

Privatization Across Time: Temporal Governance and Education Reform in Taiwan

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Research Overview

Education privatization is often explained as a linear diffusion of neoliberal policy. This study challenges that view by examining how schooling privatization endured in Taiwan across five decades through temporal governance. Analyzing education policy documents, the study demonstrates how reform was repeatedly re-timed, re-sequenced, and re-legitimated across shifting political contexts.

Purpose of Study

The global expansion of education privatization has generated extensive debate about the diffusion of market-oriented reforms in public schooling. Much scholarship interprets privatization as a neoliberal policy trajectory in which market logics gradually displace state provision. Yet empirical trajectories across national contexts often deviate from such linear explanations. Similar reform instruments may appear in different countries yet acquire new meanings when embedded in distinct political and historical contexts.

Recent policy scholarship has therefore called attention to the temporal dimension of reform. Privatization does not occur in a single moment but unfolds through overlapping waves of policy change. These waves are shaped not only by institutional conditions but also by discursive constructions of time. Policy actors frequently frame the present as a crisis requiring urgent reform while projecting future promises that justify policy intervention. These temporal narratives help stabilize reform trajectories and sustain policy change across shifting political contexts.

Building on Steiner-Khamisi's (2025) framework of the seven temporalities of policy transfer, this study conceptualizes these dynamics as temporal governance, the strategic

organization of policy time through which reform trajectories are stabilized, extended, and re-legitimized. Instead of treating time as a background condition of reform, temporal governance foregrounds how crises, sequences, and imagined futures structure policy trajectories.

Taiwan provides an analytically rich case for examining these dynamics. Over the past five decades, Taiwan has experienced multiple rounds of education reform across distinct political eras, including authoritarian governance, democratic transition, and contemporary demographic transformation. Across these periods, private participation in schooling has expanded and diversified, even though the rationales for reform have shifted significantly. This study aims to examine how education privatization in Taiwan emerged and evolved across different political periods and to analyze the temporal imaginaries that enabled its repeated re-legitimation and endurance over time. By analyzing the politics of time in reform discourse and policy sequencing, the study explains why privatization has persisted despite changing political and social conditions.

Research Methods

This study employs a longitudinal policy document analysis covering the period from 1970 to 2024. A corpus of 230 legally binding education policy documents, including education acts and amendments related to Taiwan's schooling system, was compiled from official government archives. The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, policy documents were coded to identify waves of privatization reform across different domains of education governance. Second, the study examined the temporal discourses embedded in these reforms using an abductive approach informed by Steiner-Khamsi's framework of policy temporalities, allowing interpretation of how reform was sequenced, justified, and sustained over time.

Results and Discussion

The analysis identifies three waves of schooling privatization in Taiwan, each associated with distinct political contexts and temporal imaginaries. The first wave (1970–1993) emerged under Taiwan's authoritarian developmental state, where demographic expansion and the extension of compulsory education created pressures on state capacity. Private schooling was legitimized as a pragmatic solution to expand educational provision. The second wave (1994–2008) unfolded during democratization, when privatization was re-legitimized through discourses of deregulation, school autonomy, and diversification. The

third wave (2010s onward) developed under demographic decline and intensified global competition, prompting voucher-style subsidies, experimental education policies, and expanded school choice. Across these waves, privatization endured not through ideological continuity but through repeated temporal recalibration. Reform was re-timed, re-sequenced, and re-legitimized through shifting temporal imaginaries of urgency, democratization, innovation, and survival. These temporal narratives functioned as mechanisms that stabilized reform trajectories and embedded private provision within Taiwan's education system.

By conceptualizing these dynamics as temporal governance, the study contributes to critical policy scholarship by demonstrating how the strategic organization of policy time can sustain reform across political transformations.

Keywords

Privatization, temporal governance, education reform, policy temporality, Taiwan

References

Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2025). *Time in education policy transfer: The seven temporalities of global school reform*. Palgrave Macmillan.