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**Speaking Cooperation, Acting Competition:
Supply-Side Subsidies and Private Schools in
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Contexts in Buenos Aires**

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Abstract: Few studies have explored how schools respond to competition in socially embedded education quasi-markets. This study focuses on how state-subsidized privately-run low-fee schools (S-LFPSs) compete with free public schools in some of the poorest

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neighborhoods of the City of Buenos Aires. In particular, we explore how S-LFPSs follow different logics of action to attract (and shape) enrollment profiting from their extended autonomy and some regulatory gaps. We applied discourse analysis on data from eight months of ethnographic case study research in nine S-LFPSs. Student selection and operational changes (e.g., increasing the student/teacher ratio) prevail over academic and curricular changes. Selection is operated by means of aptitude tests and screening interviews, and other symbolic artifacts aimed at signaling differences with state-run schools and the potential fit between schools and families. We present a heuristic typology of the different logics of action systematizing the schools' responses as their leading orientations toward the competitive environment. We suggest that policy inconsistencies and deficient governmental oversight tilt the field against state-run schools. Rather than ensuring equality of educational opportunity, the policy contributes to shape and deepen a highly segregated and inequitable educational landscape.

Keywords: Private education; School choice; Educational partnerships; Educational legislation; Educational opportunities; Principals

Cooperar en el discurso, competir en los hechos: Subsidios a las escuelas privadas en contextos desfavorecidos de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires

Resumen: Pocos estudios han explorado cómo las escuelas responden a la competencia en contextos de cuasi mercados socialmente estructurados. Este estudio examina cómo las escuelas privadas subvencionadas de bajo coste (S-LFPSs) compiten con las escuelas públicas en algunos de los barrios más pobres de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. En particular, exploramos cómo las S-LFPSs adoptan diferentes lógicas de acción para atraer (y seleccionar) matrícula, haciendo uso de su mayor grado de autonomía y aprovechando ciertos vacíos legales. Analizamos datos recopilados durante ocho meses de trabajo etnográfico en nueve S-LFPSs. La selección de alumnos y los cambios operacionales (e.g., aumentar la ratio alumnos/docente) prevalecen sobre cambios los académicos y curriculares. La selección se lleva a cabo a través de pruebas aptitudinales y entrevistas diagnósticas, y otros artefactos simbólicos a fin de diferenciarse de las escuelas estatales. Presentamos una tipología heurística de diferentes lógicas de acción, sistematizando las principales respuestas de las escuelas en un contexto competitivo. Sugerimos que dadas las inconsistencias en las políticas y el deficiente control gubernamental, la política de subsidios profundiza un escenario educativo altamente segregado y desigual.

Palabras-clave: Educación privada; Elección de escuela; Alianzas público-privadas; Legislación educativa; Oportunidades educativas; Directores

Cooperação no discurso, concorrência nos fatos: Subsídios às escolas privadas em contextos desfavorecidos da Cidade de Buenos Aires

Resumo: Poucos estudos têm explorado como as escolas respondem à concorrência em contextos sociais de quase-mercados. Este estudo examina como as escolas particulares subvencionadas com baixo custo (S-LFPSs) concorrem com as escolas públicas em alguns bairros dos mais pobres da Cidade de Buenos Aires. Especificamente, exploramos como as S-LFPSs adotam diferentes estratégias para atrair (e escolher) matriculados, aproveitando a sua autonomia e a falta de legislação. O análises foi feito a partir da compilação de dados feito em oito meses de trabalho etnográfico em nove S-LFPSs. A seleção de alunos e as mudanças operacionais (e.g. aumentar a proporção aluno/professor) são priorizados sobre mudanças acadêmicas e curriculares. A seleção e feita com testes de aptidão entrevistas de avaliação e outros dispositivos simbólicos com o objetivo de se diferenciar das escolas

públicas. Presentamos uma tipologia heurística com diferentes estratégias de ação, ao sistematizar as principais respostas das escolas num contexto de concorrência. Nossa sugestão, a partir das inconsistências geradas nas definições políticas e o inadequado controle governamental, é que a política de subvencionar aprofunda um cenário educativo altamente segregado e desigual.

Palavras-chave: Educação particular; Escolher escola; Parcerias público-privadas; Legislação educacional; Oportunidades educacionais; Diretores

Introduction

During the last decades, the role of private actors in educational services provision has gained salience globally as diverse types of public-private partnerships (PPPs) have been enacted, particularly in low and middle-income countries (Robertson, Mundy, Verger, & Menashy, 2012). A major underlying premise warranting the expansion of PPPs and school choice policies around the globe is that the private sector can provide higher-quality education in a cost-efficient manner, as compared to the public sector. PPPs, it is also argued, may increase educational opportunities for disadvantaged students by expanding their possibilities to choose schools, access supposedly high-quality education and, ultimately, improve their academic performance (Languille, 2016). Interestingly, these assumptions apply not only for developing countries but also for high-income settings where school choice policies are increasingly targeting marginalized and racialized populations in inner cities (Ellison & Aloe, 2018; Yoon et al., 2018).

However, evidence supporting such premises remains inconclusive. Evaluations of diverse PPPs have rendered contradictory results in terms of student achievement, school segregation and productive efficiency (Languille, 2016; Waslander, Pater, & Van Der Weide, 2010). While some evaluations have found a positive impact in students' learning and productive efficiency (Di Gropello, 2006; Patrinos, 2006; Patrinos, Barrera Osorio, & Guáqueta, 2009; Witte, Thorn, Pritchard, & Claibourn, 1994), others have shown marginal or even null improvement for both dimensions (Bettinger, 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Gauri, 1999; Levin & Belfield, 2003; Orfield & Luce, 2016). Moreover, several studies have found negative effects pointing out that charter schools and voucher models, for example, aggravate educational inequalities (Alves et al., 2015; Elacqua, 2012; Fiske & Ladd, 2001; Narodowski & Nores, 2002).

To achieve a more precise understanding of how PPPs in education work, we suggest that scholarship in the field needs to widen its methods of inquiry and scope of research. First, researchers have almost exclusively relied on quantitative approaches while relatively few studies have used more context-conscious methodologies (see exceptions in Jabbar, 2015; Jennings, 2010; van Zanten, 2009; Verger, Bonal, & Zancajo, 2016). This has been the case regardless of the fact that policy enactment is significantly sensitive to context specificities (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011). Certainly, many of the theoretical assumptions and conditions that would ensure the proper functioning of PPPs in education may not be fulfilled or may be absent in real-life educational environments. For instance, previous studies have shown that school choice processes are far from following a rational, instrumental logic, but rather decisively mediated by structural constraints (Ben-Porath, 2009; McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014; Rich & Jennings, 2015). Notwithstanding, econometric models frequently used to assess the impact of educational PPPs are limited in their capacity to comprehensively capture or control for the effects of complex contextual variables. In comparison, qualitative research methods are useful means to thoroughly examine the underlying social mechanisms and the contextual features in which PPPs are enacted. Thus,

enriching the field with more qualitative studies might provide a clearer understanding of how PPPs in education actually work in real-life scenarios (Klees, 2016; Verger & Zancajo, 2015).

Second, along with methodological narrowness, research has been limited in terms of scope. To date, most researchers have focused on demand-side funding schemes, such as charter school models and school vouchers, often considered in generic terms, and unaware of the considerable variation between different policy designs. Interestingly, supply-side funding schemes have remained largely under-explored despite their historical presence and increasing dissemination in both developed and developing countries (Heyneman & Lee, 2016; Moschetti, 2018).

Unlike demand-side subsidies, supply-side subsidies are not allocated on a direct per capita basis, but relatively independently from enrollment. In general, allocation of funding is attached to certain eligibility criteria related to private schools' characteristics. Location, availability of nearby public schools, profit/non-profit status, and socioeconomic background are the most common criteria considered in supply-side subsidy schemes (Ensor, 2004; Patrinos et al., 2009). By detaching funding from enrollment, supply-side funding schemes are supposed not to promote school competition. Thus, unlike market dynamics intrinsic to demand-side funding models, state-funded private schools are supposed to *supplement* public school provision while keeping competition to a minimum (LaRocque, 2008; Montoya & Frugoni, 2016; Patrinos et al., 2009; Verger et al., 2018).¹

However, the existence of a subsidy policy may not be incentive enough to guarantee the expansion of private providers needed to compensate for government under-provision. Also, supply-side subsidies tend to pose an extra challenge for States in terms of accountability given the diverse, complex and often difficult to assess subsidy allocation criteria. Finally, although in theory supply-side subsidy policies do not entail school competition, they may not be effective enough to avoid *de facto* competitive practices among schools. In fact, where State enforcement capacity is insufficient to ensure private providers comply with the legislation, chances are high that schools engage in competitive practices, adopting opportunistic behaviors (Gauri & Vawda, 2004; Jennings, 2010; Linder & Rosenau, 2000; Verger et al., 2018).

Against this background, in this study we use an ethnographic approach to examine the supply-side subsidy policy for private schools in the context of some of the poorest neighborhoods of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Focusing on the ways in which private school principals and staff respond to, interpret and enact the policy framework, we identify the mechanisms and practices at play to explore whether—and if so, how—state-funded private schools do supplement (as intended by the policy framework) or rather compete with tuition-free government schools.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we review the context of emergence, process of adoption and main features of the subsidy policy in the city of Buenos Aires vis-à-vis the exceptionality of the Argentine case regarding the global diffusion of pro-market policies in education. Then, we present some methodological considerations and build an analytical framework to study schools' responses in competitive scenarios. Findings are presented in two sub-sections.

¹ PPPs in the form of supply-side funding can be found also in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in both developed and developing countries (e.g., Early Childhood Centers in Argentina and Head Start in the U.S., the largest federal ECE program targeted at low-income children). As the case presented in this paper, supply-side funding PPPs in ECE do not aim to foster competition among providers but to address the lack of government capacity to provide universal ECE services. Generally speaking, PPPs in ECE aim to expand access to high-quality services for poor and marginalized young children. Strikingly, in spite of the expansion of these forms of PPPs in ECE, little to none research has examined their effects in terms of competitive dynamics, marginalization and educational inequities for young children (Gustafsson-Wright, Smith & Gardiner, 2017).

First, we present the subsidized school leaders' general views regarding their role within the education system as providers of public education, and on whether they feel they supplement or rather compete with government provision. Then, we present a heuristic typology of the different logics of action summarizing and systematizing the schools' responses as their leading orientations toward the competitive environment. Last, in the discussion section, we briefly recapitulate our major findings and reflect on the equity implications in relation to the supply-side subsidy policy goals enacted in contexts of poverty.

Supply-Side Subsidies for Private Schools in Buenos Aires: Origins, Specificities, and Recent Trends.

By contrast with other PPP modalities, supply-side subsidy programs do not appear to rely on a well-established theory of change or a consistent set of triggering mechanisms (see, by contrast, the demand-side funding rationale as described by Lubienski, 2006). In fact, in most cases the ultimate objective of subsidy programs tends to be vaguely explicit, poorly defined, or even changed over time to serve different, frequently local agendas (Verger et al., 2018). This is particularly the case of those settings in which the institutionalization of a State-dependent private sector dates back to the expansion of mass schooling, as in the cases of Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Argentina (Morduchowicz, 2005; Vanderberghe, 1999; Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2017; Villarroya, 2002).

In these contexts where PPPs were established before the “neoliberal revolution” of the 1980s, more local and markedly endogenous factors have naturally outweighed the influence of global trends in policy adoption processes. As a result, supply-side subsidy programs established in these contexts constitute a particularly heterogeneous group in terms of policy design and rationale. In fact, most of these programs are addressed by specialized literature as singular and highly idiosyncratic arrangements—rather than instances of a particular variety of PPP (Verger et al., 2018).

The establishment of the supply-side subsidy policy for private schools in Argentina dates back to 1947 (National Law of Organization of Private Education of 1947 – No 13,047). In its origin, the policy aimed at dealing with job instability affecting teachers in private schools by allocating public funds for those that proved unable to afford teacher minimum wages (Cucuzza, 1997). The policy also served a power-building agenda providing a means for the recently elected Peronist government to build a much-needed political alliance with the Catholic Church, owner of the majority of private schools, and a relevant material and symbolic actor at the time (Bianchi, 1994; Caruso, 1995).

Over the following decades, subsequent laws and decrees incorporated only minor changes and defined relatively explicit different goals for the policy—i.e., expanding access in a cost-efficient manner, increasing diversification, guaranteeing an equitable distribution of resources among different providers. Most importantly, changes in the policy regulatory framework have been always oriented towards increasing the amount of public funding for private education while specifying surprisingly vague criteria and procedures to decide upon subsidy allocation (National Law No 13,343/48, Decrees 12,179/60; 15/64; 371/64; & 2,542/91).

One of the most interesting elements that emerges from the analysis of the subsidy policy adoption process is that its premature establishment, together with the disinvestment in the public education system registered as from the 1970s, seem to have “immunized” the Argentine education system from the later global diffusion of pro-market discourses and policy paradigms (Beech & Barrenechea, 2011). On the one hand, the policy's highly idiosyncratic features are explained by these historical-contextual factors. On the other hand, its retention—in Jessop's (2010) terms—and

its long-lasting disconnectedness vis-à-vis pro-market global discourses and mechanisms may be explained by (a) the difficulty of the Argentine political parties to articulate alternative discourses—largely due to a historical lack of technical cadres in matters of educational policy in the country, as compared to neighboring Chile, for instance (Diaz Rios, 2018); (b) Strong path-dependence dynamics and a perception of irreversibility based fundamentally on economic factors—as part of an arguably short-sighted cost-effectiveness narrative; And, (c) the impermeability to global trends posed by the unchallenged role of the Catholic Church as the main articulator of the discursive defense of private provision in the country (Moschetti, 2018a). Consequently, the subsidy policy has remained anchored in the essentialist doctrine of *freedom of instruction and learning* inscribed in the philosophical-social reflection of the Catholic Church and disconnected not only from pro-market thinking imported from the field of economics, but also from the discursive and policy developments of critical studies addressing the most recent debate on educational governance (Beech & Barrenechea, 2011; Moschetti, 2018b).

The subsidy policy currently in force in the City of Buenos Aires acquired its ultimate shape in 1991. Arguably paradoxical, subsidies are intended “to guarantee the right to learn and, consequently, to choose school in exercise of the freedom of education”, and “to ensure equal opportunities for all inhabitants to access education” (Decree No. 2542/91).² The policy allows private schools to apply for different amounts of subsidies to pay for teachers and principals’ salaries in some proportion (currently from 40% to 100%). Subsidies do not compensate for real estate investment, extracurricular teacher salaries, maintenance and so on, and schools are therefore allowed to charge extra –although limited– fees to meet these expenses. As mentioned above, the normative framework is not particularly exhaustive in determining and operationalizing the criteria that define subsidy allocation. It vaguely refers to “the socio-economic profile of the school”, “the style of teaching”, “the need for the school in its influence area” and its “financial performance,” without establishing clear eligibility indicators and metrics. Not surprisingly, some studies argue that there is probably too much room for discretion in the process and, consequently, while the subsidy policy is overall and formally targeted to schools serving marginalized populations, it has also been used to benefit middle-class schools in a clientelistic fashion (Mezzadra & Rivas, 2010; Sigal et al., 2011).

Subsidies have thus enabled the emergence and consolidation of many kinds of private schools, generally depending on the amount of subsidy they receive—and the corresponding fees they charge families. This research focuses specifically on the group of schools we pragmatically named “state-funded low-fee private schools” (S-LFPSs), that is, private schools (both for profit and not-for-profit, religious and non-religious) that receive full or almost full subsidies (between 80% and 100%) to pay for teachers and principals’ salaries, and that are entitled to charge very low fees to families.³ S-LFPSs are located most frequently in the poorest neighborhoods of the city—often facing a shortage of government schools (Martínez, 2012; Musa, 2013).

² Something similar can be observed, for instance, in the Spanish constitution where the right to education and the freedom of instruction principles appear simultaneously and somewhat linked to each other (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016).

³ While there are many differences between these schools and what the literature usually portrays as LFPSs (Balarin, 2016; Srivastava, 2007; Walford, 2011), the “affordable learning, poor household targeted, expansion of access, better quality and cost efficiency” narratives are equally present in the case of S-LFPS in Buenos Aires. S-LFPSs’ fees usually range from 15 to 50 USD a month, that is between 3% to 10% of the minimum wage (AR\$ 8,080 in 2017), although it is evident that the comparison is valid only for formal workers (Moschetti, 2015).

Interestingly, during the last two decades, these schools have played a key role in the privatization of primary education among middle-low and low-income families living in marginalized areas of the city (Gamallo, 2011; Judzik & Moschetti, 2016): Students from middle and high-income families have historically accounted for the growth of private education enrollment leading to a deep socio-economically segregated educational landscape (for a thorough understanding of the process, see Narodowski & Nores, 2002; Kruger, 2014). In contrast, this latest privatization trend has been particularly pronounced within low and middle-low income families who live in the poorest neighborhoods, arguably adding complexity to the historical socio-economic stratification dynamics evidenced in the city. Surprisingly, despite such trend, no new S-LFPSs were created throughout the period, but rather existing S-LFPSs have increased their enrollments by 50% on average between 2005 and 2015, suggesting that overcrowdedness is now a feature of both public and private subsidized schools across marginalized areas of the city (DGEGP-CABA, 2016).

The existence of this long-standing policy of supply-side subsidies for private schools, together with the more recent privatization process evidenced in marginalized neighborhoods, makes the City of Buenos Aires an interesting case to analyze how this modality of provision operates in a real context. More specifically, it offers a chance to gain insight into the relationship between supply-side subsidy programs and equality of educational opportunities for disadvantaged families, and to reflect on the overall implications of privatization policies targeting marginalized populations.

Methods and Analytical Framework

This article presents results and analysis forming part of a larger policy, school and household-level study on the S-LFPS sector in the City of Buenos Aires. The study's main purpose is to examine the extent and conditions under which S-LFPSs can supplement government provision and increase educational opportunities for students in economically disadvantaged areas. Following Srivastava and Hopwood's (2009) framework for qualitative data analysis, the study iteratively addresses three interrelated analytical levels: (a) the regulatory framework, or what the policy says and does in terms of "rules of the game"; (b) the S-LFPSs' logics of action, or how schools operate within the regulatory framework; and (c) the parental choice rationalities in relation to S-LFPSs.

The results and discussion in this article are based on the findings at the S-LFPS level. We used ethnographic methods to explore S-LFPSs' views on competition and the different responses they deploy regarding enrollment under the supply-side policy framework. We selected nine S-LFPSs offering primary education located in the city's poorest neighborhoods to conduct on-site observations during a period of eight months (June 2015 through January 2016), as well as in-depth interviews with principals, owners, teachers, and legal advisors ($n=52$)⁴. Schools were selected as a stratified purposeful sample based on the type of provider following the average distribution prevailing in the S-LFPS sector. The final sample is composed of four schools belonging to non-profit organizations (NPO), three belonging to the Catholic Church or to some Catholic religious order, and two belonging to private companies. Throughout fieldwork, we explored how S-LFPS school leaders enact the supply-side subsidy policy on the ground, unveiling how they interpret, signify and respond to the supply-side funding policy in their everyday practices in relation to enrollment.

⁴ All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees and schools have been withheld from this text by mutual agreement.

Drawing on previous, although limited, research on schools' responses to other mostly demand-driven-PPP frameworks, we developed a non-exhaustive list of potential responses followed by schools in competitive scenarios as a preliminary checklist to identify whether S-LFPSs engaged in any, and with what consequences (Figure 1).

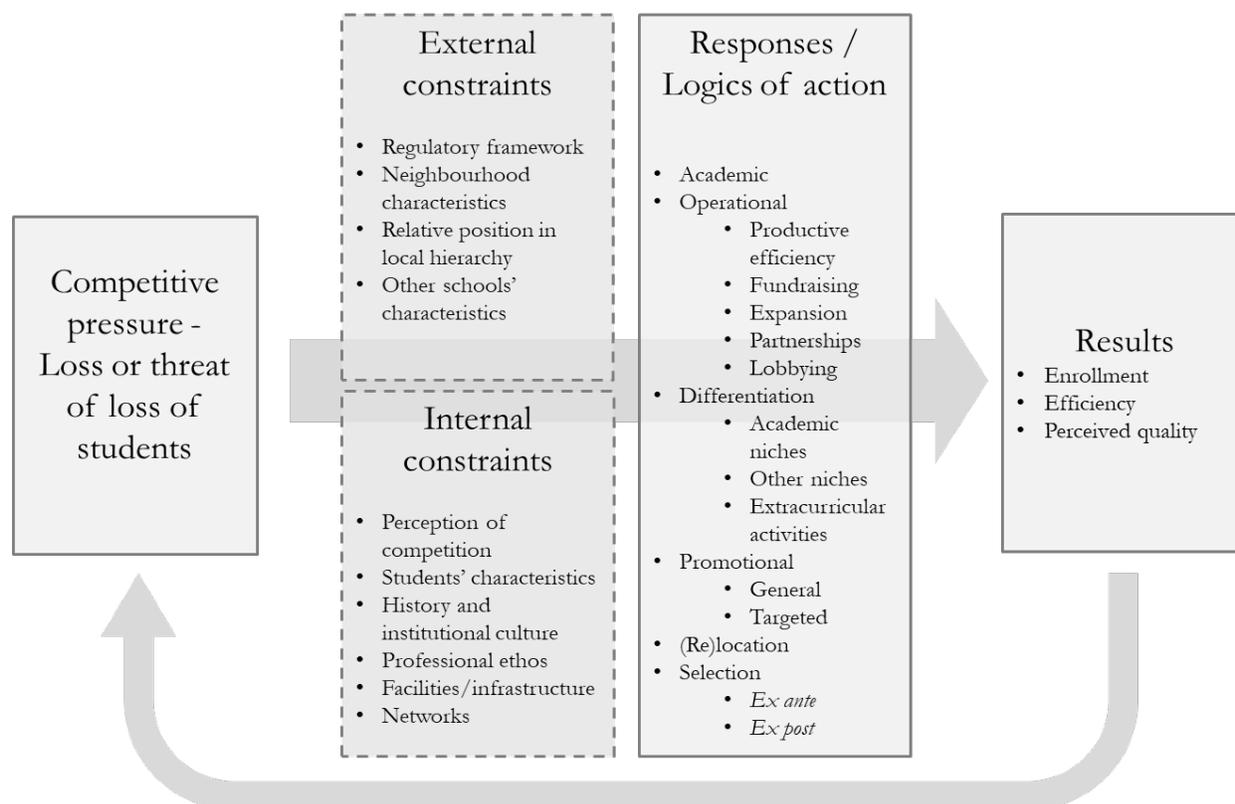


Figure 1. Analytical framework.

Note: Own elaboration based on Ball and Maroy (Ball & Maroy, 2009), Woods, Bagley and Glatter (1998), Jabbar (2015), and Van Zanten (2009).

During the data analysis phase, we conducted successive rounds of theoretical coding. To do so, we developed a coding scheme systematizing the six major potential responses schools may resort to under competitive pressure to attract enrollment. These potential responses are: *academic*, regarding changes in curriculum and efforts to improve quality; *operational*, affecting how resources are procured and used in order to gain efficiency and ultimately achieve economies of scale through expansion or the development of partnerships; *differentiation*, aiming at buffering from competition—arguably generating a less intense “monopolistic competition” (Lubienski, 2003)—by developing academic or non-academic niches, or offering extracurricular activities to gain uniqueness (Jabbar, 2015; Woods et al., 1998); *promotional*, developing various types of general or targeted communication actions;⁵ *(re)location*, relating to schools' location decisions vis-à-vis the geographical

⁵ While many consider “promotional activities” and “marketing” to be synonyms (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Jabbar, 2015), we refer to promotional activities exclusively as external communication efforts (advertising). However, studies focusing on schools' marketing strategies in more dynamic and mature marketized environments than those created by supply-side subsidies, should note that marketing is a complex process in which promotional activities only occur after schools have engaged in other marketing

demand patterns (Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009); and *selection*, which can be *ex ante* (cream-skimming), or *ex post* (getting rid of low-performing students)⁶ (Jennings, 2010; Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002; West, Ingram, & Hind, 2006).

Last, our analysis also recognizes that how schools engage in policy enactment is inevitably mediated by a series of constraints—or “mediating factors” (Jabbar, 2015). These factors are both external (the regulatory framework itself, neighborhood’s and nearby schools’ characteristics, schools’ relative position in the local hierarchy), and internal (perception of competition, enrollment level, student’s characteristics, history and ethos, and so on; Ball & Maroy, 2009)—and data have been coded accordingly.

Exploring the Supply-Side Subsidy Policy in a ‘Lived’ (Competitive) Environment

In this section, we present our major findings. First, we unfold S-LFPS leaders’ general views regarding their role within the education system as providers of public education, and on whether they feel they supplement or rather compete with government provision. Note that the no-competition narrative—that is, the fact that S-LFPSs are supposed to be neutral in terms of generating competitive interdependencies—implicit in most supply-side subsidy policies makes this point particularly relevant since it reveals the ways in which schools actually interpret and enact the policy on the ground.

Second, we present a heuristic typology (see Lunt, 2011) of the different logics of action summarizing and systematizing the schools’ responses as their leading orientations toward the environment mediated by the different, case-specific internal and external constraints. By logics of action, we refer to “the predominant orientations given to the conduct of a school in different spheres of action, through decisions, routines or practical choices, as reconstructed *ex post facto* by an observer” (Maroy & van Zanten, 2009, p. 72). Following Ball and Maroy (2009) and van Zanten (2009) we use the concept of logic of action as an enlarged version of the concept of strategy. The latter tends to be narrowly associated to an instrumental rationality, whereas the concept of logic of action “does not suppose that school agents are conscious of the effects of their choices or that they act on the basis of a rational-instrumental calculation of costs, means and benefits” (van Zanten, 2009, p. 87). In these terms, logics of action can be “strategic”—and most certainly are—but not exclusively.

S-LFPS’s Leaders Rhetoric of Collaboration, Harmony and Equivalency

As mentioned above, supply-side subsidies in Buenos Aires aim to expand access and guarantee the right to choose schools for socio-economically disadvantaged families, by reducing the cost of attending private schools where publicly-run supply is insufficient. Theoretically, as funding is relatively independent from enrollment, S-LFPSs are assumed not to promote school competition, but to supplement public school supply. In this vein, our exploration of S-LFPS leaders’ views regarding their role within the educational system revealed that they do not identify neighboring

activities such as scanning the local market (both analyzing consumer and competitor profiles), and building differentiation at the product level by means of substantive or symbolic attributes (Zancajo, 2018). It falls beyond the scope of this study to analyze marketing strategies from this systemic perspective.

⁶ Van Zanten (2009), for instance, distinguishes between *first-order* and *second-order* competition, that is, whether schools compete for enrollment, or rather for the “best pupils” by means of different explicit or implicit selection practices.

schools as competitors. Rather, the overarching rhetoric is one of cooperation and harmonious relationship:

I wouldn't say we compete for enrollment with public schools...We are part of the same education system. We are a private school, but we are part of the same public education system, then we are public too, I think. (Owner, Private company school)

We do not see each other as competitors. If possible, we try help each other...We all work in education... We have been collaborative with other public and private schools. (Principal, Catholic Church school)

Families can choose whatever suits them best; they can go for public or private subsidized. All alternatives are equally valid. (Principal, NPO school)

S-LFPS owners and principals depict their functions as cooperating with public schools and neutrally offering educational alternatives for families. According to their narratives, private and public schools are equal, and S-LFPSs have developed helpful and collaborative relationships among each other and with public schools.

Notably, the rationale that private and public schools do not compete but rather supplement each other is not only grounded in the city's long-lasting supply-subsidy policy principles, but also in the 2006 National Education Law (No. 26,206) and its 1993 predecessor Federal Education Law (No. 24,195). These laws refer to all schools as public, naming private schools as privately-managed public schools, and public schools as state-managed public schools. Some argue that this terminological turn has had important consequences for legitimating the allocation of state subsidies for private schools (Feldfeber & Gluz, 2011; Gamallo, 2015; Vior & Rodríguez, 2012). The way S-LFPS owners and principals conceive and make sense of their roles within the educational system is consistent with this legal framework. They explicitly reject the idea of competition and view themselves as public servers. In one principal's words, S-LFPSs "are part of the same public education system... so [S-LFPSs] are public too."

Moreover, S-LFPS leaders were reluctant to criticize public schools. The following exchange with a school principal serves as an example:

Researcher: What differences do you see between your school and the public schools in this neighborhood?

Principal: There are no differences...I do not want to talk bad about public schools, OK? (Principal, Private company school)

Like this principal, at first, virtually every interviewee refused to engage in criticism of public schools. Arguably, talking negatively about public schools would entail recognizing a competitive landscape, with "better and worse" players, "winner and losers." Instead, S-LFPS leaders conveyed that "all alternatives are equally valid" (Principal, NPO school), or that "there are no differences" (Principal, Private company school).

Notwithstanding this rhetoric of equivalence, private schools are characterized as being superior in most S-LFPS leaders' discourses. To a great extent, they describe S-LFPSs as being better than public schools in terms of "academic quality and teacher engagement." To illustrate this, it is worth returning to the dialogue presented above and looking at how it was resumed:

Principal: There are no differences...I do not want to talk bad about public schools, OK?

Researcher: No, of course not.

Principal: With all due respect, I... I think they do not teach anything. The academic level is extremely low. Kids go to public schools just to 'keep the seats warm.'⁷ And teachers as well, I'm afraid. (Principal, Private company school)

In this exchange, the principal declares "there are no differences" between private and public schools but continues to say that public schools "do not teach anything" and that "the academic level is extremely low." Likewise, other S-LFPS leaders assert: "Public schools do not bother to teach" (Principal, Catholic Church school); "Students from the nearby public schools are very violent" (Principal, NPO school); And "[in public schools] they don't control student attendance and families don't even care" (Principal, Catholic Church school).

In short, data suggest S-LFPS leaders share a widespread negative view of public schools but experience a moral dilemma in openly criticizing them. Further contradictions in S-LFPS leaders' narratives of cooperation and equivalency continued to emerge as the interviews unfolded. The following quotes, for instance, suggest that S-LFPSs indeed experience competitive pressure:

Last year they opened a new public school a few blocks away from here; a beautiful school and, of course, no tuition fees. We were scared to death that we were going to lose enrollment. Because, of course, we must have students to keep the school open. (Principal, NPO school)

It is impossible for us to build relationships with public schools. They won't talk to us. They label us as if we were stealing students from them, I don't know why, it's just crazy. (Principal, NPO school)

As these school principals depict, despite supply-side subsidies being detached from enrollment and of the overarching discourses of absence of school competition, attracting and retaining enrollment is still a matter of concern for both S-LFPSs and public schools. On the one hand, the possibility of losing enrollment as from the opening of a new public school "scared [S-LFPSs] to death." On the other hand, public schools "label [private schools] as if they were stealing students from them."

In sum, a rhetoric of cooperation, harmony and equivalence seems to emerge as a first reaction in S-LFPS leaders' discourses regarding their roles within the education system and their relationships with other schools, especially public. While this rhetoric smoothly fits with the tenets of the supply-side subsidy policy and broader legal frameworks, a closer look reveals S-LFPS leaders being hesitant and somewhat contradictory.

Interestingly, from the perspective of public schools, it appears that S-LFPSs "steal" students from them. However, the nature of such competition remains unclear and is strongly mediated by the neighborhoods' schooling dynamics, and especially by the fact that these neighborhoods have historically suffered from having not enough schools (considering both public and private) (Musa, 2013; Sigal et al., 2011). As one Catholic Church S-LFPS principal put it: "Fortunately or unfortunately, there's 'fish for all' in this district". This feature is particularly relevant because it helps to understand that in marginalized contexts, contrary to what global school choice discourses tend to assume, power to choose remains essentially on the supply side.

Worth considering, while competition dynamics are more evident when supply clearly outstrips demand and forces under-enrolled schools to close, competition can take more subtle

⁷ Argentine saying referring to the act of being physically present at one's workplace but not in fact working.

forms and schools may compete for enrollment and resources but simultaneously for other less obvious forms of capital, such as prestige and reputation. Prestige and reputation, as many have noted, are some of the most relied on proxies used by families in their school choice decisions; so, for schools, prestige and reputation increase desirability and may lead to success in enrollment. However, in education services production, competition for prestige is closely linked with competition for certain types of students. As noted by Van Zanten (2009, p. 86): “In all service professions, the characteristics of clients strongly modify work content and occupational prestige. This triggers a ‘second-order’ competition between schools to get the best—usually conceived as the most academically able—students.” Arguably then, public schools in the area feel threatened by the existence of S-LFPSs not because they might end up having less students—which is most unlikely given the current demand-supply imbalance—but probably “less academically able” ones. In other words, second-order competition is to be thought of as a mechanism resulting in public schools having to serve a greater number of marginalized students.

Ideal-Type Competitive Logics of Action Developed by S-LFPSs

This sub-section presents the typology of logics of action identified from our data. S-LFPSs were classified based on the different competitive responses they developed (academic, operational, and so on) and considering the frequently associated internal and external constraints mediating such responses in each case. Using these criteria of classification, we identified three different heuristic ideal types of logics of action: (a) Highly-selective S-LFPSs; (b) Focused S-LFPSs; and (c) Missionary S-LFPSs. These need to be seen as ideal types that contribute to systematize and group different real cases, but do not necessarily correspond to empirical situations directly. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of each type.

Table 1

S-LFPSs' logics of action. A typology

Type	External Constraints	Internal Constraints	Practices	Logic of Action
Highly-selective	Located on the border between squatter settlements and middle and lower-middle class neighborhoods	Low perception of competition	Significant increases in group size/ Expansion to other educational levels/ Fundraising/ (Compulsory) Volunteering activities	
	High position within the local hierarchy	Relatively diverse socio-economic status of students (low, lower-middle and middle class)	Incorporation of full-day bilingual program options, while sustaining half-day option/ Tracking	Increase enrollment by stressing academic excellence to consolidate high position in the local hierarchy
	One or no S-LFPS and no more than two public schools within 0.6 miles of distance	Long-established institutions, but recently reoriented due to changes in management entities	Differentiation through academic extracurricular activities, infrastructure and other symbolic attributes No promotional practices Systematized, <i>ex ante</i> selection processes, focused on academic and behavioral dimensions / <i>Ex post</i> selection	
Focused	Located in low-middle class neighborhoods, close (0.3 miles) to squatter settlements	High or average perception of competition with respect to other S-LFPSs and some 'new' state schools	Development of some alternative pedagogical approaches / Extracurricular, non-academic activities	Increase or sustain the position in the local hierarchy by targeting middle or lower-middle class families
	Average position in the local hierarchy in relation to other S-LFPS, and high in relation to neighboring public schools	Mostly middle and lower-middle class students		

Table 1 (Cont'd.)

S-LFPSs' logics of action. A typology

Type	External Constraints	Internal Constraints	Practices	Logic of Action
Focused	More than two S-LFPSs and two public schools within 0.6 miles of distance	Relatively new institutions	Moderate increase of groups size/ “Low-cost” extracurricular activities/ Partnerships with other schools Development of “integration, caring or alternative” niches No promotional practices Ex ante and ex post student selection based on behavioral aspects and SES	
Missionary	Located in lower-middle class neighborhoods, close (0.3 miles) to squatter settlements Low position in the local hierarchy considering only S-LFPSs, but high or average w/ neighboring public schools More than two S-LFPSs and two public schools within 0.6 miles of distance	High or average perception of competition Low and lower-middle class students Long-established institutions originally linked to the social mission of some secular or religious entity	Basic curricular approach Moderate increase of group sizes, primary and secondary in same classrooms, austerity measures Development of non-traditional niches (“problematic students”, “safe spaces”, “care”) /Development of basic symbolic attributes (uniforms, façade cladding) Scarce or null ex ante selection of students/ Ex post selection in cases of severe behavioral problems	Unable to compete with other S-LFPSs, they aim to sustain enrollment by developing non-traditional, low-prestige niches.

Note: Own elaboration

Highly-Selective S-LFPSs. The first type is that of S-LFPSs that hold a high position in the local hierarchy, both in relation to public schools and to other S-LFPSs. In general, S-LFPSs pursuing a highly-selective logic of action are religious schools owned by NPOs that operate outside the scope of the Archiepiscopate of the city of Buenos Aires. These schools are usually located on the border between middle-class, middle-low class areas and squatter settlements, without many nearby competitors. Consequently, they enjoy high and heterogeneous demand. In this context, they develop a logic of action aimed at increasing the number of students, while simultaneously trying to consolidate their privileged position in the local hierarchy emphasizing features such as academic excellence and discipline. In fact, the *ethos* of these schools tends to be inextricably linked to traditional values, discipline and respect for the rules.

These schools' good reputation ensures that they have a level of demand always higher than their installed capacity, which they seek to maximize by increasing the number of students per classroom. Every school in this group had increased class sizes to an average of 45 students over the last decade, thus maximizing the use of both facilities and teacher salary subsidies, while collecting more fees from families. The legislation does not specify maximum group sizes nor student-teacher ratios and, as a matter of fact, increasing class sizes is somehow reinforced by the subsidy policy:

Researcher: In general, you have groups of 43 to 48 students, right?

Principal: Yes. Honestly, we would rather work with smaller groups, no more than 30 students per classroom.... I don't worry about teacher salaries; I have them subsidized. But we have all the other expenses that need to be paid for with tuition fees. Then, I must maximize the use of the classrooms and teachers we have. Our financial equation is subsidies plus fees, so I have to play with the number of students and fees to break even. (Principal, NPO school)

Operational practices aimed at maximizing productive efficiency naturally jeopardize the pedagogical benefits that smaller group sizes and lower student-teacher ratios encompass. In this regard, a teacher explains:

There are too many students in each classroom. Then maybe ten, 15 children can follow your lesson... But then you see some are struggling. We do try to help these kids as much we can, but being 40 kids per group, in general, makes it very difficult to do individual, personalized work. (Teacher, NPO school)

The high level of demand, the practices aimed at maximizing the use of available resources and facilities, and the mandate to preserve their good reputation result in an extended use of exhaustive student selection practices based on academic and behavioral criteria. S-LFPSs in this group engage in selection practices establishing formal admission processes and usually implementing two to three selection techniques such as academic tests, screening interviews with candidates and parents, psychological tests, examination of transcripts and academic reports from previous schools. Despite selection practices being explicitly forbidden (Law No. 2,681/2008) and most infrequent in primary education internationally⁸, they were openly described by principals and teachers, both as cream-skimming and counselling out. In two cases, even web pages contained detailed information on the admission criteria and process.

[Prospective students] must go through the interviews and must pass the admission exams in order to be admitted... Siblings, little brothers, sisters, cousins, everybody

⁸ An exception can be found in Bogotá's charter-like schools (see Edwards et al., 2017).

has to take and pass these exams if they want to get a spot. If they're relatives, then it's easier because we already know the family, but they must pass the exams anyway. (Teacher, NPO school)

Then there are students to whom we want to give signs that they should leave. For instance, we tell parents: 'Look, if he continues here, he will repeat.' Because some children are problematic, or they never reach the academic performance standards. (Principal, NPO school)

Selection practices result in a somehow homogenous composition of students "capable and willing" to focus on academic excellence. This, in turn, makes teaching and learning possible in 45-student classrooms. Students homogeneity regarding skills and attitudes towards schooling does not always determine—given the characteristics of the context—socio-economic homogeneity. In some cases, the tensions derived from socio-economic diversity are "solved" by segregating internally in different groups, often based on parental involvement. In short, evidence suggests that these schools are further deepening marginalization (by means of attitudinal and academic selection processes) within already socio-economically disadvantaged populations.

Finally, although maximum tuition fees are regulated by the Ministry, these apply basically for curricular subjects but admit great flexibility for extras. Accordingly, offering extracurricular activities, additional subjects and services, provides schools with the chance to bypass the maximum fees regulations and charge add-ons to basic fees. Expectedly, highly-selective S-LFPSs increase available resources by providing, for instance, language, math and technology lessons at an additional cost for families. Offering extracurricular activities also helps them build differentiation: S-LFPSs in this group frequently offer extras of certain academic relevance and develop other symbolic attributes always linked to excellence and discipline.

Focused S-LFPSs. The second group is that of S-LFPSs located in low-middle class areas, although relatively close to squatter settlements. Schools in this group enjoy an average position in the local hierarchy in relation to other S-LFPSs and a high position with respect to neighboring public schools. They perceive a high or medium level of competition from other S-LFPSs and from some recently built public schools. Focused S-LFPSs are characterized by having a middle and lower middle-class student population and, in general, surprisingly little presence of students coming from the surrounding squatter settlements. In all cases, schools in this group are relatively new, established less than 25 years ago.

In order to sustain or improve their position in the local hierarchy, they usually deploy more tactical responses, especially trying to target middle or lower middle-class families as a way of gaining differentiation from other S-LFPSs and public schools. In this sense, they may develop some alternative pedagogical approach⁹—although barely innovative and poorly implemented—or to offer low-cost non-academic extracurricular activities, but of a certain symbolic value, aimed at attracting middle-class families (e.g., recreational activities, art workshops).

Principal: In the morning we teach the official curriculum. In the afternoon we do workshops and different activities. [In the afternoon] we put the groups together, so first and second-graders, one; third and fourth, two; fifth and sixth, three. Then we have three large groups.

⁹ Some of these schools may also develop non-traditional niches to increase their trade area—e.g., a "caring" teaching style or integrating middle-class students with special educational needs.

Researcher: And who gives these workshops?

Director: Well, it's usually some teacher who works full day, or some support teacher, or girls who are finishing their studies to become teachers. (Principal, Private company school)

Interestingly, schools in this group tend to be equally or even more selective than those pursuing a highly-selective logic of action. However, selection practices in this case are focused almost exclusively on assessing behavioral aspects and the socioeconomic background of the applicants.

There is an admission process including a small test, to know where they come from, a small interview with the family... And sometimes, a small test with the educational psychologist, to see if... That is, no one is discarded for his or her knowledge, but we evaluate whether this is the best school for that family, whether we can help. (Principal, NPO school)

First there's an interview with the educational psychologist. Parents also have to bring a report from the previous school or kindergarten. What we try to do is...not to select, but to see if the kid would fit in the group. We interview the parents too, and then there is an exam to see if the child... It's not a qualifying exam...it's kind of diagnostic. We don't want the kid to feel he/she is out of place. (Principal, Catholic Church school)

Principals in this group tend to offer more circuitous explanations, arguably struggling to avoid the political (and legal) incorrectness of developing selection practices based on socio-economic background. Consequently, they often rely on arguments such as ensuring a “good fit” between the school and the family or avoiding situations in which students might feel “out of place”. It is worth noting that much of the literature that discusses student selection practices under voucher and charter schemes highlights how these practices are often used to shape the social composition of schools, generally excluding candidates from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. The ambiguity of the notion of “fit” is not, therefore, anecdotal. Indeed, in the face of the political incorrectness and moral dilemmas surrounding these matters, it has been observed that schools tend to resort to more ambiguous justifications, all of which supposedly put the well-being of the child and family above the interests of the institution.

Missionary S-LFPSs. Finally, the third group is composed by S-LFPSs located in lower middle-class areas close to squatter settlements that hold a low position in the local hierarchy in relation to other S-LFPSs, but medium or high as compared to neighboring public schools. These schools experience a high perception of competition and account for a mostly low-class student population and, to a lesser extent, lower-middle class. In general, these are long-standing schools, originally established by and linked to the social mission of some secular or religious organization.

Missionary schools are unable to compete with other S-LFPSs: They face important limitations in terms of infrastructure and teach the basic curriculum while trying to sustain the level of demand developing low-prestige non-traditional niches—often accepting “problematic” or repeating students from other S-LFPSs. Consistently, *ex ante* selection practices are scarce or nonexistent and non-re-enrollment is limited to cases of severe behavioral problems.

Overall, we have kids mostly coming from other schools in the neighborhood. They come because there's some kind of difficulty in between. We are a small school and

we have a support teacher, which allows us to work in a more individualized way. So, for example, we receive kids from school X; no repeaters accepted there. School Z, the same. No repeaters. (Principal, NPO school)

In order to build differentiation from public schools, missionary S-LFPSs either (a) emphasize elements such as security, a “familiar”, safe and caring teaching climate; or (b) build a very basic set of symbolic attributes—e.g., low-cost uniforms, take-home books, keeping graffiti off the schools’ façades.

Parents reject public schools because they are a disaster. Children take drugs at the school entrance because they have ‘free hours’ when teachers don’t come to work and so they go in and out of school without control. Those things do not happen at this school. Here they are safe and supervised. [...] We know each and every one of our kids and we take good care of them. (Principal, school C)

These are expressive schools (by default) where principals and teachers develop “missionary” professional ethics seeking to maintain a good school climate. They avoid disruptions or incidents, while try to raise academic performance through more personalized teaching. Additionally, given the families’ predominantly low socio-economic status, schools in this group are unable to collect extra fees by offering extracurricular activities. Infrastructure limitations make it also impossible to raise the number of students per class. Their economic sustainability is, thus, based on austerity measures and the use of primary level classrooms to teach secondary level in the afternoon shift.

Discussion

The introduction of a supply-side subsidy policy meant a fundamental change in educational provision affecting structural variables in the Argentine educational system. The progressive public-private dualization resulting from this change had its epicenter in the biggest urban areas of the country and, in particular, the city of Buenos Aires. As with other PPPs schemes, supply-side subsidy policies entail a restructuring of traditional bureaucratic-centralized provision models. With the shortcomings and nuances observed, and motivated ultimately by a criterion of productive efficiency, the policy seeks to ensure equal opportunities and freedom of choice for disadvantaged families. As described, unlike most PPPs schemes, supply-side subsidy policies seek to satisfy these or other objectives without fostering competition among schools.

In this article we have analyzed this policy *in action* (Felouzis, Maroy, & van Zanten, 2013), examining how the normative framework affects S-LFPSs’ practices to assess the extent and conditions under which these practices follow or depart from the policy goals. In this sense, we identified a series of competitive responses developed by S-LFPSs in relation to the demand, emerging from their interpretation and translation of the rules of the game and incentives provided by the policy framework (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011). The analysis of these responses has evidenced certain links, regularities and discontinuities among the S-LFPSs of the sample. Although the analysis is specific to S-LFPSs in Buenos Aires, we believe it provides a good frame for thinking about the nuances in various types of schools more generally. We have thus synthesized these patterns in a heuristic typology of logics of action helpful to understand the different ways in which S-LFPSs address the educational needs of families in disadvantaged neighborhoods. A number of crosscutting issues and implications emerge from this analysis that need to be discussed further.

First, proponents of market policies in education tend to perceive supply-side subsidy schemes as unattractive PPP models (Patrinos et al., 2009; Tooley & Longfield, 2015). This is mainly because, unlike other forms of PPPs such as school vouchers, supply-side subsidies would not generate the level of competitive pressure on schools necessary to unleash the supposedly virtuous mechanisms typically associated with models of non-bureaucratic provision (Lubienski, 2006; Verger, Bonal, et al., 2016). However, the indirect nature of the link between funding and enrollment together with the subsidy eligibility criteria in the case of the city of Buenos Aires do not seem to result in a decrease in competitive intensity. As evidenced, S-LFPSs deploy a very varied set of competitive practices aimed at increasing enrollment and ensuring the necessary material resources to “remain in the business”. Strikingly, even with the nuances mentioned, these practices do not differ significantly in nature from those observed in *a priori* more competitive environments determined by demand-side funding policies (Jabbar, 2015; Woods et al., 1998; Zancajo, 2017). Our findings suggest that, as van Zanten (2009) acutely points out, competitive pressure and competitive responses from schools are to be expected in any educational system where resources are not allocated completely through bureaucratic procedures, and not only in the few national and subnational cases that have indeed introduced formal quasi-market reforms. In the same vein, our findings suggest that although privatization may not automatically imply the establishment of markets, it does help to create favorable environments for the development of competitive links among the actors (Marginson, 1993). In fact, as our study shows, marginalization via student selection can produce market effects without an actual education market policy.

Second, on many occasions, PPPs are adopted to promote educational innovation and diversification and, accordingly, expand choice opportunities for families. Nonetheless, some have shown that bringing the private sector in is not always a synonym for diversifying educational approaches taken by schools (Jabbar, 2015; Lubienski, 2009; Verger et al., 2018). In fact, private schools are usually those that are more sensitive to accountability and competitive pressures in the context of PPPs, which is why they tend to adopt teacher-centered and traditional forms of education (Lubienski, 2003; Zancajo, 2018). Although the normative framework of Buenos Aires’ subsidy policy does not make explicit reference to these objectives, diversification and innovation constitute elements frequently attributed to the private sector and added discursively as *ex post* policy goals by many government officials—arguably as a means of legitimation and as a way to symbolically “update” the policy to current global policy discourses. However, while the heterogeneity of the S-LFPS sector is evident in terms of profit/non-profit status, fee amounts, and religious orientation, the analysis of less evident, strictly educational features of these schools tends to question some assumptions. Thus, for example, regarding the type of academic practices developed by S-LFPSs, we identified a somewhat isomorphic process characterized by a relative convergence concerning the type of curricular design; extracurricular activities; (traditional) pedagogical approach; management-driven innovation (alliances to achieve economies of scale, development of “portfolios” of schools); and a certain tendency to standardize teaching practices, most frequent in schools pursuing a highly-selective logic of action. This general trend coexists with a series of non-substantive differentiation practices carried out by every S-LFPSs in the sample to a greater or lesser extent. On the one hand, on a collective and eminently discursive level, S-LFPSs seem to work in coalition heavily criticizing public schools while communicating a series of crosscutting symbolic attributes (safety, quality, responsiveness) shaping a somehow “private school brand”. On the other hand, at an individual level and strongly conditioned by the internal and external constraints faced in each case, S-LFPSs seek to differentiate themselves from each other—and, eventually, from certain public schools perceived as competitors—offering better facilities, non-academic extra-curricular activities, or developing some non-traditional (low-prestige) niche offer.

Third, the economic viability of S-LFPSs is based on public subsidies and monthly fees paid by families. Such scheme somehow forces schools to develop a series of practices to increase resources and efficiency. As evidenced in this study, one of the most widespread practices is to significantly increase the number of students per class. The striking normative vagueness and, ultimately, the lack government oversight, allow S-LFPSs to make intensive use of classrooms and human resources addressing operational rather than pedagogical considerations. Moreover, the subsidy policy seems to create incentives that reinforce the development of these practices by setting, indirectly, an optimum of 50 students per class, thus maximizing the equation of subsidies, use of classrooms, and user fees. Additionally, although the normative framework establishes maximum fees, it also allows schools to bypass these maximum fees regulations by charging add-ons for extracurricular activities, annual tuition, maintenance and equipment expenses, non-educational services, among other concepts. On the other hand, there are no restrictions or guidelines for S-LFPSs that seek to develop alternative financing sources. In this line, some have developed sophisticated fundraising schemes aimed at both corporations and individual donors using the “affordable learning, poor household targeted” narrative as a legitimating halo. However, very few S-LFPSs have the capacity or experience to develop fundraising practices in a sustainable manner, which tends to generate large inequalities among providers relegating schools (public and S-LFPSs) serving mostly marginalized students.

Finally, one of the most significant findings of this study is the extended use of student selection practices among the S-LFPS sector. The pervasiveness of such practices has been also observed under other PPP schemes in different contexts around the globe (Carrasco, Gutiérrez, & Flores, 2017; Jabbar, 2015; Jennings, 2010; West et al., 2006; Zancajo, 2017). Beyond the determinants that generally explain “second-order competition” dynamics (van Zanten, 2009), some seem to be fundamental for understanding the case of Buenos Aires: (a) the overall public and private educational supply inadequacy in disadvantaged neighborhoods of the city; (b) the existence of two different enrollment/admission circuits—i.e., online for public schools and school-based face-to-face for S-LFPSs; (c) the absence of government oversight; (d) the extended false assumption that private schools are allowed to select students together with the lack of information provided by the educational authorities; and (e) the incentive structure of the policy itself that, on the one hand, promotes increasing class sizes and, on the other, arguably forces schools to select the most academically able or well-behaved students to make it possible to work in large groups. Interestingly, the incidence of these factors is such that selection practices are present not only in for-profit S-LFPSs, as frequently assumed. In contrast, our results suggest that exposure to competitive dynamics may not necessarily impact differently between non-profit and for-profit providers regarding the development of certain opportunistic behaviors that tend to widen the gap with the public sector (Bano, 2008).

In conclusion, our examination of the supply-side subsidy policy in Buenos Aires evidences that S-LFPSs experience competitive pressures, engage in opportunistic behaviors and deploy a vast repertoire of competitive practices to attract students. The competitive scenario we have unveiled proves that the legal conceptualization of all schools as public along with the allocation of subsidies for private schools independently from enrollment are utterly insufficient measures to avoid school competition. Within a context of demand-supply imbalance, deep-rooted normative inconsistencies, lack of governmental oversight and deficient regulatory enforcement, S-LFPSs’ competitive logics of action hinder the objectives and assumptions on which the supply-side subsidy policy is based on. As enacted on the ground, rather than ensuring the right to choose school providing equality of educational opportunity, the supply-side subsidy policy may be contributing to shape and deepen a highly unequal educational landscape increasing segregation in already marginalized populations.

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