delivery: "my own view is that given the challenges of access and the large out-of-school population that still exists, we have to look at some kind of complementary model. At the same time, there are serious questions about low-fee private schools and the quality and in terms of how do you regulate a complimentary system without exacerbating inequities, I think that's the key thing" (Interview #1). GPE Secretariat staff members, speaking as observers to the Board of Directors, confirm these opposing views, one stating that there is "a huge rift in the Board" (Interview #5).

Positions on private education: The GPE developing country partners
The GPE includes as partners the developing countries to which it provides grants. Recipient countries apply for grants through a process that includes the review and approval of an Education Sector Plan.[4] ESPs detail broadly national education policies, including targets and plans, and are taken as indicators for how national governments intend to apply the GPE grants, and are ostensibly country-driven documents. In order to understand the positions of a group of key partners in the GPE, I have conducted an analysis of the ESPs belonging to all the 59 GPE developing countries, coding for rhetorical support to various aspects to private delivery of education. Understanding that the private sector and support to it is quite complex, a detailed analysis was conducted to determine which ESPs included significant support to privately provided education.

Table 1: Findings from Analysis of Education Sector Plans (n = 59)

Country	Type of private sector support					
	Type of private provider supported					
	Religious Providers	Fee-based private providers	Non-profit/ NGO providers	PPPs Grants/ Subsidies/ Scholarships/ Vouchers	General encouragement of increasing private schools	Need for regulation of private
Afghanistan	X	X	X		X	X
Albania		X	X		X	X
Benin		X		X	X	X
Bhutan		X			X	X
Burkina Faso		X			X	X
CAR		X		X	X	X
Guinea Bissau		X		X	X	
Haiti		X		X		X
Kenya		X	X	X	X	
Lao PDR		X		X	X	X
Lesotho	X	X	X		X	
Madagascar		X		X	X	
Malawi		X		X	X	
Mauritania		X			X	X
Mozambique		X	X	X	X	X
Niger		X			X	X
Pakistan	X	X	X	X	X	
Rwanda		X	X	X	X	
Uganda		X		X	X	X
TOTAL	3	19	7	12	18	12

Source: Education Sector Plans Retrieved from http://www.globalpartnership.org/developing-countries or country government websites

As detailed in Table 1, of the 59 GPE developing country partners, 19 include key elements relating to supporting or encouraging an increase in private sector delivery of K-12 education. Each of the 19 countries include either an objective, target or substantive policy feature that indicates support to either primary or secondary schooling that is privately provided. In 12 of these countries, the private sector is said to be financed via PPPs, such as subsidies, grants or vouchers. For example, in Guinea Bissau, one of the "promoted policies for primary" education is "to encourage growth of the private sector through a subsidy" (Republic of Guinea Bissau, 2010, p.14). As described in the ESP of Madagascar, "Support for private education will continue to be recognized as a way to help improve access… one of the peculiarities of Madagascar lies in the fact that this mode of education contributes to the education of children even in hard to reach areas and the disadvantaged" (République de Madagascar, 2012, p.48). In Mozambique, the ESP includes the "priority action" of "creating incentives for opening private schools" (2012, p. 82).[5] I furthermore coded for other forms of non-state delivery, including religious providers which are mentioned in 3 countries and non-profit/NGO providers which are cited in 7 countries.

Along with the 12 countries that both support private delivery and indicate a need to better regulate the private sector, some countries that *discourage* increased private delivery also stress the need for better regulation, such as Nigeria, as its ESP describes: "The poor monitoring of

private schools across the country poses the risk of abuse by profiteering private providers. It is, therefore, important to revisit the policy on private education provision and review the nature of state collaboration with these non-state providers to strengthen and streamline education provision across the country" (2012, p.22). Similarly, in Haiti, despite an enormous private sector in education and the establishment of PPPs, the government states that "despite this essentially private system, most schools are not accredited and costs remain prohibitive for poor households who are in the majority" (République D'Haiti, 2013, p.161).[6]

Nearly a third of all the GPE developing country partners include in their Education Sector Plans a key element that indicates support to private providers of education, either via PPPs, support to low-cost private schools, or through a general encouragement to enable a climate where private education can grow. Therefore, according to the ESPs, a substantial number of recipient countries—and major partners to the GPE—have highlighted private delivery of education as an important education policy issue.

Board-level decision-making and dialogue on private education
After determining that a divergence of perspectives on the issue of private sector delivery of education exists amongst GPE partners, I examined how this contentious issue is grappled with at both the GPE Board level and within literature produced by the GPE. Despite the significance of the issue, very little discussion of private education can be found within GPE publicly accessible documents and reports. Of the over 100 documents examined for this study, very few even mention private schools, and when they do, it is in the context of providing data on enrolment or household income spent on school fees (GPE, 2012d). The GPE's 2012-2015 Strategic Plan, its key policy document, includes only a single mention of non-state sector provision of education, in reference to a potential need for alternate school providers in conflict-affected and fragile states: "In those circumstances, the Global Partnership will seek to use capable and trusted partners, including nonstate providers, on the ground to ensure that basic educational services can be delivered, while at the same time working to strengthen government education systems" (GPE, 2012e, p.17). No pre-Board meeting paper has been developed or circulated to bring to the table a decision on private education. And documents from 14 meetings moreover contain no explicit evidence of any substantive Board-level dialogue on the subject.

The lack of discussion and dialogue on the topic of private school provision within the GPE is corroborated by interview accounts. Respondents describe discussion on private education as minimal: "I would say that in the scheme of the number of issues discussed, that would've taken at most 1%, maybe 3% of the intellectual bandwidth of the institution" (Interview #5); "For the most part, those kinds of discussions about whether the private sector should or shouldn't be involved, don't take place on the Board" (Interview #13); "We have not had a proper debate on the GPE board. It was raised and comments were noted, and then business moved on" (Interview #5). The only area where a serious conversation about private schools has occurred within the Board was reportedly in discussions on a particular country grant application where there are high levels of privatization: "It has come up for example in reviewing the funding application from Haiti where most of the schools are private, and so GPE is providing vouchers and things like that" (Interview #5).

However, although not occurring within Board meetings, there has been much peripheral discussion that shows a growing concern for this issue area. Outside of Board meetings, the Secretariat staff is "certainly being lobbied on both sides. Some of the private sector constituency would like to see GPE be much more vocal in supporting low-cost private schools… There's now a lot of pressure from these private players to have GPE really facilitate a brainstorm, a discussion about the role of private sector" (Interview #5). One respondent recalled an email exchange between Civil Society and Private Sector/Foundations Board members where a back and forth detailed positions on the issue of low-cost private schools (Interview #6). Others describe the debate on how and if to engage the private sector in school delivery as "bubbling under the surface" and "a side debate in the GPE with some members of our constituency and some donors also in favor of it saying that the GPE should be paying for low-fee private schools" (Interview #10).

Interviewees generally agree that the GPE ought to facilitate a discussion on this issue, or will need to at some point: "I think there's been, I would say, an acknowledgement that it's useful to dialogue about this, and to the extent that GPE can be a convener and provide a platform for these kinds of discussions to take place" (Interview #6); "this question of the relationship between public provision and nonpublic or private provision at the level of country level and in terms of supporting for-profit private schools. That's something that will need to be in the mix at some point. Logically, that question will have to be dealt with" (Interview #1).

Some GPE partners in their own organizational literature have moreover expressed that the GPE needs to discuss and take a position on private education. The Global Campaign for Education, for instance, articulated in 2011 that "The new Global Partnership for Education needs to take a clear position on this at an early stage and avoid being part of a privatisation agenda – or any programmes that undermine education rights" (GCE, 2011, p.23). However, a position has yet to be taken.

Discussion: The absence of argumentative rationality within the Global Partnership for Education

Why the lack of dialogue?
Why is the GPE a forum wherein one of the most significant issues in education globally is not being addressed, despite that several partners believe this to be a vital matter, feel passion concerning it, and believe it needs to be discussed within the GPE?

A number of reasons can be posited for the absence of discussion. Three respondents, all from the Secretariat office, believe that the GPE simply has more pressing priorities and it is outside of the GPE's mandate: "At the end of the day, mass equitable education is really only possible through the public system no matter how widespread a private system is. In some ways, it's outside of GPE's core business… I think it's so tangential to the core work" (Interview #5, also Interview #4; Interview #19).

Furthermore, raising the issue of private education would engender a debate on an incredibly complex issue that would need to be discussed very cautiously and with much rigorous

data produced on the part of the Secretariat, which up until now has "lacked the bandwidth" (Interview #7) to collect the evidence needed to facilitate the discussion effectively: "The private sector is a very, very broad category… the environment is quite complex, and we've got to be careful whatever strategy we come up with that we try to harness the best the private sector can offer in collaboration, but be a little bit careful on those areas where the relationship can be a bit more tricky" (Interview #8); "We need to have a really good grasp of the evidence particularly in specific context in our countries before we can take a credible position on this. I think otherwise, we're just going to be pulled to whoever happens to lobby us the day before. That's not a smart way to go about this discussion" (Interview #5).

Many respondents stressed that the debate is difficult to enter into because it is too contentious, and positions are too ideological. The issue of private education is described as "a heated debate" (Interview #15), "a hot issue" (Interview #4) and "a largely political issue" (Interview #7) where even within constituencies there are "some very divisive views" (Interview #1) and "ideological debates" (Interview #10). Others acknowledge that "in the education space there is a lot of reticence around [private provision]" and that "it's not always, you know, a comfortable discussion to have... they're shut down pretty quickly because it is an ideological discussion" (Interview #13).

Due to the deeply ideological nature of the issue of private education, a key factor in avoiding a dialogue may be trepidation as to the impacts such a debate could have on the partnership. As expressed by an interviewee from the Secretariat, were the GPE to enter into a conversation about supporting low-cost private schools: "You will have all of the civil society board members leave. They will leave GPE. They will condemn it, and they will say, 'GPE has sold out. The right to education is dead, like, we're out of here. We cannot … We will not support GPE anymore…' The risks completely out-weigh any kind of benefit we would get from taking a position on this issue" (Interview #5), and that if delving into the issue at both the global and national level, the GPE must be "very, very careful" (Interview #8).

The situation thereby becomes a form of what one respondent refers to as "strategic avoidance" (Interview #17), where the issue is not dealt with in any substantive way in an effort to avoid a confrontation that might destabilize the partnership: "If GPE wants to step into that debate, then we have to handle it really carefully, because it's the issue that will tear the fragile consensus apart" (Interview #5).

Is the absence of dialogue problematic?
It is arguable that dialoging on any issue with the potential to tear apart the partnership is simply not worth it, despite that private education is of considerable concern to many Board members and recipient partners. However, avoidance—strategic or otherwise—at the GPE governance level may elicit some unintended impacts.

The GPE promotes country ownership, where it is up to national governments where to direct the GPE funds, for example to support public or private sector schools. It is uncertain, however, if the policies of GPE developing country partners are unquestionably country-driven. As explained earlier, within each recipient country there are a large number of stakeholders involved in the GPE grant implementation, including international organizations which play a sometimes

very hands-on role in the design of the Education Sector Plans. For instance, each GPE grant in-country must have a Supervising Entity which disburses the funds. In roughly 65% of cases, this role is filled by the World Bank. As well, each country must have a Local Education Group comprised of key stakeholders, facilitated by a Coordinating Agency, most commonly UNICEF. The LEGs include several non-local development partners, including bilateral donors, international non-government organizations and multilateral agencies. At the county-level, then, those having input into the ESPs and the GPE grant implementation go well beyond country governments and local stakeholders.

For instance, interviewees described the ESP design process as involving a range of national and international actors: "ESPs are… basically jointly owned by the government and the major stakeholders, and to start off with certainly in terms of stakeholders, the development partners at country level" (Interview #8). Interviewees moreover mentioned that the LEGs do not necessarily operate in such a way to ensure in-country ownership: "the idea of a LEG, that's really like an ideal concept, and the reality is very messy. It also is bound into constitutional reform, the role of parliaments, how World Bank and other donors negotiate poverty reduction strategy papers and various development strategies within a country…" (Interview #5; also Interview #7; Interview #19). In the absence of a clear policy on private sector provision, therefore, the GPE-funded country operations could potentially be driven by international actors who have a presence at the national level.

The World Bank as Supervising Entity, in particular, is said to be often a prominent and influential player in the GPE process. As a Coordinating Agency lead in a recipient country explains: "I feel the Bank as a Supervising Entity has sometimes used it to forward their own agency's agenda" (Interview #3). Others from the Secretariat agree: "I mean, if you're the Supervising Entity, you have a lot of influence, whoever you are" (Interview #4); "The reality is that the relationship between the Supervising Entity and the government helps to shape what the subset in the grants is" (Interview #19). Were the Supervising Entity a strong supporter of engaging the private sector, this may have implications for how the GPE funds are directed.

And beyond those directly involved in the GPE grant disbursement process, other agencies (bilateral donors, for instance) may exercise a great deal of influence, particularly those who are large contributors of aid to a particular country: "I would think about who the largest donor is in the sector, because they may have more substantive influence on the broader policy. And then GPE just comes in after the policy directions are set and provides the funding. It doesn't actually drive the policy. In other words, it's funding the private sector not because somebody set out to do so, but because other players want that to happen at the country level" (Interview #19). Without a clear policy directive, resulting from dialogue and debate at the governance level of the partnership, the direction of GPE funding could be driven by whichever organizations hold influence at the country level.

Dialogue furthermore seems necessary because, even if the ESPs are taken at face value and are indeed country-driven, several reflect a desire to better regulate the growing private sectors in recipient countries. These include countries that both support and encourage more private provision, but also some that do not wish to expand their already burgeoning private sectors. A

former senior Secretariat staff member describes the low-cost private school context and the need for regulation:

> For better or for worse particularly in the very urban areas those schools are just exploding. You don't have to be pushing for these schools to exist or saying that they should or calling for public sector to occupy less of the space at primary level, it's simply a trend that is happening… You need to make sure that the kids in these schools who are vulnerable, pretty much by definition, that they are not taken advantage of. That they are actually getting good quality schooling. (Interview #17)
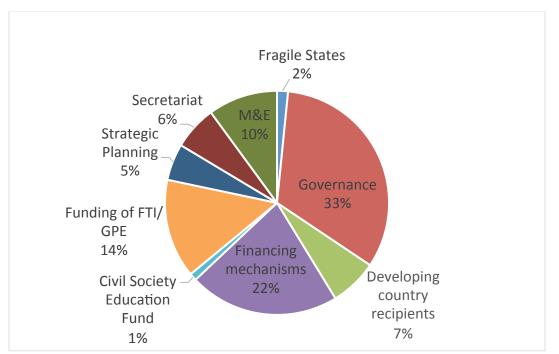
Finally, according to some interviewees, the avoidance of debate could risk the legitimacy of the partnership. This concern reflects not only lack of dialogue on the controversial issue of private education. It is questionable more broadly if the GPE Board is actively conducting one of its key tasks: acting as a forum for dialogue, where it "provides an opportunity for the members to debate" (Interview #6). As a former senior Secretariat staff member expressed:

> My biggest concern is this avoidance, because it is hard to talk about these things, you do end up having confrontation. I worry very much that the partnership at GPE can go to the lowest common denominator which ultimately, almost inevitably tends toward the financing… the worst thing that could happen to GPE would be that they move away from discussing policy which has always been harder. (Interview #17)

Another senior Secretariat staff member agrees that the lack of dialogue on private education is indicative of a more overarching governance issue where there is an absence of serious discussion targeting education policy: "We have 5 strategic objectives, we've never had a substantive discussion about any of them on the Board… the Board doesn't operate as a forum to discuss substantive issues" (Interview #19).

And Board-level decision-making does indeed seem to be weighted away from issues of education policy. In light interview responses that indicate that the GPE Board does not substantively discuss the issue of private education, I examined GPE Board decisions to determine what is in fact decided upon at Board meetings. Each Board decision (total 189) from 14 meetings of the GPE Board of Directors since 2009 was coded thematically.

Figure 2: GPE Board Decisions – 2009 - 2014

Source: Final Board Decision Documents Retrieved from http://www.globalpartnership.org/board-of-directors

Figure 2 makes clear that the most decided-upon topic by the GPE Board of Directors is GPE governance. Namely, how the Board is designed, constituted, sub-committee tasks and representation, etc. The other two most decided upon themes are financing mechanisms and funding to the GPE Fund. Some decisions have been made on issues of monitoring and evaluation and grant application approvals to developing country recipients. The Board has also made decisions on the function and budget of the Secretariat, how to finance and support education in conflict-affected and fragile states and fiscal support to the Civil Society Education Fund. Only 5% of Board decisions touch on strategic planning, the category in which I have included decisions on what education policies ought to be supported by the GPE. It is within this rarely decided upon category that any decision on private education would be included. Decisions on policy recommendations within education systems are not made frequently.

Based on the analysis conducted in this study, such decision making does not occur for a plausible range of reasons, including a lack of data on which to ground a discussion, more pressing priorities for the partnership, and avoidance of controversial issues. An absence of Board focus on broader educational policy issues may furthermore be inhibiting a more targeted discussion on private education.

Conclusion

As with many development policy issues, the debate on private delivery of education is in large part—according to both sides—ideologically-driven. An ideological position moreover arguably contributes to and reflects one's identity. And such an identity is normatively-based, where it is

implied that "good people do *X*" (Risse, 2000, p.5). International development actors endeavoring to improve access to and quality of education, and hold strong opinions on engagement of the private sector, likely all believe they are doing what is right to support children's education. The holding of deeply entrenched normative beliefs, which are inextricably tied to individual identity, engenders a potentially intractable situation.

But according to Habermas, actors situated in different ideological locations, and with relatively set identities, are in fact able to come to consensus through what he describes as "true reasoning" when "oriented toward reaching a common understanding" (Habermas, 1981). This common understanding cannot be attainted, however, without first agreeing that common understanding is necessary, and then via debate, dialogue and, sometimes, arguing. However, referring to international relations, Risse pronounces: "We talk a lot, but we do not necessarily argue, reason, or deliberate" (Risse, 2000, p.9).

The analysis conducted in this study supports Risse's assertion, as it appears very little deliberating or arguing on policy issues occurs within the GPE. In particular, it seems plausible that the topic of private education is avoided because ideologically-based conflicts may lead to increased tensions within the partnership. However, avoidance of debate on the issue of private delivery of education could have consequences. For instance, in the absence of a clear policy coming from the GPE Board, the direction of GPE grants in-country may then be guided instead by other international organizations which happen to hold influence at the country level. Moreover, it seems clear that regulation of the private sector is needed, and the GPE could contribute to ideas around regulatory policies, but does not because the topic is not introduced. Finally, strategic avoidance on this (and other) contentious policy matters may risk the legitimacy of the partnership.

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[2] Precise data on worldwide private school enrolments are exceedingly difficult to gather due to the different ways in which governments define and report private schools and due to the very large unregistered low-cost private sectors in some countries (see Srivastava, 2013).

[3] Approximately 65% of GPE country grants are overseen by the World Bank as Supervising Entity (GPE, 2013). In some cases a Managing Entity – which performs a more hands-on role in grant implementation - is established instead of a Supervising Entity due to issues of low government capacity or fragility (GPE, 2012c).

[4] Or in the case of a country experiencing fragility or conflict, an Interim Education Sector Plan.

[5] Translated from French

[6] Translated from French