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# Ethics in third sector-school partnerships: A conceptual framework

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In recent years, third sector-school partnerships have become more common and received increasing research attention. Yet, the ethical aspects of third sector-school partnerships have not been discussed in-depth. As a result, the field lacks a conceptual framework that makes possible in-depth understanding of the ethical characteristics involved in partnerships between public schools and the third sector. The aim of this paper is to fill this lacuna.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An integrative review of the general literature on stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility, cross-sector partnerships, and strategic alliances, as well as of empirical studies on partnerships between schools and the third sector, offers insights on ethical conduct in these partnerships and their antecedents.

**Findings** – Based on the general literature on cross-sector partnerships and the educational literature on third sector-school partnerships, we offer a conceptual model and propositions about ethical conduct in these partnerships and its antecedents.

**Originality/value** – The innovative conceptual model makes possible a reevaluation of existing knowledge on third sector-school partnerships, and can support direct research of ethical aspects in these partnerships. In addition, the model provides conceptual language for administrators for managing practical ethical dilemmas in these partnerships.

**Keywords:** cross-sector partnership, ethics, NGOs, schools, third sector

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, third sector organizations have begun playing an active role in public education in the West. Third sector-school partnerships are a relatively new phenomenon in education, therefore the ethical aspects of these partnerships have not been discussed at length to date. As a result, educational research lacks a theoretical framework that permits in-depth understanding of the ethical aspects of third sector-school partnerships. The present work addresses this gap by building on the general literature on stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility (CSR) theory, cross-sector partnerships, and strategic alliances, and on previous empirical studies on partnerships between schools and the third sector. Our review aims first and foremost to conceptualize ethical conduct in these partnerships and to break down their antecedents and potential pitfalls. Specific, we offer formal propositions that can be used to advance future research. We intend to stimulate interest and reflection on ethics in third sector-school partnerships.

Cross-sector partnerships (CSP) represent an important major mechanism by which the third sector delivers social services. CSP include at least two of the three sectors (government, businesses organizations, and third sector organizations) (Selsky and Parker, 2005). These partnerships are designed to achieve common goals by leveraging shared resources (Berger *et al.*, 2004). Operating in the space between government and private enterprises (Lehr-Lehnardt, 2005), third sector organizations espouse different attitudes toward government policies: some oppose the government and its policies, seeking to change the public agenda; others provide supplementary and complementary services to those provided by the public sector (Young, 2000). In both cases, the alleged legitimacy of the organizations derives from the perception that they represent public interests and are driven by altruistic motives (Lehr-

Lehnardt, 2005). The present paper focuses on government-nonprofit partnerships prevalent in the field of education. These partnerships involve third sector organizations providing supplementary and complementary services to public schools. Past empirical work suggests that school staff rarely contest the legitimacy of CSP in education. This acceptance of partnerships by schools is apparent even when NGO agendas are perceived by schools as deviating from their public mission, and it contributes to the general conceptions that schools are fully aware of the underpinning agendas and can cope with them (Author, 2018). These conceptions are based on numerous assumptions regarding the capacity of schools to vet their potential collaborators, to regulate the shared programs (e.g., monitor and possibly censor instructional content and pedagogical methods), and to shape the instructional outcomes of the alliance (e.g., avoid adverse effects by setting assessment criteria and conducting the assessment). Partnerships are therefore validated as a positive course of action, and are seen as instrumental in serving school goals, without any apparent sacrifice of the educational agenda of the school in the eyes of teachers responsible for managing school-NGO partnership (Author, 2018).

Venture philanthropy and NGOs regard public education as a critical arena for social intervention (Au & Lubienski, 2016; Ball, 2008). Such intervention may be driven by one or more of the following motivations: altruism, public recognition and image, increased sales and profit, tangible rewards (e.g., taxation benefits) (Seitanidi and Ryan, 2007), support of legal and institutional frameworks, public legitimacy, and attempting to gain influence on a large scale (Ball, 2008; Brinkerhoff, 2002). Berliner (1997) argued that CSP in education stem from the belief that no single organization can create successful schools and that all those interested in the success of the

education system must be recruited to take responsibility (see also Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004).

The vast research on interactions between governments and third sector organizations focuses on how-to and outcome-based explorations (Selsky and Parker, 2005). Ethical aspects of third sector-school partnerships are seldom discussed and have not been conceptualized. Brass *et al.* (1998) argued that "there may be little incentive for ethical behavior in a very weak, one-time, private exchange" (p. 17). But in frequent interactions, as in the case of CSP, the incentives and opportunities for unethical behavior multiply, so that decisions by one party have the potential to affect the interests, welfare, or expectations of others. For example, frequent cross-sectional interactions often expose each partner to the weaknesses of the other side, lowering the level of inter-organizational regulation and increasing the likelihood of opportunistic behaviors. This is because partnerships generate resource dependency and increase vulnerability (Babiak and Thibault, 2009). As a result, in continuous relationship, when self-interests are promoted, the potential for damaging one's partner increases (Brass *et al.*, 1998). Thus, in partnerships, the probability for unethical conduct, defined as behavior that has a harmful effect on others (Jones, 1991), is high. Even more harmful is losing the relationship (Brass *et al.*, 1998). In education, NGOs often embrace an ideological agenda (e.g., promoting human rights or 21st century skills), but ideological zeal may not be similarly prioritized and can become an interest of one partner more than of the other. For example, ideological commitment may suppress local considerations or constraints (Mumford and Fried, 2014).

It is therefore possible to ask whether organizational and environmental features shape the nature of partnerships in a manner that leads to a preference for the

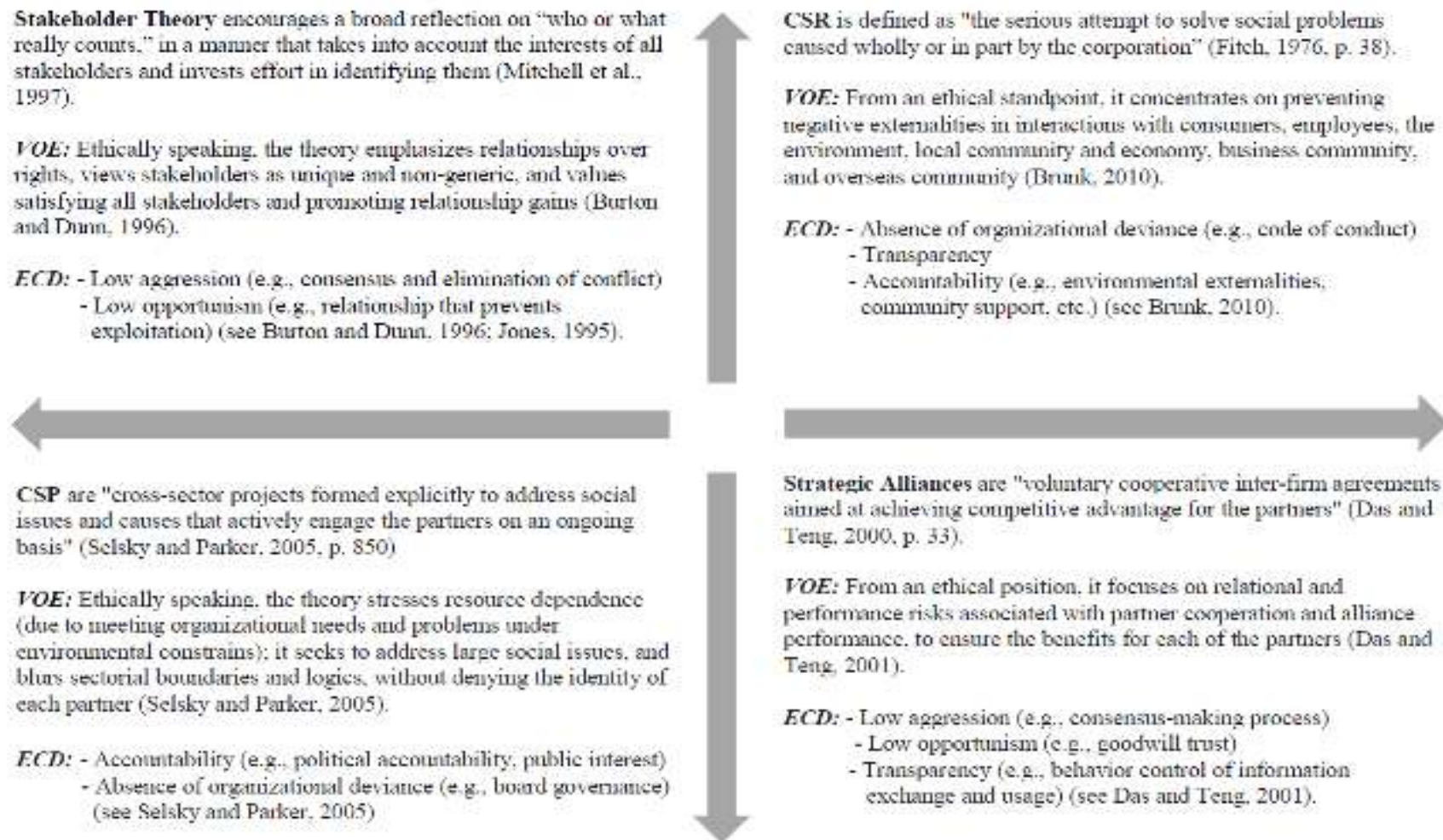
interests of one of the stakeholders. In other words, do the organizational and environmental characteristics of an emerging partnership reflect its aggression and opportunism resulting from unethical conduct of the partners, or is the partnership characterized by transparency and accountability that promote the ethical conduct of the partners. Brinkerhoff (2002) suggested that the normative support of government-nonprofit partnerships is justified because such partnerships are ethical, as they empower citizens and promote civic participation. In contrast, scholars critical of such partnerships have argued that the activities of NGOs have negative externalities (Schmid, 2004), and schools lack the ability to effectively monitor and regulate the relationships with external actors in a way that supports their public mission (Ball, 2008; Eyal and Yarm, 2018; Yemini *et al.*, 2018). Thus, there is a concrete need for a theoretical breakdown of the dimensions comprising the ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships, and its antecedents.

## **2. Analytic Approach**

CSP can be explained by several highly relevant theoretical perspectives such as stakeholder theory, CSR, CSP, and strategic alliances. Note that we do not argue that these theories and domains are the only relevant bodies of knowledge, but rather that they represent different perspectives on partnerships that are useful for our purpose. First, we aspired to define what ethical conduct of organizations and between organizations is, turning our attention to management research, which contains a vast literature on this topic. We used a series of electronic searches with Google Scholar engine by combining terms such as "stakeholder theory," "corporate social responsibility," "CSP," and "strategic alliances" with the word "ethics." Thematic analysis assisted us in identifying the distinct dimensions of ethical conduct (i.e.,

aggression, transparency, opportunism, accountability, deviance) as well as certain antecedents of ethical conduct in partnerships (i.e., trust, goals, power, formalization, ideology, environment). Figure 1 contains an explanation for each theory or research domain, and its view of ethics, and the main ethical conduct dimensions that each theory underlines.

Next, we used a second series of electronic searches. The keywords noted above were combined with organizational keywords (i.e., "partnerships," "alliances," "inter-organizational," "nongovernmental organizations," "NGOs," "philanthropy," "voluntary sector," "corporations," and "businesses"), and with educational keywords (i.e., "schools," "charter schools," and "education"). We read the abstracts to screen the results, and downloaded the works we deemed to be relevant for further review. We also complemented the searches by consulting the reference lists of several publications on the topic of the third sector and schools. Note that despite the wide-ranging scope of the project, this is not a systematic review of literature, as our primary objective is to offer an integrative conceptual framework. We used content analysis as a method for organizing the data on the antecedents and their associations with dimensions of ethical conduct. The analysis yielded the model discussed in the next section.

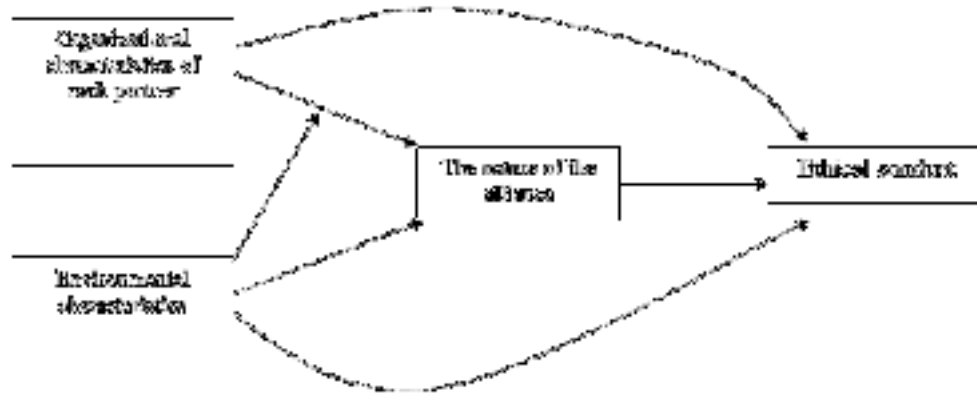


**Figure 1.** Summary of four organizational perspectives on the ethics of organizations and between organizations. VOE = view of ethics. ECD = ethical conduct dimensions. Although each theory stresses mainly certain ethical dimensions, some overlap exists between the theories.

### **3. Model of Ethics in Partnerships Between Schools and the Third Sector**

Based on the literature review, we outline a conceptual framework to discuss the ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships (Figure 2). First, we suggest that ethical conduct in partnerships between schools and the third sector contains five dimensions: low aggression, transparency, low opportunism, accountability, and absence of organizational deviance. Second, we discuss the role that the nature of the partnership (trust, goal congruence, and symmetry of power between partners) plays in predicting ethical conduct. The nature of the partnership serves as a proximal antecedent of ethical conduct. Third, we address two groups of distal variables that can serve as antecedents to ethical conduct in these partnerships: organizational characteristics (formalization, organizational ideology), and environmental characteristics (environmental turbulence). Proximal antecedents are factors that are temporally adjacent and directly responsible for changes in the outcome variables; distal antecedents are factors that contribute more indirectly to explaining changes in the outcomes. Proximal and distal antecedents are common when conceptualizing multistage processes to better depict complex phenomena in social studies (e.g., Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2009), as in the case of ethics in third sector-school partnerships. We suggest further that the nature of the partnership mediates the relationship between organizational and environmental characteristics on one hand, and ethical conduct on the other. Finally, we argue that environmental characteristics moderate the effects of organizational characteristics on the nature of the partnership.





**Figure 2.** Conceptual model of ethics in partnerships between schools and the third sector.

#### **4. The Five Dimensions of Ethical Conduct in Cross-Sector Partnerships As Identified in the Literature**

##### **4.1 Low aggression**

Aggressive behaviors manifest as attempts to directly change the partners' views or ability to influence processes and outcomes (Jay Polonsky and Ottman, 1998).

Aggressive or militant behaviors have been documented in partnerships in general as well as in CSP. The aggressiveness of one of the partners in the partnership may lead one side to cause damage to the other, resulting in an ethical failure (Munson *et al.*, 1999). For example, at times, partners from non-profit sector make a social project contingent on the presence of a certain individual in a managerial role (Lehr-Lehnardt, 2005). By contrast, an example of low aggression is an NGO that would not pressure a school to accept conditions for a program or donation of funds. Reports in the US indicate that partnerships can come to an end with the departure of a key management figure (Hess, 2004). In education, Scott (2009), also drawing on the US experience, argued that aggressive behaviors are more frequent when aggressive venture philanthropies seek to maximize returns on their investments. Aggressive NGOs may

not only affect performance but also cause create resentment among the partner's employees, undermining the partner's human capital and even leading to employees quitting (Rivera-Santos and Rufin, 2010). High aggression on the part of schools is less often discussed, but it may take the form of a school threatening to damage the reputation of the NGO if its activities do not conform to the demands of the school.

#### ***4.2 Transparency***

Another element considered to be an essential part of ethical conduct between sides in a partnership is the transparent use of information (Munson *et al.*, 1999). Addressing CSP in education in Latin America, Brady and Galisson (2008) suggest two aspects of transparency: transparency of goals (i.e. clarifies direction and interest) and of roles (i.e. clarifies authority and responsibility issues). The authors argue that transparency enables partners to create reasonable expectations about the process and work together. The literature on CSP advises to develop transparent procedures for problem assessment and outcome specification (Rondinelli and London, 2003). Partnerships are dynamic, therefore to achieve rich information exchanges over time, each partner must develop mechanisms for information sharing (Rondinelli and London, 2003). In education, a US study by Russell *et al.* (2015) suggests that there is an inverse relationship between partnership complexity (many vs. few actors) and the type of coordination and information structure (formal vs. informal). In third sector-school interactions it is necessary to have transparency in both formal and informal information exchanges. The literature also discusses situations of unreliability in communication on the part of one of the partners. In these cases, providing partial information to the partner harms synergy and effectiveness (Austin *et al.*, 2007). An example of transparency in education is an NGO that shares with the school internal

information regarding cash flow, which may affect its obligation to the program, or a school that provides to a potential partner with accurate input on staff resistance to involvement of the NGO.

#### ***4.3 Low opportunistic behavior***

Opportunism refers to situations in which a conflict of interests arises and one of the partners acts in a manner that negatively affects the other, disregarding mutual obligations or contractual agreements (Fassin, 2005) and promoting its own interests (Das and Teng, 2001). Low opportunism (benevolence) represents a willingness to help one's partners, regardless of the self-interests of the organization (Ganesan and Hess, 1997). Reeves's (2008) study in Ireland identified opportunistic behaviors that produced conflict in CSP involving public schools. An example of low opportunism in education is an NGO that does not withdraw from a program that it believes will no longer have positive coverage in the media, or a school that continues its partnership with an NGO although national political climate has changed and the NGO is under attack. Figlio and Kenny (2009) discovered that private contributors give money primarily to successful schools rather than to needy ones, possibly because this practice enhances the contributors' image as successful social benefactors. A different manifestation of such behaviors may result from the novelty of a social project wearing off, which in turn may lead to reduced public enthusiasm, causing a partner to abandon the project in favor of a more attractive initiative (Berger *et al.*, 2004). Opportunistic behaviors are also related to promoting one's agenda over the partner's. Yemini and Sagie's (2015) case study of school-NGO interaction found that each actor attempts to gain value and resources, aiming to promote its goals, often at the expense of the other partner. But to enjoy long-term exchange beneficial relations,

partners must be prepared to accept short-term losses, even if affecting their core goals, for the sake of promoting lasting partnerships and common goals. Low opportunism in partnerships is necessary to take advantage of each partner's relative strengths, and save resources in the long term (Piercy and Lane, 2007).

#### ***4.4 Accountability***

Ethical conduct in CSP should include accountability to stakeholders. Partners are expected to advance the goals of the direct stakeholders they represent (Wood, 2002), and at the same time to be committed to serving the public interest in general (Costa and Pesci, 2016). Functional effectiveness of NGOs, that is, the use of resources to gain immediate results for specific stakeholders, is different from strategic effectiveness, which takes into consideration long-term commitment of the partnership to advancing public good (Lehr-Lehnardt, 2005). It has been argued, however, that the dependence of NGOs on private funding may lead them to favor their donors' interests over those of general society, which in turn may negatively affect accountability both to their direct stakeholders and to society (Ebrahim, 2003), eventually causing them to neglect their social mission. Akyeampong (2009) explored public-private partnerships in the provision of basic education in Ghana and found that the long-term financial security was not part of their design. This naturally makes sustainability of social impact problematic. An example of accountability in education is an NGO that assumes responsibility for what happens in the school after its program ends, and takes the necessary steps to ensure the success of the mission and community commitment, or a school that terminates a merit-based program if it has a negative effect on racial tensions between students. Scholars have found that universities and schools in the West (i.e., US and Israel) are changing their mission to

obtain money and resources from their partners (Eyal and Yarm, 2018; Weisbrod *et al.*, 2008). In similar vein, although some NGOs declare their explicit intention to reduce inequality plaguing weakened populations, pragmatic considerations (financial and managerial) make them focus their efforts on the middle class and concentrate them in geopolitical center rather than at the periphery (Joassart-Marcelli and Wolch, 2003). The Berkovich and Foldes (2011) have also discovered similar considerations affecting the involvement of NGOs in Israeli public education, which paradoxically undermined the social (and often organizational) goal of narrowing social gaps, perpetuating inequality. Moreover, when the operation of the NGOs depends on matching funds by local government or service recipients, the financing policies of the NGOs prevent them from assisting disadvantaged populations that are located in geographic areas in which the population has a low socioeconomic status (Berkovich and Foldes, 2011; Fyre and Milligan, 2003).

#### ***4.5 Absence of organizational deviance***

Various types of deviant organizational behaviors have been identified as part of unethical conduct in partnerships. Examples of deviant organizational behaviors noted in the literature include managerial violations, inflated staff, inferior quality of services, nepotism, and the use of fear tactics as a managerial technique (Victor and Cullen, 1987). Brauner (2005) suggested that deviant work behaviors occur in nonprofit organizations, and Nair and Bhatnagar (2012) listed such destructive behaviors as embezzlement and bribes (property deviance), mistreatment of resources and money (production deviance), and organizational power struggles (political deviance). An example of organizational deviance in education is that of an NGO leader who gives a donation to a school and makes it clear that the school is expected

to hire the consulting company owned by the leader. Likewise, Rabea (2013) described how patronage politics in some local Israeli education agencies influence the appointment of school principals. The literature also shows that senior management of the organization has a decisive effect on the ethical decision-making process of the organization (Volery and Mansik, 1998): it is the organizational ethical leadership that provides role models and sets the reward system that either thwarts or cultivates deviant organizational behaviors (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008). Thus, deviant behaviors do not necessarily develop at the individual level, but can be collective and represent the ethical climate of the organization (Peterson, 2002). An example of organizational deviance in schools is using donations to give jobs to unskilled personnel based on personal relations with the principal. The educational literature mentions some cases when partnering between businesses and schools that appears to undermine the quality of schools. Molnar (1996) reported that in the US, at times school processes are corrupted by the corporate interests with which they partner. Similarly, some US charter schools that often form CSP (Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004) have been found to be contaminated by corruption, cronyism, and nepotism (Carnoy *et al.*, 2006).

Based on the literature reviewed above, we expect that:

**Proposition 1.** The construct of ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships consists of five distinct dimensions: low aggression, transparency, low opportunism, accountability, and absence of organizational deviance.

**Proposition 2.** Low aggressiveness, opportunism, and organizational deviance, and high transparency and accountability correlate positively with the general perception of the partner as ethical.

## **5. The Nature of the Partnerships As A Proximal Antecedent of Ethical Conduct in Cross-Sector Partnerships**

Having outlined the dimensions of ethical conduct in CSP, we proceed to explore the proximal antecedent of ethical conduct in partnerships. We identified three central variables in the literature related to ethical conduct: trust, goal congruence, and symmetry in the balance of power between partners. Note that these variables may be influenced by other factors. For example, the duration (long/short term) of the partnership may increase the dependence between parties, thereby destabilizing the symmetric power relations in the partnership and ultimately, its ethical conduct. This may be further affected by the partners' (dis)agreement on the content of instruction (technical, ideological). In their study on CSP in education, Eyal and Yarm (2018) found that the main factor characterizing the ability of schools to maintain their obligation to public ethos was the level of mutuality between parties, rather than the time span or the content of the partnership. Therefore, it appears that the aforementioned proximal antecedents are the key determinants of ethical conduct in partnerships.

### ***5.1 Trust***

Argandoña (1999) argued that "trust is a necessity in every kind of contract, [and] the indefinite and dynamic nature of these new forms of cooperation (organizational partnerships) increases the importance of a trust shared by the partners" (p. 218).

Trust is seen as a central factor in partnerships because it is impossible to cover all obligations in contractual agreements (Volery and Mansik, 1998). Cross-sector partnership opens each partner to potential harm, for example, by the misuse of partnership resources or the sharing of confidential information (Rondinelli and

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London, 2003). In the education literature, Rose's (2011) study on NGOs in the field of education in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan found that despite formal and written rules of partnership with the government, it was not possible to formalize all relationships, and that good faith and ongoing deliberation between partners were needed. Based on the analysis of the situation in England, Davies and Hentschke (2006) argued that trust in CSP was critical for the success of the partnership. CSP may be especially difficult to maintain because the partners' fundamentally different missions may create conflicts of interests, and their vastly different cultures may increase distrust (Rondinelli and London, 2003). Wohlstetter *et al.* (2004) reported that in the educational sector, leaders use proxies of trust (e.g., prior knowledge on potential partners and potential partners' reputation) to determine initial trust when initiating a partnership. Rondinelli and London (2003) advised partners to learn about each other's culture and mission as a means to increasing trust.

The literature claims that trust in partnerships promotes the ethical conduct of partners. For example, it has been suggested that trust in cross-sector partnership promotes sharing information and reduces the risks involved in sharing too much information (McDonald and Young, 2012; Munson *et al.*, 1999). In addition, trust between strategic partners has been associated with low opportunistic behaviors of partners (Munson *et al.*, 1999).

## ***5.2 Goal congruence***

Goal congruence, the fit between partners' values and their belief that a shared goal can be attained (Olson *et al.*, 2005), determines the compatibility between partners' interests and expectations. Goal congruence is considered to be critical for the initiation, success, and sustainability of CSP in general (Bryson *et al.*, 2015), and in



education in particular (Eyal and Yarm, 2018; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2004), because it bolsters synergy in the partnership, which depends on sustaining the distinct identity of both partners (basic goals and mission) and promotes mutual adaptation (Brinkerhoff, 2002). Goal congruence is a condition for preventing mission drift of both partners and helps attain the objectives of the partnership (Brinkerhoff, 2002). In the field of education, a US study found that partnerships characterized by goal congruence between non-system actors and the state on given policies have been linked to effective policy implementation in the classroom (Coburn, 2005). The Author's (2018) study in Israel also found that "transformative mutuality," when the school and NGO engage in meaningful dialogue about educational values and goals, may advance pedagogical innovation. The literature also identifies situations of goal divergence. In Portugal and England, researchers found that NGOs active in citizenship education at times pursue specific and parochial interests that conflict with social solidarity (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2016).

The literature suggests that the presence of goal congruence in partnerships promotes the ethical conduct of partners. Goal congruence, which creates a perception of shared benefits, is related to reduced potential for opportunism in partnerships (Leviten-Reid and Fairbairn, 2011), as opposed to goal divergence, which encourages opportunism (Grant and Mousavi, 2011). In education, Israeli studies found that NGOs and schools have demonstrated opportunistic self-serving behaviors (Yemini and Sagie, 2015), but nevertheless, on occasion schools accommodate the goals of their non-system partners (Eyal and Yarm, 2018; Yemini, 2017).

### ***5.3 Symmetry in power***

Power imbalance in CSP may be related to differences in resources and political capital between actors (Babiak and Thibault, 2009; Herlin, 2005). Babiak and Thibault (2009) argued that even perceived power imbalance between cross-sector partners can lead to feelings of ambiguity, uncertainty, suspicion, and anger. Power imbalance in CSP "makes one party accountable to the other, but not necessarily vice versa" (Sagawa, 2001, p. 208). Waddock (1988) suggested that when there is power imbalance in partnerships, there is a need to establish mechanisms that promote balance in decision-making power and to encourage consensus building.

The literature suggests that power asymmetry in partnerships is associated with unethical conduct on the part of the partners. For example, when one side is dominant, the stronger partner often retains authority over decisions (Hamby, 1996). Asymmetry in power between partners creates a potential for opportunistic behavior (Reeves, 2008). The dominant partner may coerce the weaker one to pursue goals that conflict with their own (Fassin, 2005). Likewise, the educational literature suggests that underfunded schools might abandon their goals to attract donations (Weisbrod *et al.*, 2008). Yemini, Cegla, and Sagie's (2018) analysis of school-NGO interactions found that NGOs with resources impose their global agenda on local schools, especially schools serving poorer communities, at times in clear contrast to the needs that principals consider to be school priorities. Cardini (2006), drawing on the UK experience, suggested that power asymmetry in educational partnerships emerges when actors use political power to overrule the goals of schools and communities. Similarly, Kolleck's (2016) study in Germany found that the NGOs tended to bypass school management, communicating directly with district leadership. Power asymmetry in partnerships may be more severe in certain national contexts in which

public schooling is underfunded or ill-managed. For example, Silova and Steiner-Khamsi (2008) described how in post-socialist countries, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the Soros Foundation was instrumental in supporting and correcting reforms in the educational sector, granting it unique power over local schools.

Based on the literature on the relations between the nature of partnerships (trust, goal congruence, and power symmetry) and ethical conduct in sector partnerships in education, we suggest that:

**Proposition 4.** Trust is positively related to ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships.

**Proposition 5.** Goal congruence is positively related to ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships.

**Proposition 6.** Symmetry in the balance of power is positively related to ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships.

## **6. Organizational and Environmental Characteristics As Distal Antecedents of Ethical Conduct in Cross-Sector Partnerships**

The nature of the partnership and ethical conduct in partnerships are influenced by both organizational and environmental characteristics. Review of the literature suggests that the partners' organizational formality and ideology, together with environmental turbulence, affect ethical conduct in CSP. These variables affect ethical conduct directly and indirectly, as they help explain the nature of the partnership. For example, Saxton (1997) noted that "although relationship characteristics alone appear to be better predictors of a firm's initial satisfaction with an alliance... the combination of both relationship characteristics and *partners' characteristics* [has] superior explanatory power for predicting sustained benefits to partners in an alliance"

(p. 454). Next, we will elaborate on several key organizational and environmental antecedents of ethical conduct in CSP.

### ***6.1 Organizational formality***

Organizational formality is a key aspect of organizational structure, signifying the degree to which regulations and procedures are dominant and guide organizational operations (Germain *et al.*, 2008). The degree of organizational formality is considered to be a structural means of control designed to influence the discretion exercised by employees (Kelley *et al.*, 1996). In organizational research, low organizational formality has been found to discourage technical judgments and encourage ethical considerations (Solymossy and Masters, 2002).

It has been suggested that high formality in arrangements between partners is related to unethical conduct in partnerships (Volery and Mansik, 1998). In the context of partnerships, formality breeds rigid arrangements (Joshi, 2008), associated with disregard of the partner's needs. In developed countries, formalization of government agreements with NGOs acting in primary education was found to be related to discomfort among NGOs and a feeling of being viewed as “mere contractors” (Batley, 2011), which is likely to result in low commitment. High formality can therefore reduce NGO accountability. It has been further suggested that formality harms the nature of the partnerships, for example, because formality decreases trust (Milne *et al.*, 1996). In education, an Israeli study found that predetermined formal arrangements in cross-sectional partnerships have adverse effects on achieving the mission of the school (Eyal and Yarm, 2018).

## ***6.2 Organizational ideology***

Organizational ideology has been identified as a key factor in explaining ethical conduct in partnerships. In ideological organizations, a strong commitment to the goals is present. Thompson and Bunderson (2003) argued that "ideological organizations confront an irony in that success often depends on attenuating rigid adherence to the cause in order to avoid alienating important stakeholders and constituents" (p. 581). Employees of ideological organizations are less likely to react to a violation if they view it as ideologically justified (Thompson and Bunderson, 2003).

Organizations' ideology has been found to be linked to unethical conduct in partnerships. With respect to CSP, Babiak and Thibault (2009) argued that the partner's ideology can shape its overt motivations and behaviors in the partnership, impeding the realization of the collaborative potential. This may increase the likelihood of aggressive conduct by the ideological partner. Educational scholars have argued that private actors' partnership with the educational sector, even in developed countries (i.e., UK, Israel), is often driven by ideological beliefs about what constitutes good educational practice, and such actors use financial leverage or political involvement to promote their ideas (Ball, 2008; Yemini and Sagie, 2015). The educational literature also indicates that organizational ideology can harm ethical accountability. For example, Williamson (2016) reported that high-tech firms partnering with schools in Silicon Valley in the US attempted to mold school culture and students according to corporate and technological ideals, instead of those of public education. Such a neoliberal ideological stand may lead to widening social inequality, undermining the public good (Yemini, 2017). Based on the literature on how organizational characteristics relate to ethical conduct in CSP, we suggest that:

**Proposition 7.** High organizational formality is negatively related to quality of partnership and to ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships.

**Proposition 8.** A propensity for high organizational ideology is negatively related to quality of partnership and to ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships.

### ***6.3 Environmental turbulence***

The term “environment” includes a range of ecological, economic, government, legal, political, regulatory, social, cultural (e.g., values, ideology) and technological elements, beyond the context of the cross-sector partnership. All these elements may influence the partnership (Clarke and Fuller, 2010). The literature indicates that environmental turbulence influences ethical conduct in CSP and the nature of the partnership. Environmental turbulence generates complexity, uncertainty, and therefore jeopardizes organizational stability and survival (Emery and Trist, 1965). In the literature on cross-sector partnerships, Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2006) suggested that in the presence of environmental turbulence, organizations aspire to lower resource dependence and decrease transaction costs. Studies have indicated that competition for limited resources and the struggle for organizational survival may cause organizations to act in an unethical manner in their decision-making processes (Etheredge, 1999).

With respect to partnerships, uncertainty in funding has been shown to be linked to the vulnerability of NGOs (Babiak and Thibault, 2009), which might cause them to engage in partnerships with lower levels of trust or goal congruence. In these cases, NGOs over reliance on private and government funding may prevent them from operating independently of the funding agency, leading NGOs to deviate from their

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original goals (Lehr-Lehnardt, 2005). For example, in education, reliance on matching funds from local authorities causes NGOs to deviate from just social goals for the sake of securing funding (Authors, 2011), and adopt unjust welfare policies (Fyre and Milligan, 2003). Silova and Steiner-Khamsi (2008) described how during the turbulence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NGOs and foundations held unique power and influence in post-socialist countries over public schools. In the same vein, the Eyal and Yarm (2018), drawing on the Israeli experience, warned that in the face of scant resources, schools might engage in partnerships that endanger their mission attainment, exposing their students to unwanted ideological messages for utilitarian motives. Another example is that of divided societies, such as Kosovo, in which multicultural ideals in education are promoted by international organizations, and often these conflict with the local actors' orientation toward state- and nation-building (Selenica, 2018), creating a reality of goal divergence. Daboub (2002) noted that in a complex and turbulent environment, the only way to avoid ethical failures is "to develop embedded relationships and cultures that facilitate ethical conduct" (p. 45). Indeed, research on turbulent environments has found that high mutuality between partners is associated with trust. For example, a study conducted in the US following a hurricane disaster found that the school district and schools were inclined to be more collaborative and trusting in their engagements with NGOs (Robinson *et al.*, 2014). Based on the claims and the evidence presented above, we further suggest that environment turbulence has a moderating effect on the connection between organizational characteristics and the nature of the partnership. We posit that high environment turbulence enhances the effect of organizational ideology on shaping the nature of the partnerships, as manifest in lower trust and goal congruence, increasing

the asymmetry in power. Therefore, based on the literature describing how environmental turbulence relates to ethical conduct in CSP, we suggest that:

**Proposition 9.** High environmental turbulence is negatively related to quality of partnership and to ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships.

**Proposition 10.** Environmental turbulence moderates the correlation between organizational features and the quality of partnership.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this conceptual paper was to outline a comprehensive model of ethical conduct in school-NGO partnerships, grounded in prior theory and empirical research on general partnerships and education. The paper makes two main theoretical contributions. First, although previous research did address distinct aspects of ethical conduct in CSP (see, for example, Figure 1), it failed to chart the multi-dimensional scope of ethical behavior. The present paper expanded this line of exploration by converging multiple theories (stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility, CSP, and strategic alliances) in a way that allow us to identify the diverse properties that make up what can be seen as a mosaic of ethical conduct in partnerships. This has the potential to stimulate future investigation and to expand our knowledge on ethical conduct in third sector-school partnership. Second, the present model identifies several key antecedents of ethical conduct related to the nature of the partnerships, and to the organizational and environmental characteristics reflecting the complex relations between these factors and ethical conduct. Thus, unlike previous descriptive works that addressed mainly few factors and did not adopt a process orientation, the present study offers a multistage model that combines distal and proximal variables in explaining ethical conduct. Therefore, the present study can offer a theoretical



framing through a multiple causal model, which in turn can serve as the basis for further investigation of ethical conduct in CSP in education.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the offered conceptual model has some practical implications. First, it provides administrators of both schools and third-sector organizations that are considering initiating a new partnership with a basic understanding of the distal antecedents of ethical conduct in partnerships (organizational ideology, environmental turbulence, etc.). Thus, administrators should take into consideration the ethical complexities of alliance when selecting their partners, and set the formal structures needed to bridge organizational and institutional differences and expectations. Second, the framework can serve as a diagnostic tool for identifying initial manifestations of ethical misconduct. This can lead to introducing changes in formal arrangements and informal dynamics, in the course of self-regulation that is imperative for the success of the partnership. Third, the model can be used to stimulate the discussion between third-sector organizations and schools about adopting a voluntary ethical code for partnering, and about mobilizing NGOs and schools to conduct ethical training for leaders for the enhancement of their ethical sensitivity.

The paper provides an initial model for ethical conduct in third sector-school partnerships. We found all four theoretical perspectives to be contributing richly to the theorization of ethics in third-sector partnerships, as together they portray ethical (and unethical) behaviors in partnerships as a multidimensional complex phenomenon that is based on inter-organizational relational and utilitarian ethics, assuring an ethic of trust inward and social commitment outward. We advocate that such multi-theoretical approach be adopted also in future research. In this work, we have suggested ten propositions that we believe researchers can test in future research by using

quantitative methods, qualitative ones, or both. By no means do we consider these propositions as outlining the complete and final picture. As research progresses, we expect additional antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes to be identified, but we believe that our work, grounded in prior claims and empirical evidence, is a good starting point for these efforts.

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