



Envisioning a new model of network governance for global education

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Abstract The 2021 UNESCO report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* presented a compelling case for establishing a new social contract on education that addresses the persistent exclusion of vulnerable individuals and ensures that knowledge and learning contribute to a more sustainable future. Research literature highlights a global trend towards replacing “hard” with “soft” governance in education, whereby legally binding procedures are replaced by advice and persuasion. The report analyzed how this trend is amplified by the current spread of datafication and digitalization in the field of education, as well as by the increasing role of non-state actors, as exemplified by the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector. In response to this analysis, this article proposes that the risk of developing a commercial model of soft governance can be moderated by creating an innovative, networked approach to educational governance, led by UNESCO as a global convenor.

Keywords Datafication · Digitalization · Education · Governance · Multilateralism · Privatization · Social contract · UNESCO

The UNESCO report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) made a persuasive argument for forging a new social contract on education that can help rectify the persistent exclusion of the most vulnerable from education, while at the same time ensuring that knowledge and learning are used to shape more sustainable futures. However, it raised important questions for the role of governance in creating a new, more effective social contract in education. Research literature highlights a global trend where, in addition to “hard” governance in education through legally binding procedures, forms of “soft” governance are emerging through advice and persuasion. What might this trend mean, then, for a new social contract for education?

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Starting from the recent UNESCO (2021) argument for forging a new social contract on education, this article examines why reaffirming a principled approach to education involves finding a balance between hard and soft governance by harnessing the potential of data management and digital technology. The evolution of the ECCE sector is analyzed as a relevant example of the current governance trends in complementing state and non-state interventions. In its final section, this article argues that the goal of promoting fairer and more dynamic governance of education as a public good requires a new networked approach to multilateralism, in which UNESCO can play a pivotal role.

Developing a principled approach to governance in education

On numerous occasions, UNESCO (2015a) has emphasized the importance of the public character of education. This implies recognizing education as a common good that must be governed accordingly. Consequently, the different voices and viewpoints of those involved in the field of education should be encouraged and included in multilateral decision-making processes that lead to the formulation of educational policies. This emphasizes the need for stronger cooperation across the range of constituencies—based on a commitment to the principles of solidarity and fundamental human rights—as well as for democratic participation supported by inclusive processes of public policy formulation and implementation with due accountability (Tawil, 2022).

Traditionally, education has been at the core of modern states' political interests. The process of establishing an educational system has varied between countries, producing a range of structures, depending on the degree of centralization and the balance between state and non-state actors (Murray, 2008; Nasser, 2019). Until recently, governments across the globe have used their authority to maintain tight control over critical aspects within this sector, as workforce qualifications and quality assessment (Ball, 2021; Estellés & Fischman, 2021).

However, recent years have seen this model of state-centered decision-making gradually disrupted by alternative forms of policymaking, which are emerging in many countries. Such approaches increasingly recognize private and civil society organizations as potential resources for guaranteeing the right to education, marking a clear shift from government to governance—that is, from a perspective in which the states maintain unilateral control of the public sector to an interactive approach through which some segments are open to multilateral interaction with non-state partners (Ansell & Torfing, 2022; Saguin, 2019).

Due to the multi-level and multi-sectoral nature of education systems, intricate constellations of organizations are responsible for ensuring policymaking, decision-making, and service delivery (UNESCO, 2018). Following neoliberal reforms in the public sector, a multitude of private and civil society actors have become increasingly involved in managing this complex sector (Cone & Brøgger, 2020). This, in turn, has led to the proliferation of governance networks within the global political landscape of education, founded on webs of relationships between independent yet interdependent government, business, and civil society actors. These networks help tackle problems that cannot be solved by one actor alone harmonizing diverging and sometimes conflicting perceptions and strategies of partners (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2015).

This tendency is particularly evident in low- and middle-income countries (Verger et al., 2016). In India and South Africa, for example, low-fee private schools offer educational provision that differs both from elitist private schools and nongovernmental agencies

(NGOs) or church community schools (Srivastava, 2013; Tikly, 2017). This is a relevant example of governance networks that preserve the central role of governments but increasingly rely on non-state actors as a cost-saving measure to support education (Dale & Robertson, 2014; Heyneman & Stern, 2014).

Research has highlighted that this trend mirrors a more general tendency towards replacing hard with soft governance. Whereas hard governance is founded on a top-down process, usually enforced through legislation, and reflects an authoritative and hierarchical model, soft governance adopts a bottom-up approach oriented towards making decisions through deliberation and consensus (Blomqvist, 2016; Moos, 2009). Nowadays, governance usually falls within a spectrum stretching between these two poles, creating hybrid steering instruments that combine hard and soft elements (Capano et al., 2015). The above-mentioned governance networks for education in low- and middle-income countries are a case in point. They are hard because they establish a legally enforceable bond between the partners, but they are also soft because they merely express overarching aims without defining precise objectives or procedures for achieving them.

Such hybrid approaches raise the question of which features of soft governance would be most conducive or problematic for education as a public endeavor and a common good. While hard governing is deemed more effective at securing the compliance of citizens by stipulating and enforcing objectives and binding norms, soft policies are believed to ensure greater flexibility through a process of collaborative planning (Burns & Cerna, 2016). However, there is a significant risk that soft governance may swiftly metamorphose into soft power networks, diminishing rather than augmenting the decision-making authority of stakeholders concerning education (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2012). To gain a deeper understanding of this risk, it is useful to briefly examine two examples of the way in which the web of relationships between soft governance, data management, and digital technologies has developed over time.

The contribution of data management and digital technology to soft governance

Data management plays a key role in accelerating the current shift from hard governing to soft governance in education (Brøgger, 2018). In recent years, international organizations, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, have considerably expanded their ability to influence education policies globally by developing systematic transnational comparisons supported by quantifiable assessments (Niemann & Martens, 2018). For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), promoted by the OECD since 2000, triennially evaluates and compares more than 70 education systems worldwide by testing the reading, mathematics, and science skills and knowledge of a sample of 15-year-old students (Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). Over the years, PISA has been very successful in disseminating the results of its assessments through the media and establishing an influential narrative that identifies human capital and competition as core values for education. What is now known as the “PISA shock” has pushed governments to adopt policies and even reform entire systems to meet educational standards set by the OECD (Schleicher, 2018). While comparison per se can certainly play a positive role in inspiring governments to improve education policy, the PISA rating and ranking mechanisms convey a powerful message that assumes a reified view of states and favors competition over cooperation. This form of soft

power has been rightly criticized, especially when it makes the external funding of governmental programs contingent on the system's alignment with predefined best practices that limit education to instruction and link learning to the narrow goal of increasing economic productivity (Zhao, 2020).

Digital technologies developed by multinational corporations and largely deployed by international organizations also contribute to wielding soft power over education (Hakimi et al., 2021; Williamson, 2017). In recent decades, manifold technological tools have been created to support wider access to education and also to standardize and measure the performance of the sector. While this process helps increase the transparency of the system by improving internal procedures and public accountability, it also entails clear risk. The creation and management of education data are progressively removed from the public sector and taken over by a small number of private edtech firms. Leveraging large digital resources and material infrastructures that overshadow many national education systems, companies such as Google or Amazon use machine learning to convert data into algorithms that transform them into education packages to be sold to the education sector (Grek et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020). Indirect soft power is embedded into these packages in the form of learning theories that privilege top-down instruction over critical thinking and extend managerialism, surveillance, and teachers' deprofessionalization (Facer & Selwyn, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, edtech companies are increasingly exerting a more direct form of soft power over educational governance as they actively bypass nation-states by promoting their transnational networks of schools and academies, along with their associated professional certifications (Williamson, 2021).

In short, the swift proliferation of non-state entities in the management of data and digital technologies underscores the risks associated with the emergence of transnational networks that fundamentally alter the balance between hard and soft governance in the field of education. Is it possible to prevent or mitigate such risks? ECCE provides a valuable case study to gain a deeper understanding of potential strategies in this regard.

What can we learn from the ECCE sector?

ECCE differs in many ways from other levels of education. First, in most countries, ECCE is not yet recognized consistently as a right or as a public responsibility. Moreover, ECCE lies at the intersection of a web of several sectors, including education, health, social welfare, and child protection, so balancing different goals and mandates requires careful mediation (Britto et al., 2014; Kagan & Dermody, 2022). Consequently, despite ECCE being now widely recognized as a priority for education, finding a common approach to identify a global agenda for the sector is a complex task (Shawar & Shiffman, 2017). Governance of ECCE activities is challenging also at the national level. For historical reasons, multiple stakeholders from government ministries, humanitarian foundations, development agencies, NGOs, and private organizations commonly participate in shaping ECCE policies and practices. Recently, the number of actors has further increased, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Neuman & Okeng'o, 2019). Moreover, as already noted, the ECCE area comprises a mix of education, health, and social services. Hence, governance of ECCE networks must be achieved through both horizontal cooperation across agencies in the sector and vertical coordination across national, subnational, and local government levels.

While other levels of education are facing a gradual transition from hard to soft governance, the latter has always been a predominant pattern in the ECCE sector. In many

countries, the degree of state control of ECCE is low, with indirect means of governing, such as through framework regulations and curricula, quality and accountability mechanisms, and certification and recertification paths for personnel (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). This decentralization process accelerated in the years after the 2007–2008 financial crisis. Cutbacks in childcare spending influenced the quality of ECCE services, while non-state organizations acquired an increasingly prominent role in promoting nonprofit and for-profit education programs (Gustafsson-Wright et al., 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

Overall, in most countries, ECCE has been characterized by a structural approach that employs soft governance mechanisms in education to mobilize a network of state and non-state actors. It is therefore useful to analyze the lessons emerging from this sector that can help us better understand current developments around the governance of other levels of education.

Finding a balance between state and non-state interventions

Over the years, ECCE has been based on an approach to governance in which states retain the right to design and regulate policies concerning education, while non-state organizations are involved in or responsible for the provision of services. In terms of the governing/governance continuum in utilizing policy levers, states usually tend to rely on the hard side of the spectrum (rules and standards), safeguarding the management of education as a common good, whereas private actors are increasingly taking on roles in managing the soft side (service delivery). Although coordinating interventions of the complex web of state and non-state actors entails multiple challenges, the evolution of ECCE shows that this balance can be effective in countries when governments exercise a clear regulatory function, ensuring that quality requirements regarding sector management and accountability are met (UNICEF, 2019). Conversely, in countries where governments have a limited ability to implement regulations, due to a lack of resources, there is a risk that non-state organizations will subsume the state's functions by creating self-regulated educational enclaves independent from state control (Gideon & Unterhalter, 2020). As noted, this trend is already in place in the areas of data management and education technologies (Decuyper et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2022). Low-income countries, where the capacity of the government to negotiate with transnational corporations is limited, are especially exposed to the risk of binding the development of public education to the signing of commercial contracts (Wagner, 2018). This could lead to a shift in the role of non-state actors from soft to hard governance, thereby expanding the degree of privatization, at the expense of guaranteeing the right to education.

In this regard, soft governance cannot be automatically associated with a positive move towards more participatory approaches that support education as a common good (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Ostrom, 1990). The current spread of datafication and digitalization clearly illustrates how further intensification of a commercial and oligopolistic model of soft governance presents a clear danger of reducing, instead of widening, knowledge diversity and cultural inclusion (Torres & Bosio, 2020). Accordingly, the transition from a traditional state-centric model of government to a soft governance approach can be successfully managed only if it builds on new forms of open networks consisting of well-distributed and balanced nodes of authority. This authority must encompass a distinct regulation function governed by the state, which helps mediate diverse and competing interests in devising education goals with strongly held principles, such as fairness, equity, and active participation. This implies going “beyond current policies of privatisation without returning to

traditional modes of public management” by ensuring a systematic connection between power distribution and the framework of values that support education as a collective public endeavor (UNESCO, 2015b, pp. 78–79). Thus, it is important to briefly analyze how a soft governance approach can help counter negative tendencies from privatization by fostering the process of commoning education through policy formulation and implementation, based on new multilateralism.

Supporting educational governance through new multilateralism

In recent years, as the lines between state and non-state interventions have been increasingly blurred, education systems have become more ubiquitous and porous worldwide. Non-state organizations have firmly established themselves as powerful actors able to collect, extract, and exploit resources from the field. While states still have the moral obligation to fulfill, respect, and protect the right to education, this expansion has considerably impinged on their role within the governance system, from policymaking to policy moderating, making it difficult to ensure that “a host of state and non-state actors together ensure the publicness of public education” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 109). To mitigate the risk of the sector being further colonized and depleted, we must formulate and implement commoning strategies that help governments act not only as regulatory bodies but also as active leaders in supporting free access to high-quality education (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2022; De Angelis, 2017).

Due to the growing global nature of non-state organizations, this task requires strong support from transnational governance processes aimed at facilitating interactions between actors through the support of multilateral institutions. Recent data, however, indicate a decrease in the effectiveness of multilateralism (Meyer et al., 2021). The global community has shifted towards a multipolar structure, leading to greater uncertainty and instability as new shared challenges materialize. Innovative forms of multilateralism must be developed to tackle this challenge, with an emphasis on enhancing global dialogue and collaboration to ensure that education is adequately supported as a fundamental component of human rights policies (Morse & Keohane, 2014).

To overcome the current crisis of multilateralism, we suggest three lines of action: incorporating networking with non-state actors into a global governance strategy; replacing top-down procedures with multi-nodal methods; and promoting webs of cooperation at the regional level, especially among countries in the Global South (Moore & Nesterova, 2020; UNESCO, 1960). This renewed approach to networking can help regenerate multilateralism through a more flexible and equitable approach: flexible as it operates through an agile network structure that encourages multiple actors to establish think-and-do tanks and develop effective solutions to specific questions, and equitable as it helps constructively address the power imbalance between state and non-state organizations (Abelson, 2018).

Conclusions and recommendations: How UNESCO can support networked governance of education

The recent global evolution of educational policies shows an emerging pattern of soft governance predicated on the expansion of non-state organizations and the limitation of the state’s role to the regulation of interventions. This pattern presents a high risk of disempowering governments’ efforts in the pursuit of an inclusive and equitable quality

education for all. Minimizing the risk implies finding an effective balance between state and non-state organizations. This can be achieved by securing the dynamic governance of global commons through networking and promoting multilateral connections between all organizations working in this critical area. Favoring interplay requires facilitating dialogical processes seeking to expand our ability to hear multiple voices, especially from those usually on the margins of conversations concerning education (United Nations, 2021).

Since its establishment, UNESCO has always been at the forefront of innovating education through initiatives that support active listening and imaginative planning. Managing governance networks requires, now more than ever, an innovation strategy that helps tackle the current turn of education policy towards a model of soft governance dominated by transnational players. This implies dealing with substantive complexities and enhancing collaborative building and cross-frame learning to develop common grounds that facilitate the attainment of joint solutions (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2015).

As part of its networking strategy, it is thus recommended that UNESCO help foster open and systematic data collection and exchange regarding good practices developed by governance networks and support education as a human right based on shared values. In this way, UNESCO will play a pivotal role in drawing up a new social contract for education grounded on a just, inclusive, and sustainable model of governance, thereby responding to an urgent question that requires a global and collective solution.

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