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VIEWPOINTS/ CONTROVERSIES

Education governance and digitization: Inherent conflicts and potential safeguards for a new social contract

Lara Patil[1]

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Abstract This article highlights inherent conflicts between technology industry incentives and a new social contract for education, while arguing for safeguards to mitigate the risk of technology industry engagement in education governance. Business strategies often utilize economies of scale, standardization, and internationalization to maximize profits. These strategies are diametrically opposed to education as a public endeavor and as a reflection of humanity's diverse ways of knowing and being in various local contexts. Technology industry strategies tend to emphasize the disruption of sectors and encourage entrepreneurialism and innovation with an emphasis on outputs, measurement, and impact. These strategies often recast the "good" of education from public to private returns. While appropriate engagement of non-state technology actors in education governance can offer solutions in support of global education goals and a new social contract for education, I argue that such mobilization is multi-sided, simultaneously pushing through innovative, yet untested, education agendas. The article identifies potential risks to systems of public education and reflects upon safeguards, which fall into two main categories: issues of transparency, accountability and legitimacy; and issues of technology management and governance. Proactively addressing inherent conflicts and potential safeguards, I argue, is a key step to identifying ways to strengthen motivations for corporations to forge meaningful long-term investment in a new social contract for education and for the development of education governance structures that are equitable and democratic.

Keywords Education governance · Digitization · Non-state actors · Social contract

The mechanisms of global governance and cooperation that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War were conceived with governments as the principal actors. In this

✉ Lara Patil
lara.patil@graduateinstitute.ch

[1] Graduate Institute of Development Studies, NORRAG, Rue Rothschild 20, 1202 Geneve, Switzerland

system of global governance, nation-states were assumed to be the guarantors and regulators of political systems, with non-state actors and institutions as collaborators. Since the 1950s, however, economic theories equating freedom with competition as the ideal defining characteristic of societies have gained influence in a number of nations and international bodies. Globalization has increased the reach and power of multinational corporations to the detriment of governments' power to collect taxes and maintain or improve public services and public goods (Lewin, 2019). As a result, the centrality of governments in conceiving, delivering, and regulating education based on agreed-upon norms and principles has weakened under pressures of demand and supply (Draxler, 2020a).

Within this context, private sector businesses, billionaires, high-tech disrupters, and social entrepreneurs are expanding the range of actors beyond the small number of large foreign aid agencies who previously dominated the landscape (Kumar, 2019). The scholarly literature on the roles of these emerging non-state actors reveals powerful new players that elicit new forms of global governance and modalities on the part of the state (Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012; Ball et al., 2017) while systematically weakening the public sector, democratic processes, and the voice of civil society (Avelar, 2018; Draxler, 2020a; Patil, 2021; Tarlau & Moeller, 2019). In particular, private technology companies and philanthropists have become major policy actors, influencing reform agendas and realigning power dynamics in educational governance through shifts from public to private oversight and monopolies of financial flows (Patil, 2021). While non-state technology actors generally have origins in the United States or technology hubs located elsewhere, the ubiquitous global demand for and use of technology products and platforms implies global reach. These broader shifts highlight the critical importance of the debate on private sector engagement and digitization and the role they should play in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2015; UNGA, 2015). Furthermore, the outsized influence of these actors raises important theoretical questions about the influence exerted by digitization over global governance (Avelar & Patil, 2020, 2023).

How, then, should these shifts in the roles and interests of governing players be considered in the context of a new social contract for education? A new social contract for education implies new governance arrangements based on two foundational principles: (i) assuring the right to quality education throughout life; and (ii) strengthening education as a public endeavor and a common good (UNESCO, 2021b). Through the lens of global governance and digitization, the aim of this article is to highlight some of the inherent conflicts between technology industry objectives and these foundational principles. After exploring some potential challenges to achieving a new social contract for education, I reflect upon possible safeguards to proactively counter these conflicts and mitigate the risk of technology industry engagement in education governance.

Education governance and digitization

Analyzing current dynamics in education requires an examination of the power and influence of non-state technology actors and their potential influence over education governance and systems of public education. As Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2020) has observed, private sector actors from the technology industry operating within the realm of digitization and education are amassing and interpreting data in significant quantities across boundaries. This trend places systems of public education at the mercy of technology corporations who ultimately control the knowledge, means, and global networks to scale their technological solutions. In

order to sustain their business models, these data-driven enterprises rely upon the transfer of information to readable electronic formats, producing large amounts of quantifiable data that can be tracked, monitored, and analyzed. Ultimately driven by economic models, this trend implies a shift toward standardization, testing, and internationalization, as corporations seek to maximize economies of scale (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi & Draxler, 2018). These practices are at odds with the ethos of education as a public endeavor reflecting the local context and unique ways of knowing. From the perspective of education policy borrowing and lending research, the uncritical transfer of innovation from one context to another further risks disempowering local actors and local solutions (Steiner-Khamsi, 2020; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012).

Inherent conflicts in a new social contract

This section identifies some inherent conflicts between technology industry objectives and the achievement of foundational principles for a new social contract. It also highlights potential risks and vulnerabilities that these conflicts pose to systems of public education.

Assuring the right to quality education throughout life

Quality education throughout life is a human right. The Futures of Education Commission report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* clearly states that the right to education, as established in Article 26 of the Universal Decla ration of Human Rights, must remain the foundation of a new social contract for education, and be expanded to include the right to quality education throughout life (UNESCO, 2021b). However, there are a number of well-established, significant challenges to this foundational principle. Development assistance and national public funding for education have declined despite the need for significant increases in spending to meet education targets. The most recent Global Education Monitoring Report published data citing an average national financing gap of USD$97 billion per year in the 79 low- and lower-middle-income countries worldwide, an amount several times higher than the external resources currently being offered (UNESCO, 2023). The underlying expectation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its supporting background documents is that the private sector will make up much of this financing gap, either through direct financing or digital innovation (Draxler, 2020b; Education Commission, 2016; UNESCO, 2015; UNGA, 2015)—an assumption that is as yet unproven. Critical scholars argue that education goals and targets will be particularly vulnerable based on an expectation that the motivations of the public and private sectors will converge (Draxler, 2020b). These vulnerabilities will likely be expressed in unmet financial needs, distortion of spending for programs, inability to scale projects, and the capture of public funds to support privately conceived innovations that lack equity as their core objective (Draxler, 2020b).

Private sector entities have incentives to promote policies and practices that are aimed primarily at generating new markets and profits. However, such business strategies often utilize economies of scale and standardization to maximize profits, and, as such, are often diametrically opposed to reflecting humanity's diverse ways of knowing and being in various local contexts. Given that the business incentives of multinational companies also include non-financial resources such as products, employee time, and know-how, these efforts often align with technology industry priorities and preferences, and do not necessarily map onto the public priorities and needs identified under SDG 4 (Patil and Brakman

Reiser, 2021). This inherent conflict engendered by the digitization of education is deepening the crisis of public education, as national governments become increasingly reliant on the expertise, products, and services of the private sector to implement education technology services (Steiner-Khamsi, 2020). The risk to systems of public education is twofold: (i) incentives to guide education technology solutions are conceptualized through the lens of unique corporate products, services, and platforms; and (ii) technology non-state actors can, by default, become the arbiters of education (Patil, 2021).

Strengthening education as a public endeavor and a common good

Education is, first and foremost, a collective public endeavor. The Futures of Education Commission report (UNESCO, 2021b) is furthermore adamant that a new social contract for education must ensure public funding for education and incorporate a society-wide commitment to including everyone in public discussions about education. This emphasis on participation, the report argues, is what strengthens education as a common good—a form of shared well-being that is chosen and achieved together (UNESCO, 2021b). Significant challenges to this foundational principle are well established. Central to the debate on the role of non-state actors in education are the divergent perspectives of opposing properties of education: whether education is a public or private good, a form of consumption or a means of investment (UNESCO, 2021a). Traditionally, education systems have been structured to provide a balance of public and private benefits: public social benefits include increased social cohesion and greater economic development; private personal benefits include increased employability and earning potential.

While systems of public education are often positioned to mediate and balance the competing demands of public and private benefits, the digitization of the education sector, as driven by the technology industry, generally advances an agenda that emphasizes individual benefits and promotes policies that undercut attention to the collective purposes of schooling. These strategies often emphasize the disruption of sectors and encourage entrepreneurialism, innovation, accountability, and an emphasis on outputs, measurement, and impact (Lubienski & Hedges, 2020). They also foreground industry incentives promoting standardization, which drive global, versus local, education processes (Steiner-Khamsi, 2020). However, by recasting the "good" of education from a public to a private return (Lubienski & Hedges, 2020), technology industry actors are increasingly engaging in international education policymaking in ways that often bypass traditional structures and instead reflect their own institutional agendas and values, which are rooted in wealth accumulation (Patil, 2023). This inherent conflict has the potential to weaken education as a public endeavor and common good (Lubienski & Hedges, 2020).

Potential safeguards for a new social contract

Possible safeguards that systems of public education can enact to counter the aforementioned conflicts fall into two main areas: (1) issues of transparency, accountability, and legitimacy; and (2) issues of technology management and digital governance.

Issues of transparency, accountability, and legitimacy

Ensuring the legitimacy of technology industry actors engaged in educational governance and digitization requires transparency and accountability—to their missions, to

governments, and to the wider public. As articulated elsewhere (Patil & Brakman Reiser, 2021), this is challenging, as these actors tend to operate without a public mandate or political accountability, and have varying disclosure obligations. Furthermore, the extent of any existing mandates differs by jurisdiction and by donor type, legal form, and area of activity. Enhancing non-state actors' transparency, whether directed by individuals or businesses, will increase information about funding allocation, use, and effectiveness. For example, independent civil society organizations could take up governance and project management roles in education technology, wherein they could anchor and manage unbiased reform agendas for governments. Regulators, the public, and other members of the philanthropic sector can use this information both to challenge technology actors' priorities and implementation, and to learn and scale effective interventions. Involving stakeholders at the civil society, government, and private sector levels, while remaining mindful of the features of the national ecosystem in which education technology is delivered, is one potential strategy to encourage equity and scalability, and, crucially, transparency. Transparency will not only inspire debate, but also enhance efforts to create complementarities, craft technological solutions, and improve training and implementation.

Technology management and digital governance

In an environment where technology corporations and other private actors openly and actively participate in the formation of public policy and governance, the development community lacks adequate tools to evaluate technological offerings and fully protect public goods such as education (Draxler, 2020b). This raises the key question of how models of educational governance need to adapt to manage digitization initiatives and ensure possible safeguards imperative for a new social contract for education. Three such possible safeguards include: (i) reducing reliance on commercial actors in decision-making processes, (ii) ensuring the localization of digitization in education initiatives, and (iii) employing mechanisms to safeguard data. Government reliance on commercial actors in the design and development of digitization has largely increased at the expense of accepted principles. However, the training of decision-makers in emerging technologies and educational technology options could help counter this process, which is currently driven heavily by the private sector, potentially minimizing governments' dependence on technology companies during decision-making. In addition, the design and implementation of educational technology initiatives in collaboration with end users such as teachers and students, in alignment with the long-term vision of governments and civil society, will help ensure local relevance. Addressing the needs of local contexts in this manner will: (i) foster an understanding of local ecosystems for sustainability and scale, (ii) ensure better alignment with country priorities and commitments from partner governments, and (iii) promote connected and coordinated efforts, rather than isolated projects. Finally, safeguarding data requires mechanisms to ensure data protection and prevent abuse. Paradoxically, this can include existing technologies, such as encryption and blockchain, alongside independent evaluation of technology partnerships.

Conclusion

Appropriate engagement of non-state technology actors in education governance and digitization can offer solutions in support of global education goals and a new social contract for education. Major commitments on the part of technology corporations and philanthropists can create opportunities to unleash vast capital and in-kind resources to address some of global education's most challenging problems. These products and solutions can potentially foster lifelong learning and increase access to quality educational services. Such mobilization is multi-sided, however, as it can simultaneously push through innovative, yet untested, education agendas at incredible speed via technology platform solutions. The inherent conflicts between the objectives of the technology industry, the effects of digitization, and the foundational principles of a new social contract must therefore be mitigated to safeguard systems of public education against risks and vulnerabilities. Innovative scholarship is a potential lever to strengthen existing motivations and widen possibilities for corporations to forge meaningful long-term investment within a new social contract for education and to develop education governance structures that are both equitable and democratic. This avenue of research could untangle inherent conflicts, identify points of mutual benefit, and help navigate the uncharted waters of education governance and digitization to achieve the overarching objective: the achievement of a new social contract for education based on ensuring the right to quality education throughout life and strengthening education as a public endeavor and a common good.

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Lara Patil is an Advisor to NORRAG, an associated programme of the Graduate Institute of Development Studies, Geneve, Switzerland. Lara's research in the area of education technology, donor logic, and the role of non-state actors in educational development builds upon academic and professional experience with technology industry giving. She managed global education research, policy, and strategy for Intel Corporation for over a decade, and holds a doctorate in communication and education from Teachers College, Columbia University. She was the coordinator for the Global Partnership for Education Private Sector and Private Foundations constituency and member of the Global Partnership for Education Country Grants and Performance Committee. She has been a consultant for various international agencies, including OECD, UNESCO, USAID, and the World Bank.