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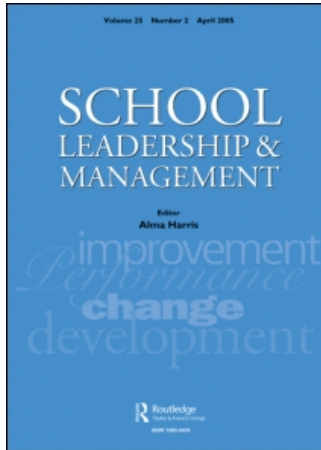
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### Public-private partnerships

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Public–private partnerships

The involvement of the private sector in education is surrounded by controversy. It engages a political debate about the role of the private sector in what has traditionally been seen as a public service domain. The involvement of the private sector can be seen as an example of a move from traditional public administration to a new public management, often characterised as ‘managerialism’. While the policy debates about the nature and purpose of education provision are important and significant, this special issue does not revisit such debates, which have been covered extensively elsewhere. A view of the changing educational framework may be one where we consider three dimensions: who pays for education? Who provides for education? Who benefits from education? The traditional public administration model was one of the state paying for education, the state providing education and, it is to be hoped, children benefiting from education.

The last 20 years have seen some erosion of state paying for education, with increasing reliance on parental financial support and individual student loans in university education, for example, and the increase in business support in the form of funding for City Technology Colleges (CTCs), Specialist Schools and now Academies. Concern about the outcomes of education as seen in benefits to children has resulted in an increase in the role of the private sector in terms of partnership contracts to run individual Local Education Authorities (LEAs) or parts of LEAs, and partnership contracts to support or run individual schools. This changing of the ‘who provides’ dimension of the three dimensions of the educational framework has been prompted by two forces. The first is the perceived failure of some LEAs and of individual schools by traditional public sector management and the second is a policy belief that private sector skills could improve traditional public sector monopoly provision. This mini special issue comprising of three articles does not intend to engage in this policy debate. Instead it looks at research on the ground in terms of current practice, to evaluate what has happened and whether a framework for analysis can emerge for examining the impact of public–private partnerships.

The first article in this issue, by Brent Davies and Gilbert Hentschke, reviews the literature on partnering to outline the perceived benefits of partnering and to set up two useful models for examining the field. The first model looks at ways of partnering by examining networking, coordinating, cooperating and collaborating. The second model looks at seven dimensions of organisational relationships and compares markets, hierarchies and partnerships as alternative methods of organisational operation. The paper moves on to consider perspectives from the literature concerning the criteria that lead to ‘successful’ partnerships. The research looks at two different public/private partnerships: one, a company that undertook a contract

for the school improvement service of an LEA and the second, a company that undertook to run an individual school. The research report is organised in four parts: preconditions for partnerships, change dimensions that emerge as a result of partnerships, partnering mechanism and success indicators of partnerships. The research conclusion is that enhanced provision is possible by the use of public–private partnerships.

The second article, by Linda Ellison, takes the school operated by the public–private partnership reviewed in the Davies and Hentschke research and examines the benefits of the school in being operated by the new private company in partnership with the LEA, as perceived by the pupils. This school had been a failing school subject to a number of LEA attempts to stabilise and improve it, which were not successful. Faced with closure, the local community lobbied to keep the school open and were part of the process that chose a private contractor to try to succeed where previous attempts had been unsuccessful. This is a characteristic of the involvement of the private sector in that it is often used a means of intervention where previous public sector management has provided a less than satisfactory service. The unique element of this research is that it not only reports on pupils' views on how the school is functioning under the private sector provider, but also compares the experience of some pupils who received education in the school before and after private sector involvement. This student voice is a powerful advocate in the benefits of transforming a school through the involvement of the private sector. Ellison states: 'Critics of privatisation would claim that the transformation could happen anyway, without the involvement of a private company but there had been several failed attempts at regeneration using "traditional" approaches.' Whether of course this improvement can be applied across a large number of schools is a totally different question.

The involvement of the private sector in the provision of education acting on behalf of the state through a number of partnerships is not just an English development. The development of the Charter School Movement in the USA is a growing phenomenon, where individual States contract with individuals, groups of parents, local communities and private companies to provide them with the revenue that previously went via the school board to state schools, to provide the funding for charter schools. Joanna Smith and Priscilla Wohlstetter, in their article, establish a typology of public–private partnerships to understand the different faces of partnering. Their research examined 22 charter schools across the USA to understand more deeply the different types of public–private partnerships that exist between charter schools and other organisations. The findings of the research focus on the distinguishing characteristics of the research based on the origin of the partnerships, the contents of the partnership, the form of the partnership and the depth of employee interaction. Using these dimensions, Smith and Wohlstetter develop a typology of public–private partnerships as a way of mapping this emerging field of organisational activity in the educational sector. In their conclusion they suggest 'that partnerships can increase the ability of schools to provide high quality service by offering access to additional resources, expertise and knowledge.'

What are the insights that can be gained from these three articles? Clearly from these small-scale research efforts the creation of public-private partnerships has made a positive impact and great understanding has been displayed as to how they work and the benefits that accrue. Whether extending the role of public-private partnerships on a much larger scale would have the same level of benefit brings us back into the political debate. What these three studies provides is a better understanding of how public-private partnerships function and what is needed to make them successful. It is clear that the age of traditional public management has been succeeded by the new public management in terms of both the accountability demands placed on schools and also on rethinking how educational services should be provided. A state-only or a private-only solution is unlikely; what is more likely is a partnership between public and private providers that will vary in degree and responsibility, but it does seem necessary to understand the nature and dimensions of these partnerships. It is to be hoped that these three articles will contribute to that understanding.

The remaining two articles in this edition of *School Leadership & Management* focus broadly upon the important issue of the recruitment and retention of school leaders. The article by Rhodes and Brundrett explores head teacher and middle leader perceptions of the identification, development, succession and retention of leadership talent in 12 urban primary schools. The article identifies some of the barriers that stand in the way of middle leaders aspiring to senior leadership positions and it highlights some of the difficulties that converge around succession planning in schools. This next article, by Bush, Glover and Sood, outlines findings from a research project funded by the National College for School Leadership, which explored how black and ethnic minority leaders are identified, developed and supported. The article highlights the extent and nature of the problems experienced by black and minority ethnic (BME) leaders and the ways in which these barriers to senior or middle leadership positions are overcome. With a shortage of head teachers on the horizon, both articles offer important insights into the progression pathways of those aspiring to senior leadership positions. It is clear that this is not easy terrain to traverse.

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