Courting Corporate Philanthropy in Public Education: Multi-Disciplinary Literature Review of Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) in Urban Public Schooling

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Abstract
The last few decades have been ones of complexity and contradiction. Long-term socio-economic restructuring has produced deep and growing wealth disparities, leveling great constraints on urban public schools that must confront the social and educational repercussions of chronic poverty. Long-standing political austerity, coupled with fallout from the great recession, has rendered private/corporate sector solutions to public problems increasingly expedient. Corporations have aggressively encroached into the gaps in provisions to public education, addressing problems that hyper-concentrated wealth has helped to engender. This literature review examines ideological debates surrounding one aspect of this shifting landscape: corporate philanthropic partnerships in education. Exploring research from education and business, this article rethinks the underlying assumptions, motivations, and implications of two bodies of literature and wider discourses that take counter-related positions on the role of corporate social participation: (a) public–private partnerships (PPPs) as manna and (b) PPPs as privatizations in education.

Keywords
educational administration, leadership and policy, sociology of education, education theory and practice, corporate philanthropy, public–private partnerships, privatizations, corporatization of education, school commercialism, business ethics

Introduction: Mapping Corporate Philanthropic Partnerships in Public Education

These last several decades have been ones of complexity, uncertainty, and contradiction. The world’s largest superpower has thrust itself into a period of long-term socio-economic restructuring. The wealthy and their protectors have dug deep to resist taxation responsibilities, as the disparities between the rich and poor are growing wider in the United States than any other advanced economy (Brandolini & Smeeding, 2007; Stiglitz, 2012). This globalized restructuring creates asymmetries between people and places with capital and those without, implicating powerful institutions in social exclusions for growing underclasses of youth and families (Barlow, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Poor and marginalized communities frequently find themselves “bypassed by flows of wealth and information, and alternately deprived of the basic technological infrastructure that allows us to communicate, innovate, produce, consume, and even live, in today’s world” (Castells, 1998, p. 74).

The constraints leveled on public education are immense as urban schools must routinely confront the realities of inter-generational poverty (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Coleman, 1966, 1990). Concurrently, fiscal crises have tightened the public schools’ budgets. While the long-term repercussions of Wall Street’s “dance of the trillions” (Palma, 2009) are only partially understood, the immediate impact of toxic debt has aggravated financial problems facing the public sector (Jimenez, 2009; Palma, 2009).

Saddled with austerity policies and budget shortfalls (Alm, Buschman, & Sjoquist, 2007; Reschovsky, 2004), government and school leaders have increasingly sought alternate means of resourcing schools, rendering private sector solutions to public problems ever more expedient (Forrer, Kee, Newcomer, & Boyer, 2010). As schools have looked to corporations for support, corporations have found business motivation and felt social pressure to become involved in public governance and policy. As Buhl (1996) explains,

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In return for a fairly unconstrained marketplace and the license to hold on to the lion’s share of their earnings, corporations are expected to help support the civic problem-solving and service-providing capacity of their communities. Their understanding has been validated by corporate practice across the 20th century and encouraged by tax law. (p. 135)

Although schools and corporations have intersected complexly since the dawn of public education (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; National Education Association [NEA], 1929), the current K-12 landscape has titled perceptively toward increasing amounts and degrees of private/corporate sector engagement (Ball, 2007; Barkan, 2011; Buras, 2011; Burch, 2006, 2009; Cuban, 2004; Hess, 2005; Himmelstein, 1997; Kowalski, 2010; Morsy Eckert, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2000, 2004). Currently in public education, “there are no surface areas which are exempt from private sector participation” (Ball, 2007, p. 13). In her analysis of corporate culturing in public education, H. J. Robertson (2005) maintains,

The shadow of the private sector is being cast all over aspects of school reform, from how we think about learners and learning to how schools should be governed and financed; from who produces curriculum to who (or what) “delivers” it; from whether public education is viewed as a remarkable accomplishment or an anachronistic failure. (p. 116)

The nature of these changing relationships between public institutions and private wealth raises critical questions in regard to the purpose of public schooling in the United States.

This review of literature takes up research and theory regarding one layer of public–private intersections by examining the ideological debates surrounding the rise of corporate philanthropy in public education. The remainder of this article is broken into four sections. The section “Definitions and Underlying Theoretical Assumptions” offers a discussion of the theoretical assumptions that guide this author’s ways of seeing corporate engagement with urban schools. The following two sections critically survey research from two bodies of literature that assume counter-related positions on the nature and consequences of corporate participation in education:

- Dominant Discourse: Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) as Manna From Above
- Non-Dominant Discourse: PPPs as Privatizations or Corporatizations in Education

Each clustering of discourses holds potential analytic value in researching and understanding corporate philanthropy within public education. Each also poses problems that will be critically examined. For instance, core issues of public accountability and social equity arise from the reality that questions of what, where, why, how, and how much to “help” schools, and local communities are left almost entirely to the corporations to define (Gurn, 2014). Conclusions drawn from this review suggest a need to conceptualize educational inquiry that crosses ideological divides, drawing on the best of what dominant theories have to offer, while learning from counter-hegemonic forms of action and scholarship.

Definitions and Underlying Theoretical Assumptions

Cross-sector collaborations have been given a variety of names, including PPPs in education (S. Robertson, Mundy, Verger, & Menashy, 2012), business involvement in public school improvement (Mann, 1987), cross-sector partnerships to address social issues (Babiak, 2009; Selsky & Parker, 2005), and social partnerships (Waddock, 1988, 1989, 1991). Broadly, this review defines PPPs as “cooperative institutional arrangements between public and private sector actors” (Hodge, Greve, & Boardman, 2010, p. 4). More specifically, PPPs promote “relational contracting between the public and the private sector for the organization and delivery of services that involve[s] risk sharing and mutual learning between the parties involved” (Verger, 2012, p. 114). These governance relationships take many shapes, encompassing a range of inter-organizational policies, managerial practices, and professional networks. A semantically expansive concept, the PPP includes “an almost infinite variety of combinations” (Edens & Gilson, 2005, p. 124), such as, private companies assuming leadership and management of public services, government agencies contracting with firms to provide operational or instructional services, and arrangements between corporate foundations and government agencies.

The PPP “is largely a rhetorical invocation of a vague ideal” (Glendinning & Powell, 2002, p. 3). Its shape-shifting nature and conceptual ambiguity allow fundamentally different ideas to be labeled and framed as the same, leaving partnerships a poorly understood phenomenon in academic literature (Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Smith & Wohlstetter, 2006). In practice, however, partnerships are quite common and “increasingly professionalized, technical and rational” (Hodge et al., 2010, p. 3). Despite a lack of agreement among scholars over how to appropriately define or assess PPPs, these cross-sector innovations are well established in local, state, national, and international public policies (Hodge, 2006). Although the concept of partnerships remains popular in public policy and practice, “demonstrating their effects for good or ill remains an illusive goal” (Edens & Gilson, 2005, p. 123).

The driving purpose of this academic exercise is to more deeply understand what happens when public schools elect to “partner” with a corporation as part of its philanthropy. By not rushing quickly into judgment about the meaning of the phenomenon, we may “get farther into it, see more and more...
things in terms of it or ‘through’ it, use it as a hypothesis . . . from which more can be seen and understood” (Elbow, 1998, p. 163). Each instantiation of school–corporate contact must be understood within its socio-historical context and individual evidence. Questions such as who benefits from a partnership and how cannot justifiably be answered outside of the social material workings of localized relationships. It is thus unproductive to argue that school–corporate philanthropic relationships unconditionally represent either “manna from heaven” (Burke, 1986) or a “corporate assault” on public education (Boyles, 2005). Some partnerships will lead to substantial and needed school change, while others may be directly or indirectly detrimental to schools, teachers, and youth.

In one study of PPPs, Leys (2001) asserts that, because of broad societal changes wrought in globalized capitalism, “the analytical task has become more complex . . . the main causal links no longer converge conveniently” (p. 5). The political and economic context of corporate involvement in the public sector is increasingly complex and uncertain. Seeking conceptual footing that is adaptive to these shifting dynamics, this literature review adopts a socio-cultural approach to discourse, based on the notion that people’s worldviews are constructed through real and imagined social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Discourse embodies a socially mediated lens for seeing the world, or “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network” (Gee, 1999, p. 131). Group insiders tacitly understand how to “be” in their community because of commonly held assumptions about the way the world works, which serve as ideological shorthand for interpreting society. Within institutions such as schools, the discourses of the place and people ripple through what is construed as commonsense, natural, irrational, controversial, problematic, as well as what is not thought about at all (Foucault, 1971; Gramsci, 1971).

Discourse is productive in that it continually works to construct social and material realities. As linguistic and cultural practices mediated by historically constituted power relations, discourses are not created equal nor are they neutral, though group insiders may view its own norms as the “truth” or objective reality. Dominant discourses wield greater social and cultural capital that can be used to acquire more wealth and influence. There is constant tension and movement “between reflecting and constructing the social world. Seen in this way, language cannot be considered neutral, because it is caught up in political, social, racial, economic, religious, and cultural formations” (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 369). Discourse “never just is but instead does,” which offers dynamic representations of culture and ideology (Thornton, cited in Heath & Street, 2008, p. 7). This article thus considers the socio-historical undercurrents of power that influence public schools’ expectations and interactions with corporate players.

Given the increasingly blurred boundaries between public educational and corporate interests, in which the private sector is deeply vested in educational policymaking, infrastructure, services, advocacy, lobbying, researching, and marketing, it can be said that, what is public in public education is not at all obvious (Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Rowan, 2002). This review aims to construct a broad picture of the principles and motives at play behind corporate philanthropic participation in public education. By moving beyond simplified rhetoric that unilaterally exalts or castigates corporate or school actors, this work adopts ecological thinking that seeks out:

Theoretical spaces in-between, which allow movement back and forth, into and away from the best that mainstream theories of knowledge have to offer, while simultaneously exposing and avoiding their more egregious limitations—or so I hope—and evading the risk of mere fence-sitting. (Code, 2008, pp. 187-188)

Amidst the complex cultural and techno-rational realities surrounding public education today, this literature review operates multi-directionally, so as to respond to the social structures reflected in public–private arrangements. In doing so, I hope to advance honest and even-handed dialogue on the opportunities and threats to urban public schooling in the “contact zones” of contemporary capitalism (Pratt, 1998).

**Dominant Discourse: PPPs as Manna From Above**

Public-private partnerships can help change the way education takes place inside and outside the classroom, and create more positive relationships between disadvantaged students and successful adults . . . Increasingly, urban high school students are outsiders to the American dream. Public-private partnerships have the power to change this by instilling new hope and offering real prospects. (Weil & Ferrandino, 2006, p. A22)

The dominant perspective in research, governance, and public opinion on PPPs suggests the judicious melding of public (educational) and private (business) interests in mutual relationships that aim to “do good” and promote short- or long-term benefits to all involved parties, for instance, in the sharing of key resources across organizations and the ability to pursue objectives that could not be achieved working alone (Austin, 2000; Babiak, 2009; Burke, 1986; Cook, 2005; Cromarty, 1997; Hodge & Greve, 2007; Hoff, 2002; Hess, 2005; Himmelstein, 1997; Relave & Deich, 2007; Rosenau, 2000; Savas, 2000). Connecting most of this literature is a basic trust in the business community to act “with the best of intentions” (Hess, 2005) when engaging schools and local communities.

Seen as a win–win for society at large, “the literature on partnership tends to be both positive and prescriptive, focusing on the benefits of partnership and how these might be
increased” (MacDonald & Chrisp, 2005, p. 307). PPPs are increasingly viewed as a “default solution” to governance problems, big and small, in the administration of social services (Forrer et al., 2010, p. 475). These policy inventions offer promises to promote public benefits, for instance, by more effectively fighting social problems that are too large or complex to address alone (Kanter, 1998; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Waddock & Smith, 2000). Concomitantly, for-profits have faced increasing social pressure to address societal issues and have built the “business case” for doing so (Godfrey, 2009; Margolis & Walsh, 2003).

A growing roster of wealthy individuals and brands has invested private dollars, as well as human, social, and cultural capital, in public education (Morsy Eckert, 2011). The captains of private industry have increasingly inserted themselves, their organizational networks, and money inside the “iron cage” of public educational change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In this way, corporate philanthropy creates opportunities for social entrepreneurs to innovate in new markets, strengthen constituent relationships, and enhance image or reputation. By applying business strategy to philanthropic partnerships, charitable endeavors and community relations are harnessed as means to boost the bottom line or create “competitive advantage” (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

The vastly different organizational logics and disparate power dynamics between schools and corporations pose enormous challenges to achieving mutually beneficial relationships (Selsky & Parker, 2005). However, the invocation of partnership discourse underplays these power disparities and draws attention to the positive, reciprocal language of cooperation and collaboration.

Often combined with notions of modernization and economic redevelopment (Levine & Trachtman, 1988), PPPs summon optimistic images of the government and the private sector joining forces to create a brighter and more efficient future. Philanthropic partnerships are seen as a vital tool to combat “the bureaucracy and regulation (of) public schooling that stifle . . . the genius of the American system . . . to nurture ingenuity, foster voluntary cooperation, and provide opportunities for individual and entrepreneurial initiative” (Hess, 2005, p. 3). A synergistic relationship ostensibly exists wherein “the public sector draws attention to public interest, stewardship and solidarity considerations . . . (and) the private sector is creative and dynamic, bringing access to finance, knowledge of technologies, managerial efficiency, and entrepreneurial spirit” (Rosenau, 2000, p. 218).

Building from these optimistic images of corporate involvement in the public sector, business management theorists have proffered numerous typologies to classify various forms of public–private interaction (Austin, 2000; Kanter, 1998; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007; Smith & Wohlstetter, 2006; Waddock, 1991). Austin’s foundational theory (2000) presents a “collaboration continuum” between for-profit and public/non-profit organizations, consisting of three basic levels of institutional development, which correspond to major historical periods and leading approaches of business–community relations: philanthropic, transactional, and integrative stages. This continuum assumes that as cross-sector relationships move from philanthropic to integrative, “the strategic value of the collaboration escalates from modest to major” (p. 34). Although economic and opportunity costs are assumed, such as the time and financial resources needed to sustain inter-organizational relationships, there is little consideration of detrimental outcomes from collaborating, whether intended or unintended.

The philanthropic stage represents traditional forms of corporate/private giving, in which an individual or business beneficiary, usually operating through a connected or related foundation, provides in-kind donations of goods, services, infrastructure, labor, cash, or discounts to a public or non-profit organization, such as public schools. Austin’s model assumes that a corporation does not expect, though still might realize, direct or indirect rewards from this relationships. Therefore, the underlying corporate motivation to participate is deemed altruistic. Austin and others do acknowledge certain profit-oriented reasons for philanthropy (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007, p. 248), such as tax incentives and deductions on income and wealth, as well as the branding benefits of conducting charitable works to promote public goodwill for a corporation and its partners. However, Austin theorizes the primary exchange as that of one-way, discretionary charity from private benefactor(s) earning no direct economic or social returns.

In contrast, around the time of early globalization, corporations began shifting the basic terms of involvement to seek direct rewards for charitable giving, giving rise to what Austin (2000) calls a transactional stage. Through techniques such as corporate sponsorship, cause-related marketing, and exclusive contracting, a corporation would provide resources to a school in exchange for direct financial compensation, such as advertising space or marketing opportunities with teachers or students. Sponsorship was developed to enhance the commercial market potential of charity as a quantifiable business activity, strengthening institutional relationships based on market principles.

Early on, corporate leaders learned that if they wished “to exploit the commercial potential of sponsorship, the sponsor had to invest further monies . . . to leverage the sponsorship” (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007, p. 251). For this reason, on top of donated resources of use to schools (e.g., grant dollars, sponsored curricular materials, volunteered human manpower, social capital, or institutional influence), a business may spend an additional 50% on activities such as merchandising, advertising, and incentives, all of which are tax deductible and help render the sponsorship more commercially viable. The inclusion of language and strategies aimed at “commercial exploitation” has created controversy and openings for critics to challenge this corporate social engagement as under-handed, privatizing encroachments in education.
Partly in response to vocal opposition to schoolhouse commercialism, corporations developed strategies with higher degrees of interaction and more mutually constituted practices than traditional philanthropic or commercialized relationships. In Austin’s (2000) model, this represents an integrative stage of collaboration. Central to this conceptualization is Waddock’s (1988) definition of a “social partnership”:

A commitment by a corporation or a group of corporations to work with an organization from a different economic sector (public or non-profit). It involves a commitment of resources—time and effort—by individuals from all partner organizations. These individuals work cooperatively to solve problems that affect them all. The problem can be defined at least in part as a social issue; its solution will benefit all partners. Social partnership addresses issues that extend beyond organizational boundaries and traditional goals and lie within the traditional realm of public policy—that is, in the social arena. It requires active rather than passive involvement from all parties. Participants must make a resource commitment that is more than merely monetary. (p. 18)

In this view, social partnerships tackle intractable societal problems that individual organizations find too overwhelming or complex to deal with alone. The issue affects all parties, which must contribute substantially and not simply monetarily, though often not in the same ways or for the same reasons. Leaders and staff at multiple levels in both organizations play active roles. This “contrasts with the more passive forms of involvement possible . . . by donors in philanthropic endeavors” (Waddock, 1991, p. 483). Successful social partnerships find the means, working across multiple organizations, to express “reciprocity, system openness, an atmosphere of trust and commitment, and compatible organizational structures” (Beder, 1984, p. 85).

One weakness of Austin’s (2000) conceptual framework is in the assumption that increasing collaboration across public and private organizations inherently leads to greater benefits and mutuality among partnered organizations. Establishing and maintaining strong ties across organizations and sectors entails significant commitments of material and opportunity costs. If the goals are not clearly stated and regularly met, partnerships may represent greater cost than benefit to either or both parties. Thus, a crucial feature of developing mutually beneficial partnerships, and not merely adopting partnership rhetoric, is “a recognition, by all concerned, not only of the benefits of a partnership approach, but also of the inherent costs involved in taking such an approach” (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007, p. 254). Partnership costs include constraints placed on managerial autonomy when operating in coordination with another organization, structural barriers to cross-sector collaboration, and the human and financial capital required to sustain a partnership (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007).

Diverging from organizational theories that assume increased collaboration leads to increased benefit, Smith and Wohlstetter (2006) propose a non-hierarchical partnership typology. Rather than estimating the value of public–private collaboration based on a strong-to-weak hierarchy, they suggest using a “flat typology” to study school partnerships, which attends closely to the individual histories and contexts of organizations in collaboration. First, a partnership’s origin story speaks to when, why, by/for whom, and how these cross-sector relationships were formed. Next, a partnership’s mission articulates its core values and organizational logic, which shape what resources are exchanged (i.e., financial, human, cultural) and promote public/private benefits, often defined and led by the more resource-rich partner. Third, partnerships vary by institutional form, ranging from formalized, contractual agreements to informal relationships arranged through private conversations and handshakes between owners and leaders. Last, the authors consider the depth of employee involvement in the creation and maintenance of the partnership. One-level involvement includes only a single layer of professionals, such as organizational leaders, while multi-level involvement crisscrosses leadership, staff, and other constituents. Smith and Wohlstetter’s descriptive typology considers partner relationships on a case-by-case basis, attending to the origins, intentions, and interactions of social institutions and actors from different sectors of the economy.

However, a major conceptual limitation of this and Austin’s (2000) typology comes from a lack of explicit political orientation. As a result, these theories never challenge or question the dominant cultural assumptions of private/corporate altruism, and public/educational deficits. Power is always present, though often unacknowledged, in research on governance arrangements in the “iron cage” of public education (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Institutional relationships always include aspects of power, as social actors jostle for position and influence (Hodge et al., 2010). In Rowan’s (2006) words, “education in the United States (and in most other advanced capitalist societies) is both big politics and big business” (p. 18). In turn, cross-sector collaborations are not neutral relationships among mutually benefitting allies or equivalently positioned sectors. Theories on partnerships or collaborations cannot justifiably bracket themselves from the everyday political implications of public schooling. Failing to acknowledge the potential asymmetrical power dynamics, differing motivations, and conflicting interests, much of the literature on partnerships conveys “a sense of a benign and purposeful relationship between equals” and disregards “the possibilities of negative synergy” (Ball, 2007, p. 117). This positive skew in the research base tacitly assumes that all or most school–business relationships operate with the best of intentions and seek effective and efficient uses of resources.

This optimistic view overlooks the fact that partnerships encompass ideologically positioned players, policies, and practices to address certain social issues. Which social and
educational problems find the greatest traction or salience in the academy, in the media, and in grant-making, which ones are marginalized; whose interpretations of those problems find voice, and whose are silenced; whose visions educational reform find footing, and whose get pushed out—these contested issues shape and are grounded in the politics of language and cultural reproduction in education. While business and education research is needed on strategies and approaches to school partnerships that can increase organizational efficiencies, equally so, research is needed that considers a gamut of questions “not caught up with the assumptions and inscriptions of policymakers and the immediacy of practice” (Ball, 2006, p. 20). This means interrogating aspects of policies that move beyond questions of “what works” to consider for whom and in whose interests do partnerships work? The next section takes up some of these broader questions, discussing a counter-related discourse that primarily frames PPPs as mutable instruments of privatization and corporate culturing in education.

Counter-Discourse: PPPs as Privatizations or Corporatizations in Public Education

My approach is Leave No Dollar Behind . . . There are tremendous needs in this system where 85 percent of the kids are below poverty level. I’m not uncomfortable with corporations giving us money and getting their names on things. As long as it’s not inappropriate, such as tobacco and liquor companies, I don’t see any downside. (Paul Vallas, former CEO of the School District of Philadelphia, cited in Lewin, 2006)

Although dominant discourse in U.S. culture generally supports closer contact with and investment by the private sector in often cash-strapped urban public school systems, this view has been challenged on a number of fronts. There is passionate if not widespread opposition, from both the left and the right, to corporate participation in education and other public arenas.

From a neoclassical economic perspective, Milton Friedman (1970) disputed, “the only one responsibility of business towards society is the maximization of profits to the shareholders within the legal framework and the ethical custom of the country” (p. 33). The notion that a for-profit entity should promote any public social goals or have a social conscience, Friedman labeled “pure and unadulterated socialism” (p. 33). From this viewpoint, the corporation’s sole obligation is to generate the maximum amount of shareholder profits, by any legal and ethical means necessary. From a critical legal perspective, law professor and filmmaker, Joel Bakan (2004) argues that this lawful and legally mandated purpose of corporations to strategically pursue power and profits creates socio-pathological tendencies. “The corporation’s legally defined mandate is to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, its own self-interest, regardless of the harmful consequences it might cause to others” (Bakan, 2004, p. 2). Public sector leaders have good reason to exercise caution and due diligence before entering into institutional arrangements with corporate organizations.

From a liberal progressive perspective, historian turned activist scholar, Diane Ravitch (2010) maintains that corporate philanthropy, as an instrument of the market, is unfit to assume the lead in shaping public educational change. The Billionaire Boys Club—figuratively headed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation—has freshly championed the market model in the U.S. school system by strategically investing in urban school reform. Although the Gates, Broad, and Walton foundations command the most influence in the field, setting the tone for corporate philanthropy in public education, hundreds of smaller philanthropic players collectively contribute more than US$41 billion annually to K-12 education, though not exclusively in the public sector. In proportion to overall local, state, and federal funding, philanthropic investments in education are rather small, representing less than two tenths of 1% of the total figure, a mere “rounding error on local, state, and federal public budgets” (Ferris, Hentschke, & Harmssen, 2011, p. 709).

Despite the relative small scale of this financial support, advocates of corporate philanthropy argue that the institutional flexibility of corporate resources offers significant promise to reshape the terms of schooling in a supposedly change-resistant public educational bureaucracy (Frumkin, 2006; Hess, 2005). They say that corporate philanthropic involvement in education creates possibilities to initiate change through targeted, strategic investments in high impact strategies. The institutional power that corporate players wield, their ability to make decisions without stakeholder consultation and a general “amiable conspiracy of silence” afforded corporate philanthropies by mainstream news outlets, policy experts, and academics, cumulatively, lead corporate donors to take significantly greater risks than government in tinkering with schools (Hess, 2005, p. 9).

However, before handing over the reins on agenda setting and “control of public policy to private interests, public officials should be sure that they understand the full implications of the foundations’ strategies” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 201). In a conceptual review of PPPs in the United States, Kowalski (2010) challenges the mostly uncritical treatment afforded partnerships both in the press and public opinion:

In truth, however, there is little empirical evidence supporting the contention that public-private partnerships have improved student learning; and at the same time . . . democratic deficits in these ventures are incompatible with the concept of local control and potentially detrimental to school reform. (pp. 71-72)

In other words, targeted private capital allows business leaders to circumvent traditional mechanisms for public accountability in school policymaking, such as local school board
control. Barkan (2011) contends that the Billionaire Boys Club of corporate philanthropists has aggressively supported educational reform and change efforts that promote choice, competition, deregulation, accountability, and data-based decision-making. And they fund the same vehicles to achieve their goals: charter schools, high-stakes standardized testing for students, merit pay for teachers whose students improve their test scores, firing teachers and closing schools when scores don’t rise adequately, and longitudinal data collection on the performance of every student and teacher. (p. 49)

Through funding of educational research and policy, newer and older philanthropies serve as a loose grouping of powerful players driving U.S. and global educational change. This new and old guard comprises “a de facto advocacy coalition, they often fund the same educational initiatives and organizations, gauge success according to similar outcome measures, and pursue similar goals” (Scott, 2009, p. 107). Newer “venture philanthropists” tend to fund those educational initiatives that most clearly express the values and language of the market in social exchanges. This hybridized approach to corporate giving fuses principles of venture capitalism and strategic management with philanthropic activities (Saltman, 2010), resulting, for example, in donors making “a small number of large bets. After making these bets, the (donor) stays with the organizations that are funded for an extended period of time, assuming the organization can demonstrate progress and results” (Frumkin, 2003, p. 11). These methods rely on intensified contact between corporate donors and public recipients through high engagement strategies, such as systematic tracking and monitoring of outcomes and ongoing consultation for continuous program improvement. In exchange for corporate resources, philanthropies increasingly expect high returns on investments—not in financial returns but in data, such as, key performance indicators of student academic achievement (Saltman, 2010).

Scott (2009) exposes a key problematic tension in the political economy of philanthropic involvement in education. Many of these new philanthropies were formed in the 1990s—a period marked by the emergence of “the greatest wealth gap in U.S. history,” a trend aided in part by the fact that “the majority of U.S. corporations have paid no federal income taxes since that time period, allowing corporations to amass unprecedented profits and for executives to enjoy record compensation packages” (p. 127). As a small subset of Americans rapidly expanded their individual wealth, increasing numbers of young people and adults have been left out of the prosperity of globalized capitalism and thrust into extreme long-term poverty. The growing problem of structured wealth inequality creates repercussions in the educational opportunities availed to poor and minoritized youth who face unstable access to basic necessities, such as, housing, food, health care, employment, and physically and environmentally safe neighborhoods (Berliner, 2006). Highlighting the structured fragmentation of the super rich and poor, Scott (2009) maintains,

Wealth that comes largely from favorable public policies is now directed into mostly tax-exempt foundations, where trustees and philanthropists directly shape public policy for the poor, without the public deliberative process that might have been invoked over school reform policies were that money in the public coffers. (p. 128)

In other words, the deregulation of industries has helped expand wealth inequality and created opportunities for business elites to shelter their wealth in private foundations where they often have considerable say over where and how that charitable contribution is spent. In this manner, companies have seized opportunities to reduce their taxation burden while promoting social and educational issues entirely of their own design. More and more corporations, private businesses, and affiliated foundations have chosen step into the public arena of school reform.

Most PPPs, however, are not directly involved in educational policy, operating along a related continuum of privatizations—that of schoolhouse commercialism.

Critical theorists argue that the overt or tacit promotion of commercialism by a school or district destabilizes the fundamental purpose of public schooling through the erosion of democratic and civic mechanisms (Boyles, 2005; Giroux, 1999, 2002; Saltman, 2004, 2010). By allowing market-based entities to operate in education, schools endorse consumerism and “negatively alter what it means to be a citizen” (Boyles, 2005, p. ix). As a result of increasingly commercialized dominant culture, Schor (2004) asserts, “American teens and tweens have emerged as the most brand-oriented, consumer involved, and materialistic generations in history” (p. 13). Behind this observation is a “marketing juggernaut characterized by growing reach, effectiveness, and audacity” (Schor, 2004, p. 20). Using embedded branding techniques in schools and other youth spaces, marketers aim at “blurring the boundaries between editorial content and advertising and thus thoroughly infusing childhood with marketing messages” (Molnar, Boninger, Wilkinson, & Fogarty, 2009, p. 3).

In general, the critics of school–corporate contact reject the possibility of “positive synergy” arising from corporate participation in public education (Ball, 2007). Corporate philanthropy is seen as a commercial or public relations tool to infiltrate, and initiate market-oriented change in local communities while seeking direct economic or indirect social rewards (e.g., public goodwill) for a cause-related corporate agenda. From this view, philanthropy is an invention of capitalism to shape public discourse and “greenwash” corporations through “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image” (“Greenwashing,” 2012; see also, Athanasiou,
Talking the talk without walking the walk. Most corporations do not greenwash their reputations by lying outright. Rather, they bend the truth or misrepresent their ecological stances. The deception often lies in the emphasis corporations place on their ecological projects, rather than in the existence of the projects themselves. (p. 679)

Placing corporate public relations strategies in the context of school partnerships, philanthropy presents a shrewd business practice to establish a socially or environmentally responsible brand, which can be used to maintain a firm’s social license to operate. By exposing greenwashing tactics aimed at manipulating a corporation’s reputation or diverting attention away from unethical or even unlawful aspects of a business’ environmental and social record, community activists have sought to challenge individual corporations’ license to operate (Beder, 2002; Greer & Bruno, 1996). School collaborations offer a means for a firm to promote a youth-oriented image through sponsorship of urban educational programs that reach young consumers and provide a platform for cause-related marketing.

The concept of partnership offers a rosy image of working together in unity rather than the more controversial privatization movement in education. Thus, the focus remains on collaboration across sectors, instead of “the transfer of assets and service functions from public to private hands” (Hanker, cited in Mhone, 2005, p. 1907). While certain forms of privatization have been commonplace for ages, others represent new efforts in “loosening governmental control over public operations” (Haubrich, 2007, p. 481). Core non-instructional services, such as, textbook publishing and sales (Apple, 1989), testing and assessment instruments (Lagemann, 2000), school construction and renovation, and student transportation (Ball, 2007), have routinely and historically involved private sector participation. It is only since the 1990s that for-profit firms have played central roles in providing instructional services, school management, test data storage and analysis, supplemental or remedial education services, and online curriculum and instruction (Ascher, Fruchter, & Berne, 1996). What once served as a barrier to direct corporate involvement in education has been ruptured.

However, as private entities have intensified their involvement in the K-12 continuum, the market-oriented aspects of these relationships tend to remain invisible to the public eye, creating “hidden markets” in public education (Burch, 2009). These hidden markets have generated large and growing revenues for hyper-concentrated wealth in the United States. Combined, private and corporate firms earn on average approximately US$4 billion annually through publicly funded contracts for management, curriculum, and instructional services to K-12 schools (Rowan, 2006). In 2003, the top 10 publicly traded national education firms cumulatively realized profits of US$430 million. In 2008, these generated US$780 million (Burch, 2009). Textbook publishers make more than US$1.85 billion annually in K-12 contracts. Companies providing K-12 research, not including universities (some of which are also private and for-profit), yield approximately US$550 million each year (Rowan, 2006).

Boyles (2005) argues that most corporate “partnerships exploit schools in the sense that they make unethical use of schools for their own profit” (p. 218). Throughout U.S. history, critical observers have expressed ethical concerns over K-12 schools accepting corporate gifts or entering implied social contracts with profit-making institutions (Harty, 1979; NEA, 1929; Spenny, 1996). In one empirical study of school and business leaders’ perspectives on partnerships, Feuerstein (2001) observed that business executives typically characterize a successful school partnership as one that helps elevate the firm’s image/brand or enhances its marketing opportunities. In contrast, school leaders tended to center ideas of success on the enrichment of educational resources and potential impact on youth learning. Thus, schools’ enduring social responsibilities to educate youth exists in constant, though mutable tension with corporations’ economic responsibilities to maximize wealth and power. For school and business leaders to collaborate honestly and effectively, they must grapple with the realities of fundamentally different organizational logics.

Case Study: Greenwashing Shell Oil in the Schoolhouse

One recent illustration of these tensions comes from Scholastic Inc.’s promotion of “free” corporate-sponsored educational materials from the energy sector. In today’s schools, teachers have access to a dizzying array of “free” corporate-sponsored educational materials, such as computer-assisted tools, traditional text, and multimedia environments, readily available for classroom use. Between the years 1990 and 2000, Molnar and Reaves (2002) estimated that corporate-sponsored educational materials grew by approximately 1,875%. As a longstanding brand in children’s publishing and school partnerships, Scholastic (2014b) explains, “the name Scholastic evokes warm memories from those who treasured their childhood experiences.” Scholastic (2014a) claims more than 90% of U.S. schools make use of their offerings, and more than half of U.S. schoolteachers have online accounts for free materials that “help create literacy-rich homes, schools and communities”.

In 2010, Scholastic began producing and marketing sponsored educational materials for two organizations in the energy sector, including Shell Oil, the global conglomerate of energy and petrochemical companies (http://www.shell.com/). Shell’s Energize Your Future curriculum for middle and high school students teaches about the social imperative...
to develop alternative energy sources and touts Shell’s socially responsible initiatives to produce innovative solutions for the world’s energy problems (Shell, 2012b). The accompanying website, documercial videos (see Figure 1 & Figure 2, below), teachers’ guide, classroom visuals, standards-based lesson plans, and suggestions for project-based learning, cumulatively illustrate Shell’s role as a leader in the development of new resources and technology to address today’s and tomorrow’s global energy challenges (Shell, 2012a, 2012c). Taking participants through interactive learning environments, intended to supplement classroom teaching and linked to national content standards in science, mathematics, geography, engineering, and technology, the curriculum explores evidence to demonstrate that, “around the globe, Shell companies work in partnership with industry, government and society to deliver what is expected of us—economically, socially and environmentally” (Shell, 2012c; see also USA International Business Publications, 2015, p. 184).

The current global energy problem is presented in terms that never question the underlying logic of fossil fuel exploitation, production, or consumption, while promoting solutions that can meet ever-growing escalations in consumer demand (Molnar, Boninger, & Fogarty, 2011). One classroom poster plainly frames the problem in Shell’s terms: “Challenge: By 2050, the worldwide demand for energy is expected to double. Solution: Get energy from many different sources” (Shell, 2012a, p. 1). Furthermore, the materials tout Shell’s commitment as a leader in developing renewable sources of energy, such as wind, solar, and hydrogen, yet, CorpWatch (2010) reports, “Shell spends a miniscule 0.6% of its annual investments on renewables.”

The deviation between its professed environmental protecting mission and actual record of polluting and posturing on the environment amounts to corporate greenwashing in educational materials.

Shell was attracted to partnering with Scholastic because of its trusted reputation and long track record of marketing and selling curriculum and literature to schools. The company sought to strategically use Scholastic’s position and influence within schools to conduct cause-related branding that might help divert attention away from environmentally problematic aspects of its industry or company practices. Scholastic seemed caught off guard when community and parent groups, affiliated with the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (http://commercialfreechildhood.org/), effectively mobilized against its promotion of energy conglomerates (Lewin, 2011). Once protests mounted, though, Scholastic ended these relationships. Scholastic’s CEO Richard Robinson apologized for the partnership, calling the initial

Figure 1. Energized by Shell.
Source. http://www.shell.us/
decision, “a slip-up in editorial judgment,” and explained, “We have to improve our standards and make sure there’s not a scintilla of anything that could be suggested to be biased” (Lewin, 2011, para 2). Grassroots opposition to this corporate greenwashing demonstrates the potential for civic engagement, illustrating small changes that are possible when critically conscious citizens challenge, what Maxine Greene (1998) called, “the givens of an imposed real world” (p. 22).

Linking PPPs to the privatization movement offers a conceptual basis from which to interrogate hidden aspects, as well as darker sides, of corporate sponsorship not usually explored in the dominant discourse on partnerships. Without a framework to deconstruct power dimensions of partnerships, one might reasonably interpret Shell’s “free” resources as sensible curriculum with good intentions. The lessons are designed intuitively with clear standards-based learning goals linking multiple subject areas. They offer appealing activities and project ideas for teachers to extend learning. The accompanying website provides tech savvy teens a web 2.0 environment of fast-paced style and interactive digital tools. The curriculum is engaging and reflects knowledge of educational policy and instructional design. However well produced, Shell presents a limited and problematic view of the energy sector’s role in creating and responding to the global environmental crises. Although Shell’s sponsored materials do not directly sell products to students, they represent “corporate efforts to promote ideologies, identities, agendas, and viewpoints to children and youth, both in the classroom and beyond” (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2009, p. 770).

Much of the literature that critiques privatizations focuses on the most blatant forms of corporate advertising and marketing to children without analyzing school–corporate interactions in light of broad social and institutional structures. However, it is far more challenging to identify and contest more subtle attempts to influence youth identities and learning. For instance, how has long-term intermingling of schools and corporations contributed to fundamental shifts in the political and professional conditions in which education is carried out? What are the consequences that stem from the ubiquity of business discourse in education and the reality that

The market has “paradigmatic status” . . . [which] does not simply bring about technical changes in the management and delivery to services—it involves changes in the meaning and experience of education, what it means to be a teacher and learner (Ball, 2006, p. 127).
Beyond Binaries: Ecological Thinking on Partnerships

This literature review has reconsidered and refereed competing discourses on corporate philanthropic engagement in education in the midst of a fundamental transformation of the public sector. Figure 3 (below) summarizes these counter-related stances on partnerships as either, corporate manna with the best of intentions, or self-interested profiteering and privatization of public education. By examining the meanings and rationales for corporate–school interactions from alternate ideological perspectives, this article has explored the assumptions that motivate cross-sector relationships, and how they shape the nature of schooling. Each set of discourses is capable of seeing parts of school–corporate contact that the other ignores, whether consciously or unconsciously. Each reveals aspects of this phenomenon while obscuring others.

The first more dominant discourse of PPPs as corporate manna, “draws on an old and rich heritage, grounded in notions of noblesse oblige” (Godfrey, 2009, p. 701), which assumes that individuals of immense wealth have clear responsibilities to give back socially, in the words of Andrew Carnegie, “to promote the permanent good of the communities from which they have been gathered” (cited in Godfrey, 2009, p. 701). From this perspective, research has sought to understand the partnership conditions that can facilitate positive synergies in society, promoting “what works” or promising practices for continuous improvement. Alternatively, counter-hegemonic discourse on PPPs as corporatizations or privatizations focuses on the social and human costs of partnering with private industry. From this perspective, social theorists have examined how asymmetries of power get framed in news, popular culture, and public policy, and how businesses have used philanthropic endeavors to gain social–political influence and competitive edge.

The discourse on privatizations adds critical texture to understand partnerships, illuminating social and political factors of corporate engagement. However, like other discourses, this one also has trouble seeing realities outside of its own ideological boundaries. The dominant discourse on PPPs as manna reflects a kind of “epistemological monoculture” (Code, 2008) in its failure to incorporate power and politics in examining partnerships. Likewise, the counter-discourse of privatizations reveals its own monoculture, in frequently rejecting wholesale the possibility that any substantive good can come from corporate involvement in education. When cultural critics of corporatization take aim at the most commercialized examples or obvious instances of greenwashing, but leave unmapped more complex corporate social responsibility initiatives or social partnerships, they construct a one-dimensional “straw man” that is mocked for its simplicity. At the same time, exercising skepticism and casting doubt on the presumed value of partnerships must not be conflated with a blanket presumption of exploitative motivations or deleterious outcomes.

Educational research should resist the urge to uniformly castigate or praise corporate engagement in public education. We must attend to subtle maneuverings of power, the multidirectionality of social change, as well as the potential positive, negative, and paradoxical effects of PPPs. At the same time, educators must recognize the growing role of the market in and out of schools, “which becomes embedded in our daily lives through an array of subtle processes that take

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**Figure 3. Binary tensions in research and theory on corporate participation in education.**

| Dominant Discourse: Corporate Altruism | Non-dominant Discourse: Corporate Profiteering |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| - Focus on revealing contradictions in the socio-political dimensions of PPPs. |
| - Emphasis on unequal distribution of power in partnerships, i.e. works for whom? Is it just? |
| - Limited attention on practical questions, so as to more systematically lead and manage actual PPPs in schools. |
| - Romanticized images of public schools and bleak images of corporations creates a blind eye to positive synergies that might be realized in school-corporate contact. |
| - Emphasis on describing institutional arrangements of PPPs. |
| - Focus on exploring and enhance organizational efficiencies, i.e. what works? |
| - Limited accounting of the potential asymmetrical power dimensions reflected in PPPs. |
| - Basic assumptions about broken schools and well-intentioned corporate altruism in philanthropy creates a blind eye to negative synergies or adverse consequences of PPPs, whether intended or unintended. |

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"Gurn"
shape as the flesh and bones of dominant discourse” (Ball, 2007, p. 185). The diffuse forces of globalized capitalism have brought about “a new ‘order of things,’ a new set of conditions for the possibility of social relations” (Ball, 2007, p. 185). In this new regularity, education is increasingly subject to the language and norms of economic competitiveness and market value. In educational policy, research, and practice, the economy is continually reshaping normative assumptions about what it means to teach, learn, and lead in schools today. More and more, education’s complex nature is seen as something reducible into finite, standardized units to be measured, controlled, and harnessed for profit.

The research community’s reaction to this creeping corporatization “cannot be based on a simple assertion that everything we now have has to be defended” (Apple, 2006, p. 44). When Ravitch (2010) theorizes about the nature and consequences of this collapsing space between public and private in U.S. education, she romanticizes a past in which the public sector worked in the common interest, protecting traditional values, ties, and morals. The problem with such characterizations is that “community consensus” on these traditional values is not at all agreed upon. Schools of the past were not insulated from the interests of capitalism, nor can we justifiably argue that, prior to the advance of globalization, public educational institutions operated chiefly and justly in the public good.

Prior to recent waves of privatization, schools were not neutral or innocent places, or devoid of structured forms of racism, classism, and sexism (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Throughout the history of public schooling, our public institutions have often done abysmal work at leveling the educational playing field or providing universal access to quality education (Kozol, 2005). The persistence of educational inequities for youth from poor, working-class, and minoritized communities, serves as a reminder that shielding schools from the market will not return these institutions to an imagined pristine or idyllic past that never existed in the first place. It is not possible to categorically defend public schooling against encroaching privatizations. Likewise, it is naïve to think that all forms of corporate participation, including “successful” ones, are always well intentioned or work efficiently in the interests of schools and youth. My readings of this literature compel me, in Ball’s (2007) words, to “an acceptance that some kinds of private sector participation are more defensible than others and some public sector ‘work’ is not defensible as all that” (p. 187). Educators need to critically and fairly assess the breadth of interests, aims, and effects of each partnership in which they engage.

This multi-disciplinary literature review has spanned opposing epistemological camps to consider “theoretical spaces in-between, which allow movement back and forth, into and away from the best that mainstream theories of knowledge have to offer” (Code, 2008, pp. 187-188). Thinking ecologically about PPPs means summoning multiple kinds of questions in following the corporate money trail in public education. For instance, is corporate philanthropy effective in meeting specific goals within local public schools? For whom and how does philanthropy work? Is philanthropy just? Who or what assumes the impermanent benefits and costs of partnering? Ecological thinking draws on “criteria and standards of knowing well that do in fact seek and respect empirical evidence, while urging another, arguably better, way of imagining knowledge and its place in social-political, geographic structures” (Code, 2008, p. 47). Coming to deep understandings of any public–private governance arrangement in schools necessitates ways of knowing that are, at once, attentive to the global, situated in the local, socially imaginative, and critically conscious.

As democratic institutions, public schools must confront difficult questions if and when they choose to partner with the private sector. The omnipresence of globalized media and fast capitalism create a set of inescapable conditions in dominant U.S. culture that schools must address with eyes wide open. Without meaningful dialogue over the range of implications for schools, the end result may be an erosion of public interests. Seeing education as a site of critical engagement, school leaders, teachers, and students may embody active cultural workers who continuously assess, interpret, and act upon the meanings and messages that permeate digital media and the urban landscape. At times, private industry may hold answers and crucial resources to design more equitable solutions for learning. At times, public educators must openly challenge market-based ideology or hold businesses accountable for predatory practices. Much like the act of teaching itself, there is no failsafe method that will be effective all of the time. These are matters that must be taken up in ever changing daily practice, to critically assess corporate and school partners on their own terms, interrogate underlying organizational logics, and consider intended and unintended consequences. There is no panacea for the immense challenges that schools face, but there are pragmatic options for collaborating across sectors and integrating corporations in this shared task.

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