Familiar strangers – managing engagements in public-private partnerships in education

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ABSTRACT
Various forms of public-private collaborative organizations have been emerging in the education sector, a development that has made managing public-private partnerships an unavoidable imperative for school managers today. Addressing interactions between the partnership manager and partners in a public-private innovation partnership, this article explores the attachments public and private actors establish in the framework of such partnerships. While formal structures often bind partnerships together, open innovation partnerships have a more fluid organization in which the participants have to establish the ground for their common work. Specifically, the article presents a study of a Danish partnership project aimed at developing a new secondary school. Drawing on the sociology of engagements, the article sketches out the differing forms of mutual engagements at stake between the actors involved and the challenges they face. As the partnership studied lacked formal agreements, the manager’s and partners’ locally performed acts of proximity became a means of binding the partnership together. In these acts, a mutual explorative engagement intertwined with a familiar engagement, thus creating a distinct attachment of familiar strangers between the public and private actors – an attachment through which ideas on education and common educational visions could traverse the public and private sectors.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 20 December 2019
Accepted 27 June 2021

KEYWORDS
Public-private; partnership; education policy; collaboration; management; schools; pragmatic sociology; sociology of engagements

Introduction
This article examines attachments emerging between public and private actors in cross-sectoral education partnerships and the management task required to manage such partnerships. As part of the life of an experimental state, various forms of public-private partnerships have been emerging in European public education and policy-making (Ball, 2018, 2007; Derouet & Normand, 2011; Glatter, 2003). One danger of this movement is said to be an eventual blurring of the boundaries between the public and private sectors (Ball, 2018, p. 588). Indeed, there is a growing need to gain insight into what characterizes the attachments established by public and private actors in partnership organizations and thus forms the conditions under which education comes about in such partnerships. Public-private partnerships cover numerous aspects of education, ranging from administration and management to curriculum development, and their organization varies depending on the local and national contexts in which they are established. Some involve formalized outsourcing of standardized services, while others are organized as open partnerships on welfare innovation and have a low degree of formalization. This article focuses on the latter type.

In both policy and applied research, public-private education partnerships have been identified as a breeding ground for innovating educational welfare services, and in this regard appear promising (Antelo & Henderson, 1992, p. 59; Gibson & Davies, 2008, p. 74; Watters & Diezmann, 2013, p. 53). However, critical education policy research has also distanced itself from the ‘idealised let’s all do this together’ discourse of partnerships and from the political promotion of partnerships as innovative organizations producing educational welfare solutions (Klees 2002 in Cardini, 2006, p. 412). Instead, education policy scholars have characterized such partnerships as a market relation included in a movement of neoliberal policies introducing market thinking into education (Ball, 2007, 2018). Other studies see the nature of the changing relation between the public and private sectors in education from another perspective, thus directing attention to the significance of trust and personalized relations in these partnerships (Dhillon, 2009; Hoff, 2002). As such, scholars have at this point made a series of diverging proposals on how the attachments between public and private actors in partnerships should be understood. These proposals present views of partnerships that range from their being innovative collaborations that
improve welfare services, to being market-oriented economic relations, to being personalized relations of trust.

This article offers an analytical framework by which to consider the significance of various types of relations in partnerships in combination. The framework enables one to distinguish a given collaboration as consisting of various possible forms of mutual engagement between actors. This approach paves the way for an open analysis that equally investigates the significance, if any, of the element of trust, the exploration in which the public and private actors engage and their interests in forming partnerships.

School managers are key actors in the establishment and development of partnerships between schools and external private-sector partners, and as such are central to the empirical investigation in this article. In practice the managers have to handle the partnerships’ loose organization and a low incidence of formalized agreements. The open form of public-private innovation projects also emerging in the Danish public sector has indeed been described as a complex way of collaborating, as participants must continuously negotiate and re-negotiate the organization and scope of the collaboration (Højlund, 2014, p. 30), and success can be hard to evaluate (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011, p. 7).

This complexity means that the managers, teachers and private-sector partners involved indeed struggle in practice to figure out how to relate to each other, what to expect from each other and what kind of partnership they are to build. In the partnership investigated in this article, this included doubts about whether to prioritize establishing fixed project goals, openly explore new ideas or instead patiently engage in relation-building aimed at establishing long-term commitments and visions. On the face of it, these local doubts and difficulties might seem mundane, but this highly local level of interaction is actually important, for this is where these formally loosely defined partnerships take shape and thus where the conditions for managing and generating a partnership’s education work is manifested.

This article suggests that scholars pay attention to the specific level of interaction in these partnerships to gain insight into the attachments establishing themselves between the public and private actors involved, and into the management requirements these attachments imply. The article presents a Danish case of a municipal-level public-private partnership as the basis for analysis. The partnership was organized as an innovation partnership (Greve, 2019, p. 25) aimed at developing a new secondary school, and comprised more than 20 private-sector companies.

To attain the scope required to consider an array of attachment forms between public and private actors, I draw on concepts from French pragmatic sociology, particularly the sociological concept of regimes of engagement (Thévenot, 2001, 2006).^1^ A central concern in the sociology of engagements is the question of how to ‘make commonality’ (Thévenot, 2015, p. 82). In short, the concept of engagement indicates formats on which humans rely to coordinate with themselves and with each other (Thévenot, 2014, p. 11). Importantly, the sociology of engagements distinguishes between a plurality of forms of human engagement, and these forms can compete with each other, become dominant or intertwine in practice. The approach makes it possible to analytically distinguish between relations based on innovation exploration, economic market thinking and personal attachments of trust. Using the concept of engagement enables one to analyse how differing forms of relations might intertwine, conflict or cause each other’s collapse as managers and partners struggle to establish a common ground for their collaboration.

Against such a backdrop, one can unfold partnerships as a practice where differing possible forms of mutual engagement compete with each other, with some becoming dominant as partners struggle to establish a common ground for their work. Applying this perspective on the partnership case studied, the article addresses these questions: What forms of mutual engagement are established between public and private actors in their partnership interactions? In addition, what demands on the manager arise from these forms of mutual engagement?

The article proceeds as follows: the first three sections define the framework of the study, describing its empirical, theoretical and methodological underpinnings. The next three sections present the analysis of three empirical examples taken from observations of the day-to-day management of the partners’ interactions, with each example respectively focusing on the significance of three differing forms of mutual engagements in the partnership. Finally, the results are discussed in a discussion section and summarized in the conclusion.

### Debates on public-private relations in education partnerships

The practice of public-private partnerships has not been researched to the same extent as policy initiatives pertaining to public-private partnerships as a governance model have (see for example, Ball, 2007; Robertson et al., 2012). However, studies have addressed the practice of partnerships as well as the management work required to manage relations between public and private actors (e.g. Cardini,
2006; Davies & Hentschke, 2006; Hogan et al., 2018; Taylor 1998; Woods et al., 2013). As a result, some education researchers have provided critical perspectives on such partnerships, pointing to a divergence between policy discourse and practice (Cardini, 2006, p. 411; Taylor, 1998, p. 419). This research has also pointed out challenges to the sometimes uncritically pro-collaboration and pro-business stances taken in today’s school policy (Woods et al., 2013, p. 763). As such, scholars in this research stream distance themselves from a representation of partnerships as collaborations characterized by an innovative exchange of resources, knowledge and views that produce solutions to welfare problems. Instead, they see the changing boundaries between the private and public sectors from a critical viewpoint, and have described such collaboration as part of a neo-liberal movement to privatize and marketize education (Ball, 2007; Jones & Bird, 2000; Robertson et al., 2012). Some oppose partnerships for an idealized discourse (Klees in Cardini, 2006, p. 412), while others point to these social relations as characterized by conflicts of interest (Lumby & Morrison, 2006, p. 339). Remaining within the conceptual framework of a possible marketization of education, practice studies have, however, softened these sombre predictions, pointing out how actors adhere to public values and resist spreading market logics into public education (Hogan et al., 2018; Papanastasiou, 2017; G. J. Woods & Woods, 2005; P. A. Woods & Woods, 2004).

Still other management studies understand partnerships as something other than economic and interest-oriented relations centred on a distinction between the public and private, therefore shifting the focus to aspects of the attachments between public and private collaboration partners, such as trust (Dhillon, 2009, p. 697), sustained contact (Lumby & Morrison, 2006, p. 339) and moral capacities (G. J. Woods & Woods, 2005, p. 37). It has been suggested that partnership relations notably rest on personal relations, and changes in key personnel are pointed to as the primary reason why partnerships lose momentum or fail (Hoff, 2002, p. 73). As regards the requirements of partnership management, in some studies scholars have presented views on partnership managers as figures that manage not only the deal but also the relations (Davies & Hentschke, 2006, p. 212). Such studies contribute a perspective on the social attachments in partnerships as entailing personal human relations, thus placing less emphasis on partners’ positions as representatives of different interests. In sum, the existing literature within educational research holds a range of substantial yet varying suggestions about how to understand partnerships, but these accentuate different elements as being what characterizes public-private partnership relations. As such, the task is now to pave the way to analytically consider these elements of partnership formation together.

Similarly, partnership research on other sectors has pointed to the necessity of considering public-private collaboration as potentially containing elements oriented at economics, exploration and trust alike (Højlund, 2014, p. 38). To this end, I suggest that one can analytically distinguish such collaboration as consisting of differing forms of mutual engagement. Such a distinction permits an open analysis that equally examines the significance, if any, of personalized relations, exploration and (economic) interests in the attachments emerging between partners in practice, which is currently missing. As such, in this instance the efforts of the partners and the partnership manager to coordinate their work can be studied as a sociological and a management phenomenon in a way that sheds light on how different types of attachments intersect, challenge or oppress each.

**The Danish municipal partnership project**

Compulsory education in Denmark centres on a welfare state model that has an extended public sector, with the involvement of private actors being limited. Public schools make up about 85% of Denmark’s education sector. However, in recent years politicians, scholars and stakeholders alike have regarded and criticized the public school system as being too closed around itself (Evalueringstitut, 2013; e.g. Klingsley & Smith, 2010). Legislative and policy initiatives have sought to open up public schools to collaborations with the private and third sectors, the aim being to strengthen innovation in the schools and thus engender educational change. Still, with regard to compulsory education, the private sector is rarely involved in Danish public schooling through any formalized contracting out of services or public-private partnership projects at state level.

The private-sector involvement in compulsory education in Denmark primarily takes the form of decentralized local collaborations between single schools or local municipalities and private companies (EVA, 2018, pp. 4–5). As in other Danish sectors, such partnerships can be considered public innovation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2017, p. 828) or innovation partnerships aimed at innovating the content and scope of public education (Greve, 2019, pp. 25–26). Notably, such collaborations largely concern curricular activities and, hence, the core service of the school. Social research has further looked into the implications of the seemingly iniatiable political demand for innovation and flexible organizational partnership structures also emerging in Denmark (e.g. Andersen, 2008; Bergmann & Højlund, 2015; Carlsen & Vaaben, 2016; Højlund, 2014; Pors &
Andersen, 2015; Pors, 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011; Vaaben, 2013).

The recent years’ initiatives in the education sector to open public schools to collaborations with external actors have been taken at both the state and district levels in the education sector, but also at the local level by way of school managers and teachers (Deloitte, 2014; Evalueringstilfæt, 2018; Slok et al., 2012). Legislatively, this development is reflected in the 2014 Danish school reform act, which stipulates that public schools ‘enter into collaborations’ with local institutions (Undervisningsministeriet, 2013). In 2017 the act was amended to include private-sector partners (Undervisningsministeriet, 2017). However, the act does not specify demands as to the extent and form of the collaborations, instead delegating this question to municipalities and school managers. Furthermore, few actors in the field have developed any general models for how these collaborations should be conducted (e.g. Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening, 2020; Engineer the Future, 2020; Naturvidenskabernes Hus, 2020), and participants develop local solutions in the course of each specific collaboration.

The Danish education partnership under scrutiny in this article is located in a Greater Copenhagen municipality. The original mission of this partnership was to create a new secondary school – one based on an innovative curriculum model that would be in better sync with the ways and needs of the labour market (Project Plan). The ambitious partnership united the partners in designing a model and curriculum for the new school, which was to be housed in a vacant municipal building. The new school project commenced with about 25 different partners variously representing the municipal schools and large and small businesses in a number of industries, including electronics, engineering, organic food catering and medicine. During the project period, new partners were included in the project on an ongoing basis. The content of the partnership centred on the partners’ exchange of human resources in terms of professional experience, knowledge and time. Combining these resources, the partners were tasked with planning five to seven of the new school’s thematic educational programmes and its teaching programmes.

At the time of the study, the project did not rely on private-sector partners’ funding. Moreover, the school project did not operate on a financial model resembling that of a charter school or private company, nor was a model for outsourcing services used – as has been the case elsewhere (OECD, 2012; Patrinos et al., 2009). However, the collaboration had a scope that included developing a funding model to consist of a combination of donations from private funds, public development funds and contributions from the private-sector partners (Project Presentation).

Organized as an innovation partnership, the case provides an example of a partnership organization that has a low degree of formalization and relies on partners’ willingness to participate. These factors have been pointed to as characteristic of the initial stages of some partnerships, but also more broadly of other stages throughout the collaboration period – particularly when it comes to partnerships engaged in explorative activities (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2006). In the partnership studied, the degree of formalization was low from the start and remained so throughout the two years of the study.

The partnership thus conformed to a general definition of public-private partnerships as organizational forms that consist of ‘voluntary, enduring arrangements that involve significant levels of resource-sharing and joint decision-making’ (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2006, p. 250). The organization of the partnership thus required the partners to build up relations and establish the principles for their collaboration in the process.

While the lack of binding formal agreements supported the explorative scope of the collaboration, it also spurred doubts among the participants. Some participants pointed to the challenges they saw arising from a lack of strong project management, expressing a wish for clearer agreements on mutual expectations for their deliveries in regard to the project goals. Conversely, other participants paid less attention to difficulties regarding definitions of and agreements on project goals, instead emphasizing common long-term visions and good relations among the partners. A variety of views on how to coordinate the work and relate to each other in this way emerged in the partnership, then clashed and intertwined as the participants worked to establish a common collaborative ground.

**Conceptual premises: the management of engagements**

Having a different theoretical point of departure than other partnership studies, this article uses French pragmatic sociology, particularly the concept of engagement regimes developed by Laurent Thévenot, as the foundation of its analysis (Thévenot, 2006, 2001). Providing an ethnographic point of entry, the article paints a concrete picture of the interactions in a partnership. In this regard, the present study aligns with studies that have also sought to ‘avoid the macro critique of policy, instead researching the operation of public-private partnerships in practice’ (Davies & Hentschke, 2006, p. 206), an undertaking done from the perspectives of school leaders and teachers (Hogan et al., 2018, p. 618).
Although grounded in questions and critiques posed in the existing critical research on the discourse of partnerships in education (Cardini, 2006), the conceptual premises for this article do not bring one behind the discourse to find relations of power and economic interest. Rather, they bring one below the ideological discourse of innovative partnerships in education, thus enabling the emergence of partnership relations in practice to be investigated in the light of a plurality of possible forms of attachment between the public and private actors involved.

Concepts rooted in French pragmatic sociology have been a subject of increasing interest in general management and organization studies in recent years, including in studies of innovation in organizations (Jagd, 2013), of collaborative projects (Mailhot et al., 2014) and of professional identity (Haugseth, 2014), as well as in education policy studies (Skarpenes, 2010). Scholars in the research environment of French pragmatic sociology have also looked into transformations in the general organization of work and the emergence of network organizations.

The sociology of engagements directs one’s attention to human struggles with achieving coordination, resolving conflicts and adjusting to fellow humans in order to create and maintain mutual understanding (Luhtakallio & Thévenot, 2018, p. 3). The difficulties of being together and making something together are a core theme of all cross-sectoral partnerships. In light of the sociology of engagements, actions are not simply coordinated or conflicts easily resolved, for such efforts require extensive human investment in terms of one’s own engagement. At the same time, however, such efforts are no guarantee that others’ engagement will be endorsed. The use of the conceptual frame of the sociology of engagements thus helps not only to determine the partnership as part of a certain organization of work – for example, a connexionist order (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 356) – but also to describe the various relationship formats that emerge in these network organizations (Thévenot, 2007, p. 419).

A basic assumption in Laurent Thévenot’s sociology of engagements is that of plurality, as it points to a plurality of possible forms of engagement on which humans can rely and that allows their coordination to take place. The sociology of engagements distinguishes between the engagement regimes of justification, of planned action, of familiarity and of exploration. The latter three regimes are below the discursive level of public generalization and are a main focus of this article. Engagement allows a person to relate to herself and others. It constitutes a person’s access to reality and the way she grasps it in order to coordinate with herself and others. Engagement ensures a certain good, which is also put at stake in the tensions, compromises and competitive relation between the differing forms of engagement (Thévenot, 2007). The concept of engagement also emphasizes a dependence on the environment, as a person’s engagement relies on an appropriately arranged environment.

Humans engaging in planned action are oriented towards a good of a fulfilled planned action, and such this engagement concerns a person’s capacity to project herself into the future and realize this projection (Thévenot, 2016, p. 183). This engagement is so diffused that it can be considered ‘normal action’, and occurs in many types of work, such as the setting and pursuit of goals. Coordination here takes the form of individuals choosing between options about which possible plans to engage in so as to reach an agreement achieved by negotiating among individual interests (Thévenot, 2020, p. 8). This is precisely an engagement drawn upon in liberal market relations and competitive situations.

Unlike an engagement in planned action, engagement in familiarity ensures a good of ease and care. In familiar engagement, coordination is based, not on agreements or negotiations, but on accustoming oneself to the environment and each other. The attachments between persons in a familiar engagement are oriented towards trust and care, and require personal investments in terms of personal, local and bodily engagement. Lastly, and contrary to a familiar engagement, the human engagement in exploration is linked to strangeness and novelty. This explorative engagement guarantees the good of the excitement of experiencing something new, and Thévenot describes the mutual engagement between persons engaged in exploration as playful (Thévenot, 2014, p. 15). Contemporary society’s overwhelming imperative for innovation has sounded a growing call for this kind of human engagement (Thévenot, 2011, p. 51).

Building on the theoretical foundation of the sociology of engagements, I conceptualize partnership management as a work of establishing and maintaining engagements, and my analysis of management work is demarcated empirically and centred on the practice acts of the partnership manager observed. The concept of engagement offers a view into the demanding work of arranging materiality, gestures and movements, as well as into the local acts of proximity the manager and other partners require to establish mutual engagements, to coordinate their interactions and to handle situations where mutual engagements collapse.

The sociology of engagements makes it possible to consider a plurality of engagement forms that variously establish the relation between participants. Importantly, this also includes forms of engagement based on local and personal customization, which are not strongly anchored in language and hence less visible on a discursive level. As will become apparent,
the present study suggests that the open cross-sectoral partnership under scrutiny in this article must be understood as an example of a collaboration where two forms of mutual engagements manifest themselves between the participants and thus enact a relation of familiar strangers. My use of the term familiar strangers connects to the conceptual world of the sociology of engagements. Emphasizing a mutual and binding engagement established through interaction my use distinguishes itself from Stanley Milgram’s early use of the phrase. In his urban studies he uses the term to indicate strangers who share public spaces for instance, bus stops and stations and who see each other repeatedly but do not interact.2 I use the term familiar strangers to indicate an attachment between actors, which draws on the two differing forms of engagement in exploration and in familiarity.

Methods and data

The empirical data on the partnership presented in this article were generated in continuation of a research project encompassing 10 Danish schools working with innovation in collaboration with private-sector actors (Slok et al., 2012). This interview- and document-based study pointed to a low incidence of formalized agreements in the collaboration projects, and to the possible significance of other forms of attachments established in practice between the participants (Carlsen & Vaaben, 2016).

This broader study became the starting point for an observation study focused on the practice interactions between the manager of and participants in a partnership. This study was conducted from 2015–2017. Seen in terms of the partnership’s project plan to establish a new school, the period of study can be defined as the project’s starting stage, a period in which the scope and curriculums for the new school were developed and pilot tests of teaching activities were implemented with students from the existing municipal schools. However, although the partnership neither ultimately resulted in the planned new school, nor achieved its planned mission, the interactions at this stage of the partnership laid the ground for new project activities between some of the partners. This indicated that the notion of the partnership needed to be stretched beyond the limits of the initial project, and the observations were accordingly prolonged so the initial steps in the new activities could be observed.

By analysing concrete situations, one can observe the tensions between differing forms of engagement as well as the work done to sustain them. As such, the analysis sections of this article present examples from concrete interactions between the manager and partners in the partnership studied. To also gain insight into possible local forms of mutual engagements in the partnership, I both conducted shadow observations and observed selected activities. In addition to these observations, I conducted qualitative interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) and conversations (Larsen, 1995) with the partnership manager and with partners. The shadow observations entailed a focus on the manager’s work and interactions with the partners. Interviews with partners provided knowledge on their perceptions of the partnership and on how the acts of the manager observed affected the private-company partners. Although the manager was shadowed throughout her work day, the observations for this study remained disciplined in the sense of a ‘systematised way of looking at others’ (Madden, 2017, p. 100). In particular, the observations were directed at how various acts and the environment supported or impeded specific forms of mutual engagement in the partnership. However, the observations also included internal meetings at the municipality and the manager’s administrative external meetings, which served to contextualize the observations of the partnership interactions. This enabled me to pinpoint the predominance and intertwinements of engagements characteristic for the partnership. By combining observations with interviews and project documents, I could also explore the close forms of partnership engagements communicated and upheld through the manager’s and the partners’ local acts of proximity. The methods and empirical data of the study is outlined in Table 1 below.

Partners’ exploration of new ideas for education

The previous sections have presented the partnership case and the methodological and theoretical premises for the article. They have set out the general conditions of the partnership’s practice life as being characterized by a plurality of differing forms of mutual engagement. Three forms of engagements have been outlined: an engagement in planned action, an engagement in exploration and an engagement in

| Table 1. Overview of methods and empirical material. |
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| **Method** | **Empirical material** |
| Observations | 52 hours of observations: |
| | ● 40 hours of shadowing observations of manager. |
| | ● 12 hours observations of selected activities. |
| Interviews | 7 interviews: |
| | ● 4 interviews with manager. |
| | ● 3 interviews with private-sector partners. |
| Documents | 42 official and personal documents: |
| | ● Partnership strategies, description of prototypes, description of outputs, meeting agendas and minutes, and talks given by manager and participants at partnership events. |
| | ● Manager’s calendar extracts, written correspondence between manager and partners. |
familiarity. The following sections will address each of these three forms and their implications for how the manager and partners formed attachments to each other. While these engagements in practice intertwine, conflict and compete, the following addresses them in succession to facilitate the clear presentation of their characteristics.

Education research has criticized the political discourses on public-private collaboration as idealizing partnerships’ potential for welfare innovation and as not corresponding to partnerships’ practice life, which, on the other hand, is described as rife with conflicts of interest (Cardini, 2006, p. 412), competition and the accommodation of conflict (Lumby & Morrison, 2006, p. 324), and competing understandings (Woods et al. 2013, p. 763). As will be seen, however, the present study shows that an orientation towards innovation, exploration and the new should not be allocated as an ideal exclusively on a discursive level. In the partnership studied, this orientation also guided a way of engaging in the manager’s and partners’ work prevalent in activities involving an exchange of knowledge, ideas and views between the public and private partners. These situations formed a specific attachment between the public and private actors as that of inspiring strangers, creating a channel through which ideas and views on education could traverse the public and private sectors.

Example: a partnership meeting at the city hall

This example of a partnership meeting provides observations of concrete interactions and apparently mundane human acts. However, observing these acts of the manager and partners gives important insight into the engagements established between the partners in practice. The situations of mutual explorative engagement reinforced a characteristic relation between the participants of inspiring strangers, as well as bolstered the way in which educational ideas and experimental activities were advanced between the public and private actors.

The collaboration between the participants in the partnership was organized around a series of meetings arranged by the municipal partnership manager. One afternoon a partnership meeting occurred at the city hall, on this occasion attended by around 25 partnership participants, including the partnership manager, private company partners, politicians, teachers and student representatives. The meeting was intended to generate ideas on how to organize the work process for developing activities for the new curriculums. The first part of the programme entailed an introduction from the manager, who presented the scope of the meeting. This was followed by a talk from the municipal political member in charge of the project, in which she presented the current status and ideas for the collaboration. After these speeches, the meeting programme was arranged to include group work sessions and a common discussion. The respective groups for these sessions blended participants having different backgrounds and coming from both the municipality and the private companies. As one partner put it when interviewed:

It’s important that we don’t all work in the same engine room, because then we can’t inspire each other. So, it’s really good that we all come from different places and can each offer our own.

(Partner interview 1)

I sat at a group table that included a political representative highly engaged in the project and a student representative invited to provide a student’s perspective on the school. A teacher representative and a representative from a large tech company were also at the table. They each started by taking a card from the table intended to stimulate ideas on the educational goals for the school’s new educational programmes. In the ensuing group discussions, the participants showed their interest in the topic, becoming animated as they asked each other questions and expressed their own opinions and experiences in their own home organizations, or, in the case of the student, from her school experience.

The sense of inspiration following these interchanges also gave the partners a sense of motivation for participating in the partnership. When interviewed about their motivation for collaborating with public education institutions in general, the partners from the large industrial partners pointed to long-term economic profit, particularly in terms of ensuring a future labour force within science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). However, their motivation for participating in this particular development project and the work with developing the new school also rested on the partnership meetings’ ability to provide inspiration. After the meeting, one partner said that, on the face of it, her participation was not directly relevant to her business, but it had been interesting, and she had also received inspiration for her own work.

The partners’ experience of the interactions in the partnership as inspiring and interesting was also the result of the work done by the manager (and the other participants) to support a mutual exploration between the partners. To establish and maintain this form of relation between the partners, the manager worked elaborately through a series of mundane but essential acts of establishing arrangements of materiality, surroundings and persons. Furthermore, while the material arrangement of the room was important, the arrangement of persons was a key remedy in ensuring the partnership innovation work and maintaining the partners’ fragile explorative engagement,
which could dissolve as the partners got to know each other. For this meeting, the manager arranged the participants into dissimilar constellations in which to meet, thus reinforcing a situation of confrontation with something new so as to foster inspiration. As the manager and private company partners explained, the partnership was also organized to take in new partners during the process and thus ensure continued inspiration within the collaboration.

Accordingly, the manager created a continuous inflow of new persons by shifting group formations and inviting new persons into the partnership, all of which served to provide new input and ensure an inspirational collaboration characterized by mutual engagement in exploration.

**Attachments between strangers**

The manager’s work to support an explorative way for participants to engage with each other included a continuous reinforcement of relative differences and strangeness between the participants. Difference was here understood in terms of differing knowledge and ideas that stemmed more from differing public or private experience than from differing interests. The participants were attached to each other in a relation of inspiring strangers, and this relation led to a mutual dependence in which their mutual differences as regards their public and private affiliations were meant to provide a source of inspiration. Through this mutual engagement in exploration, the partners experimented with educational activities; exchanged opinions, experience and knowledge; and permitted experimental activities and ideas on education to traverse the public and private sectors.

**Building familiarity**

However central a mutual engagement in exploration might have been to the work of the partnership, this fragile form of engagement on its own cannot account for the attachments between the public and private actors in the partnership. The way that the participants in the explorative engagement related to each other as inspiring strangers continually interchanged with a disparate attachment of familiarity oriented towards care, trust and ease with each other. In this familiar engagement the participants’ organizational affiliations to public or private organizations became irrelevant. The differences between their public and private affiliations disappeared in favour of personal accommodation with each other and adherence to common educational long-term visions.

The observations of the partnership confirm management research on public-private partnerships that has pointed to the significance of work in public-private partnerships to build trust (Dhillon, 2009, p. 699), sustained contact between partners (Lumby & Morrison, 2006, p. 339) and person-based relations (Hoff, 2002, p. 73). By looking closely at the practice acts of the manager and partners, the present study adds to the existing studies by unfolding this management work in terms of the personal investments of local acts of proximity that it requires.

Sustained contact and the establishment of trust have been pointed to as conducive for partnership building (Dhillon, 2009, p. 699; Lumby & Morrison, 2006, p. 339). The present study similarly points to a familiar engagement as a central way of forming attachments in partnerships. However, addressing this as one of several forms of mutual engagements, the study also shows that a familiar engagement and a mutual engagement based on exploration come to intertwine in a way demanding for the actors to handle. Furthermore, the study indicates that familiar relations oriented towards trust do not necessarily strengthen partnership relations in terms of the formulation and fulfilment of common project goals.

**Example: returning to the city hall meeting**

Returning to the partnership meeting at the city hall, the following sections draw attention to meeting observations in which additional interactions indicate a familiar engagement and bear witness to the manager’s efforts to establish familiar attachments in the partnership. The previous section’s example focused on how a series of mundane but significant acts of interacting with and arranging the environment served to establish and communicate an explorative engagement. When the partnership manager and her assistant prepared the meeting room for the partnership meeting, as described in the previous section, they also put three tables together against one of the walls to create a buffet table. The manager, her assistant and I, who assisted with the practicalities I could during my observations, set the table with beverages, sandwiches, snacks, napkins, coffee in brass thermoses, cups and cutlery. Before the project presentations, the manager, as the host of the event, greeted the partners, and people circulated around the buffet table, where we chatted, passed food to each other and shared bagel halves, gesturing and smiling. The manager divided her attention between all the tables where partners were seated, talking to them and making sure that everybody felt comfortable.

In this work of familiarization, the manager’s efforts stood out as a limited local management performance of acts of proximity. This management was acted out locally through her interaction with the environment and arranged objects, but especially through her movements and gestures. At this meeting her work resembled that of a host, a resemblance that
also manifested itself during the group work session, during which she moved between the groups. As a small snippet from my field notes from the meeting says: ‘Maria [the manager] walks over to Annette (Annette is sitting at my group table), she places a light hand on her shoulder, smiles, squats down beside her, looks up at her and talks in a calm, light voice’ (Field notes).

While successfully establishing a mutual familiarity emerged as a way of binding the partnership together, a failure to do so could have created a social situation of misplacement and jeopardized the bonds between the actors involved. As mentioned, the meeting participants were to do group work, and were therefore split into groups, each comprised of people with different backgrounds: for instance, one school representative, one administrative employee, one student representative and one person from the private sector. Some days prior to this meeting, the manager and her assistant had met to discuss the preparations. At their meeting, the manager followed up on the previous partnership meeting and the group constellations created at that one. She noted that one of the partners, a young woman, had felt uncomfortable sitting between two elderly women with financial backgrounds. The young woman was unfamiliar with budgetary language and felt as if the two women were talking over her head (Field notes). In preparing for the upcoming meeting, the manager and her assistant arranged the groups in a way that seated the young participant with persons the manager considered more likely to make her feel at ease.

The interviews with partners revealed the significance of the familiar engagement’s feeling of trust and ease with each other in the partnership, expressed in terms of ‘good relations’ (Partner interviews). At a later stage of the partnership, one partner was asked about how he perceived the challenges that arose when it came to fulfilling core project goals, and how this affected his participation in the partnership. He explained that the changes in the partnership goals were not pivotal for his participation, saying: ‘Bottom line – it’s about having good relations with each other. And looking to the common visions you have and boosting interest in the natural sciences’ (Partner interview).

**Familiarizing with strangers**

While a familiar engagement emerged as significant in the attachments formed in the partnership, the manager’s ability to ensure such engagement and prevent it from collapsing also heavily depended on a local personal investment in acts of proximity. The present study shows how the establishment of trust, which has been put forward as supportive of partnership building (Dhillon, 2009), requires personal investments in terms of a personal, local and bodily engagement.

The familiar engagement between the involved actors did not demand that the differences between the public and private participants be accentuated, as the engagement in exploration did. Rather, it required the partners to engage in commonality based on personal customization with each other.

Maintaining a successful familiar engagement was complicated by the fact that the actors’ engagement in familiarity evolved alongside other differing forms of mutual engagement. As illustrated in the previous section, the simultaneous explorative collaboration activities implied a continual accent on differences and on the partners’ position as inspiring strangers. As such, the partnership should neither be understood as tantamount to nor be confused with that of an organization based on personal or familial ties. The familiar engagement in the partnership did not lead to an integration or alignment with each other’s interests. The constant shifts to situations involving explorative engagement, which called attention to mutual differences between partners as coming from different sectors and organizations, continually arrested their process of mutual familiarization. While both forms of engagement have a proponent position in the partnership collaboration, these forms of engagement also continuously hold each other back, thus requiring the involved actors to navigate a tension-filled relation of familiar strangers.

**Negotiating project goals and engaging in planned action**

Lastly, to provide insight into the attachments that public and private actors developed in their interactions in the partnership, I look at attachments based on the negotiations of project goals, deliveries and the partners’ (economic) interests. These attachments are addressed in terms of a mutual engagement in planned action. In line with other studies, this study showed the work of negotiating goals and interests as comprising difficulties for the participants (Lumby & Morrison, 2006). However, the difficulties were related to more factors than just the manager’s difficulties with successfully facilitating the establishment of common goals within this form of coordination.

Indeed, difficulties also arose because shifts to situations of negotiation clashed with the successfully established mutual engagements in exploration and familiarity among the participants. The act of negotiating project goals and individual interests and deliveries cast the relation between the partners in a different light than that of the mutual engagements in exploration or familiarity. The partners now had to relate to each other as representatives of
organizational (economic) interests, a change in relations that also spawned situations of doubt and reticence. Eventually this form of engagement also came under pressure, as partners returned to relying on an attachment based on mutual exploration and familiarity.

**Example: a group meeting at a partner’s home organization**

To demonstrate the difficulties that arose in the partnership when partners’ engagement in planned action challenged the familiar and explorative forms of mutual engagement, I offer a last example from the partnership activities studied. The example centres on another meeting, conducted at a stage in the collaboration where prototypes for the new school’s educational programmes were to be developed. The meeting presented here was one in a series of meetings aimed at developing such prototypes. Smaller working groups with six to eight participants were established within the partnership. One group I observed included the largest industrial partners of the partnership. They came from a technology company, a transport company, an energy company and a medical company, respectively. A teacher representative from one of the municipal schools also participated in the group, as did the partnership manager, who facilitated the group meetings.

The meeting concerned was held one noon at the home company of the partner belonging to the energy sector. In this working group, the manager had arranged with the partners for their group meetings to take place at the partners’ home organizations on a rotation basis. Considering the previous sections on the manager’s work to support both exploration and familiarity in the partnership, this way of conducting meetings can also be seen as part of this endeavour. Spending time to visit and see each other’s home organizations and daily work environments constituted a way of familiarizing with each other, while the visits also provided new input.

The two-hour meeting was targeted at taking the first step in developing a prototype for one of the new school’s educational programmes, which was to include student activities hosted by the participating private companies. The private partners at the meeting developed ideas for the prototype and tasked themselves with testing the prototypes with students from the existing municipal schools. The meeting commenced with a brainstorming session where the partners produced ideas for programme goals and activities. During this session, the interactions around the conference table and flipchart board included laughter, turns at the whiteboard and energetic speech. Participants made statements like ‘you can come a long way if …’, ‘there are many possibilities’ and ‘that looks quite good’ and shared ideas (Recording).

However, at one point when the discussions had returned to the table, a participant changed the subject by recalling one of the partnership’s overall goals. She referred to the student goal of learning through engaging with the companies’ concrete work practices and real-life problems. She expressed doubts about whether their ideas for the programme and the private companies’ specific contributions to the programme could adequately reach that goal. This turned the discussion to the consideration of this goal, after which the partners sought to come to an agreement, discussing concrete solutions and the role the private companies would play in realizing the activities, for instance, by inviting students for educational visits to their companies. As the dialogue progressed towards how best to meet the project goals, the partners expressed themselves with increasing hesitation and reticence, using expressions like ‘I would think we could do that’, ‘I think it could be possible for us to do that’ and ‘at the risk of saying something that is not very constructive here at the last minute’, all of which expressed doubts about the decisions they had made (Recording). Two other partners closed the discussion by saying they did not think they should worry too much and that they thought the idea could work.

As this situation evolved, the previous form of interaction – characterized by laughter, energetic body language and mutual excitement – was lost as one partner shifted her engagement to a rational questioning of the projected goals of the partnership. In this new situation, the actors involved felt uncertain about the appropriate mutual engagement. With the sudden shift to questions of whether the ideas they had developed for the educational programme could adequately meet the project goals, the relation between the partners changed into one of differing interests to be negotiated. This situation of confrontation between differing forms of engagement was accompanied by a situation of awkwardness and doubt between the partners.

**The ending**

Some months after the work group meeting, another obstacle to realizing the partnership’s overall project goal arose, with the effect of generally taking the wind out of the partnership’s sails. The municipal council made a political decision to use the vacant building for housing not the new school, but refugees instead. Since the new school no longer had physical premises, municipal top management decided to change the partnership mission from creating a new school to carrying out local initiatives to develop teaching
activities in the existing secondary schools. This fundamental shift in the partnership’s goal meant the end of the partnership activities concerning the creation of a new school.

However, the partners from the working group of large industrial companies observed did not let the thwarted plan discourage them. They did not see the concrete project objectives as all-defining for their collaboration with the manager, the municipality and each other, choosing instead to depend on a long-term common attachment. As one partner explained: ‘That’s a kind of thing that we deal with every day, I wouldn’t say every day, but at companies we also have to say that what we thought should be – became something else’ (Partner interview). Thus, with the sudden absence of a new school building, the partnership seemed momentarily at risk of ending, but a new plan materialized. This plan entailed developing the curriculum at the existing municipal schools under a common theme of strengthening STEM subjects and working with the real-life questions arising in the companies’ actual work. The manager and the observed group of industrial partners thus engaged in a new collaboration with a similarly low amount of agreement formalization but based on their mutual engagement of exploration and familiarity with each other and on the general theme of a vision for boosting interest in the natural sciences.

The observations suggest that the primary form of binding engagement between the manager and the large industrial partners did not mainly depend on the successful negotiation of goals and deliveries. Rather, their common work and attachments were based on mutual explorative and familiar engagements combining an explorative, inspirational exchange of ideas with relations based on mutual care, trust and adherence to common educational visions.

**Discussing the findings**

This article has offered an analytical framework by which to consider the significance of various types of relations in partnerships by drawing on the sociological concept of engagement and especially the concepts of engagement in exploration, familiarity and planned action. Public-private partnerships have become a prominent remedy deployed in present-day educational policies, and in this light, I have argued for the importance of determining the mutual engagements that arise between public and private actors in such partnerships. The key point revealed in the article is that the relations between the public and private actors in the partnership under scrutiny rested on a combination of exploratory and familiar forms of mutual engagement, which turned their relation into a particular one of familiar strangers.

The article has examined a Danish case study of a public-private innovation partnership in education to create a new secondary school. Observations of a series of partnership and work group meetings between the public and private partners involved in this partnership provided the main empirical data for the study. The partnership was a locally initiated municipal partnership centred on the exchange of ideas, knowledge and human resources between the partners and had a low degree of formalization. Hence, rather than exemplifying a state-level, public-private partnership that contracts out or privatizes educational services, this partnership entailed a variety of local collaborations between single schools or municipalities and private companies and was based on voluntary participation – a type of partnership emerging in the Danish education sector today.

**Managing engagements in partnerships**

One of the twofold ambitions for the study was to help address the question of the demands placed on managers to manage public-private partnerships in practice. Although previous management studies have already focused on the management of partnerships in practice (e.g. Davies & Hentschke, 2006; Dhillon, 2009; Hogan et al., 2018; G. J. Woods & Woods, 2005), I have approached the partnership manager’s work in light of the concept of engagement, thus adding to these earlier studies by unfolding the local work of proximity required to manage partnership interactions. This work entailed an investment of the manager’s own engagement as she sought to ensure an explorative and inspirational collaboration while also building up relations of trust and creating a sense of ease and care amongst the partners. In the mundaneness of her concrete arrangement of the work environment and in her personal movements and gestures, the work of the manager observed at the partnership meetings stood out as a comprehensive local work of proximity.

Addressing partnership management through the lens of the sociology of engagements has also called attention to situations of tension within partnerships, as differing forms of engagements do not necessarily support each other. It has previously been suggested that actors can address obstacles like conflicts of interest by building confidence through sustained contact (Lumby & Morrison, 2006, p. 339). However, in the present case successfully building personal relations of trust through a familiar engagement did not solve the challenge of fulfilling formalized agreements and common goals in the partnership. Furthermore, the work of building
relations of trust between the partners through accommodation with each other was not easily combined with the aim of establishing an explorative and inspirational collaboration. As such, partnership management, when understood in terms of engagement, appears to be a task not only of building mutual engagements, but also of handling conflicts and clashes between the differing forms of mutual engagement and of dealing with situations where they fail.

**Relations between public and private participants in open partnerships**

The second aim of the study was to expand the knowledge on the forms of attachments manifesting themselves between the public and private actors in the partnership – also bearing in mind the possible consequences in terms of a blurring of boundaries between the public and private.

Some discussions within education research have been dedicated to understanding the relations between the public and private sectors in education partnerships. One point of discussion has been whether such partnerships can be understood as an explorative collaboration with a strong potential to innovate welfare services, or whether they should be seen as an interest-oriented market relation accompanying neoliberal education policies (Ball, 2018; Robertson et al., 2012). Additionally, some studies have focused on the practice life and management of partnerships and have pointed to partnership relations in terms of personal relations, trust and confidence (Dhillon, 2009; Hoff, 2002; Lumby & Morrison, 2006). However, the challenge remains as to how it is possible to consider partnership relations without presupposing the partnership to be an (economic) interest-oriented relation, either because market-thinking is placed as a driving force behind a discourse of innovative collaborations, or because the building of trust is depicted as a means of supporting negotiations of goals and interest.

Approaching partnerships with the sociological concept of engagement regimes, in this article I have suggested a way to understand the partnership relations between public and private actors as relations of interest (the engagement form of planned action), trust-based relations (the engagement form of familiarity) as well as explorative relations oriented towards the new (the engagement form of exploration). The partnership analysed shows an example of a partnership where, despite unredeemed project goals and the dissolution of the all-new school project, attachments formed between the public and private partners through an incessant mutual engagement in exploration. In addition, continuous actions of familiarization paved way for the fostering of common long-term visions or educational themes, in this case the strengthening of STEM subjects.

The aim of this article is not to deem public-private interchange as either good or bad for public education. However, regarding the question of changing public-private boundaries and the effect of these changes on education, possible new attachments manifesting themselves also through seemingly trivial actions of practice should be considered.

In the present case the public-private collaboration as a formal project failed. Still ideas and views continued to be exchanged, and in this sense crossed the boundaries of the public and private sector. Experimental education activities were carried out, and common themes and visions for public education were reinforced through a distinct attachment between the partners, here conceptualized as one of familiar strangers.

**Conclusion**

Public-private partnership organizations emerging in today’s society must be understood as accompanied by particular forms of human mutual engagements. The case of a public-private partnership discussed here has evinced the need to look at these forms of engagement as a means of understanding the changing relations between public and private actors in education. Three forms of engagements and their significance in partnership formation have been investigated: engagement in exploration, engagement in familiarity and engagement in planned action.

In present-day education policy, one can see a strong societal belief in the powers of partnership organizations to deliver innovative solutions. Such belief risks putting too narrow a focus on determining how to ensure the success of partnership projects. Indeed, another pressing policy and management concern is to examine education partnerships at the local interaction level where actors laboriously work to establish mutual engagements developing attachments across the public-private divide through seemingly mundane practices.

In the education partnership case covered here, a distinct combination of engagements in exploration and familiarity manifested itself in an attachment of familiar strangers between public and private actors. This kind of attachment subsists despite the coming and going of singular partnership project plans and specific project interests. Actors connect through unremitting explorative activities intertwined with actions of personal familiarization, where they build affinities to common educational themes and visions across institutional boundaries between the public and private sectors.
Notes
1. The term attachment is employed to indicate the binding dimension of the bonds established between public and private actors. In the sociology of engagements, engagements are understood as binding in the sense that the human capacity for coordination secured in the engagement is dependent on an appropriately prepared environment, understood here as including both other persons and well as the milieu (Thévenot, 2015, p. 22).
2. The phrasing familiar strangers has previously been used in Stanley Milgram's urban study (Milgram, 2010), Stuart Hall's autobiographical narrative (Hall, 2017), and studies of virtual spheres and networks (Schwartz, 2013), each of which has employed the phrasing in a particular manner.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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