**The expansion of private schooling in Latin America: A regional phenomenon with multiple causes and faces**

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Latin America is the world region where education privatization has experienced the greatest and most consistent growth over the last two decades. The region exhibits not only the highest rate of private enrolment in primary education, but also an exceptionally steady rise of private provision since the nineties. At the secondary level, Latin America is also among the regions with the greatest levels of private enrollment, topping the ranking along with Sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite the scale of the education privatization phenomenon in Latin America, there is limited research addressing this advancement from a political economy and a regional perspective. This is however a relevant approach since the main rationales, drivers and factors behind education privatization vary widely among countries. In a study recently published by Education International, we map out the different manifestations and processes of education privatization that coexist in the region – on the basis of the variety of sociopolitical, institutional, demographic and historical determinants affecting each case. Specifically, our research identifies seven different paths toward education privatization:

* **Chile** represents the most distinctive example of a privatization process grounded in a broader process of a **structural State reform** under the tenets of neoliberalism. In this country, the education reform implemented during the eighties drastically redefined the role of the State in education, promoting school choice and fostering private sector participation through a universal voucher program. The reform was adopted in the context of a military dictatorship that greatly hindered the articulation of an effective resistance against such drastic changes.
* Conversely, in countries with a highly decentralized education system such as **Colombia and Brazil**, privatization has experienced an **incremental advance** as a result of the cumulative effect of education reforms – gradual in nature and apparently disconnected since they have been typically adopted at a sub-national level. In both countries, political and socio-economic factors transcending the education policy realm (such as the emergence of a new middle class with greater purchasing power for private education) have also stimulated these incremental processes of education privatization.
* In countries like **Peru, Dominican Republic and Jamaica**, the growth of the private sector is the result of the passivity and/or limited response capacity of the State in the context of a growing demand for education. In these cases, privatization advances, to some degree, ‘**by default’**, and translates into the emergence of so-called ‘low-fee private schools’, which mostly target low-income families.
* In **Argentina** and the **Dominican Republic**, the growing presence of non-state educational provision is the result of a stable and historical relationship between the Church and the State. These types of partnerships between the State and the private (initially religious) sector are intrinsically linked to the establishment of national education systems and to the need to expand school coverage in a cost-efficient manner.
* Humanitarian crisis situations resulting from natural disasters or armed conflicts are fertile ground for the adoption of drastic educational reforms, which would find it more difficult to thrive under normal situations. Such dynamics of **privatization by way of disaster** have occurred in Central American countries affected by armed conflicts (such as **El Salvador**, **Nicaragua** and **Guatemala**), and in **Haiti** after the earthquake of 2010. In Haiti, private educational provision was consolidated and expanded within the process of reconstruction of the country and in a context of significant influence of international organizations and external agents.
* We also find countries like Uruguay where the private sector has historically played a marginal role, but in which we identify a recent process of **latent privatization**. In this country, we note the emergence of a pro-private politically transversal discourse, and the establishment of incipient public-private cooperation schemes in the form of experimental initiatives, or legislative proposals aiming to favor such cooperation, along which private provision could be promoted in the coming years.
* Finally, against the general trend in Latin America, private enrollment has experienced a stagnation and slight regression in some countries in recent decades. [In **Bolivia,** this process of **partial reversion of privatization** is explained by changes in the dynamics of educational supply and demand](https://www.unite4education.org/uncategorized/the-privatization-of-education-can-be-reversed-evidence-from-recent-education-reforms-in-bolivia/). The relative retraction of private provision occurs in Bolivia in a context of increasing state regulation of private providers, and of a certain loss of the comparative advantage of private institutions resulting from increased educational investment and modernization of the public sector.

As we can see, the growing presence of the private sector in Latin American education systems does not respond to a monolithic set of causes. The development of a wide range of educational privatization trajectories in the region can only be understood in the light of a series of specificities (political, socio-economic and institutional) that, in most countries, are markedly endogenous. Understanding the multiple causes of privatization and its various manifestations is a necessary condition for articulating relevant and context-specific responses to improve and strengthen public education.