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Partnership Schools for Liberia: a critical review

Tyler Hook

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This is a document analysis and research proposal written by Tyler Hook, PhD student in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It includes revisions by Dr. Nancy Kendall, Associate Professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Emmanuel Urey, PhD Candidate in Environment/Land Resources Management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Jasmine Blanks Jones, PhD student in Education, Culture, and Society at the University of Pennsylvania.

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List of Abbreviations

Ark	Absolute Return for Kids
BIA	Bridge International Academies
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
COTAE	Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EFA-FTI	Education for All-Fast Track Initiative
EGMA	Early Grade Math Assessment
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
ESA	Education Sector Analysis
ESP	Education Sector Plan
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPA	Innovations for Poverty Actions
LFPS	Low-fee Private Schools
LIYONET	Liberia Youth Network
MoE	Ministry of Education
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OSIWA	Open Society Initiative for West Africa
PPP	Public Private Partnership
PSL	Partnership Schools for Liberia
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
RCT	Randomised Control Trial
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WAEC	West African Examination Council

Abstract

This report reviews and analyses documents related to the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) pilot. It particularly highlights the Baseline Report conducted by Innovations for Poverty Actions (IPA) (2017), and the Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE) monitoring report (2017). The analysis focuses on three key areas: transparency and accountability, students and teachers, and scalability and sustainability. The analysis identifies issues related to MoE's capacity to hold providers accountable, transparency in the commissioning and implementation of the pilot, and potential concerns regarding enrollment, teacher policies, school infrastructure, and funding, particularly between local and international providers, that warrant further investigation. The report concludes with an overview of a proposed research program to address these concerns. Overall, the report aims to provide an overview of the data available to analyse PSL in year 1, and to suggest additional areas of research, most notably the studying of PSL's impact on educational ecology, essential to strengthening the evidence base available to evaluate the full impact of PSL.

Section 1

Introduction

Section 1: Introduction

In January 2016, the Liberian Ministry of Education (MoE) announced that in the 2016-2017 academic year, it would be turning over management of 50 primary schools to the historically low-fee, for-profit international school provider Bridge International Academies (BIA), known for its "school in a box" model. The announcement was met with extensive national and international criticism, including from the United Nations Special Rapporteur to the Right to Education, Dr. Kishore Singh, who called the move a violation of "Liberia's legal and moral obligations," and a "gross violation of the right to education" (UHCR, March 2016). In response, the MoE opened up the program to other service providers, and initiated an official three-year pilot. Known as the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) pilot, this program officially launched in September 2016, with eight for-profit and non-profit providers: Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Bridge International Academies (BIA), Liberia Youth Network (LIYONET), More than Me, Omega, Rising Academies, Stella Maris, and Street Child (see Appendix 1). These eight providers are currently operating in 94[1], early childhood and primary schools, which together enrol approximately 27,000 students.

PSL is a public-private partnership (PPP) that aims to improve student performance in primary schools by introducing external management in public schools and increasing levels of competition within the sector. Such management is expected to provide closer school monitoring, additional resources, and innovative learning models (MoE, Feb. 2017). The PSL model also injects significant additional external resources into PSL schools.

According to official PSL documents, there are three main objectives of the PSL pilot: "1) select, commission, and contract non-state operators to run 94 public primary schools, leading to higher learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy; 2) build the capacity of the Ministry of Education to effectively play the role of commission, regulator and quality assurer to PSL schools, and 3) Conduct a rigorous external evaluation to measure the performance (quality, cost-effectiveness, equity) of PSL schools in comparison with traditional public schools" (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.8).

Under PSL, the government continues to own school infrastructure and to pay public employee teachers' salaries. The Government pays each provider USD$50 per student through teacher salary and maintenance costs (MoE, Dec. 2016, p.42). The service providers operate the schools and provide a matching subsidy of a minimum of USD$50[2] per student, with a maximum of USD$3,250 designated per grade, or 65 students per grade. Bridge International Academies

1 The number of schools within PSL differs based on the report. There is no clear explanation as to why some documents count 94 (including some of the RCT team documents) and others state 93 (MoE, Feb. 2017). The MoE will be expanding the number of schools in PSL to 202 in year 2.

2 In year 2 there will be a matching philanthropic subsidy of USD$60 per student.

(BIA) has a different arrangement with the government, which includes a cap of 55 students per grade (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.7)[3]. There is a minimum payment of USD$12,500 per school given to providers operating smaller schools to ensure these schools are not disadvantaged (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.18). All external service providers can also funnel additional resources into their schools, including by hiring additional teachers, providing additional teaching and learning materials, and building new infrastructure.

In the current Education Sector Plan (ESP), PSL is allocated USD$ 15 million over three years (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.20). The MoE claims to spend approximately USD$50 per student at government primary schools, with a majority of that going to teacher salaries and maintenance costs.[4] External funding for PSL has included some prominent corporate and philanthropic donors, including Vitol, UBS, ELMA, Social Finance, and Big Win Philanthropy. PSL is being advised by the UK charity Absolute Return for Kids (ARK).

PSL's 3-year pilot study is being evaluated through an independent randomised control trial (RCT), conducted by the Center for Global Development in partnership with Innovations for Poverty Actions (IPA). The estimated cost of the RCT for year 1 is USD$ 800,000-850,000 (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.22). The RCT is designed to evaluate whether PSL raised student learning levels, its cost-effectiveness, and if it reduced teacher absenteeism, improved teaching methods, and raised student enrollment (IPA, 2016, p.2). The RCT sampled from 2,619 public schools, selecting from that sample schools that had at least 6 classrooms and teachers, good access to roads, didn't have a secondary school within the same compound, and were single shift (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.7). After sampling using these variables, only 299 schools remained, which were then paired. The eight partnership private school providers were then given a list of these paired schools based on the areas of Liberia in which they had decided to operate (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.7). After the provider approved the list, the RCT team was able to randomise each pair into a control and treatment group (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.8). This resulted in 92 treatment schools (i.e. schools managed by private partnership providers) and 93 control schools (i.e. schools that remained managed by the government) spread across 13 of the 15 counties in Liberia (IPA, 2016, p.1).

While these data will be an important component in evaluating certain effects of the PSL intervention, they are limited in their capacity to assess others, including the reasons that certain RCT measurements arise, and the effects of PSL on educational ecologies. Indeed, one of the most likely effects of an intervention like PSL is that educational ecologies will shift—that is to say, the PSL intervention will likely change daily school practices (teacher, student, and principals), and PSL schools will impact other public schools (and communities) in their catchment area.

3 The Baseline Report (2017) states that BIA has a different arrangement and receives "a total of XXX, for their running of schools in Liberia, regardless of enrollment" (p.7). Note that in the Baseline Report, there is no number given, just "XXX." Older BIA MOUs have a stated budget of approximately USD$ 8 million, which would be USD$160,000 per school (given that the old arraignment was for 50 schools). Further details are needed to fully understand how much BIA is spending per student.

4 The MoE while stating USD$50 as the estimated cost for primary programming also states that this amount is "through various albeit non-equitably distributed aid-funded intervention programs" (MoE, Feb. 2016, p.13). Further and specific details on per-pupil spending in public education within PSL documents are hard to decipher and are at times misleading.

Our proposed research complements the RCT by asking not what learning gains occur within PSL schools, but how the PSL intervention changes internal school ecologies (why, for example, the RCT baseline found that PSL teachers come to spend more time in their classrooms, or why they say they are less happy with their jobs than non-PSL teachers); how the presence of a PSL school impacts surrounding schools, and how communities are engaging in and understanding PSL and its implementation. These questions are essential to understanding how PSL may or may not influence systemic change, and how such changes may make various components of PSL more or less sustainable. These questions are also essential to understanding whether PSL is having unintended consequences on students who do not attend PSL schools, or on teachers or schools that are located near a PSL school but are not included in the program. Evidently, such research might uncover a broader range of intended and unintended consequences than the more targeted RCT, but this should be the goal of educational intervention research—to understand, and thus to be able to improve where needed, the full impact of the intervention.

This report begins with a short description of Liberia and its education system, before reviewing the main logics guiding PSL. It then presents a brief analysis of the findings of two reports on the impact of PSL thus far: the RCT Baseline Report conducted by IPA and drafted on March 6, 2017 (available online at: http://moe.gov.lr), and the Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE) monitoring report, titled *Public Private Partnership in Education* (March 2017). This analysis is supplemented, where warranted, by document reviews (such as MoE reports and key stakeholder documents), midline reports by school providers, and other non-academic reports printed in local and international newspapers. The analysis focuses on three key areas: transparency and accountability, students and teachers, and scalability and sustainability. The paper concludes with an outline of our team's proposed research. Our goal in presenting this proposal is to spark discussion about how to assure that the research base supporting decisions about the PSL pilot is as complete as possible, and to encourage all actors involved in the PSL process to recognise the benefits of a more fulsome research process that yields a rich, experientially-valid evidence base on which to make decisions about the PSL pilot and its impact. We believe that the proposed research is complementary to the RCT, which is designed to yield one particular type of data through which to capture the impacts of PSL. These data are important, but they are far from complete. Empirical research on the effects of PSL on educational ecologies is necessary to understand the full impact of the intervention, and to therefore more effectively support and improve Liberian children's education.

Section 2

Country Context

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2.1. Brief History of Education System in Liberia

Liberia is a small country in West Africa with approximately 4.5 million people. Settled in 1822 by the American Colonisation society, it was officially founded as a nation in 1847. Liberia was never formerly colonised by European powers, but rather settled by free blacks from the Americas. This small group of settlers, known as the Americo-Liberians, never made up more than 5% of the population, but dominated the political, economic, social, and education spheres for most of Liberia's history (Truth and Reconciliation, 2009, p.13).

Throughout Liberia's first 100 years, education was primarily administered by the church. Schools were used to fulfil a "civilising mission" and as a method for spreading Christianity (Buor, 2001, p.149). Public, or state-sponsored education was limited for most groups in Liberia during this time. For those who did have access, education mainly served to further Americo-Liberian interests, including their economic and political advancement. At this time, Liberia was governed under a system that created a bifurcated state, in which indigenous populations and settlers operated under separate political systems. This created massive social, economic and political inequalities amongst ethnic groups, and resulted in a 98% adult illiteracy rate by the 1950s (Buor, 2001, p.121).

Under the presidency of William Tubman in the mid-20th century, educational opportunities were expanded, with the aim of creating "good and loyal citizens of Liberia" (Buor, 2001, p.143). This was initiated by Tubman's "Open Door" and "Unification Policies," the former directed at increasing foreign investment, and the latter attempting to integrate all Liberians into the social, educational, and political systems. While these policies resulted in large increases in school enrolment, particularly among indigenous communities, they did not yield political and social integration. Rather, Liberia largely shifted from an oligarchical to a patronage state, where political and social power were tied to one's relation to government personnel.

After Tubman's death in 1971, President Tolbert attempted to dismantle the patronage system, but largely failed to do so (Pham, 2004,p.74). Conflicts rooted in inequality were prevalent throughout the 1970's, eventually resulting in a military coup in 1980. The coup was led by Samuel Doe, who became the nation's first non-Americo-Liberian president. Doe's rule, which lasted a decade, witnessed several other coups attempts and conflicts. From 1989-2003, Liberia suffered through a 14-year civil war, which displaced approximately 800,000 citizens and left 270,000 dead (UNDAF, 2007, cited in Quaynor, 2015). The decade-long conflict further decimated the nation's infrastructure (Radelet, 2007) and education system with approximately 70% of schools destroyed during the war (ILDLS, 2010, cited in Quaynor, 2015).

2.2. Foreign Involvement and Investment in Liberia

Liberia's longstanding partnerships with other foreign corporations[5] and governments extends back to the "Open Door" policies under Tubman,[6] which were aimed at "encouraging foreign investments," "granting foreign concessions," and promoting free trade (Marinelli, 1964, p.93). Yet, despite increases in revenue and economic growth between 1951-1961 only surpassed worldwide by Japan, most of the gains were captured by a small ruling elite and foreign concessions, resulting in "growth without development" (Clower et al, 1966). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Report (2009) Liberia's significant natural resources (including gold and diamonds) have mainly benefited the ruling elite and foreign institutions, leaving the majority of the population impoverished (p.15).

Liberia also has had a contentious history with international development organisations and banks, receiving its first International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan in 1963, followed by several subsequent loans from the IMF and World Bank between 1980 and 1985[7], and then again throughout the 2000s. Ikenze (2016) notes that, as in many other countries, the IMF and World Bank-backed loans included conditions that placed restraints on public sector spending. These disproportionately hurt the poor, while benefiting elites and foreign organisations. Ikenze (2016) further notes that the conditions of the loans, along with a growing national deficit and dropping growth rates due to capital flight, had a deleterious effect on the education system in Liberia, demonstrated by the fact that primary school enrolment decreased from 49% in 1980 to 40% by 1984 (p.11). Some experts have also argued that decades of cuts in public sector spending exacerbated the recent Ebola crisis by contributing to a major shortage of health officials and doctors in the country (Kentikelenis et al, 2015).

Following the civil war, Liberia saw substantial investment from the international development community. Between 2004 and 2006, approximately USD$550 million was invested in Liberia for "peace building." Education was allocated about USD$32 million (Roberts, 2015, p.110-111). Funding for education was increased through the Education for All-Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) Catalytic Fund in 2007. EFA-FTI was a global partnership committed to using international funds to fill funding gaps in national education plans (Wright, 2015, p.42). The initiative resulted in new investments from both international government organisations and private investors, including substantial investment from the World Bank, UNICEF, and the Open Society Foundation (Taylor, 2015). Such funding has not been without controversy, with Wright (2015) noting that it may have increased dependency and reduced accountability within Liberia.

The Ebola crisis (2013-2015), which led to an eight-month shutdown of schools in 2014, resulted in increased international investment and interest in Liberia's health and education sectors.

5 One such power is the Firestone corporation, which received its first concession, a 99-year lease on up to one million acres at six cents an acre, from the Liberian government in 1926. Labeled by some observers as a "state within a state" (Jahr, 2010), Firestone and operates its own primary school network of 27 schools. Firestone's presence in Liberia has long been controversial, with accusations of labor and human rights violations (Business and Human Rights Center).

6 Foreign intervention and antagonisms were seen throughout Liberia's history including with the French and British who saw Liberia as a "threat to their colonial ambitions" (Marinelli,1964, p.91).

7 In 1985 the World Bank and IMF withdrew support, canceled all further loans and closed up their offices in Monrovia due to no agreement on monetary issues (Claassen et al, 1991, p.133-136).

Currently, Liberia receives significant education funding from USAID, the European Union, the World Bank, and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Government documents report that these major funders "wield considerable power," with official development assistance (ODA) significantly higher than domestic funding (MoE, Feb 2017, p.5). As a result, with an ODA to gross national income ratio of 177%, significantly greater than all other countries, MoE (Feb 2017) documents have labelled Liberia the "least sovereign country in the world" (p.5).

2.3. Liberia's Education System Today

Following the war, the Liberian Government made efforts to increase educational quality and access. This was seen in the 2011 Education Reform Act, which establishes free compulsory primary and basic education, and decentralises the education system in an attempt to improve provision (Right to Education Country Fact Sheet, 2012).[8] However, despite legal and political reforms, education funding remains limited. The education sector had about a 13.5% budget share between 2012-2016 (MoE, Feb. 2017). This is far from meeting goals set by the MoE in its previous Education Sector Plan 2010-2020, or the benchmark of 20% set by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Total public expenditure on education is 3.83% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (MoE, Dec. 2016, p.39). The domestic basic education budget averages around USD$ 44 million, with approximately 78% of it going to the compensation of employees (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.4).[9] The education sector gets significant contributions from foreign donors, with USAID, European Union, and GPE contributions surpassing USD$50 million annually (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.5).

Due in part to historical inequities and current low funding levels, significant inequalities remain within the education system. Although girls' enrolment in primary school stands at 49% of total students (MoE, 2016), larger gender disparities exist in public schools than in private, religious, and community schools (MoE, 2016). Inequalities also exist between urban and rural and upper income and lower income students, with students from urban and wealthier households twice as likely to attend primary school than their rural and poorer counterparts. Fewer than 50% of youth ages 10-19 from the lower two quintiles reach grade 6, compared to over 88% of the top quintile (MoE, Feb 2017, p.4). Inequities compound across forms of marginalisation: only 13% of poor rural females complete primary school, compared to 86% of wealthy urban males (MoE, Sept. 2016, PP).

8 The Education 2011 Act in all aimed to "ensure the provision of quality education to citizens;" "promote equal access" for all Liberians; "promote and sustain public confidence in the educational system;" decentralize the education system; promote the protection of the human rights in education in respect to access and quality; reduce illiteracy; "promote gender equity and equality throughout the educational system;" produce good citizens; and "ensure proper and adequate governance and management of the education sector" (GoL, 2011).

9 In June 2017, the MoE released a statement regarding discrepancies in the budget. As the MoE press release notes: "on 12 June, there was a discussion about an additional $30.9 million in aid funding for the education sector in Liberia, outside the Ministry of Education's budget for fiscal year 2017/2018." The MoE goes on to state that this was a "mischaracterisation" and that the money is for "off-budget aid that goes directly to NGOs and other organisations that work within the education sector." Further investigation as to whether or not this money is related to PSL is needed.

Disparities also exist between private and public schools. Liberia's education system includes a variety of types of schools, including government schools established and funded by the state; community schools established and managed by communities, which charge fees and are more prevalent in rural areas; faith-based/religious schools run by religious institutions, which usually charge fees; and private schools run by a variety of corporate and private actors, which charge a wide range of fees and are both for-profit and non-profit (Iversen and Begue, 2017, p.5). Between 2008 and 2015, enrolment in traditional government or public primary schools decreased from 57% of all enrolment to 52%. In 2015, private primary enrolment made up 30%, Faith-based/ religious enrolment 13%, and community enrolment 6% (MoE, Dec., 2016).

Private schools are more concentrated in urban areas, and generally have better pupil-teacher ratios than public schools, although they have a slightly lower percentage of qualified teachers (Iversen and Begue, 2017, p.13). Private schools are also attended mostly by higher income students, with over 50% of enrolled students coming from the upper 4th and 5th quintile, compared to just 10% from the lower two quintiles (Iversen and Begue, 2017, p.14). Further, 60% of urban children, compared to just 30% of rural children, attended private or religious schools (Iversen and Begue, 2017, p.14). Not surprisingly, then, private schools have often had higher pass rates than public schools, though in five counties, public school students were more likely to pass West African Examination Council (WAEC) exams than private schools (Werner, 2015).

Enrolment rates in Liberia remain low, with gross enrolment rate at 87%, and a net enrolment rate at 48% in primary schools (MoE, 2016). The education system has a high over-age enrolment of 82% in primary schools. Student teacher ratios and student classrooms ratios are relatively low, standing at 22 and 33 respectfully (MoE, 2016). However, average classroom sizes, according to EMIS data, are quite large at 127 in primary schools (MoE, 2016, p.8).

For the close to 1.5 million (655,000 primary) students who do attend school[10] (ECE, Primary, High School), quality remains low throughout, as 35% of students in grade 2 could not read a single word correctly, while only 20% of adult women who reached fifth grade could read a sentence correctly (MoE, Feb 2017, p.4). Further, more than 50% of high school students who sat for the WAEC in 2014 failed (Werner, 2015), and more than 20% of young people between the ages of 15-24 are illiterate (MoE, ND, p.1). The teacher workforce is also beset by issues, with 34% of teachers remaining untrained, with qualifications varying greatly between counties. For example, over 70% of primary school teachers in Sinoe are untrained (Werner, 2015).

Due to these ongoing problems, the education sector has been labelled by the government as a "mess." In 2016, amidst claims that the "status quo is unacceptable," and in hopes of moving from a "mess" to the "best," the MoE in Liberia adopted a variety of bold reforms outlined in the Education Sector Plan for 2017-2021.[11] One of these is partnering with private providers through a public private partnership (PPP) under the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) pilot.

10 Includes both public and private school enrollment numbers.

11 Includes policies to improve teacher workforce, girls access, government accountability and monitoring, reach out of school children, and remove ghost teachers.

Section 3

Underlying Logics of PSL and PPPs

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3.1. Overview of PPPs

PSL is characterised as a public private partnership (PPP). PPPs are increasingly promoted by a variety of international actors in education as a means of improving school access, quality, efficiency, and accountability. Broadly defined by Robertson et al. (2012) as "cooperative institutional arrangements between public and private sector actors," PPP's operate across scales and through "interactions with local, regional, national, and intergovernmental organisations" (p.1). Newman (2001) notes that PPPs emerged in the early 1990's as means of remedying damage done by earlier, more severe forms of privatisation, without having to abandon the core notion of the benefits of privatisation (Newman, 2001, p.7 cited in Robertson and Verger, 2012, p.26). PPPs were considered part of "third way" politics, which saw partnering between the state and market as a "corrective to too much state, on the one hand, and too little state, on the other hand" (Robertson and Verger, 2012, p.26) and as a means of making up for governance and funding gaps throughout the developing world. PPP's thus became part of the "good governance" policies promulgated in development circles from the 1990s through today. In education, the most common forms of educational PPPs are vouchers and charter schools (Edwards et al, 2017). Other forms include the contracting of infrastructure and school construction, teacher training (professional development), curriculum development, and the provision of supplemental services.

Proponents of PPPs often describe them as an effective response to concerns about educational governance, and have become particularly popular with international development organisations and banks. For example, in the World Bank report titled *The Role and Impact of PPPs in Education* (Patrinos et al, 2009), the authors acknowledge the importance of the public sector in education, while also emphasising the failure of governments to deliver quality and equitable education systems. The solution proposed is a merging, or partnership, between the public and private sectors, intended to spur innovation, provide adequate funding, and "expand equitable access and improve learning outcomes" (p.2). These improved outcomes are expected to result from the increased market competition, budget flexibility and risk sharing generated by PPPs, creating an incentive for schools to improve and become more cost-effective (p.4).

The MoE (Feb. 2017) describes PSL as a "publicly financed, privately provided PPP" (p.6). The government has two roles in the partnership: fund and staff the schools at the level of USD$50 per student; and regulate and monitor the schools. This second role is viewed as essential to the success of PPP models; the RCT (Sandefur et al, 2017) notes that without such oversight "policies that leverage the private sector to improve coverage and quality may fail to deliver better outcomes" (p.4).[12]

12 Oddly, the Baseline Report (2017) cites a study of a voucher program in New Orleans that led to lower test scores for students attending the voucher schools as a good example of poor accountability. However, the MoE has used the New Orleans voucher and chartering program as a model to be emulated (MoE, Feb. 2017; Werner, 2016).

The private school operators are expected to manage the school, control pedagogy and teaching methods, provide professional development to teachers, match government funding, and potentially provide additional resources for the schools. The private sector role is also evident throughout the PSL planning, implementation, and evaluation process, perhaps most obviously in the relationship between the Ministry of Education and the UK-based charity Absolute Return for Kids (Ark). Ark has been an important player throughout the entire PSL process, extolling the virtues of PPPs to key actors in Liberia as early as May 2015. In a 2015 PowerPoint presentation titled *Public-Private Partnerships in Education: A Viable Model for Liberia*, (Ark, May 2015) PPPs are promoted with the identical rationales (raising school quality, stronger accountability, attracting philanthropic funding) and examples (success of US charters and UK Academies, etc.) presented in later official PSL documents (MoE, Feb. 2017).

Interestingly, despite Ark's strong promotion of PPPs within PSL documents, a recently released report by Ark on PPPs in developing contexts found that the evidence base in support of PPPs' positive impact on learning outcomes is limited enough that universal conclusions about effectiveness cannot be drawn. Instead, the new report highlights how research and results are context-specific, that the issue of PPP effectiveness is complex, and that in order to work effectively, PPPs need strong and effective government oversight (Aslam et al, 2017).

According to Ark's webpage, their involvement in PSL started in January 2016 at the request of the Government of Liberia, and includes providing "policy and technical advice on all aspects of the project- from overall program design and contract structure to school quality assurance and financing" (Ark, 2017). The website also states that Ark has played a "significant role in the delivery of the program," including helping evaluate PSL due to "limited government capacity" (Ark, 2017). In official PSL documents, Ark is listed as providing "policy advice, project management, operator and evaluator commissioning, capacity building of Ministry team, data analysis, fundraising, and communication" (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.14). Ark has taken up similar roles in other countries (including the UK, India, and Uganda), claiming to provide innovative business methods to find new solutions to public policy problems (Junemann and Ball, 2013, p.430).

3.2. Promotion of PPPs in PSL

In official PSL documents, PPPs are promoted as a way to improve educational performance, especially amongst the most disadvantaged students, through increased competition (MoE, Feb. 2017, pg.6) and improved managerial, bottom-up, and top-down accountability (Sandefur et al, 2017, pg. 3-4). MoE documents (Feb. 2017) cite successful US-style charter schools and UK-style academies as examples of PPP success.

The RCT Baseline Report (Sandefur et al, 2017),[13] similarly emphasises the importance of multiple forms of accountability. The first form of accountability is managerial accountability, in which "non-state operators have the capacity to implement routine performance management systems, monitor teacher attendance, track student performance, and provide teachers with feedback and support" (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.3). The report goes on to state that, since PSL

13 The Sandefur et al. (2017) report is referred throughout the report as the "Baseline Report" (2017).

operators will have "limited authority to request teacher assignments", managerial accountability will be "generated through monitoring and support" which "can have significant effects on worker's performance" (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.3). The Baseline Report notes that PSL will thus serve to test the theory that management practices (monitoring and support) have a significant impact on worker performance, and that union and teacher contracts are not necessarily the problem (p.3).

The second form of accountability is "bottom-up accountability," which the RCT team describes as the ability for parents to use "client power" (p.3). According to the report, parental choice can lead to more accountable systems, by making schools more reactive to parent demands (p.3). The report notes that this "power" is likely to be restricted in rural areas, where there are few school options, and may be better suited for urban locations like Monrovia (p.3).[14] How bottom-up accountability will work as PSL moves into more remote areas in year 2 remains to be seen. In any case, bottom-up accountability is reiterated by MoE documents claiming that diversity of provision puts pressure on all providers to improve school quality (MoE, Feb 2017, p.6).

Finally, the Baseline Report (2017) notes the importance of top-down accountability, or strong oversight and regulation by the government and donors. Citing a preliminary Ark-funded report by Crawfurd (2016) on school management in Uganda, the Baseline Report claims that "PPP schools run by a foreign owned, non-profit chain of schools with a robust accountability framework, perform significantly better than other schools" (p.4). The MoE is expected to monitor and hold these providers accountable. This is to be done, in part, through the creation of "PSL" delivery unit within the MoE, that will meet with Ministers weekly (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.10). The MoE will also attempt to capture better data to improve accountability, which includes service providers compiling reports and submitting them to the MoE, and the design and implementation of a quality assurance framework which is to be used by County Education Officers and District Education Officers (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.11). Overall, the MoE (Feb 2017) notes that PSL provides autonomy and accountability to school operators (p.7), while letting the government focus on "strong regulation and commissioning" (p.6).[15]

The rationale for supporting PPPs to improve student learning is bolstered by arguments that Liberia's current education system is a "mess," and that Liberia as a whole is in dire need of increased outside investment as it emerges from the devastation of a prolonged civil war and recent Ebola epidemic (Werner, 2015; MoE, Feb. 2017). The MoE repeatedly notes that the majority of children in Liberia are not receiving a quality education, and that change cannot wait (MoE, Feb. 2017).

14 It should be highlighted that year 1 PSL schools are by no means a representative sample of most public primary schools in Liberia. PSL schools have better infrastructure seen in their having to have at least 6 classrooms and 6 teachers, and good access to roads (not to mention the request by some service providers to 2G mobile service). School providers are also able to further invest in the infrastructure of these schools which has the likely effect of exacerbating rural/urban divides.

15 Despite repeated claims for the importance of strong MoE accountability and monitoring, MoE reports repeatedly claim the failure and lack of capacity of the MoE to do so, stating the data collection process is "cumbersome" and that DEOs and CEOs are overburden (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.10).

3.3. Critiques of PPPs

While the PSL documents clearly lay out the intended and expected benefits of PPP models in improving educational funding, efficiency, equity, management, and learning, there are also many criticisms of PPP models, some of which the MoE and RCT team acknowledge (MoE, Feb. 2017; Sandefur et al., 2017). For instance, the MoE and the RCT team recognise that PPPs "are not a panacea," that "weak accountability" can lead to failure, and that PPPs require strong government capacity and accountability to be successful (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.7; Sandefur et al, 2017). Ironically, some of the same reasons for supporting the PPPs in Liberia can therefore also be considered potential challenges to the model.

Critics of PPPs often argue that their market logics and engagement with for-profit organisations may exacerbate inequalities, undermine democratic accountability, reduce transparency, and may not be as cost-efficient as previously believed (Sundaram et al, 2016). Critics also argue that many of the choice and competition models promoted by education reformers do not serve all members of the population, as "the ability to vote with one's feet is unequally distributed in modern societies" (Hirschman, 1978, p.96). For example, while proponents claim that choice, competition, and professional management all improve school quality, a recent literature review by Musset (2012) found choice and competition to have no positive impact on neighbouring public schools, concluding that "few studies link increased choice with enhanced outcomes" (p.30). The review also suggests that the resources parents need to successfully navigate systems of choice are often lacking, and that concerns about inequalities stemming from a market based system "seem to be justified" (Musset, 2012, p.33). Wells (2002), examining charter schools in the US, similarly notes how laissez-faire reforms often exacerbate existing inequalities, while another OECD report (2012) finds that school choice can enhance segregation based on ethnicity, income, and ability, leading to greater inequities throughout the educational system (p.64). Härmä (2011), looking at low-cost private schooling in India, notes that "equity effects of the market in education are negative," and that wealthier families fleeing to the private sector removes those community members most "capable of exercising voice in an effort to affect positive change" (p.356). Härmä concludes that "all traditionally privileged groups in society are favoured by the market in education" (p.356).

In a related critique, Woodhead et al (2013) find that low-fee private schools (LFPS) are largely based in urban areas, where there is more profit to be made, and thus often do not meet the needs of rural students. Similarly, research has shown that the privatisation reforms in New Orleans celebrated by the MoE (see Werner, 2016) actually compounded segregation (Adamson et al, 2015) and did little to improve student outcomes, particularly for the least advantaged (Adamson et al, 2015).

Other critiques have focused on how PPPs, while advocating accountability, transparency, and increased parental ownership, often fail to meet their own standards (Bhanji, 2012a; Cutler, et. al, 1999; Menashy, 2017). Ball and Olmedo (2011) find that PPPs are increasingly opaque and complex, while Menashy (2017) argues that key stakeholders in multi-stakeholder partnerships engage in "strategic avoidance" in the belief that debate may destabilise the partnership (p.240).

Further research finds that PPPs and private governance and participation in education are often only accountable to "self-nominated boards" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2008, p.12), may undermine systems of public accountability (Bhanji, 2012b, p.315), and may legitimise forms of corporate governance, or "private authority," that can weaken democratic institutions (Culter, et. Al, 1999, p.369).

Finally, some critics have questioned the timing of PPP reforms, as well as who benefits from them. Verger et al (2016) argue that market-based reforms are often opportunistically promoted following disasters, which provide "fertile terrain" for the expansion and legitimisation of radical policies (p.120). Bhanji (2012a) notes that PPPs largely serve to strengthen corporate/private shares in education markets, while Van Fleet (2012) finds that PPPs are often an attempt to meet business objectives that can perpetuate "dependency, inequality, and marginalisation" in the structures and countries in which they operate (p.178-179).

3.4. Overview of PPPs and the logics of PSL

Regardless of the stances taken by various PPP researchers, most PPPs aim to: transform the role of private actors in public school provision; improve the quality of schooling, in part by changing management models; shift the role of the government towards oversight of private management; and provide new choices for parents and new curricular, pedagogical, and labour flexibilities to privately-run schools. Thus far, most research on PPPs within the education sector has focused on student outcomes (achievement) and enrolment, which as Edwards et al (2017) argues, overlooks essential aspects of how PPPs operate, specifically with regard to how private partners engage with communities and other stakeholders, and how they are held accountable. Overall, research on PPPs should include but move beyond basic student data, looking at how a particular PPP model matches up to its core objectives. We will explain how the RCT addresses some of these objectives but cannot systematically examine others. We begin with a review of the impact of PSL on some of these factors to date, including: accountability and transparency; students and teachers; and sustainability and scalability.

Section 4

Current Issues and Understandings of PSL

Section 4
Current Issues and Understandings of PSL

This section largely draws on two documents, the Baseline Report (2017) written by the RCT team, and a report produced by COTAE (2017) titled *Public Private Partnership in Education*. The two reports are supplemented with other PSL documents, service provider midline assessment reports, and local and international newspaper reports.

4.1. Background on Baseline and COTAE Reports

The baseline RCT data were collected from 92 treatment schools and 93 control schools spread across 13 of the 15 counties in Liberia (IPA, 2016, p.1). Research was conducted in September and October 2016, a few weeks after the school year began. Data were collected from some schools up to seven weeks after classes began, and differences between reported teacher behaviour in treatment and control schools are largely attributed to an early, positive intervention effect.[16]

Data collection methods at each school included: teacher and student surveys, in-depth interviews of Math and English teachers, classroom observations using the Stalling Observation tool, and collection of relevant school administrative information (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.9-10). The Baseline Report (2017) does not compare operators, districts, or geography; mention successes and challenges of specific providers, districts, or geographies; or provide copies of the instruments. And while it does gather data regarding student socioeconomic status[17] and gender, it doesn't appear to go beyond enrolment numbers for such demographics, nor does it appear to include other variables like disability, language, etc. While theoretically the Baseline Report should have demonstrated similar starting points for treatment and control schools, it instead shows statistically significant differences. These differences have been attributed to a treatment effect, though this claim is difficult to evaluate given the limited data presented in the report. In any case, the differences between treatment and control schools have been repeatedly used by the MoE and others to argue that PSL has already been successful in changing teacher, principal, and student behaviors (MoE, June 2017; MoE, Feb. 2017).

The COTAE (2017) report gathers together information from a diverse array of stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, community leaders, members of school boards, and county/district officials. Data were collected between September 2016 and February 2017 (p.9). COTAE personnel "intermittently" visited Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Gbarpolu, Margibi,

16 Section "B: Extra figures" (p. 23) includes four tables showing treatment effect by weeks tested. The effects are not linear; they indicate a consistent dip in treatment effects in week 4, and then a much larger treatment effect range in week 7 than in any other week. The number of data points per week is not included, nor are the data from early-week and late-week data collection compared to the data collected in control schools. The authors also note that some service providers began managing their PSL schools a few weeks into the academic year; the impact of late start dates cannot be evaluated with the data presented in the report.

17 Using a "wealth index".

and Rivercress counties throughout the year to "obtain first-hand information" (COTAE, 2017, p.9). The report provides updates from field monitors in the counties listed, supplemented with close monitoring of key developments at the national level, including Akon's visit in October 2016, teacher strikes against BIA, and public forums pertaining to the initiative (p.9). Examples of questions and specific qualitative research methods used (interviews, focus groups, etc.) are not discussed. The report outlines twelve key findings, providing recommendations for each. Key findings include: PSL is "limiting access to Education for All;" that PSL may be "improving learning outcomes' in Bridge while creating a mess in Non-Bridge schools;" and "financial commitments from donors and GOL not forthcoming as expected" (COTAE, 2017). The study was funded by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and ActionAid. In contrast to the RCT report, it is largely critical of PSL. While the Baseline Report includes all eight providers in its analysis, the COTAE study focuses almost entirely on the work of one provider: Bridge International Academies (BIA).[18] Therefore, future research needs to examine all providers, not just BIA. Finally, conclusions reached by both reports presented here, as well as those of the news articles, and midline reports referenced, have not been peer reviewed.

4.2. Transparency and Accountability

According to official MoE documents, accountability and transparency are essential to PSL's success (MoE, Feb 2017; Sandefur et al, 2017). These actors claim that accountability and transparency will only be effective if the government has the capacity to hold providers and key actors accountable, and if it releases education-related documents and data in a timely fashion. Thus far, concerns have been raised about the government's capacity to hold providers accountable (MoE, Feb 2017, p.13), the involvement and knowledge of community actors in PSL (COTAE, 2017), and the transparency of the entire PSL pilot process, particularly with regard to the continuing confusion around the providers' memorandum of understandings (MOUs), which have yet to be made public (COTAE, 2017, p.9).[19]

As noted by the MoE (Feb. 2017) and the Baseline Report (2017) one of the key forms of accountability is "client power." The Baseline Report notes that choice and competition can only function in situations where there are viable choices in the immediate educational ecology. Many of the public schools being managed by PSL providers are the only school in the immediate area, leaving families with no other, or very limited, school options outside of the PSL school. Further, providers are largely confined to particular counties, so that they are not necessarily competing with each other for students. For example, one provider, BRAC, is operating almost entirely in Lofa county, where there are no other service providers (MoE, ND, List of PSL Schools and Operators Year 1). In year 2 the MoE plans to allocate schools using clusters, meaning most areas will be controlled by just one service provider (see Appendix 3). While PSL does not necessarily increase competition in rural areas (as the PSL providers move into existing

18 The COTAE report acknowledges this limitation, stating that the focus on BIA is in part due to the limited information available on the other 7 providers, particularly their MOU's and financial documents (p.9).

19 Also significant is the fact that a majority of the providers are large international for-profit providers and/or NGO's based outside of Liberia. This raises questions about accountability, like what happens if such providers either decide to leave or are no longer able to operate in Liberia, or whether continued operation is dependent more upon student achievement or funding.

schools), it is also unclear why competition and choice were seen as significant needs in certain parts of Liberia. Only 52% of students in 2015 attended government schools, a reflection of the fact that private and alternative school providers were prevalent before PSL implementation. Finally, as noted in Musset (2012), and McGinn and Ben-Porath (2014), in order for choice to improve school quality, parents need resources and information to effectively navigate a market system, including transparent and accessible data on school providers. However, such data has largely been absent in PSL thus far. Overall, as the RCT pairs publicly-run and privately-run public schools, the RCT cannot shed light on how PSL schools impact existing educational ecologies, which are not comprised only (or even primarily) of public schools.

Issues of accountability are also apparent in a recent open letter by the RCT team and other important PSL actors, expressing their concern about scaling up the program in year 2 without the proper empirical evidence and government capacity (Romero et al., April 14, 2017). In the open letter, the authors call for the government to build up its capacity before scaling up, stating that the MoE faced a variety of challenges in year 1, including "developing the monitoring and evaluation system to hold operators accountable for learner gains and the general care of children has been weak or non-existent outside of the randomised evaluation" [20] (p.1). Despite these concerns, and without the release of the RCT midline report, the MoE has moved forward and is set to scale up the number of schools in year 2 to include approximately 200 schools.

According to COTAE (2017), the lack of transparency was evident from the beginning, in the way that PSL schools were commissioned. Originally, PSL was going to have Bridge International Academies (BIA) as the sole service provider of the program. However, after public outcry and media backlash (see: UNHR, March 2016), the MoE opened up the project to seven additional providers. Government documents claim that providers were subsequently chosen based on their "track record and capacity," yet a quick review of each school provider finds that only one had a history of running primary schools in Liberia (More than Me), with most either never running a primary school in Liberia (BRAC, Omega, Rising Academies, BIA, Street Child) or never running a primary school in general (Stella Maris, LIYONET).

Further, while government documents claim that provision was granted through a "transparent and competitive commissioning process" (MoE, Feb 2017, p.8), it also acknowledges that BIA was commissioned through an entirely different process (p.8). The COTAE (2017) report states that:

> Contrary to the MoE's claims of lawful and competitive recruitment, all providers under the pilot, including Bridge, were not recruited through transparent and competitive procurement processes. Simply put, the Public Procurement and Concession says it has no records on any transparent and competitive process(es) carried out by MoE in recruiting Bridge and those operating the pilot (p.6).

A lack of transparency also surrounds the memorandums of understandings (MOUs); seven out of eight are unavailable to the public. The one MOU available (Bridge International Academies) is reportedly outdated and null and void. According to COTAE, this has resulted in communities,

20 The MoE did downgrade Omega in the recent grading/categorizing of service providers, moving them to a Category C provider. This resulted in them losing several schools that were originally to be allocated to them in year 2. Whether this was based primarily on student learning or managerial issues (including submitting year 2 allocation proposals late) is unknown.

and even some local MoE officials, being uniformed about what PSL is and what it hopes to achieve (COTAE, 2017, p.7). This is also a result of the fact that civil society and community actors were largely left out of the PSL process (COTAE, 2017, p.13). Remarkably, the Baseline Report (2017) finds that only 35% of teachers in control schools and 57% of teachers in treatment schools have heard of PSL (p.16).

The MoE has responded to these accusations by referencing the Education Sector Plan (ESP) appraisal report (MoE, Dec 14 2016). A letter by USAID on the appraisal report (the ESP includes PSL) claims that there was in fact local consultation at a decentralised level, though it also states that "this began before the Education Sector Analysis (ESA) process technically began" and that "in reality no further consultations were held at decentralised levels since the ESP was developed" (USAID, 2016). Due to the confusion around the commissioning process of PSL, it is important that future research examines this process, including the role of all key stakeholders in consultation, planning, selection, review, and evaluation processes.

Despite these concerns about the Government's role in assuring accountability and transparency in PSL, this report does not want to minimise the many successes that the MoE has achieved thus far. The MoE has put together a bold vision for the education system, and has done a remarkable job of reforming the system in a short time period, such as removing some 1,500 ghost teachers, estimated to save over USD$3.5 million per year (Pilling, April 21, 2017). The MoE has also expressed an interest in sharing PSL data through a rich, anonymised data set of all 185 schools, publishing policy briefs and op-eds, and sharing government reports of school performance with communities (MoE, Feb 2017). Recently, the MoE has attempted to present some transparency and accountability in school allocation with the release of year 2 allocation criteria. In year 2, schools will be allocated based on service provider grades/categories (A, B, C, D)[21], with providers graded 0-6 in three areas: improved teacher attendance, MoE assessment of extent of intervention, and capacity to scale as demonstrated by scale internationally.[22] Service providers are also graded 0-2 in two areas: effective tracking of student assessment, and learning gains study (MoE, June 4 2017, Annex2). Such monitoring and evaluation frameworks are essential for holding these service providers accountable. All of this is to be commended.

Further, there does appear to be increased accountability of teachers and principals to service providers, as outlined in some service provider midline reports. BIA states that support and monitoring teams typically visit each school every 1-2 weeks (BIA, 2017). BIA also holds teachers and administrators accountable through the tracking of teachers via smartphone, and through the transferring of teachers out of BIA schools if repeatedly absent or "neglectful of duties" (p.12). Also, some service providers do appear to be reaching out to parents and community actors. This is most notably seen with Street Child, who in their midline report, outline a PTA workshop that included 180 PTA members (Street Child, 2017, p.14).

21 Category A: "Demonstrate significant quality of implementation and ability to scale"; Category B: "Demonstrate sufficient quality implementation and ability to scale; Category C: "Limited ability to scale or ability to scale limited to scaling within local area;" and Category D: "Presently does not have the ability to scale further" (MoE, June 4 2017).

22 This is potentially concerning, as it could favor larger international providers. Apparently the MoE has attempted to address this concern by using a larger multiplier for the smaller scale provider, but exactly how this works, and what grades each provider received within each of the 5 areas, is not publicly known at the time of writing. It should be noted that even with these apparent larger multipliers, the smaller Liberian operated providers have been allocated a much smaller number of schools for year 2 than the larger international providers.

4.3. PSL Impact on Student and Teachers

The primary aim of PSL is to "dramatically improve learning outcomes for students," especially for the poorest children (MoE, 2016, p.1). The Baseline Report (2017), along with midline assessments from four providers (BIA, More than Me, Street Child, Rising Academies), and op-eds from private providers (May, 2017) and some news outlets, have all noted various levels of success in year 1 related to teacher performance and motivation, student performance, and improved school environment. Other reports, including the COTAE report and other local and international media accounts, highlight the intervention's challenges. These successes and challenges, particularly regarding the experiences of students and teachers (including administrators) are discussed below.

4.3.1. Students

Student performance data by the RCT team has not been released as of the writing of this report, though details should be revealed in the midline report due out August 2017. However, on July 3rd the MoE released midline assessment reports conducted by four providers: BIA, More Than Me, Street Child, and Rising Academies. In each report, providers gave a brief analysis of student performance data using Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA)[23] and Early Grade Math Assessments (EGMA). Rising Academies, More Than Me, and Street Child tested students at their partnership schools, while BIA selected 6 of their schools and compared their test scores to 6 non-PSL schools with similar school level characteristics. All providers showed significant improvement in several literacy and numeracy indicators, while one provider (More Than Me) saw decreases in grade 2 and 3 addition and subtraction between the baseline and midline assessment. More Than Me (2017) also noted that literacy gains were smaller in the largest class sizes. Rising Academies (2017) further claims that, using "business-as-usual learning trajectories," the average Rising Academy student "demonstrates higher literacy and numeracy skills than students a full two grades above them demonstrated at baseline" (p.2). Due in part to these learning gains, three of these four providers recently received A ratings from MoE (More Than Me, BIA, and Rising Academies), while Street Child received a B rating.[24]

The varying levels of improvement in student outcomes using EGRA and EGMA assessments should be expected given the large increase in resources (funding), the caps on school and class sizes, and in teacher training under PSL. In fact, it would be remarkable were there not to be an improvement in student learning in PSL schools. It should also be noted that none of the midline assessments provided a cost-benefit analysis, or any data on how much the provider was spending per student. Further, some providers (for example Rising Academies) conducted

23 EGRA is a short assessment that attempts to gauge early literacy skills. Developed by RTI in 2006, it quickly spread across the globe as the literacy assessment of choice for many development organizations. While a widely adopted literacy assessment tool, EGRA has been criticized on a variety of levels, including its promotion of a universal conception of language development (stages of development), its timing on-tasks which potentially undermine demonstration of comprehension, and it being a form of linguistic and pedagogical imperialism.

24 For all service provider ratings see Appendix 1.

EGRA and EGMA assessments every 6-8 weeks, while reducing the length of the test following the baseline in an attempt to combat assessment fatigue (p.5). Rising Academies also states that it removed the time element of the EGRA and EGMA assessments, though it is unclear whether the baseline was also not timed. It also appears that some of the curriculum in these schools was based on the EGRA and EGMA assessments, potentially resulting in these providers teaching to the test. Rising Academies (2017) admits to using an approach outlined by RTI international, who helped create EGMA/EGRA to group students into literacy categories (p.11). As a result, questions remain with regard to the causes of these improvements. It is assumed that reports will be released by the other four providers over the coming weeks, along with the RCT midline report, which may give useful insight into the differences among school providers, locations, and sizes, and what is behind the improved learning outcomes across PSL schools.

Information currently available regarding student experiences with PSL is decidedly mixed. The Baseline Report (2017) finds that students attending partnership schools are less likely to miss school, that PSL students are "equally likely to still be enrolled in schools" (p.16), that there is no evidence of partnership schools "selectively admit(ing) wealthier students" (p.4),[25] and that partnership schools have increased enrolment relative to control schools (p.17). The Street Child midline report (2017) claims that there was a 20% increase in student enrolment across all 12 schools from the previous year, with an 84% attendance rate, while the BIA midline report (Gbilia et al 2017) found that, between the control and treatment schools in their study, there were minimal differences in student demographics. Also, students at BIA schools were more likely to have a teacher or substitute teacher present, though they also noted slightly lower student attendance when compared to control schools, which they attribute to a longer school day, lack of feeding programs, and the assessment often occurring in the afternoon at BIA schools (p.26). COTAE and local and international news and op-ed reports, on the other hand, have argued that partnership schools are not reaching the most disadvantaged, due in part to their locations, and that classroom cap-limits at some schools have led to students being pushed out of PSL schools, resulting in students losing access to schooling within a reasonable distance from their homes, and subsequent overcrowding at neighbouring schools (COTAE, 2017; Senah, 2016; Phillips, 2016; Mukpo, 2017).

While there is little to no evidence that treatment schools in the Baseline study differ in terms of student demographics from the government schools (control schools), there is evidence that the schools included in the study do not represent the most disadvantaged communities and differ from typical government schools not in the RCT.[26] PSL schools are generally located in higher-quality buildings and easier to reach communities than their government school counterparts. For example, BIA requested their school buildings meet certain standards, and that they be located near main roads, with good internet[27] and mobile phone access (BIA and MoE, ND1). BIA requests, as cited in the old MOU (ND1), include: "sufficient number and quality

25 The Baseline Report does admit small anomalies with school rosters that need to be addressed.

26 Student characteristic data capture by the RCT team include sex, wealth index, and ECE before grade 1. It does not appear that other characteristic including language, disability, parent education, and family status were captured.

27 Both Omega and BIA, according to a webpost by members of the RCT team, have demanded 2G internet connectivity (Romero et al, Jan. 2017).

of desks," sufficient number of "enclosed classrooms," and pit latrines; that schools taken over will include recently built, and refurbished GPE-funded schools; that schools should be clustered within urban areas to "ensure cost-effective oversight"; and that all rural and peri-urban schools have access to "data-enabled cell service, and "reasonable logistical access for support (p.9-10)." It is likely similar conditions were in the new/current MOU. Another provider, Omega, also demanded specific locations and conditions[28] (Romero et al, Jan. 2017). Indeed, simply by looking at the PSL map,[29] EMIS data, and the BIA midline assessment report,[30] one can see that most year 1 PSL schools are located near main roads and in more developed and accessible regions. Some rural areas and districts, including River Gee and Grand Gedeh, do not have a single PSL school, while a handful of other rural and southern counties have only 1 or 2. Finally, substantial new investment in these schools by the service provider, along with certain provider enrolment policies, like "first come, first served" and student placement examinations, may exacerbate inequalities by benefitting students from wealthier and more networked families, as well as schools already identified as having better infrastructure/resources prior to the intervention. For example, according to BIA's midline report, BIA delivered over 29,000 textbooks, 435 student e-readers, 259 teacher computers, and 9,000 student uniforms to their schools (Gbilia et al, 2017, p.14). While laudable, this has undoubtedly led to even larger resource disparities between BIA schools and traditional public schools. Further, there are reports that BIA conducted entrance exams at certain schools (Senah, 2016), while placement exams are discussed in the previous BIA MOU and the recently released BIA midline report (BIA and MoE, ND2, p.3; Gbilia et al, 2017). Given that Liberia has a very high overage in primary schools (over 80% in most counties), the use of entrance and/or placement exams (for whatever reason) might potentially lead some students to drop out or not enrol. It is important to study what effect, if any, such policies are having.

In response to these concerns, the RCT team asserts that, while the schools taken over in year 1 were "somewhat larger and had better infrastructure than the national average," they were also "disproportionately concentrated outside of Monrovia and in poorer rural counties" (Romero et al, Jan. 2017).[31] However, the MoE itself admits that many schools were "deliberately chosen because they were closer to towns or roads and easier to access," and that PSL schools do generally have better infrastructure and more teachers (MoE, Feb 2017, p.20). It should be noted that in year 2, the MoE has proposed placing 80% of the new partnerships schools in the more rural southeast of Liberia (Maryland, Rivercess, Sinoe, Grand Gedeh, Grand Kru and River Gee Counties) (MoE, June 4 2017). The RCT team has identified 684 schools that meet year 2 criteria (the only criteria given in MoE in the June 2017 allocation document is 2G network connectivity) with 182 of those schools located in the southeast of the country (MoE, June 4 2017). Schools are also set to be clustered, with 7-9 cluster groups with 12 schools each. One questions whether these clusters mean that every public school in the immediate area will now be under the ownership of that one provider, if these schools still must meet year 1 selection

28 The MOU for Omega as well as the other providers have yet to be released to the public.

29 See Appendix 3.

30 The BIA report claims that on average BIA schools were a 4 minute walk to the nearest main road compared to a 26 minute walk for traditional public schools in the study (Gbilia et al, 2017, p.24).

31 The BIA midline assessment (Gbilia et al, 2017) also states that their 6 schools in the study had less classrooms, had less "active use" bathrooms, and were less likely to have a library.

criteria of having at least 6 classrooms and 6 teachers, and if class caps will continue.[32] There is already evidence of selective skimming, as seen in the schools having to meet certain minimal standards, like 2G cell-phone coverage, which are not common for schools in these areas. Finally, while certain providers have made stipulations about where they would operate, others (as noted by Romero et al, Jan. 2017)[33] have expressed willingness to go to more rural areas with less ideal conditions. How these providers differ, and their rationales for going to these underserved and more geographically challenging areas, deserve further research.

There have also been some in-country media reports of students being pushed out of partnership schools, overcrowded class sizes in the schools surrounding PSL schools, and in some cases, partnership schools taking over the only school in the catchment area, leading some children to no longer attend school at all (COTAE, 2017). A recent report in Bong county supported by Education International, told of students being pushed out of school due to caps on PSL classroom sizes (Mukpo, 2017). Indeed, certain providers cap class sizes at 55 and it appears that all providers are capped financially at 65. As class sizes in some Liberian schools are higher than these caps, sometimes double that number,[34] many students may have been forced to find enrolment elsewhere, leading to crowded classrooms and worsening conditions at surrounding schools. For example, local media accounts (Senah, 2016) show that this happened at Kendeja Public High school, operated by BIA. According to community reports, some 300 students remain unenrolled, due to the 55-student-per-classroom cap. The community also reported that students had to pass an entrance exam in order to enrol (Senah, 2016).[35] These actions are in violation of PSL policy, which intended that spots be reserved for previous students on a first come, first served basis. Entrance exams are not permitted in selecting enrolment. These accusations have been repeatedly denied by BIA, and the RCT team finds no "systematic evidence" that PSL is favouring richer students over poorer ones, or is pushing out certain types of students (Sandefur, March 9 2017, CIES; Sandefur, et. Al, 2017). The RCT does attempt to measure if students are being pushed out, as well as overall student performance, through a strategy known as intention-to-treat analysis. Data on this should be available in the August 2017 report (Romero et al, Jan. 2017). The Baseline Report (2017) states that treatment schools did increase enrolment, and that treatment schools are less likely to charge fees than control schools (17% versus 47%)[36] (Sandefur, 2017, p.12).

Overall, there is currently little data available on student experience in PSL schools. While the Baseline reports on student attendance, student outcomes, and general school characteristics, there has been little reported qualitative data related to these baseline results. Research

32 A list of schools was recently released, a quick review of the schools selected seems to show much smaller schools that may have a lower number of classrooms and teachers. However, this brings into question its own set of questions, as given there is a set minimum spent on each school (USD$12,500) some of these schools may see per pupil spending close to USD$300. Further review is needed.

33 Based on midline reporting, Street Child appears to be one such school provider.

34 Such as Martha Tubman Elementary (AM) according to EMIS data.

35 The MOU between BIA and the MoE states that students will sit for exams so that they can be properly placed within each grade. The sitting for an exam has the potential to dissuade students from joining, particularly those who may believe they will perform poorly on the exam. Further, students ages 15-18 are asked to be put in a separate track, which again may limit enrollment.

36 It should be noted that partnership schools are not allowed to charge fees and at the time of the Baseline Report 17% of schools were doing so. It will be important to see if this number decreases or increases at the midline report.

stressing qualitative methods, and offering a more holistic approach that brings in different perspectives and asks different questions, is needed to construct a more detailed picture of the situation.

4.3.2. Teachers

According to the Baseline Report (2017), teachers at treatment schools have less experience teaching, are slightly more likely to have received training over the last year,[37] score higher on math and memory scores, are less likely to be paid by the government, and are more likely to be paid by an NGO than teachers at control schools (Sandefur et al, p.15).[38] The report also notes that partnership schools have more teachers per school (Sandefur et al, p.15). One of the most notable successes observed in PSL is reduced teacher absenteeism, and teachers spending more time on task (Sandefur et al, 2017). As the Baseline Report (2017) notes, teachers in PSL schools were 9% less likely to be off-task during classroom observations (p.13), they were also 4% more likely to have access to and use technology in class lessons (p.13). Teachers in PSL schools were also less likely to engage in corporal punishment, and Math and English teachers were less likely to have missed school the previous week or leave the classroom, according to student survey data (p.16). Teachers in treatment schools are also more likely to spend time on passive instruction and classroom management (p.16).

According to the Baseline Report, teachers are also very supportive of PSL and its expansion, with a majority of both control and treatment teachers who have heard of PSL preferring to work in a PSL school, and over 95% of both supporting PSL expansion (p.16). However, it should be noted that only 34% of teachers at control schools and 57% of teachers at treatment schools have heard of PSL, while treatment teachers also report lower job satisfaction (p.15). The Baseline notes that this is a bit of a puzzle, but cannot shed light on teachers' responses because of the limitations of RCT data. Similarly, though it appears it is possible that PSL schools are becoming better-staffed than control schools thanks to NGO hires of additional teachers, the data do not offer insights into how such hires are affecting the school ecology. Do they relieve teachers (or administrators) of overloads, thereby making everyone's jobs easier? Do they have different terms of employment than government teachers, causing a growing divide between types of teachers? Do the newly-hired teachers systematically behave differently than government teachers, or play different roles in classrooms or the school? All of these ecological questions are essential for understanding if and how the effects of PSL are impacted by increased teacher

37 Both the Street Child and BIA midline report outline a few interventions regarding teacher training/professional development. Street Child states that they have run two major teacher trainings programs throughout the year (August and February), which focused on literacy, numeracy, classroom management and child protection (p.9). According to Street Child's midline report over 100 teachers participated and participants were provided with classroom/learning materials to take back to their schools. BIA midline report (Gbilia et al, 2017) outlines a 13-day pre-service training for teachers which covered topics such as classroom management, teacher practice using teacher computer, and content mastery (p.12).

38 Teacher demographic data is limited in the RCT baseline report, with no information presented regarding the teacher's gender. The BIA midline assessment report does include some details on teacher and administrator gender, finding that teachers at BIA schools are slightly more likely to be male than teachers in the 6 control schools (traditional public schools) in their study (Gbilia et al, 2017, p.24).

staffing as opposed to, for example, changes in management.

Despite the complexity of these outcomes to date, an op-ed by BIA co-founder Shannon May (June 2, 2017) trumpeted teacher successes on a much greater scale than that seen in the baseline data, claiming that teacher attendance had skyrocketed from an estimated 40% to over 90% in one school year. However, BIA claims in their midline report that the BIA PSL schools had a teacher or substitute present 89% of the time, compared to just 57% for the traditional public schools, though they admit in a footnote that teacher attendance at BIA schools fell from 100% in September 2016 to 82% in February, 2017 due to issues with the Ministry payroll (Gbilia et al, 2017, p.25). Street Child also has reported an 89% teacher attendance rate at their schools in their midline report (Street Child, 2017).

While the RCT baseline numbers show that partnership teachers are generally optimistic and enthusiastic about PSL, there is also evidence that these teachers work significantly longer hours without any increase in compensation. There are also reports of teachers not being paid on time and of teachers at BIA schools being forced to incur extra costs, such as charging tablets, to ensure that the school remains up and running (COTAE, 2017, p.12). Other reports have quoted teachers as "resenting longer hours" and going hungry due to the lack of a feeding program at PSL schools (Pilling, 2017). There is also some confusion over how teachers are selected and relocated by PSL providers. For example, questions remain around BIA's "mutual opt-in" or "double opt-in" for teachers in which the teacher and the provider must both agree on that teacher working in the school or else the teacher is removed and turned over to the government (BIA and MOU1, p.8; BIA and MOU2, p.1). In a blogpost, the RCT team states that baseline data shows "on average only one teacher per school from the 2015/16 teacher roster has been re-assigned to another location, and this number is the same in both treatment and control schools" (Romero et al, Jan. 2017). However, they further state that BIA is "the exception," "having on average 3 re-assignments per school" (Romero et al, Jan. 2017). As a result of this confusion, further research is needed.[39]

The Baseline Report (2017) also provides principal (administrator) data. It finds that principals at treatment schools have slightly more experience in the position and are more likely to know the PTA head's phone number (p.11). Principals at treatment schools also spend less time overall working, but more time: supporting teachers, disciplining students, off school grounds, and doing administrative tasks, and significantly less time teaching and planning (p.12). These results are lauded as signs of increased time spent on management, but again, it is difficult to learn from existing data why this shift in behaviour has occurred and what its consequences are in PSL schools. For example, are principals spending more time on managerial work because they can be relieved of teaching duties thanks to partner hires of more teachers? Are they spending more time because of demands for such behaviour by PSL providers (and if so, does this differ across providers)? Are modes of discipline at the school changing, or are they being centralised in principals' hands? These and other questions need to be asked about changes in principal's behaviour patterns, as these deeply impact school ecology.

39 The RCT team in a response to David Archer's concerns states that all providers have some ability to reassign teachers who do not pass a Ministry test and that the evaluation hopes to measure teacher turnover/ reassignment (Romero et al, Jan. 2017).

4.4. Sustainability and Scalability

One of the biggest concerns regarding PSL is whether it's scalable and sustainable. The RCT team has yet to report on the cost effectiveness of the program; later reports are expected to include such data, but it is essential to note that partner reporting about full costs must be generated in order to support robust cost effectiveness measures. For example, if partners report on the cost of hiring another teacher for a school, but do not include the cost of hiring or managing this teacher, the cost effectiveness data will be skewed. Similarly, PSL partners might offload the cost of charging tablets onto teachers, and thus not claim this cost of tablet technology. To generate robust cost-effectiveness data, the RCT team will need to go beyond reported numbers, and carefully examine experiential costs for various PSL activities. This kind of forensic accounting research is unlikely to be supported within the current RCT framework.

Concerns about costs remain as the MoE attempts to scale up the program in year 2. The MoE has admitted that it currently lacks the funds to properly finance all schools in the country, yet it plans to grow PSL over the next three years, with some scenarios discussing scaling up to 550 PSL schools over the next five years, resulting in a total estimated cost of over USD$17 million, with an estimated USD$9 million coming from external funds (MoE, Feb 2017, p.22). The MoE further acknowledges potential issues with sustainability, particularly regarding external financing, claiming that PSL "cannot rely on short-term philanthropic funding," but instead must be funded through domestic sources or long-term in-country development assistance partnerships (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.18).

In April 2017, the Minister of Education announced that PSL will be scaled up next year to include "no more than 100%" of the current school level, with the intent of moving at least 80% of these new schools into the harder to reach areas of the southeast. In response, the RCT team published an open letter to the MoE, calling for the increases to wait until evidence is properly gathered on the initial schools (Romero et al, April 2017). The letter identifies massive inequalities in the funding of PSL schools, finding that while some providers spend an estimated USD$50 per student, others are spending substantially more. For example, as reported in the Economist, BIA is spending almost 9 million in Liberia, over USD$1,000 per child,[40] with much of that (approximately 5.5 million) going to staff costs outside of Liberia (Economist, 2017). Some providers have claimed that costs will go down as the program is scaled up, though this remains to be seen (Romero et al, Jan. 2017), especially as these providers move into harder to reach areas. COTAE has also reported that not all providers are fully operating due in part to funding problems (COTAE, 2017), with these funding issues mainly attributed to the Liberian owned providers. This may be why the MoE has labelled Stella Maris and LIYONET category C providers in the recent final allocation report (MoE, June 29, 2017). A level C provider is described as having "limited ability to scale or ability to scale restricted to scaling within local area" (MoE, June 4, 2017). This may indicate that PSL is creating a privatisation market that favours large and well-connected outside actors. In fact, if year 2 school allocation numbers hold up, the two Liberian

40 See Appendix 4.

owned providers (Stella Maris and LIYONET) will be operating just 6% of PSL schools (12/202), while three large providers (two of them for-profit and all three providers which never before operated in Liberia, see appendix 1) will be operating 64% of PSL schools (MoE, June 29, 2017). Further research is needed on the differences in the funding and operation of these schools, as well as the specific actors participating in fundraising/funding PSL. As noted in the government documents, outside funds raised by individual donors are "considerable" and outweigh their philanthropic subsidy payment "several fold" (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.18). A brief list of PSL funders and operators includes: Vitol, UBS, Mulago, ELMA, Gates foundation, and the Zuckerberg Foundation. Ark and other private actors in the PPP have their own additional funders (including the Omidyar Network, UBS Optimus Foundation, Morgan Stanley, Big Win Philanthropy, and Bain and Company), that deserve further study.

4.5. Conclusion

Through a review of two reports (Baseline and COTAE), service provider midline reports, several media articles, and official PSL documents, one can draw some early insights regarding PSL. Regarding accountability and transparency, it is evident that, despite increasing investment by MoE in the monitoring of PSL schools, there remain several capacity gaps that have the ability to undermine PSL effectiveness (top down accountability). Concerns continue with regard to the ability of MoE to monitor and evaluate the 94 PSL schools; plans to expand PSL into the southeast and other harder to reach areas exacerbate these concerns, which have been expressed by a range of actors, including the RCT team.

There are also questions about provider accountability to education quality standards; these questions are raised in part because of a lack of clarity about the regulations that will guide PSL, as opposed to government-run, schools. For example, will failing schools be handed over to other PSL providers, returned to the government, or remain in the hands of failing providers?[41] The MoE's commissioning of an evaluation team is a significant step toward holding providers accountable, but it appears as though the MoE is committed to scaling up the program before independent publicly-available empirical evidence has been released to demonstrate PSL's positive impact. What evidence has been provided in support of scaling up comes from a baseline report created just 4-7 weeks into the school year and midline assessment reports conducted by participating service providers. This concern about scaling up, before at least midline RCT evidence is in, is shared by several key actors, including Ark and the RCT team (see Romero et al, April, 2017).

Forms of bottom-up accountability, such as choice and competition, seem to be undermined by the fact that all PSL schools have simply taken over local government schools, and are often the only school in the area. Furthermore, teachers and communities generally had little knowledge of PSL at the Baseline, perhaps a reflection of the fact that they had little input in its planning and implementation. More research is needed regarding when, how, and to what effect communities were involved in PSL planning (or other forms of consultation), and if and how

41 Edwards et al (2017) notes that in the US, charters are more likely to be closed due to finance and mismanagement, than poor academic performance (p.7).

school stakeholders are being made aware of the intervention now. Finally, serious concerns around transparency and accountability arise from the fact that documents relating to PSL have not been provided to key stakeholders in a timely fashion, including MOUs. To ensure that all stakeholders understand and can participate in PSL, it is essential that such documents are made readily accessible to community members, civil society, and the free press.

In relation to teachers and students, it is evident from the Baseline (2017) study that PSL does show some promise, even just a few weeks in. School stakeholders reported reduced teacher and student absenteeism, decreased corporal punishment, and increased school enrolment. However, some media reports, along with the COTAE report (2017), provide evidence of students being pushed out of schools, overcrowding in neighbouring schools, and complaints by PSL teachers regarding lack of compensation for longer hours and a lack of feeding programs (which may, of course, also significantly affect pupil health and wellbeing). There is also confusion over how students and teachers are chosen, what powers providers have, and how these powers differ among providers. These reports raise legitimate concerns, and reinforce the idea that further research is needed to better understand the impact of PSL on Liberia's overall school ecology.

This report also touched on questions regarding scalability and sustainability. These are difficult questions to answer without financial documents and interviews with key actors. However, MOE budget documents, and the high levels of foreign and philanthropic donations needed to keep PSL operating, raise questions about PSL's financial sustainability. Indeed, the recent increase in the philanthropic subsidy in year 2, from USD$50 to USD$60 per student, shows that expansion may not lead to the savings originally claimed by some providers. Can these donations be sustained, not just over the next five years of expansion, but after the pilot is finished? Given that some providers have a history of promoting low-fee private schools, many wonder what will happen when they control operations in a large number of schools. In order to determine the sustainability of the PSL, it is essential to interview a variety of stakeholders, most importantly Ministry officials, providers themselves, and external funders, about their vision and plans for the intervention's future.

It is also important to note that issues of scalability and sustainability cannot be fully answered based on the schools included in Year 1 of the intervention. These schools do not share the characteristics of the majority of Liberia's schools—indeed, this could be one reason why only 299 of Liberia's 2,619 primary schools qualified for potential inclusion in the intervention. Costs and challenges will shift as the school population shifts—and they are likely to increase, as PSL has creamed off a group of schools with fewer constraints to infrastructure, staffing, geographic reachability, and access to resources than the average Liberian school. Lastly, the current PSL framework raises important questions about the consequences for educational equity of having divergent amounts of funding flowing to different schools. While PPP proponents claim that interventions like PSL will increase educational equity, thus far the increased educational resources are not reaching the most marginalised schools or students. Given these questions, it is important that further research investigates PSL from a variety of angles and through a diversity of methods. Toward that end, we now describe the research that we proposed to conduct in May through July 2017, as a first effort at exploring some of the questions raised above.

Section 5

Our Research

Section 5
Our Research [42]

This section briefly outlines our research plan. It is now widely acknowledged among educational researchers, research funders, and research users that multiple research methodologies improve triangulation of data, as well as provide a more complete picture of the impact of interventions (Rao and Woolcock, 2003). Our proposed research was an empirical study of changes to educational ecologies as a result of PSL. It aimed to capture both intended and unintended impacts, which in turn would support intervention quality improvement, and provide a broader range of data through which to understand and interpret RCT results. It did not replicate the RCT in goals, questions, or methods. Attacks made on the research, prior to its careful consideration or approval, have created a discouraging research environment, which we hope will improve over the coming months and years.

5.1. Overview

After reviewing the literature on PPPs, and analysing documents and news reports related to PSL, our team created a research plan that aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of PSL in practice, particularly examining how international, national, and most importantly school and community actors were understanding and engaging with PSL, and how it was impacting educational ecologies. The research was particularly interested in systematically collecting interview and observational data from multiple actors and institutions, to create a triangulated, and thus more holistic, picture of how PSL is experienced by students and communities. In line with the research team's goal of studying educational ecologies, the research design also included schools located near PSL schools, and community members who were and were not involved in PSL schools from the school catchment area.

The research design aimed to increase the body of data available on key claims made by PSL, most notably how managerial, bottom-up, and top-down accountability were shifting in daily educational practice as a result of PSL, how PSL was impacting least advantaged students in PSL catchment areas, how each provider was selecting students and teachers, what were the differences between providers on school location, school characteristics, funding, engagement with the Ministry and community, teaching practices, teacher development, and provider and community motivations and rationales, and how communities were involved throughout the PSL creation and implementation process.

The proposed research consisted of two threads. Thread one included collating and reviewing available information on the PSL program, and conducting interviews with key PSL stakeholders at the national and district levels (service providers, IPA/RCT team, Ministry officials, district

42 A similar research plan was shared with the Ministry of Education upon their request on May 2, 2017.

and county education officials, NGOs, external funder community, civil society actors). Thread two consisted of an empirical investigation of stakeholders' daily experiences with PSL, through a detailed 2-3 month (May-July 2017) qualitative study in up to 10 PSL schools and 10 neighbouring public schools. This included in-depth interviews with students, parents, teachers, and community leaders; focus group discussions with parents and students; and observations of classrooms, school surroundings/environment, and school meetings. As with many extended qualitative studies, the research aimed to triangulate what people say and what people do, with what diverse groups of people say, and what people do in different educational settings. In so doing, the research can offer extensive reflections on why people behave as they do and say what they do, and how different stakeholders' opinions and experiences come together to create a more holistic understanding of daily educational practices.

Below, we outline the broad questions that were to be explored under each research thread.

5.2. Research Questions and Methods

Thread 1: *(Methods: Document analysis and interviews of key implementing stakeholders)*

1. How is PSL being understood and implemented by international and national actors (including county and district education officials)?

a. **Sub-questions:**

1. What do different actors believe are the logics/rationales driving PSL?
2. Why do different actors believe PSL is being promoted and implemented at this time? What do they view as the strengths and potential weaknesses of the PSL model?
3. How have the different actors been engaged in the PSL process?
4. How did the competitive commissioning process occur, what criteria was used to select schools?
5. How does each provider differ and compare in spending? How do they choose how to focus their resources? If these are data-driven decisions, what data are most commonly used to shape these decisions?
6. Who are the funders of these private providers, what is their rationale for participating in PSL and in the promotion of private service provision? What are the particular roles of the World Bank and Ark in the promotion of PSL?
7. What do specific actors (MoE, Ark, service providers, etc.) see as the greatest challenges and successes of year 1? What changes are needed by year 3?
8. What interventions (private provision, accountability, contract teachers, longer school hours, 2G network, teacher training) do key stakeholders believe have most impacted student learning, community engagement/ perception, etc., and why?

Thread 2: *(Methods: Document analysis; interviews with parents, students, teachers, principals/ administrators, local leaders; focus groups of parents; observation of classrooms and schools)*

1. How are local education stakeholders (teachers, principals/administrators, students, parents, and community leaders) understanding and experiencing PSL?

a. **Sub-questions:**

1. (How) have communities been engaged in the PSL process, either through consultations or through direct interactions with a PSL school?
2. What do stakeholders view as the successes/benefits of PSL in their area, and what fuels these successes?
3. What do stakeholders view as challenges related to PSL, and from where do these challenges arise (e.g., in planning, implementation, relationshipbuilding, etc.)?
4. What intervention policies (private provision, accountability, contract teachers, longer school hours, 2G network, teacher training) do communities and school personnel think has the most impact on student learning, community engagement/ perception, etc., and why?
5. What enrollment choices exist in each educational ecology? How and why are families choosing to enroll their children in specific schools within this ecology? Are there differences in what parents, students, and community leaders view as "good" enrollment decisions?
6. How is PSL impacting internal school ecologies (that is, the relationships among school leaders, teachers, and students) in a given catchment area? Do there appear to be systematic differences between the daily practices (i.e., the internal school ecologies) of PSL and non-PSL schools?
7. How exactly has the MoE engaged in monitoring and evaluating PSL schools, how does this differ from other government schools?
8. How are service providers dealing with different languages within Liberia? What policies have they implemented and how are these embodied in daily practice in PSL and government schools?
9. How do school stakeholders make sense of changes caused by PSL? That is, to what do they attribute the changes, and do they feel they are positive/negative, sustainable/unsustainable?
10. How is PSL impacting the local school ecology (that is, the relationships among schools and communities) in a given catchment area? (How) is PSL impacting community engagement in schooling?
11. How exactly are different actors working with the local community and what have been their successes and challenges just far? Who do communities view as responsible for their child's education? What is the role and responsibility of private actors and the government in education?

12. How do people perceive differences between providers, specifically Liberian and international providers, and for versus non-profit providers? How and in what ways do communities categorize and label these providers?

Across all of these questions, the research would employ an intersectional analytic lens to better understand and compare the effects of gender, ability, geography, family income, orphanhood or family vulnerability, and other emergent categories on stakeholders' experiences and the PSL impact.

5.3. Sampling (Schools)

Our research team was open to two possible sampling methods that we planned to discuss with the MoE. The research team had initially communicated with a member of the RCT team, and agreed to not sample from specific schools involved in their study. In both options, 10 PSL schools and up to 10 non-PSL government schools[43] would be sampled.

Sampling Option 1

The first sampling option included 5 schools spread between the large providers (BIA: 1-2, Omega: 1-2, and BRAC: 1-2), and 5 schools (one each) for the remaining 5 providers (Rising Academies, Street Child, Stella Maris, LIYONET, More than Me). These schools would be purposefully selected to span as broad a range as feasible of PSL school locations (counties and rural/urban), sizes, and proximity to neighbouring schools. At least one school sampled from the 5 large providers would, based on EMIS data, be the only nearby school in the catchment area. Each PSL school would then be paired with a primary school that was not a part of PSL but was located within 5 kilometres of the PSL school.

Sampling Option 2

In this option, 10 PSL schools would be sampled after discussions with MoE officials (particularly district officials) to identify the names of PSL schools that they consider to be "average" (neither the best nor the worst). We would then sample from these "average" schools to allow for some comparability across providers, districts, communities, etc. The 10 non-PSL schools would be sampled based on their proximity to the identified 10 PSL schools (5km radius). The goal of this design was to attempt to avoid randomly sampling a provider school that was particularly good or bad, but to instead try to better understand how "average" PSL schools were functioning.

43 The research team was also considering including private schools, faith-based schools, and community schools in this number in order to understand the full school ecology in each catchment area.

5.4. Limitations

There were several limitations to the proposed study. First and foremost was its short timeline, as the team needed to be out of schools and communities before exams began in July. The team would have preferred to stay for a longer period of time in each school ecology (2-4 weeks), to better understand daily processes, but due to time constraints, research in each community (2 schools) was shortened to 1 week at each site. Further, since each provider would have had only 1-2 schools studied throughout the three months, the study would not have been able to draw specific conclusions about any one provider. The scope of the research was limited by its budget and the size of the research team could not be increased to cover more schools.

5.5. Rationale and Significance

The proposed research would have contributed to debates around PSL and PPPs by collecting systematic data from a variety of PSL school ecologies over a 3-month period. As reports have shown, PSL has the ability to impact both schools and entire neighbourhoods and surrounding schools/communities (COTAE, 2017). By focusing on the effects of the intervention on educational ecologies, the research aimed to answer a range of questions that cannot easily be addressed by the RCT, but that complement insights arising from the RCT. The research would have explored questions such as: why are principals/administrators spending less time teaching and more time disciplining than their non-PSL control school counterparts? How does this difference impact accountability among administrators, teachers, students, and parents? How do parents experience their child's PSL experience, and, as the intervention progresses, when, how, and to what effect do parents choose to enrol their child in a PSL school? The research would also have asked questions that have not been directly addressed by the RCT, such as if and how non-PSL government school administrators, teachers, students, and parents make sense of increased resource differentiations between PSL and non-PSL schools? Our design would have allowed us to examine when and how increased spending becomes visible to community members, whether different amounts or kinds of spending (e.g., infrastructure versus ICT) have differential effects on people's understanding of the school and its quality. Indeed, our project aimed precisely at filling in these research gaps in community participation and understanding, which are an essential but too often neglected part of the larger PSL and PPP picture (Miraftab, 2004; Edwards et al, 2017). Illuminating these areas would have benefitted all actors dedicated to improving education in Liberia.

Our research further aligns with the stated objective of the World Bank and international nongovernmental organisations to incorporate more qualitative research into studies that have often focused on quantitative data collection, in order to better understand the attitudes, opinions values, and experiences of those who are directly impacted by interventions. According to the World Health Organisation (2017), qualitative research is "[i]mportant for theory generation, policy development, improving educational practice, justifying change or a particular practice,

and illuminating social issues". Reflecting this shift in reporting from predominantly quantitative measures, and grounded in the Capabilities Approach developed by economist Amartya Sen (1999), our qualitative research study aimed to:

1. discover how students, their families, their teachers, and administrators experience PSL in their everyday lives;

2. identify and, where appropriate, compare attitudinal and behavioural patterns of students, teachers, and staff attending Partnership Schools and traditional government schools in similar areas.

These measures cannot be captured by purely quantitative means, yet are essential to understanding how the PSL intervention might yield the intended academic and societal improvements outlined in the Education Sector Plan. The research addresses many of the MoE's priorities, including focusing on teachers, schools and teaching materials, girls' education, and decentralisation.

Finally, our research was based on the belief that the impact of education cannot and should not simply be measured in terms of student performance and cost-benefit analysis, but should explore a variety of other rationales and logics, particularly those that animate local stakeholders' involvement in schooling. Questions about the purpose and power of education, and what it does or is supposed to do, need to be debated, not only in the development sector, but amongst a variety of actors in Liberia. For example, in many of the PSL documents, quality is associated with basic indicators including literacy and numeracy. These are very important, but are not the only indicators that matter, and may not be the indicators that matter the most to parents, students, and teachers. Qualitative research allows for a generative expansion of the categories (and thus the logics) that matter, and that motivate people's actions. Such an expansion is essential for understanding why people respond to PSL as they do, and therefore how to increase desired responses and decrease undesired ones through intervention quality improvement.

Section 6

Conclusion

Section 6
Conclusion

PSL is set to scale up by 100%, to a greater variety of schools, in year 2; many questions about the year 1 intervention and its impacts still remain. Given the extent of the reforms, and its potential impact on the children of Liberia, key stakeholders (proponents and critics) must be honest and forthcoming about the challenges, successes, and limitations of PSL and its evaluation. It is important that future research focuses on all providers and actors participating in PSL. Extending research to all providers, which is what our research attempted to do, will deepen our understanding of how PSL is being implemented, understood, and experienced in communities throughout Liberia. It is quite possible—in fact, we should expect that—different service providers will have different impacts on school ecologies. Similarly, we should expect that the same intervention will have differential effects on different kinds of schools. Careful, detailed, systematic, and holistic research that examines similarities and differences across educational ecologies is essential for understanding PSL's impact. All actors dedicated to improved educational experiences and outcomes for Liberian children should want such research to be done, and we hope that such research will be supported in the coming year.

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Appendix 1: Service Providers

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) (33 schools):

Number of Schools: Year 1: 20, Year 2:13

Locations: Year 1: 18 Lofa, 2 Nimba, Year 2[44]: 13 Grand Gedeh

Founded: 1972

Type (Non or for-profit): non-profit

New to Liberia (Y/N): No, worked in health and economic development sector since 2008

International or National: International

History Running Primary Schools (Y/N): Yes (internationally), No (Liberia)

Year 1 Grade/Category: B

Background: Established in 1972 in Bangladesh, BRAC is the largest non-government organization in the world based on number of people helped and number of employees (BRAC, 2017). It operates in over a dozen countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and works in several fields, including microfinance, economic development, health, and education. It has worked in Liberia since 2008, mainly in economic development (microfinance and agriculture). It has no experience with the education sector in Liberia prior to PSL, and its international website for Liberia does not discuss its education initiatives in the country. BRAC does have extensive experience operating primary schools internationally, claiming to have built the "largest, secular, private education system in the world with more than 900,000 students" (BRAC, 2016) On its website, BRAC describes its primary schools as offering a "high impact and low-cost model" that provide "disadvantaged students a second chance at learning," and complement mainstream education models with "innovative teaching methods and materials" (BRAC, 2016).

44 Year 2 school locations are tentative and are based on documents released as of July 9th, 2017.

Bridge International Academies (BIA) (68 schools)

Number of Schools: Year 1: 25, Year 2: 43

Locations: Year 1: 7 Bong, 5 Montserrado, 5 Nimba, 4 Bomi, 2 Grand Bassa, 1 Grand Cape Mount, 1 Margibi; Year 2: 24 Grand Kru, 19 Maryland

Founded: 2009

Type: For-Profit

New to Liberia: Yes

International or National: International

History Running Primary Schools: Yes

Year 1 Grade/Category: A

Background: Since opening its first school in Nairobi, Kenya in 2009, BIA has spread rapidly to other countries including Uganda, Nigeria, Liberia, and India. It currently serves over 100,000 students worldwide. Historically described as a low-fee private school (LFPS), BIA has typically charged students/families a fee to attend (Liberia is the only country it does not charge a fee). It prides itself on offering choice to parents and improving student performance. It has several large investors, including Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Gates Foundation, Omidyar Network, and the World Bank's International Finance Corporation. Known for its "school in-a-box" model, BIA has drawn criticism for its use of contract teachers, scripted lessons (lessons are developed by personnel outside of the country and delivered to a tablet which is followed by teachers), and low-fee model. Its expansion in Uganda was halted over concerns with school safety and regulations. BIA was the original PSL partner in Liberia, having initially been granted 50 schools to operate in January 2016, scaled-down to 25 schools after international criticism. The original operating budget for the 50 schools was approximately USD$8 million. BIA currently operates under a different MOU with the MoE, and was in country setting up schools months before the other providers were commissioned. BIA has set conditions as to where it will operate in Liberia. In year 2, BIA will have 68 schools or 34% of PSL schools. It is the largest PSL operator.

Liberia Youth Network (LIYONET)(6 schools)

Number of Schools: Year 1: 4; Year 2: 2

Location: Year 1: 3 in Bong County, 1 in Sinoe (southeast), Year 2: 2 Sinoe

Founded: Unknown

Type: Non-profit

New to Liberia?: No

International or National: National

History of Running Primary Schools in Past: No

Year 1 Grade/Category: C

Background: One of two Liberian owned providers, LIYONET is described on the MoE website as a children's charity from Liberia. Little information is available about its past experience in the education sector or school management (Sieh, 2016). Its social media page (very little internet presence) describes itself as "a non-governmental, non-political and non-profit organisation committed to promoting children & youth in sustainable development and good leadership". Funders are unknown.

More than Me (MTM) (18 schools)

Number of Schools: Year 1: 6; Year 2: 12

Location: Year 1: 4 Bomi, 1 Gbarpolu, 1 Montserrado; Year 2: 12 Gbarpolu

Founded: 2009

Type: Non-profit

New to Liberia?: No

International or National: International

History of Running Primary Schools: Yes, 1 school in Liberia opened in 2013

Year 1 Grade/Category: A

Background: Founded by a North American woman who received acclaim for her work during the Ebola crisis, MTM is described on its website as "a vocal advocate of women's empowerment." It first operated in Liberia as a scholarship program for young women, before opening its first and only school in Liberia in 2013. As the "first tuition free, all-girls school", it prides itself in providing a "safe and high-quality" education through rigorous academic standards, increased computer/technology access, free meals, and, the provision of free healthcare to students (it is unknown if this continued under PSL). Funders include Chase Bank, Exxon Mobile, Cisco, and Microsoft, among others. Board members include several corporations including Vitol, an important funder of PSL.

Omega (19 schools)

Number of Schools: Year 1: 17[45] ; Year 2: 2

Location: Year 1: 9 Nimba, 5 Bong, 2 Margibi, 1 Montserrado; Year 2: 2 Nimba

Founded: 2009

Type: For-profit

New to Liberia?: Yes

International or National: International

History of Running Primary Schools: Yes, approximately 40 in Ghana

Year 1 Grade/Category: C

Background: Founded in 2009, Omega is a chain of for profit low-fee private schools operating primarily in Ghana, where it runs approximately 40 schools. Like BIA, it is known for its "school in a box" model and its pay-as-you learn model, which charges students for daily attendance (approximately USD$.75 per day). Omega often employs contract and non-certified teachers. It is backed by some powerful players in the international development field, including academic James Tooley, a vocal advocate of LFPS and other forms of private education in low-income countries, and Pearson Education, which has invested millions in Omega through its Pearson Affordable Learning Fund. Omega has opted not to operate two assigned schools in Liberia, and has placed conditions on which schools it is willing to operate. Its schools in year 1 are largely located in Bong and Nimba county, with 2 in Margibi, and 1 in Montserrado (Monrovia area). Exact locations of year 2 schools are not currently known at the time of this publication, due to recent changes in the number of schools allocated to them. It appears as though Omega was set to be allocated 15 new schools in year 2 but have been downgraded to just 2 schools in year 2.

45 Decided not to operate two of its schools according to Baseline Report (2017)

Rising Academies (29 schools)

Number of Schools: Year 1**:** 5[46]; Year 2: 24

Location: Year 1: 3 Bomi, 2 Montserrado; Year 2: 11 Sinoe, 4 River Gee, 4 Maryland, 3 Grand Bassa, 2 Rivercess

Founded: 2014

Type: For-profit

New to Liberia?: Yes

International or National: International

History of Running Primary Schools: Yes, operates primary schools in Sierra Leone

Year 1 Grade/Category: A

Background: Founded by British and Canadian entrepreneurs in 2014, Rising Academies operates 8 schools with approximately 1,300 students in Sierra Leone (Rising Academies Website; Sieh, 2016). It is for-profit, operating low-fee private schools, with a "mission to provide the best learning for the most students at the lowest cost" (Center for Education Innovations, 2015). It prioritises gender equality, while charging families a small fee that can be paid weekly, monthly, or termly. It has promoted outside evaluation in Sierra Leone. Prior to moving to Liberia (where it had no presence prior to 2016) it had opened a total of 3 schools, with numbers 2 and 3 opening in January of 2016 in Sierra Leone. Rising Academies operated schools in Bomi and Montserrado, and opted not to operate one of its assigned schools in year 1 of the pilot (Sandefur et al, 2017, p.7).

46 Decided not to operate one of its schools according to Baseline Report (2017).

Stella Maris (6 schools)

Number of Schools: Year 1: 4; Year 2: 2

Location: Year 1: 2 Grand Kru, 2 Maryland; Year 2: 2 Montserrado

Founded: 1988

Type: Religious, Non-profit

New to Liberia?: No

International or National: National

History of Running Primary Schools: No

Year 1 Grade/Category: C

Background: Stella Maris Polytechnic is 1 of 2 Liberian owned service providers. It has operated a private post-secondary institution of approximately 2,000 students since 1988, which is owned and managed by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Monrovia. While the Catholic Church has operated schools in Liberia in the past, there is no evidence that this specific provider has any experience operating primary schools. Stella Maris currently operates PSL schools in Grand Kru and Maryland counties. However, there have been reports that Stella Maris is not in full operation (COTAE, 2017, p.6 and 16).

Street Child (23 schools)

Number of Schools: Year 1:12; Year 2: 11

Location: Year 1: 7 Grand Cape Mount, 4 Margibi, 1 Montserrado; Year 2: 11 Maryland

Founded: 2008

Type: Non-profit

New to Liberia?: No

International or National: International

History of Running Primary Schools: Street Child has partnered with rural community schools in Sierra Leone, though it is not known if it is acting in the capacity of school provider.

Year 1 Grade/Category: B

Background: A United Kingdom charity founded in 2008, Street Child has worked largely in Sierra Leone, before moving into Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria. It began operations in Liberia in 2013. Originally formed to help street children and orphans following the civil war in Sierra Leone, it has expanded into working with communities in the building/funding of schools, between 2010-2017 helping to build or repair approximately 400 schools worldwide (Street Child, 2014).

Appendix 2:Overview of PSL-Year 1

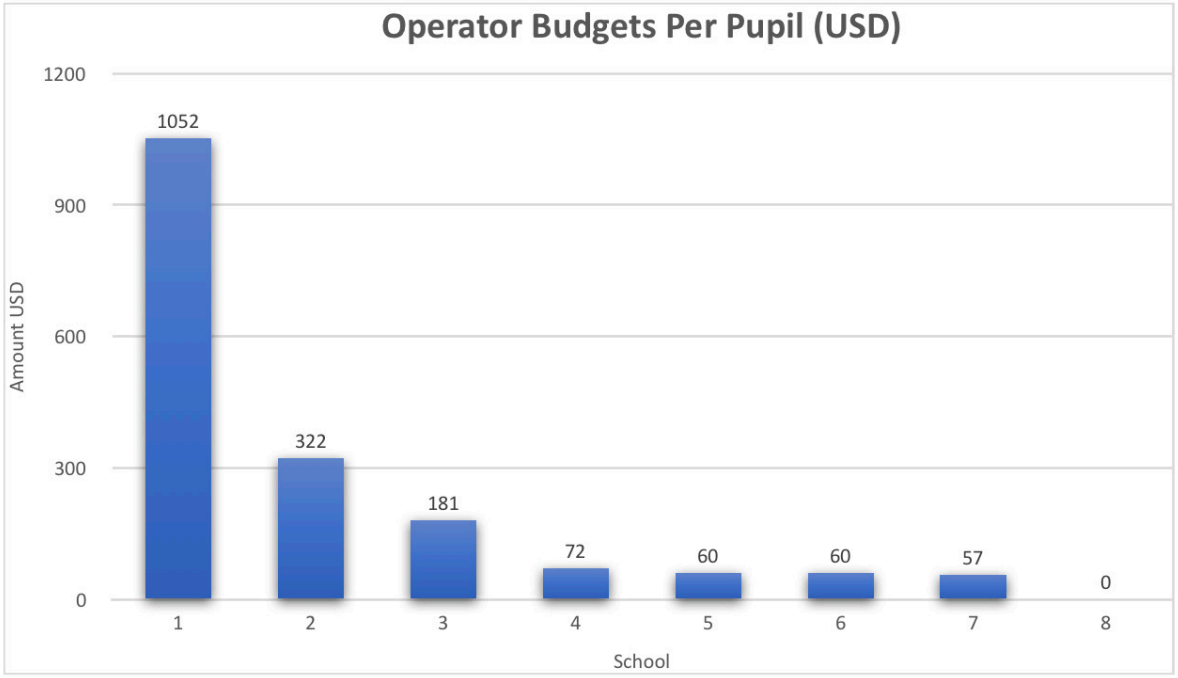
YEAR 1	
Operators	8
Schools	93/94
Children	27,379
Counties Covered	13/15
New Teachers Hired	500+
Number of hours teaching	Increase from 4 to 7
% of Girl students	47%
Spending Per Student Public	50 USD
Spending Per public Private (min.)	50 USD

Appendix 3: Map of Operators Year 1 and Year 2

Map of Operators Year 1

Map of Operators Year 2 (Note: Stella Maris, LIYONET, and Omega are not provided as data is not available)

Appendix 4: PSL Operator Budgets Per Pupil



*Based off of data received from Sandefur. (March 9, 2017). CIES Conference Presentation

Appendix 5: Noted Differences Between RCT and EI Research:

This section is to alleviate any concerns that our research would have undermined or duplicated the current IPA RCT. [47]

Item	IPA	Our Research
Type	Evaluation	Research
Methods:	Randomized Control Trial (RCT), Quantitative: survey data (parents, teachers, students), student learning outcomes, cost-benefit analysis, Qualitative: classroom observations, school facility information, interviews (teachers).	Qualitative: focus groups (parents), interviews (teachers, administrators, students, parents, community leaders/ elders, Ministry officials, civil society actors, NGO's, service providers), classroom observation, school document analysis,
Number of Schools in Study	185 schools (92 treatment, 93 control)	Up to 10-PSL schools and 10-neighboring schools (in the same catchment area).
Sampling:	Matched pairs (control and treatment), from 299 schools.	See section 5
Time Period:	3 years (September 2016-June 2019)	3 months (May 2017-July 2017)
Stated Objective:	"To provide a rigorous, independent measure of the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of the PSL program in delivering quality education to Liberian children." (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.15) "To test whether non-state management improves teacher accountability as measured by absenteeism, time on task, and ultimately improved student performance. Complementary analysis will assess the sustainability, scalability, and relative cost effectiveness of this PPP model, as well as its effects on equity." (MoE, Feb. 2017, p.15).	To provide a nuanced understanding of the PSL implementation process, particularly examining how international, national, and most importantly local/community actors were understanding and engaging with PSL and how it was impacting school ecology (neighboring schools).
Operating Budget	Year 1: 800,000 USD, Year 2: 500,000, Year 3: 500,000	Less than 35,000 USD

47 Based off of PSL documents made available to UW research team.

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Education International
5 Bd du Roi Albert II, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
Tel. +32-2 224 06 11
headoffice@ei-ie.org
ei-ie.org

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