

Partnering with non-governmental organizations in public education: contributions to an ongoing debate

In the governance era, a broad range of non-governmental actors are interacting with schools and public authorities in the delivery of formal education and, as a result, educational systems are becoming more diverse, complex and segmented. Nonetheless, in an attempt to align non-governmental initiatives with public sector objectives in education, many governments are establishing partnerships with the private sector. These partnerships, which usually adopt the form of legal contracts that are in force for a certain period of time, are known as public-private partnerships (PPPs) (Robertson *et al.*, 2012) or as cross-sectoral partnerships (Eyal and Berkovich, 2019).

Advocates of non-governmental involvement in education consider that PPPs are an efficient way of both organizing and taking advantage of a blooming private sector participation in public education. From this perspective, partnering with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is a way of bringing new ideas, actors and resources into public education systems (Patrinos *et al.*, 2009). Nonetheless, there are also more critical and skeptical voices with PPPs. To them, non-governmental participation in education means transferring public assets and responsibilities to the private sector, tends to generate public accountability issues and contributes to deepening (or to triggering new forms of) social inequalities within educational systems (Ball and Youdell, 2007).

Private sector participation in education has generated a passionate debate in both the Global South and the Global North (Ginsburg, 2012; Srivastava, 2010; Waslander *et al.*, 2010). The publication of the special issue "Understanding third sector participation in public schooling through partnerships, collaborations, alliances and entrepreneurialism," edited by Nina Kolleck and Miri Yemini, introduces complexity and new sources of evidence into this fascinating debate. The articles included in the special issue address the PPPs debate from well-informed theoretical perspectives and solid empirical strategies. The case-studies that conform the issue have been developed by a set of very well-established and upcoming educational scholars in several countries, including the USA, Germany, Israel and England, and have been approached through various methodologies, such as comparative case studies, literature reviews, school ethnographies, social network analysis and media analysis.

As I argue in the following pages, this special issue achieves two main general objectives. First, it contributes to reflect on the complexity and diversity of manifestations of non-governmental participation in education; and, second, it provides the academic and policy communities with new sources of evidence on the pros and cons of this emerging, evolving and challenging phenomenon. I structure my commentary according to these two objectives.

The multiple faces of non-governmental participation in education: from policy influence to educational delivery

The case studies included in the special issue show that the modalities of participation of NGOs in educational systems are wide and multi-level. Broadly speaking, these modalities go from the private sector attempting to influence the production of policies (mainly by lobbying decision makers to introduce new regulations, or advocating educational reform ideas) to the private sector delivering specific services (such as managing public schools, or supporting schools with new educational materials, teaching training resources and so on).

Non-governmental actors are not only increasingly present in public education, but are also becoming increasingly influential. Some contributions to this special issue reflect on the changing sources of power and legitimacy of NGOs in the educational domain. Especially in



contexts of social vulnerability, the main mechanisms of non-governmental influence in education rely on material and economic factors. As shown by Yemini and Sagie (2015), NGOs are more inclined to use their financial leverage to impose their education preferences to schools operating in poor environments than to schools operating in less vulnerable contexts. Nonetheless, increasingly, private actors' influence also relies on softer forms of power, reason why they invest more and more time and resources in developing their networks and discursive capacities. As Kolleck (2019) shows in this special issue, this is the case of private foundations in Germany. In this country, those foundations that are becoming more influential in the educational domain are those that understand power as three-dimensional phenomenon and, accordingly, activate three main sources of power, namely the material, the relational and the discursive. To put it in Bordieuan terms, NGOs influence in education increasingly relies on the articulation and mobilization of different forms of capital: economic, social and symbolic (see Fontdevila *et al.*, 2019).

The special issue also reflects on the wide range of non-governmental actors that participate in educational governance structures currently. These include private foundations, NGOs, firms, community organizations, philanthropic organizations and charter management organizations, to name a few. These are non-state actors with very different legal personalities and organizational structures. Non-governmental constituencies also differ greatly in how they do interact with the political and/or the economic spheres. Non-governmental actors are usually conceived as part of a "third sector" that is autonomous from both the state and the market sectors. However, NGOs might also be organically attached to the state or to the market sectors. This is the case of, for instance, semi-public or private foundations that are created and funded by states or by private corporations, whose mission is intrinsically – although not always explicitly – attached to the political and economic agendas of their founders (Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Expectedly, for a government, partnering with this type of NGOs will be a very different experience than partnering with more independent NGOs or with NGOs that are more genuinely socially motivated. In real situations, however, the NGO sector combines a broad range of social, economic, religious and/or political motivations and logics. To make things more complex, the political or ideological orientation of NGO actors can differ widely. In most countries, there are both left-leaning NGOs and conservative NGOs operating in the educational domain simultaneously. The educational initiatives, discourses and agendas of non-governmental actors will differ substantially according to their ideological orientation, but also to how much is ideology driving their mission, goals and actions.

This is to say that it is not appropriate to analyze (or reach conclusions about) the participation of the non-governmental sector in education in abstract and absolute terms. The quality of the contribution of the NGO sector to educational systems will depend on many factors: the ethos of the non-governmental actors, their educational capacities, their motivations and interests in educational affairs, or their education policy preferences, to name a few. The organizational structure of non-governmental actors is also a variable at play in this respect. Glazer *et al.* (2019), in this issue, reflect on the importance of the operational scale of the NGOs contracted by governments to operate neighborhood schools. Their paper shows that a community NGO, which relies on teachers' autonomy and informal relations with local actors, is inclined to operate schools very differently than a big national NGO with more well-established teaching support procedures, learning materials and instructional strategies, but with weaker links to the community.

Another important variable to understand the "varieties of PPPs" in education concerns the main role that state and non-state actors play within partnership arrangements. An educational PPP is very different in nature when the NGO is the actor that funds educational initiatives than when the NGO is the actor that receives public funding to implement educational initiatives. In other words, public-private mixes can become a drastically different policy according to how the public and the private partners engage with educational funding and

delivering responsibilities. If the private sector is the funder, we are in front of initiatives of so-called “corporate social responsibility,” philanthropy or private donations to public schools. In contrast, when the funder is the state and the non-governmental actor benefits from public funding to, for instance, operate schools, we are in front of the phenomenon of charter schools in the USA or academy schools in England (Barrera-Osorio *et al.*, 2009). Most of the papers in this special issue refer to this last form of public-private mixes, in which the state finances education and the private sector delivers schooling services.

Non-governmental engagement with public education: desired vs undesired effects

Educational policies are usually assessed from the perspective of their impact on learning outcomes and, in particular, on students’ academic achievement. Nonetheless, the contributions to this special issue go beyond conventional approaches to policy evaluation and reflect on the impact of partnerships with NGOs from different perspectives. Several papers included in this special issue adopt a governance perspective and focus on how non-governmental engagement in public education alters the relationship between and within school actors in terms of cooperation vs competition dynamics, or school engagement with their local environment. Other papers focus on the impact of PPPs in core educational processes, including the promotion of educational innovations and the enactment of organizational changes at the school level.

In general, the conclusions of the studies included in the special issue reveal that, for governments, trying to improve educational systems by partnering with the NGO sector is a challenging enterprise. Promoting ethical behavior among the different parties involved in PPPs is one of the main challenges that derives from NGO engagement in education. On the basis of an extensive literature review, Eyal and Berkovich (2019, in this issue) articulate an original framework to analyze unethical behavior within PPPs in education. Their paper shows that the ethical conduct of the partners is strongly mediated by both environmental factors and the organizational characteristics of the partners. They give examples of how unethical or opportunistic behaviors are more frequent in the context of partnerships with for-profit oriented private actors such as firms, since this type of actors are more inclined to impose their organizational culture to public schools (see also Lubienski and Perry, 2019; Peurach *et al.*, 2019 in this issue). Undesired behaviors, according to Eyal and Berkovich (2019), are also more frequent in contexts of so-called environmental turbulence, understood as junctures in which different forms of political, regulatory and/or economic instability endure in time.

Regulatory factors mediate the capacity of NGOs to operate public schools and, accordingly, the capacity of PPPs to achieve their expected outcomes. Within PPP frameworks, NGOs are usually invited to run public schools under the assumption that this will contribute to promote system diversification and educational innovation in a cost-efficient way. Nonetheless, in a context of highly standardized curriculums and intensive testing regimes, private operators are not always able to bring these expectations about. As Glazer *et al.* (2019) show in this special issue, the regulatory context of the USA, with all the performative pressure it generates among schools, is more conducive to the educational and organizational practices of large-scale school operators than to the practices of more informal community-based operators. In the end, the regulatory environment pushes the small PPP operators to emulate the processes and organizational styles of more professionalized providers, especially if they want to achieve the demanding learning achievement goals that public authorities establish.

The competitive dynamics, that by design or by default, come with increasing NGO participation in educational systems are, paradoxically, one of the main barriers for PPPs to bring their promises of educational innovation up. Competition between schools for students and/or resources does not generate the right climate for educational innovations to emerge. This is due to the fact that a competitive environment does not encourage schools to learn from each other, to cooperate with other schools from the community, or to exchange good pedagogic and organizational practices among them. As shown by Lubienski and Perry

(2019, in this issue), also on the basis of evidence coming from the US, “in a competitive climate, organizations and individuals may be incentivized to limit the visibility of useful innovations so as not to lose a competitive advantage over rivals, and therefore this may seek to guard innovations as private, proprietary information.”

Several contributions to this special issue raise concerns with the fragmentation of educational systems that results from further NGO participation in public education. As stated by Peurach *et al.* (2019), fragmentation is a logical and expected consequence of engaging NGOs in the management of schools. Non-governmental engagement in schooling generates more diverse and somehow more incoherent education systems. Nonetheless, under some circumstances, schools’ fragmentation might easily derive into further educational inequalities. This is especially the case when the regulatory frameworks in place do not contemplate equity measures in a decisive way, or when the frameworks are in place but the governmental capacity and/or willingness to enact them is insufficient. Furthermore, in educational environments with relative high levels of school choice and market competition between providers, as is the case with most country cases covered in this special issue, NGO schools are more inclined to discriminate against certain groups of students, and many of them compete to enroll the most academically able students. These opportunistic behaviors, more than horizontal diversification, generate vertical segmentation in education systems (Van Zanten, 2009; Zancajo, 2018). When this happens, the state needs to invest additional resources, time and energies in coordinating, incentivizing and controlling those school actors whose actions deviate from the general public interest.

The promotion of well-informed public debates on PPPs and NGOs engagement in education is key to promote more equitable educational systems, especially in countries where the enrollment in privately managed schools has expanded more significantly. Unfortunately, very important factions of society are excluded from the PPPs debate, or are very poorly informed about it. As argued by Tamir *et al.* (2019), in this issue, readers of popular newspapers from England and Israel have only the chance of accessing to very anecdotal and isolated information about NGO interactions in education. This information is usually framed in a positive, comforting and sensationalist way. Only more demanding and elite newspapers situate the debate within it broader political, cultural and economic conditioning factors, and reflect on the implications of PPPs for quality and equity in education on the basis of rigorous academic evidence. As the authors conclude, this lack of generalized access to quality information is one of the most important constraints in democratizing current educational reform debates.

In summary, this special issue shows that partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors are (re-)configuring educational systems in many countries. The special issue compiles new and original studies on the governance and social implications of this phenomenon. When read together, the main results of these studies are a call for caution in the adoption of PPPs in education. The studies reflect on the potential of PPPs in education, and show how, once enacted, PPPs tend to generate issues of educational equity, unethical behaviors and/or resource dependence. Especially when implemented in contexts of school competition and weak governmental oversight, PPPs run the risk of generating education systems fragmentation and further social inequalities in education.

The articles included in the special issue push research on education PPPs in new directions by incorporating new analytic approaches and methodological perspectives. They are an invitation to continue conducting research on NGO engagement in education from an international and comparative perspective. More and new systematic analyses of the phenomenon can contribute to find out what are the socio-economic, regulatory and organizational factors behind the differential effects of PPPs in educational systems. This type of research is urgent at a time when many governments around the world face strong

educational reform pressures and, at the same time, high uncertainties regarding the most appropriate policies to promote quality and equity in education remain.

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