BELLING THE CAT: EXPLORING ALIGNMENT BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND STATE IN BELIZE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

UN ESTUDIO SOBRE LA RELACIÓN ENTRE LA IGLESIA Y EL ESTADO EN EL SISTEMA EDUCATIVO DE BELICE: UN RIESGO QUE SE DEBE CORRER

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Abstract

This paper explores whether the relationship between church-state actors contributes to or constrains educational quality. It posed the following research question: Is there alignment between the church and the state in the envisioning and delivery of education in Belize? Technical documents, non-technical documents, and key stakeholder interviews were qualitatively analysed and triangulated. The study found that, while alignment exists in overarching goals and historical appreciation of the partnership, there are also misalignments in overlapping roles, conflicting philosophies, dissonance between actions and stated commitment to the partnership, and the manifestation of accountability in education. Given that the government's approximately 23% investment in education is juxtaposed with documented low returns, this paper can contribute to understanding some underlying challenges that potentially undermine that investment.

Keywords: Belize, Educational policy, Church, State, qualitative analysis.

Resumen

Este artículo investiga si la relación entre la Iglesia y el Estado contribuye o limita la calidad de la educación. Se parte de la siguiente pregunta de investigación: ¿hay alguna conexión entre la Iglesia y el Estado en cómo se visualiza y cómo se imparte la educación en Belice? Se realizó un análisis cualitativo de documentos técnicos, no técnicos y de entrevistas con los principales interesados, así como una triangulación de los datos. El estudio encontró que, aunque hay una conexión entre los objetivos generales y la valoración histórica de la alianza, también hay discordancias en cuanto a duplicación de puestos, filosofías en conflicto, disonancia entre las acciones y el compromiso expreso con el acuerdo y una manifestación de rendición de cuentas en la educación. En vista de que aproximadamente el 23 % de la inversión gubernamental en la educación está yuxtapuesta a la baja rentabilidad documentada, este artículo pretende ayudar a comprender los desafíos pendientes que podrían potencialmente debilitar la inversión.

Palabras claves: Belice, Política educacional, Iglesia, Estado, análisis cualitativo.

Introduction

Formerly British Honduras, Belize's population of roughly 400,000 people is spread across 8867 square miles with eight identified ethnic groups, each with its own language and with an increasing number of immigrant communities. Culturally Caribbean, Belize is the only country in Central America with English as its official language, and it is one of the many developing countries that allocates almost a quarter of total government expenditure to education (Lauglo *et al*.). The state, however, did not prioritize schooling at its inception. In fact, various Christian missions in the 19th century built the country's first schools as a part of an international evangelization effort. The colonial government of what was then British Honduras only took a serious interest a century later, after primary and secondary education had already been significantly developed (Bennett). Today, the government holds most of the control in Belize's education system, while the churches still manage majority schools as owners of the land and buildings. This, along with funding arrangements that differ across education levels, defines the partnership.

Prioritizing basic education as a human right (Government of Belize), the Government of Belize (GoB) covers 100% of teachers' salaries and pensions or gratuities at the primary school level, and education is mandatory up to the age of 14. Funding for grant-aided secondary schools is determined by a per-student formula. These grants are calculated by student numbers, accounting for academic and socioeconomic needs as outlined in the secondary education finance reform rules (Belize Ministry of Education). Additionally, when their teachers retire, school boards must cover 30 % of pensions or gratuities, while the Ministry of Education (MoE) guarantees 70 %. School fees are fixed by the government, so schools are expected to find other ways –usually fundraising– to cover the costs of maintaining the school environment, meet the 30 % financial obligation at the secondary level, and cover bills and other necessities. Managers are also responsible to ensure effective educational delivery by monitoring classroom instruction, accounting for teachers, and ensuring that MoE has the required paperwork to process payments.

Managements, therefore, play a crucial role in Belize's educational landscape. It is unclear, however, how they should be held accountable when their schools underperform. For example, when exam results –the main diagnostic of educational quality in the country– annually illustrate widespread problems with grade-level content knowledge, it is the government that is criticized. Under pressure to address performance issues, and with most of the government budget constrained by salaries and scholarships, the state has turned to high-profile, low-cost reform efforts. These include enforcing teacher training and qualification requirements, centralizing decision making on teacher services, outlawing corporal punishment, restructuring the curriculum, redefining per-student funding formulas, and reshuffling internal ministry structures.

Despite the efforts, Belize's education system is still underperforming with the most vulnerable benefitting the least (Näslund-Hadley *et al.*). Much like its regional neighbours, learning outcomes remain low in socially vulnerable populations, and many underprivileged children in rural areas are out-of-school (Jules; Young *et al.*). This disparity is reflected in the 42% poverty rate as of 2009, with approximately 14% of that population classified as extremely poor. Although the country is classified as "upper middle income" (World Bank 2019), its relative prosperity is stratified along geographic and ethnic lines (Carneiro). To address these and other pressing social issues, Belize's parliamentary government invests heavily in education. The returns are low, however, and one possible reason might be misdirected reform efforts that address symptoms of a dysfunctional education system instead of underlying problems.

These problems include inequality in provision, dropouts and repetition, poor learning environments, and lack of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), all of which have been linked to leadership inadequacies throughout the system (Babb; Gayle *et al.*). Nonetheless, reform efforts have largely sought to address the quality of micro-level inputs into the education system through leadership training, enforcing laws on teacher qualifications, and curricular changes. Where systemic changes have been made, they have been mostly bureaucratic additions to an already top-heavy system. In their scathing 2013 report, Näslund-Hadley *et al.* pointed out that "Belize is paying a lot for education but getting very little" (3). They also described underlying challenges that have remained unaddressed, including a powerful union that protects teachers even when they are underperforming and issues with the over 25 mostly denominational partners managing majority of schools. The government has long acknowledged that the church-state partnership needs to be renegotiated (Shoman), so the purpose of this study was to touch on this question in Belize by attempting to explore whether the relationship between church-state actors, organizations, and institutions contributes to or constrains educational quality. The study adopted a political economy lens to understand the nature of the partnership and its relationship with inefficiencies in the system. The following question was posed:

Research Question: Is there alignment between the church and state in the envisioning and delivery of education in Belize?

Defining Alignment and Coherence

According to the World Bank (2017), "successful systems combine both alignment and coherence" where "alignment means that learning is the goal of various components of the system" and coherence means those components are working complementarily (13). In Belize's education system, it is unclear if the church and the state – two of the biggest actors in the system– are working coherently and in alignment with

Belize's education goals. The question posed in this study addresses both the questions of alignment and of coherence as a system operating in alignment would effectively mean its components are working together to achieve its goals (Case *et al.*). Symptoms of misalignment within education systems manifest in two related problems: competing priorities which can undermine the goal of learning, and elements of the system – such as actor interactions or managerial competence– being incompatible.

Specifically, in the developing world, education systems are challenged by actors working discordantly and by misalignments caused by political forces, limited management capacity, competing goals, and other technical and political difficulties (World Bank, 2017). Similar factors contributing to misalignments were revealed in the Kingdon *et al.* rigorous review of 50+ political economy studies in developing contexts. Building from the definition of political economy posited by Leftwich, Kingdon *et al.* revealed a pattern of strong political power of teacher unions, low parental involvement, regular rent-seeking, patronage politics and corruption, and other political economy constraints as likely reasons for poor governance, accountability, and delivery of education. Particularly regarding unions, in the Belize context the Belize National Teacher's Union (BNTU) is especially strong. It is notable that, like the churches, the BNTU, through their membership in the umbrella organization the National Trade Union Congress of Belize, holds a seat in the senate (Government of Belize, 2019). Further studies on the role of the union in Belize's political economy could present a more holistic picture of the country's education system as the competing interests of actors is a critical element of misalignment.

Kingdon *et al.* highlighted the role of political will noting that expansion of educational coverage is often more desirable and convenient as it provides opportunities for personal and political enrichment while mitigating potential fallouts from expenditure cutbacks. Additionally, they noted that alignment and coherence with and among potential drivers for change, which for the focus of this study would include church managements and the government, can create an environment that is "mutually reinforcing" (3). This is instead of a situation with competing priorities which can be "at best neutralising and at worst undermining" (3). Kogan, as early as the 1970s, posited that these interactions inevitably contradict as education is an amalgamation of conflicting norms that must be negotiated by various actors and that politics cannot be separated from education.

Almost four decades later, in accord with much of the literature discussed above, the World Bank points to political and technical factors that underpin misalignment by drawing managers, teachers, learners, and resources away from the goal of learning. The institution recommends taking a systems approach to identify misaligned elements such as unclear goals, roles, and responsibilities; lack of accurate and credible data; insufficient and/or inadequately allocated funding; and weak links between actor incentives and stu-

dent learning. A systems approach to education accounts for the complexity of actor interactions, primarily to understand coherence and to assess whether components of the system align with education goals (World Bank, 2017). Unhealthy or misaligned systems are distinguished by actors minimizing problems and emphasizing successes, avoiding blame, and maintaining a *statu quo* of mediocrity. These are common in developing contexts that are often constituted by small formal sectors relative to a larger, stronger informal economy where most decisions and agreements are made (Khan).

The History of Belize's Faith-Based Partnership

Belize's education system is built on a strong informal economy as its organic partnership predates its independence in 1981. Education was never a priority for the export-heavy logging community of British Honduras as the *de facto* colony was never intended to be a permanent settlement (Ashcraft & Grant). The development of the sector was instead driven by Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Roman Catholic missionary groups that established primary schools from the late 18th century onwards to further their evangelization efforts. Bennett and Woods *et al*. have provided comprehensive accounts of how the partnership developed. They showed how the colony reflected Great Britain's educational perspectives and policies of relying on resources available through churches. Both works illustrate that the churches were filling an important gap since, from the first primary school was built in 1816, the British did not begin to financially support non-Anglican schools until the 1840s.

By the end of the 19th century, the churches had extended their reach to secondary schooling while the colony had established the legal foundations to support the churches' administrative role in education. Even then, despite the increasingly formal role that the churches played in the financing and administration of schools in the colony, challenges concerning administrative control and denominational competition started to emerge within this system (Frankson). Specifically, the nature of the church-state partnership was regularly questioned in diagnostic reports, as Thompson highlighted. She pointed out that the question of school management was common in internal and external education reports from the late 19th century onwards. Discourses on the partnership ranged from completely abolishing the system to supporting its continuance. She cited the Easter Report of 1935 and the UNESCO reports of 1964 and 1983, which all recommended the partnership. She contrasted that stance with a 1938 report from the West India Royal Commission, which recommended increasing government control.

Despite criticisms, Belize's church-state partnership was formalized under the Ordinance of 1962 with the government agreeing to cover the cost of teachers' salaries and offering to cover 50% of supply and maintenance costs. The churches committed to covering managerial duties and the other 50% of the associated costs of managing the schools. Churches also had autonomy in managing the operation budgets (Thompson).

This arrangement carried over into the country's independence, declared on September 21ˢᵗ, 1981. The church-state system had been deeply embedded into the country's culture at that point, and every government since then has publicly committed to supporting the arrangement with the churches.

About a decade after the country's independence, in the context of the emerging Education For All agenda, a National Symposium of Education was organized where key Belizean educationalists assessed the country's system, made recommendations, and responded to recommendations of others through a series of papers. The opening contributor, then Minister of Education Said Musa, who later became Prime Minister, posited that "real reform requires an effective implementation of the Church-State partnership in education" (Musa in Shoman 22). He conceded, however, that the "dilemma" (22) lay in centralization of management in the government versus decentralization of management to the churches. Subsequent contributors debated whether it mattered that the partnership was disproportionately advantageous to the churches, whether the community benefit and cost-savings of decentralization outweighed the accountability difficulties in ensuring effective resource allocation and quality of education delivery, and whether faith was an important component to a holistic education. Despite these differences, there was a consensus that the church-state partnership needs to be a key consideration when attempting education reform, with it described as "the backbone of the educational system we now have, most especially at the primary and secondary levels" (Shoman 163). Still, with the burden of responsibility increasingly placed on the state as the churches struggle to uphold the financial conditions of the arrangement, the benefit of the church-state system is less clear-cut. Moreover, even as governments continue to publicly endorse the church-state partnership, there is evidence of dissatisfaction behind the scenes (Gayle *et al*.).

The Church-State Partnership Today

Consensus exists among the referenced scholars and historians that the church-state partnership has not changed much since colonialism. When adjustments have been made, they have been incremental and in the form of financing and inclusion of new types of community and denominational school managements. Today, the government allocates approximately 23% of its budget to education with its biggest expenditure on salaries and pensions (Government of Belize, 2018). Denominational schools have a small role in easing this burden, but the financing situation has changed in favour of the churches with the government paying an increasingly larger share of administrative costs while the administrative role of the churches remains largely intact. All salaries and pensions at the primary school level are fully covered by the government through MoE, and at the secondary school level, the state provides grant-aided

schools with per-student vouchers based on socio-economic and academic needs as well as 70% of pension payments (Government of Belize, 2011).

Any school under this arrangement, whether denominational or community-run, is categorized as government-aided. According to the Belize Ministry of Education (2016), these predominately denominational grant-aided schools constitute a little over 60 % of all pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in the country. Specifically, MoE relies on partners to manage 143 of its 233 preschools, 201 of its 308 primary schools, 29 of its 59 secondary schools, and 10 of its 14 tertiary education institutions. The second largest funding category is the government school wherein the state fully funds, owns, and manages the schools –about 20% of all schools fall under this classification. The remaining 20 % are classified as private, to which the government makes no contribution. All schools must meet the basic criteria of licensing, teacher qualification, school health and safety, non-discriminatory practices, and respect for the organizational structures as outlined in the country's Education Act (Government of Belize, 2011).

All of Belize's 631 educational institutions from preschools to tertiary schools are differentiated in these three ways. Although the distribution of schools differs across the country's six districts and across various educational levels, the system is effectively a dual one between the government and the denominational managements. For example, the Roman Catholics control almost 34 % of all assisted primary and secondary schools. This success has extended into their evangelization efforts as, according to data from the country's 2010 population census, they also have the largest religious membership with 40.1 % of the population identifying as affiliated (Statistical Institute of Belize). Anglicans constitute 4.7 % of the population, Baptists 3.6%, and Methodists 2.9 %. Even so, although Christians constitute over 73 % of the population, most of them are neither Anglican, Methodist, nor Baptist. Relative newcomers such as Pentecostals (8.4 %), Seventh Day Adventists (5.4 %), and Nazarenes (2.8 %) each have significant numbers of Belizean members and control a significant number of primary and secondary schools (Belize Ministry of Education, 2016).

It is true that these numbers have likely declined in the last 10 years, and 15.5% of the population identified as non-religious in 2010 (Statistical Institute of Belize). However, as the preamble to the constitution affirms that the country's principles, rights, and freedoms are rooted in an acknowledgement of the supremacy of God, and as it is likely that the predominant faith is still Christian, the country can be classified as a religious –largely Christian– nation. This might be a result of strong influences by the original four Christian denominations in the country's early education system, which established a framework of church involvement in what is now considered state affairs. For example, one of the country's 13 senate seats is "appointed on the advice of the Belize Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Churches" (Government of Belize, 2019, par. 1). Clearly, the history of evangelical efforts through education has led to a strong association between the two sectors, with denominational schools

making up the lion's share of educational institutions in the country. Furthermore, the older denominations own the land for and manage many of the country's most elite and successful schools. The formal role of the churches in education, however, is the administrative power they hold through representation on several education committees as well as through the General Managers Association (GMA).

Management and Accountability

In their report on male social participation, Gayle *et al.* discussed this "complicated system of finance and management of schools" (116). They linked it to increased educational exclusion and reduced accountability in schools serving some of Belize's most vulnerable populations. They cited examples of schools prohibited to teach about sex and unchecked discrimination in disciplinary decisions that resulted in unfair expulsions. School managements have the responsibility to oversee school administrators and the implementation of the approved school curriculum. To cover all their schools, General Managers delegate to Local Managers (LMs) in a long chain of command. Through this, managements also serve as a liaison between administrators and the government. They are empowered to allocate about 1/3 of class hours as they see fit and have partial control over disciplining, transferring, hiring, and firing teachers –the latter with approval from the Belize Teaching Services Commission (Government of Belize 2011). Even with government accountability measures in place, unfair disciplinary practices persist; this, along with poor coordination among and within managements, poor accountability, and insufficient infrastructure, has been identified as a barrier to schooling for vulnerable populations (Young *et al*.). There is a recognized need to have common standards of management and accountability to prevent continued inefficiencies and wastage (Näslund-Hadley). When confronted with these and other criticisms, church leaders acknowledged that changes needed to be made, and "they even suggested that the power relations between the church and the Ministry of Education need to be revisited" (Gayle *et al.* 116).

The government has acknowledged that "the church-state system of management and delivery of education fails to reach its full potential" (Belize Ministry of Education, 2012) and that there is a "discord" (47) between partners, a "lack of accountability" (17) and inefficiency in school management that "exacerbates problems and challenges" (14) of the education system. The government, despite what seems to be its best efforts, is unable to significantly improve quality, and this has been linked to, among other things, a disconnect in the church-state system. Other areas of need continue to be addressed through significant investments in new schools, increased capacity building of civil servants and teachers, standardization of qualifications, and the creation of external committees to increase transparency (Näslund-Hadley *et al.*; Bennett), but the topic of denominational managements does not seem to have been explicitly addressed. Rather, subtle

changes to other aspects of the education system indirectly influence the partnership. For example, the government received a grant in 2016 to construct 35 new government schools, which may indicate a shift away from the denominational monopoly on education. However, the implications of that change on the education system have not been discussed publicly or in prior studies. Additionally, although M&E are regularly identified as critical weaknesses in Belize's education system, attempts to address accountability at the managerial and governmental levels have not had demonstrable impact on quality (RESTORE Belize).

Studies on historical faith-based Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), under which Belize can be categorized, can illuminate common points of misalignment between the church and state. Faith-based PPPs are "historical public-private partnerships in education systems with a tradition of religious schooling" (Verger *et al.* 758). Although several advantages to faith-based institutions due to the fostering of a community culture (Parra & Wodon) in these contexts, secularization trends, and discrimination on moral grounds have affected the practices and perceptions of these institutions (Judge; Walford, 1995). Nonetheless, largely underrepresented in the literature outlining these partnerships are explicit accountability roles. Accountability has been identified as one of the most important aspects of educational quality (UNESCO).

In public-private partnerships, under which Belize's church-state partnership system can be classified, accountability is often implicitly understood as schools responding to parents via school choice (Finn *et al.*). Nevertheless, this has been insufficient to ensure quality education, often resulting in issues concerning unfair and unequitable resource distribution to the detriment of socially vulnerable students. School choice can lead to a local hierarchy of desirability, resulting in some schools being oversubscribed (Walford, 1995). In reviewing privatization efforts in Chile and elsewhere, researchers have found that this hierarchy can lead to social stratification where higher performing, usually better resourced, students are selected by the top performing schools. Rural students are also at a disadvantage as parents do not necessarily select schools based on quality, but rather are motivated by proximity to home and work (Elacqua *et al.*). Finally, even when parents want to choose high performing schools, they do not always have sufficient information to make informed decisions (Barrera *et al.*). Strengthening local accountability in such contexts is complicated, and strong teacher unions, isolated classrooms, and the difficulty to see the effect of reforms in short term policy cycles further complicate attempts to improve accountability (Hickey & Hossain).

One way to improve quality might be to increase transparency. Using a transparency-accountability matrix, Finn *et al.* compared four different accountability and transparency strategies. They carefully distinguished between the concepts of accountability (action) and transparency (publicization of information). Finn *et al.* pointed out that the "sunshine and shame" strategy was most popular among the respondents in his study as it transfers the politically controversial accountability role from education

actors to parents. However, although transparency should be high, access to the information necessary to make effective choices might still be limited. This is because decisions on what to measure are often made for political reasons with powerful actors often choosing indicators that minimize their responsibility (World Bank, 2017). For example, examination results as a diagnostic mechanism for school performance alone might be attractive in an unhealthy political system for their ability to obscure accountability channels where possible inputs include parental, school, and systemic factors. These results are ineffective on their own as they cannot account for the dynamism of "multiple interactions" (178). Moreover, if this is the main diagnostic for an education system, it can incentivize narrow learning foci and biases toward high scoring students and exam results. Considering these factors, Finn *et al*. matrix can be useful in understanding the role of trust and transparency in strengthening accountability in education systems, which has been acknowledged as a crucial element in successful PPPs (Aslam *et al*.). This accountability matrix can enhance the understanding of alignment within the church-state partnership of Belize's education system as well as inform possible recommendations to improve this aspect of the system.

Research Design

As there is no universal approach to planning and conducting research on education (Richard, Andrei & Julia) due to the field's broad scope (Perry) and multidisciplinary nature (Freebody), the research purpose must inform the research design. Decisions must further be based on considerations of resource, access, and other limitations (Cohen *et al*.). The research question "Is there alignment between the church and state in the envisioning and delivery of education in Belize?" was therefore addressed with qualitative methodology, which seemed the most suitable to answer the research question as this study takes an exploratory approach (Agee). Within qualitative research, an interview is the most logical method for an exploratory study on perceptions as its structural flexibility allows the researcher to probe deeply into complex phenomena in a personalized way (Gray). Moreover, a primarily inductive approach is required to describe the complex interactions between educational partners in the system of study –a further justification for qualitative methods (Lewis *et al*.). Finally, methodological decisions were made regarding resources, positionality, and access (Yilmaz). Specifically, a semi-structured interview schedule was designed as a guide to prevent being "too deferential or obsequious" (Walford, 1994, 226). Additionally, as document analysis can be an effective response to reflexivity concerns (Bowen), interview data were triangulated with technical and non-technical documents to further minimize potential bias.

Data Collection and Analysis

Five documents were chosen from 2003 to 2012. These are the 2003 Belize Education Act which outlines the legally defined institutions governing education in Belize from 2003 to 2010; the landmark judgement of the Supreme Court justifying the award of BZD$150,000 to a teacher for wrongful dismissal by the Catholic Management described in the Action No. 132: Supreme Court Judgement: Roches v. Wade (2004); The Belize Education and Training Act (2010) which clarified the new structure of educational organizations and instituted new commissions to which government and management power and responsibilities were devolved, such as the Belize Teaching Services Commission; the Business Rules for the Implementation of the New Secondary School Financing Model (2010) which outlined new financing rules for secondary schools, including grant-aided denominational and non-denominational schools; and the Education Amendment Rules (2012) which amended rules pertaining to the roles and responsibilities of the MoE, District Education Councils, Managing Authorities, and Teaching Services Commission in the Education Rules to align with the new education structure. These sampled documents were used to validate and round out data from key stakeholder interviews.

To further inform key stakeholder interviews, as well as to deepen understanding of the church-state partnership, an analysis was conducted of news stories appearing in the online archives of *7News*, a national Belizean broadcast station, from 2004 – the start of the online archives– to June 2019 –the end of the data collection period using eight specific search terms. Of 533 results, 133 news articles were selected, covering 89 news stories. Excel was used as the database management tool in which they were summarized, ordered, and analysed. In document analysis, two of the biggest limitations are low retrievability where access is restricted and biased selectivity where available documents reflect the organizational aims of publishers (Yin). In sampling policy documents, most were publicly available acts of law and, therefore, not subject to these limitations. In sampling news articles, however, additional, broader, search terms from more stations would have increased rigor. Due to time limitations, search terms were targeted and informed by policy documents, as well as the researcher's own familiarity with the country's national news.

A representative sample of stakeholders was selected for the research herein, as illustrated in the pie chart below, based on their legally defined roles, appearance in relevant news stories, and recommendations. There was a slight imbalance of state participation, and contributing to this was snowball sampling, which was crucial in understanding where influence might lie outside of the formal system. Additionally, it took longer for state views to reach saturation, thus resulting in a larger number of state participants. The number of people initially contacted was 25, with 19 stakeholders

agreeing to participate. It is important to note that most participants intimately understand education in Belize at both the micro and macro levels, having served as teachers, administrators, and managers from denominational and non-denominational schools, union members at basic and –at times– executive levels, or members –and in some cases chairpersons– of national committees and school boards. As shown in Figure 1 below, eight participants represented the state from either the civil service or from politically appointed roles; three represented the church-management perspective; two represented school-level administrators; and three participants were retirees who still regularly interact with and strongly influence the education system. Some participants, due to BNTU involvement, were also able to provide insights from the union standpoint.

Figure 1
BREAKDOWN OF PARTICIPANTS
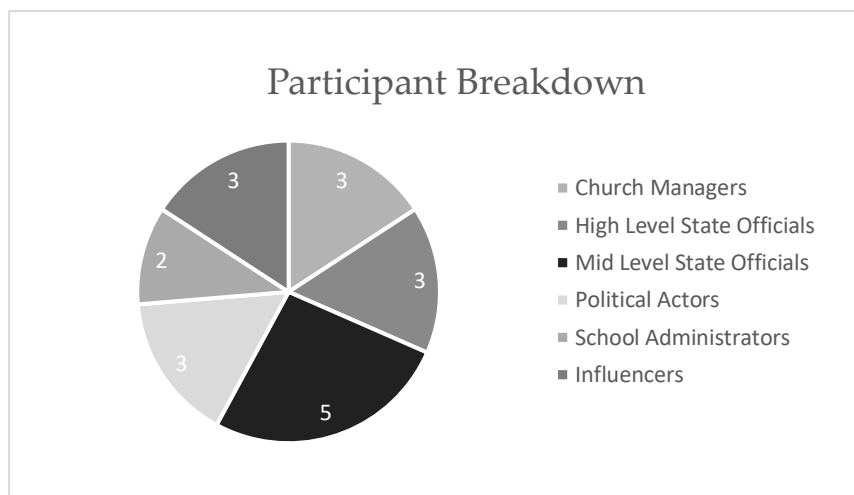
Source: own elaboration.

Participants were classified in general terms for the purposes of analysis and anonymity by their self-identified most significant roles in the church-state system of education. In the findings, they are coded as C.M. for Church Managers, H.O. for High-Level State Officials, M.O. for Mid-Level State Officials, P.A. for Political Actors, S.A. for School administrators, and I. for Influencers. All eight state participants had experiences at various levels of denominational schools that led to and a nuanced understanding of education issues. Of the total sample, 17 were former full-time teachers with experience at the primary (6), secondary (5), or tertiary levels (2), or more than one level (4). Additionally, the two school level administrators, two non-state influencers, and some state officials have sat on, and at times headed, national education committees, associations, and initiatives. Notably, of the eight participants from the state, six had served as principals, vice principals, or managers at church-owned

schools before transitioning into MoE. Those labelled as Influencers each have strong relationships with key decisionmakers in the education system and regularly interact with the system. Conducting the study from outside Belize reduced the number of available participants as several key stakeholders, especially those from the church, could only be contacted through phone calls and physical visits.

Interview validity was strengthened by using documents and previous studies to inform questions, piloting those questions with four trusted Belizean educationalists, building trust and rapport with interviewees throughout the outreach and interview process by being transparent, and sampling a range of perspectives –including mid-level MoE personnel to member check high-level decision makers who might, as Walford warned, overstate or understate their influence. Additional validation techniques included encouraging interviewees to expand on their responses with examples and interviewing until data began to converge as recommended by Arksey. Preparation is particularly important in researching elites (Halpin & Fitz; Walford 1994) and document analyses coupled with insights from experience within the system served as adequate preparation. This knowledge of important issues allowed the circumvention of stonewalling and gatekeeping. For interview data, open coding was first conducted, informed by the research question. Codes were then carefully reviewed to uncover relevant patterns and themes. This iterative process was completed after saturation was reached and outliers accounted for, resulting in a final code list. Findings from each data source were triangulated which is instrumental in increasing validity and reliability (Denzin & Lincoln).

Findings from Technical Documents

The technical documents contextualized the interviews conducted in the study, and all documents except the 2003 Belize Education Act were referenced by interviewees. Notably, the Action No. 132: Supreme Court Judgement Roches v. Wade (2004) was unanimously agreed to have impacted the power dynamics between the church and state as it was the first court case brought against the Catholic Management by a schoolteacher for unfair disciplinary practices. Roches was awarded BZD$150,000 –the largest in the country's history– by the Supreme Court, setting an international precedent and strengthening the rights of teachers in the country. As described in the interviews, this ruling may have contributed to a shift in the country's educational philosophy from morality to human rights, and it was described as a learning experience for management on the limits of their authority. Those boundaries were solidified in the *Belize Education and Training Act* (2010), which followed from that ruling to institute the School Inspectorate as an independent body and shifted power and responsibility in teacher hiring, firing, and disciplinary practices from the management and government to the Belize Teaching Services Commission (TSC). It also provided more precise delineation

of roles, responsibilities, and sanctions. Interviewees expressed mixed opinions about the TSC, with managements focusing on the inefficiencies due to the bureaucracy of the commission. It is important to note that one other court case which has likely affected the partnership was the 2013 challenge to and 2016 overturning of Section 53 of Belize's Criminal Code which had outlawed any non-heterosexual, non-vaginal sexual act. As it was not explicitly related to the research question, however, it did not meet the inclusion criteria for this study.

Findings from News Stories

From the start of the online news archives in 2004, the first news story that met the inclusion criteria was published on March 31st, 2004 and headlined "A Teacher Vs. The Church." In this and subsequent news articles, the media covered the details of the Roches v. Wade proceedings and judgement, as well as its implications for the church-state system. Notably, although several news stories from that decade revealed morality tensions, there were many reports of collaboration between denominational managements and their local and international partners in fundraising and capacity building. In the following year, teachers held a historic 10-day protest against increased taxes, delayed increments, lack of Social Security payments, and poor school conditions. Other news articles that met the inclusion criteria covered several topics including infrastructure –which encompassed new schools being built, as well as infrastructural issues and environmental hazards in schools– teacher strikes and protests, education policy changes, advocacy campaigns, school fundraisers, school assessments, and fallouts between parents and school managements. These news articles were used to validate key stakeholder interviews and provide deeper context.

One clear example of how the three data sources were triangulated is with the TSC which resulted from the *2010 Belize Education and Training Act*. In leading up to its passage, news stories covered consultations and regular interviews with the Minister of Education who defended it as a way to ensure teacher qualifications and reduce discriminatory practices. News interview transcripts indicate that the managers perceived the TSC as a threat to their authority, to which the Minister of Education responded in a 2009 news story headlined "Faber Defends Teaching Services Commission" when he said: "I am not trying to challenge that supremacy. As you know, I come from a system of the church-state working together very well." The union also expressed concerns about the TSC, noting that while they accepted it in principle, they were unsure how it would work in practice. Despite unresolved arguments surrounding the potential bureaucratic hurdles of the TSC, the bill was passed. The findings largely corroborated with information gathered through key stakeholder interviews and contextualized some respondent claims about the TSC.

Findings from Key Stakeholder Interviews

In following the iterative process outlined in the Methodology, after a first read-through of the transcripts, the first stage of coding produced 76 codes which were grouped into 20 categories. In the second stage, 48 codes were produced and grouped into 12 categories. Further literature was read on emerging phenomena, and theories on alignment served as the basis upon which the final code list was generated. The final stage resulted in 12 codes grouped into the following five thematic categories: Institutional Landscape, Organizational Motivations, Organizational Capacity, Accountability Strategy, and Tensions. Notably, this latter theme overlapped with the others. Analysis of news transcripts within the five themes revealed a few contradictions in respondent claims from the Influencers and Political Actors groups. Even so, they were largely concordant, while members of the other four groups often diverged in opinion on the church-state system. An example of this strong agreement among Influencers can be found in their discussion of school-level factors that affect educational quality as the excerpts below show:

> **I.1:** "The second and I think probably the more significant one [issue] has to do with the schools themselves and the way how the leadership in these schools organize and do their basics" (4).
> **I.2:** "It depends on the leadership. Some take interest. Some don't. You have some managers some local managers that take a lot of interest in their schools… It varies across denominations" (7).
> **I.3:** "Well [pause] I think a part of it is the leadership, and the leadership taking on some of the responsibility and pushing, especially for the overall lifting of the school image, and getting parents more involved, actively involved in the whole school spirit and contributing to the develop of the school. [Confidently] I think part of it was just leadership" (9).

Additionally, it was found that among all respondent groups, the most common areas of discord were the perception of roles, responsibilities, motivations, and interactions in the institutional landscape of Belize's church-state system. This is most pronounced in the comparison of transcripts between *High-level State Officials* as demonstrated by the following excerpts describing the institutional landscape as regulated, unregulated, and poorly regulated, respectively.

> **H.O.1:** "The state would always try to enhance what we are doing at the school level. They would provide training, put regulations in place to ensure that certain things were followed, all for the betterment of students" (1).
> **H.O.2:** "So I think this is still a very (sigh). It is our failure to write the proper kind of legislation to regulate the church state system" (13).

H.O.3: "So on the ground we don't have the –there is the opportunity in terms of the regulations– but the capacity would need to improve in terms of the quality of persons we would need to have in those key positions" (6).

One group that was almost entirely discordant its views was composed of *School Administrators*, who were from a non-denominational and a denominational school. They were often in agreement with secular state actors and churches, respectively, as comparison of the following excerpts describing the nature of the partnership demonstrates.

S.A.1 "I think the main reason is political because no political party wants to really take a stand to see that this practice, we will need to phase it out. Because it is just not working. I think it is just all about politics. No party in power wants to do that because they feel that that will lose the next election for them" (4).

H.O.1 "For political reasons, they want to keep that partnership. Because excluding the church from the school system, some people have said that would be like political suicide… It can be done, but certain aspects of how we are governed ensure that. And you will notice that both political parties will try to keep the churches involved and part of the system" (5).

S.A.2 "[Complaining] Because now they control the curriculum, they control who you hire, who you fire, they control fees, they control school –the opening, when the school closes" (8).

C.M.3 "They make all the decisions. They come up with the handbook of policies and implement it. They come up with memos… And everybody has to be in compliance with all the rules that are there" (15).

For this reason, despite their unique understanding of the education system on the micro level, the views of School Administrators are grouped with their larger counterparts in the thematic breakdown of findings below.

Institutional Landscape

Structure

With the exception of High-Level State Officials, stakeholder perceptions on the institutional landscape of the church-state system were largely aligned within groups and unaligned across groups. There was an almost universal understanding of the legal structure of the partnership as follows: the churches own the schools and manage day-to-day delivery and building maintenance; the state pays teachers, sets policy, and should hold their partners accountable. Opinions diverged, however, in the enactment of these roles. One *High-level State Official* put it:

H.O.3: "The law is very clear on the large role that the managing authority plays. Basically, you're saying that you want to establish a school and you're going to be committing to providing the best possible environment and resources for teachers and students within your school… In practice, it doesn't always happen" (3).

For example, most participants acknowledged that MoE often reluctantly extends more support than is legally mandated due to cross-cutting management failure to upkeep schools.

H.O.2: "We have a relationship. We have a partnership, but it is kind of lopsided, then. A lot of responsibility lies on the government" (5).

Aside from religious representatives, almost all the participants pointed out that the imbalance might be due to widespread public expectation of the government as ultimately responsible and thus obligated to "rescue" schools. For example, some proponents of a full state system of education called the partnership outdated and framed churches' inaction and subsequent appeals for help as forms of "bullying'" or "politics", while others blamed public ignorance of roles and decreasing church capacity to cover maintenance costs. Excerpts that represented this range of views among state officials are presented below:

H.O.1: "The church now clearly has an expectation that if they cry poverty, they can bully the state into meeting the infrastructure cost because in the end it is the ministry that will get the blame because the child won't be able to go to school because they won't have the building" (5).
R4: "Now when anything happens in any school regardless if it is a catholic or government school, everyone looks to the government and expects the government to do something –which is not the government's responsibility. Yes, the government may assist, but it is the responsibility of the management to maintain their schools" (4).
M.O.5: "The proprietor is responsible for that. The Ministry now helps when they really can't… But it's not the Ministry's responsibility to go and fix [a school] because [switches to Kriol] their roof is leaking!" (5).
S.A.1: "Honestly, I can't see those [advantages]. I don't notice it. I don't see it visible at all. Because even in terms of maintaining their buildings, they don't do that. As being around a lot of principals that complain about that fact –like that's the only thing that they are really responsible for" (2).

When juxtaposed with Church Manager transcripts, some of the challenges to fulfil infrastructural responsibilities become immediately apparent –from capacity constraints to the role of individual school leadership to the need for external oversight and differences in understanding the management role.

C.M.3: "The infrastructure breakdown happens when schools are not [pause], when they're not being visited… We have to find donors. We have to seek donors and donors that are willing to take on such projects. See, some of my schools are very, very old. [Anonymized] But we tried to maintain them over the years" (8).

C.M.2: "The problem is oversight to ensure that the goals of government are carried out" (6).

C.M.1: "I am not –the schools themselves are responsible; for example, the schools themselves, they do their fundraising activities… So, for us, it is a matter of the schools helping themselves with their parent-teacher associations and the administrators reaching out to other agencies and get the funding they need to fully run the school" (7).

One Mid-level State Official further developed the argument on the role of individual leadership. They noted that where the partnership does appear to be working is likely due to strong individual action. This link was mentioned in every group except Church Managers.

M.O.2: "The issue in terms of people dropping the ball, it is the progressive and proactive principals who end up assuming the role of management! Those schools that are properly run, nine out of 10 times the management ain't doing Jack Shit! It is the progressive principal who is out there soliciting, writing grant proposals, and getting things done" (5).

Even with consensus that managements increasingly cannot, or will not, meet their legal obligations, several respondents across groups described the partnership as "working" or "working well." Several others described it as "dysfunctional," "not working" or needing to be "revisited." S.A.1 and H.O.1 best account for this discrepancy in their excerpts below.

H.O.1: "Within the higher levels of the ministry what you will hear said is that 'we are supporters of the church-state system; we have to make it function better.' And I think there are some people [anonymized] who off the record would tell you that we have a completely dysfunctional church-state system. But if you tried to raise the conversation should we therefore abolish the church state system completely, that is an outright no. Can't happen, won't happen, never going to happen" (8).

S.A.1: "I don't think it is anything complicated. I don't know that there is any sitting government that would think that the church state system is working but it's just about politics" (4).

Control

Throughout the interview process, variations of the idiom "who pays the piper calls the tune" was used as justification of and, in the case of Church Managers, resignation to the fact that government control has increased while church managements' has been pulled back. The most commonly discussed example among church and state respondents was the role of the TSC in hiring, firing, mobilizing payment, and protecting teachers from discrimination. Nonetheless, observations on denominational managers' receptivity to the TSC were largely inaccurate across state actors. Specifically, Church Managers complained about the state grouping them with less-organized and disinterested single-school managements. They largely perceived increasing government intervention as punishment for mistakes made by those smaller parties. They also acknowledged that discriminatory actions taken by their predecessors in education might be "haunting" them. They finally noted that the government has too much control and used the TSC and Smart Stream payment system as examples of the government undermining their authority by removing sanctioning power and reducing them to "secretaries." Including the School Administrator, for three of the four participants, this was the biggest point of contention:

> **C.M.3:** "We as the church-state believe that the government has too much control over our schools. We are not happy with the control. [Momentary pause] And if you were to put nothing else to submit, that is what I would want to be recorded. We are not happy with the level of control that the government has over the church. And all they do is to pay the teachers" (14).

This contradicted claims from non-denominational respondents that the TSC was a source of relief for managements who have often had teacher personnel issues. Notably, one former church manager, C.M.2, also shared this view.

In the Influencers group, there was consensus that recent changes to the institutional landscape of education has led to a decrease in the power of denominational managements. The respondents gave similar examples of how control has shifted with I.1 and I.2 both citing the establishment of the TSC, the shift to the Smart Stream payment system, and increasing standardization of the school curriculum. Additionally, I.2 and I.3 both discussed the construction of new government schools as increasing government control in education delivery. This was corroborated with the non-technical documents. Other discussed evidence of government control include control over policy decisions and oversight through documentation requirements. Some respondents did note that managements still control how diagnostic school data are used and still have the power to grant approval for school-level interventions. These insights corresponded with observations from other respondents about ways the government has

"pulled back" control from denominational managements. All actors were open about the culture of nepotism, cronyism, and intimidation tactics by both the church and state.

Deductions from teacher salaries as church donations were also regularly mentioned. All actors except the Church Managers disapproved of the deductions, which some politicians and some state officials attributed to a respondent-described "culture of fear."

> **P.A.1:** "Some have said to the teachers specifically: 'You have to pay us this money because this is what pays me.' So, 1. It is unconstitutional. You cannot deduct from a person's salary without their permission. Secondly some of these teachers agree for the deductions to be made, not willingly, not freely, because it is done during interviews… So if they get some of these teachers sign some of these things under duress –I want a job, I need a job, and if that is what it takes me to get a job then I have to do it" (3).

Others from the state more neutrally discussed the issue of tithes unearthed by the Smart Stream payment system, noting that –without a teacher willing to come forward– intervention would mean acting on "hearsay." Notably, many who asserted that the church-state system is working denied a culture of fear. This contradicts with words "bold" and "brave" that they used to describe teachers willing to complain. Linguistic contradictions such as these were common across state actors. Supporting the view that deductions are largely involuntary, several participants noted that, if teachers refuse to donate, schools often make up the money by charging high fees for basic administrative tasks. Deductions were also described as a union bargaining tool to prevent sanctions.

> **H.O.3**: "By law, the managing authorities are supposed to withhold for strikes. And for the first time they did it. Right? And so, there was a lot of push back from the union and having –and the union threatening that they would have teachers withholding support from the managements. Because some managements actually request deductions form teachers' pay" (6).

Organizational Motivations

Within and across respondent groups, there was unanimous agreement that the churches' understanding of the purposes of education is rooted in morality and spirituality, while the state is more concerned with academics and civics. Additionally, most actors accurately pointed out that the original motivation for churches to develop education in Belize was to evangelize the public as this excerpt from I.1 demonstrates:

> **I.1** "And they basically were using schooling as a form of getting converts for their religion. But at the same time, they were via mission –the belief at that time

was that devil and ignorance were synonymous. And if you wanted to win on that front, then education was the key" (7).

Many stakeholders within and across respondent groups disagreed, however, on current organizational aims and on whether the church and state are aligned in their understanding of education. In the Influencer group, I.1's assertion that the church and state are largely aligned in their goals conflicted with observations from another Influencer.

> **I.1:** "So there is a kind of a gap there… Where there might be conflicts in terms of the church-state. But notwithstanding, if you look at the overall system, I think that they share the same set of goals" (6).
> **I.3:** "I think we have some tension there as well in terms of we're not working together and not seeing things as, you know, having the same goal or focus" (6).

The final Influencer was unable to provide clarity on alignment of organizational aims.

> **I.2:** "I wouldn't know. All I know is that the schools follow the curriculum as it's laid out on the ministry website right now" (7).

This was the only contradiction among the Influencers. In the other respondent groups, there were equally some conflicts between respondent statements. Church Managers all agreed that the purpose of education was, most importantly, to provide "a moral base" (C.M.2 and C.M.6) and spiritual development. As the denominational school leader put it:

> **S.A.2** "We are all teaching more than just education, academics, and content. It's making better citizens for our world. It's making our students more compassionate, more kind, less violent, more faithful and converting; conversion, bringing them closer to Jesus. That is the big, that's what's in it for the church" (9).

Only one representative of the church management directly contrasted this purpose with ministry aims, observing differences in how education is understood between the partners.

> **C.M.3:** "It is an evangelism tool that we use. And we believe that the church is the only place that can offer the moral guidance that we need for our society today. So, although the ministry's objective is to make sure that our people get the best quality education. The church works, agrees with that, accepts that and works towards that as well. But also offers the spiritual guidance that we believe society needs" (9).

C.M.3 also noted that previous church representation during multi-stakeholder consultations are not representative of these generally held denominational views as education policy no longer reflects and preserves the moral and spiritual functions of education. Findings from the government were less black and white. Most state respondents felt that faith is important in education, stating that MoE promoted a Christian value-driven philosophy of education. For some participants, this meant that they believed the church and state have the same education goals. For others, this meant that they sympathized with the church perspective, but acknowledged its conflict with the state's human rights obligations. Respondent views in this thematic area emerged most richly in discussions on public reports of moral conflicts in education, such as the cases of children being removed from school based on uniform violations, the Roches v. Wade verdict, and a recent case of a teacher who the church management tried and failed to fire after sensitive pictures of her were leaked. These various nuances are best captured in the following excerpt from a High-Level Official summarizing the core tension:

> **H.O.1:** "What this comes down to is the state understands education from a human rights perspective –at least on paper... So that is what brings together the Maria Roches case, or sex education, or [anonymized] or whatever it is. That students have a right to this information. Students have a right not to be discriminated against because of -and then you can insert a whole lot of things. Students have a right to equal provision. Students have a right to express themselves. But the churches don't necessarily approach education from a human rights perspective. And a lot of this has to do with tension between a human rights interpretation and a church-based interpretation" (11).

Most respondents agreed that these differences, while fundamental, are not irreconcilable, and the system can only work when these are acknowledged and there is compromise.

Organizational Capacity and Accountability

Discussions on organizational capacity concerned resource availability, constraints, and political influences on schools, government, and managements. The political climate was a commonly cited factor in organizational capacity with concordance among respondent groups that unions now play a strong role in the envisioning of education and that state actions are influenced by potential political ramifications. Funding was also heavily cited. Discussions on perceived and actual state resources revealed a pattern of dramatic budget cuts to quality mechanisms. Political will was also discussed throughout interviews as the main reason the education system lacks an effective accountability strategy. Notably, two participants from the church and one from the state claimed that there was a strong framework of accountability in place; of those

three, two named the District Education Centers (DECs) the entities responsible for classroom observation and quality. Everyone else pointed to the Management, specifically the LM, as responsible for ensuring quality on the micro level. Several respondents problematized this as LMs are often non-Belizean church leaders, and even when they are aided by retired teachers serving as assistants, they are usually unfamiliar with updated rules. There is no oversight for this role, as one state official noted:

> **H.O.1:** "The real power there is the local manager and the local manager is the church manager, even though legally the local manager doesn't exist" (3).

Many also disapproved that most managers are unpaid. Importantly, across respondent groups and under the theme of accountability, the LM was almost unanimously identified as the "bottleneck" or "flaw" in the system. Despite these discrepancies on micro-level quality, most respondents agreed that lack of political will is the main culprit in macro-level accountability. The most common example was reluctance to amalgamate and close schools, which the following excerpt succinctly captures:

> **M.O.1:** "Um [sighs], what action will they take? Write them a letter? Sanction them? Tell them they will take away their school? That can be done, but who will do it? It is usually a case in Belize of 'who will bell the cat?' When the tough decisions that we need to be made it is usually passed around" (8).

Respondents noted that schools are also used to gain "political mileage" (M.O.3), as, commonly, area representatives or aspiring area representatives step-in to save schools.

> **P.A.1**: "Throughout the political cycle, persons who come around campaigning are persons who you know, they will remind you: 'Remember that this person did this' –and it is– our children are used as political pawns. The education system is being used for that. They will not admit it, but it is so."

Additionally, examples of political cycles affecting the envisioning of education were presented as the following excerpt describing the union's role illustrates:

> **S.A.2:** "They go to BNTU. Agree with BNTU and then tell [anonymized] the law will change, and this is what we've been hearing. The law will change and that effective August you will have to pay teachers their 30%. You know, so it, it puts a real strain on the relationship and that is where we are right now –[sighs] very worried… Election is coming around. We don't want them to make election promises that will create difficulty for us, you know? So, it's a challenge I'm telling you" (9).

Denominational actors were also acutely aware of resource constraints, citing diminishing funding sources due to increasing secularization, decreasing international aid, and fixed school fees. They also raised issue with the TSC for taking too long to approve replacement and substitute teachers and not paying for teachers' time spent in the classroom before approval had been granted. Some state officials acknowledged this bureaucratic difficulty and recommended that managements be "creative" (M.O.2) in finding replacements. Managers also complained that they now lack sanctioning power to withhold salaries and fire teachers, which undermines respect and teacher quality. They noted further that accountability measures often meant increased documentation, even at the cost of student safety and comfort. They also stated that because the TSC compared the strength of arguments and evidence from managers with that of teachers, they felt they had to be attorneys. These arguments are most concisely explained below:

> **S.A.2**: "I have had my peers share with me cases where a teacher is in a relationship with a student, but they cannot prove it… The student says yes. The commission says you need to prove that the teacher did it. [Uses Kriol] If you can't prove by DNA or by semen tests or –then we can't call this man guilty until you can prove he's guilty. So he gets to keep his job. [Uses English] And so it's been very difficult to terminate people because they almost have to have a legal, like a legal case. Which, you know, creates difficulty for us who are school leaders, but we are generally teachers. We are teachers that came up through the ranks, noh?" (4).

In discussing evidence-based decision-making, several respondents also criticized MoE for only just informing schools, after several years of unmonitored spending, that they must report how per-student grants are being spent. Some managers questioned this new requirement, considering it another example of "a lot more bureaucracy and a lot more paperwork" (S.A.2 6). Another frequently mentioned constraint on capacity was the strong political power of the BNTU. Managers complained about agreements between them and the government increasing education costs and teacher power. One Mid-Level State Official confirmed this observation:

> **M.O.4:** "The last time that the ministry agreed that the, that same, um, 11-day strike time, the managements cried about that because every time the salary goes up, they have to find the increase on their end" (12).

To combat this, the denominational managements have recently activated a joint-staff committee, through which they hope to resolve some of the tensions emerging from the "push and pull" (I.2) of the church and state in education:

S.A.2: "And right now that's why as I said, GAMAS for us is the hope, because we think they have to come on the scene because so far the government and union have been acting as if they control the system" (10).

Finally, discussions on accountability pointed to examinations as the diagnostic of the system. Respondents also mentioned a lack of parental involvement, the misuse of data in envisioning and improving the delivery of education, and the lack of public access to whole-school diagnostic information. Notably, when asked, most respondents were unable to pinpoint who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that students are learning, as the following illustrates:

M.O.4: "You just touched on one of the most SENSITIVE areas of the working relationship between institutions and the government of Belize, or the Ministry of Education... The question you asked, though, is a key one because whenever we meet as Ministry personnel, compliance has been a big topic. And compliance is only like one facet of what you asked. Because it's more than compliance you're talking about. You're talking about a shift in culture. And that, I don't even know if the government of Belize through the work of the Ministry of Education can easily engineer that shift" (7).

Interestingly, five of the respondents from inside and outside of the system reframed the question through the idiom "who will bell the cat", citing that as the crucial problem undermining alignment between the church and state.

Summary of Findings

Following Verger *et al*. recommendation to explore the institutional dynamics of partnerships in context before extrapolating concepts, elements of Belize's education system relevant to this study's political economy framework were first explored. Based on the triangulation of findings, Belize's historical faith-based partnership is defined by per-teacher subsidies at the primary school level and per-student subsidies at the secondary school level. The administrative and state roles are legally defined with the largely denominational administrators managing the delivery of education (budget, staffing, environment & infrastructure, curriculum delivery, M&E, support), while the state sets rules and regulations, grants licenses, defines the curriculum, pays teachers and pays grants, provides supervision support, and holds managements and schools accountable. However, in practice, there is regular overlap in the infrastructural and M&E roles. Perceived vulnerability of the ruling elite is particularly significant in understanding motivations underlying decision-making (Khan). In Belize, this vulnerability is exemplified by findings on instances of political influence and interference in the system. Crucially,

BNTU's bargaining power has risen, greatly influencing how the state envisions and delivers education. Additionally, the state's willingness to act is severely restricted by potential backlash from the politically strong union and churches. Overall, the church and state face resource challenges –the state through its increasingly costly obligations to cover salaries and scholarships, and the church through dwindling sources of donations and a culture of secularization.

Misalignment is apparent in how the church and state envision education. The philosophies and goals of the church and state are fundamentally different. The churches define the purpose of education as tools for evangelization and moral development, while the state believes it should be a tool for academic, personal, and civic development. Most significantly, the church's morality perspective directly conflicts with the state's human rights perspective. In sum, although they are largely misaligned in the envisioning of the purpose of education, they are aligned in their goal to improve the quality of education delivery. In terms of cohesion, Belize's education system is marked by an expressed commitment by actors to work together within the church-state system while acting as separate entities with their own beliefs. As noted by respondents, the culture of maintaining the *statu quo*, the lack of accountability, and poor communication point to a poor cohesion and misalignments in both the envisioning and delivery of education. This is exemplified by, among other factors mentioned above, the budget cuts and the reluctance to sanction and closedown consistently underperforming schools. Misalignment is also visible in the accountability strategy underlying the church-state partnership. Many actors described the system as "name and shame", but as the state holds sanctioning power and receives in-depth diagnostic information, Belize is instead structured as a high accountability, low transparency, or "trust the government" system where the government is responsible to sanction the school. Nevertheless, the reluctance to exercise these accountability measures, coupled with the devolution of teacher sanctioning to an independent body, the TSC, indicates that the state is practicing a low transparency, low accountability, or "trust the market" system.

The Formal Economy of Education

As noted in the findings, the church and state have different expectations for education, with the former viewing education as an evangelical tool for moral and spiritual enrichment and the latter for civic and economic means. This aligns with literature on faith-based partnerships (Walford, 1995). Findings also illustrate that the legal framework of the church-state partnership has evolved over the last two decades through controversial laws, policies, strategies, and one significant court case. That court case, Roches v. Wade in 2004, due to its precedents, may have been a catalyst for what some interviewees described as an increasing prioritization of human rights over

Christian morality. The reporters covering the judgement also noted this shift. Interestingly, in online polls conducted by the news station, most respondents disagreed with the church's value-driven viewpoint on pregnancy out of wedlock. This supports respondent observation of increasing secularization affecting the funding, lobbying power, and community culture in denominational schools –a phenomenon that is acknowledged in wider literature on faith-based PPPs (Judge; Walford, 1995).

Other notable points on the formal economy of education involve the TSC, the creation of which signals a serious shift in the church-state relationship and, perhaps, a reduction of managements' agency. It might also signal a reduction of trust which is crucial in PPPs (Aslam *et al*.). As demonstrated in the findings, this pulling back of management authority may have created a power vacuum which helped bolster union power, and as managements enact their own lobbying group, it will be interesting to see if it will help balance out BNTU influence and help realign the church and state in the envisioning of education.

The Informal Economy of Education

Many education systems in the developing world are characterized by a strong informal economy (Hickey & Hossain). In Belize this is best exemplified by the significant role of the LM who, as described by respondents, exists outside of the law. As they operate outside of the formal education system, LMs are not regulated and many are unfamiliar with the education system, hold other jobs that they prioritize, and in some cases do not speak the official language of instruction –English. They are also not a part of the formal information flow between the state and its church partners. Crucially, the LM was identified by most respondents as the actor ultimately responsible for ensuring curriculum delivery and supporting student learning as well as providing on-the-ground oversight of the school environment and practices. Most respondents problematized this "flaw" in the system describing LMs as the primary source of teacher discrimination and frustration, as well as infrastructural decay. In-depth news coverage on infrastructural school problems also made this link. For example, coverage on the most widely cited and recent example of school-level breakdown, Holy Angels RC Primary School, revealed that the Catholic LM ignored principal reports on the school's leaking ceiling, bat infestation, and other glaring infrastructural issues because, as he purported, it was not his responsibility. As his role does not legally exist, and as he is a priest paid by the church, he is virtually unsanctionable. Importantly, the Catholic Management was not held accountable, and the state and wider community contributed to repair costs, giving further credence to the finding that the system operates on a low accountability model as described by Finn *et al*.

Another problematic practice in the informal economy which undermines accountability in the system is, as noted in conversations with actors from participant

groups, the issue of tithes through salary deductions which allegedly exceeds 10% in some cases. Denominational managers were open about the difficulties in securing these donations after the government streamlined teacher payment, but still framed them as voluntary. Furthermore, some actors alleged that this unregulated funding source is, at times, used as a bargaining mechanism between the teachers and their managements. For example, it was claimed that reporting and sanctioning teachers could result in withholding deductions, potentially undermining school-level accountability measures such as the teacher appraisal forms, through which increments are approved, as well as macro-level checks on the union from withholding salary payments during strikes and demonstrations. Additionally, if teachers refuse to donate to schools voluntarily, the money is often made up through charging exorbitant fees for basic administrative tasks. Importantly, several state respondents cited this as an example of how the churches financially benefit from education –a claim which interviewed church managements denied. According to participants, other elements of the informal economy include the "backdoor" of teacher firing by creating hostile work environments, nepotism and cronyism, and financial corruption by both the churches and the state.

Implications and Limitations

From these instances of tensions, conflicts, and misalignment in the areas of how education is envisioned and delivered, it is apparent to both key stakeholders and to this researcher that the partnership is unsustainable in its current form. If this continues to be unaddressed, the partnership will continue to be strained, schools will continue to degrade, and students will continue to learn less than they should. It is, however, unclear that this *statu quo* can be maintained during imminent changes that could potentially catalyze change in the partnership. In the lead up to the 2020 elections, with politicians vulnerable and the union very strong, managements are fearful that promises will be made to enforce the 30 % benefits which they have not been paying, and which they are likely unable to afford. As such, the partnership will either have to be restructured or there will need to be significant changes to funding of teachers and/or schools. Additionally, the creation of the joint committee for denominational managements introduces a new lobbying power to potentially balance the unions in influencing education. If successful, the diminishing agency of church-partners in education might be slowed and perhaps reversed –assuming the perceived trend of secularization can be overcome.

Due to the time and access constraints, although this study included representatives from church schools, it was unable to include the views of church leaders, which likely would provide a more robust understanding of the denominational perspective. For this same reason, teachers and school-level administrators were also not well-represented. Further studies could approach alignment from the perspectives of actors on-

the-ground to increase understanding of the political economy factors affecting educational envisioning and delivery in Belize's church-state system. Finally, further studies on the political economy of education in other former colonies in the Caribbean could begin to pattern common alignments and misalignments in faith-based partnerships in the developing world.

Recommendations

Based on these implications, it is recommended that the state publicly addresses the need to restructure the partnership, perhaps by contracting out management services in low performing schools and amalgamating or closing schools with multi-grade classrooms. Based on interview transcripts and news analysis, both of these options are being considered but unlikely. As indicated in the findings, even with consensus on the tangible constraints, there were significant differences of opinion on whether the government could maintain a completely state-run education system. Notably, many respondent answers linked strongly to their philosophical beliefs with those believing that the church and state should be separated also asserting that the state could take over. Those who disagreed, tended to assert either that the state lacked the human and financial resources required, or that they lacked political will, or both. Due to low education commitment with politically viable short-term actions prioritized, coupled with low church and state capacity, it is unlikely that any but the most elite denominational schools and none but the most remote government schools could survive a separation of the church and state.

Nevertheless, if the partnership is committed to, there needs to be more trust in denominational partners to manage their schools. One suggested way is by reinstating some of the power on hiring, firing, and teacher conduct. Compromises can include providing short-term probation periods as buffers for the TSC review and approval process which would allow for schools to be adequately staffed. Additionally, reinstating management discretion in firing teachers whom students identify as predators, or against whom parents protest, would likely restore some trust and help realign the state and its church partners in their dual education roles. Moreover, allowing managements to have more control in staffing might increase school cohesion, which has been identified as a key strength of faith-based schools (Parra & Wodon).

Finally, whether or not more trust is placed in the managements, there needs to be more reliable accountability. One way to increase accountability is to legally clarify the role of the LM in education. Another simpler, if less effective, option is to publicize whole-school results using several indicators such as examination performance, repetition and drop-out rates, infrastructural supports for those with disabilities, remedial academic support, and other support services. As Finn *et al.* recommend, the public transparency of these latter-most indicators could be tied to financial grants, such as the SAN and SEN

provisions in the funding formula, with those receiving more funding having more documentation obligations.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to understand whether the church and state in Belize's education system are effectively working together to plan and deliver quality education through their faith-based partnership. Guided by this purpose, the following research question was posed: is there alignment between the church and the state in the envisioning and delivery of education in Belize? By triangulating technical and non-technical documents with key stakeholder interviews, alignment and coherence were explored through the lens of the political economy of education. Specifically, inefficiencies in the system were identified through thematic analysis. Through this process, alignment was identified in how the roles of the church and state are legally understood, their overarching goal to improve educational quality, their reliance on the informal economy of education, and their political constraints by increased union power. Misalignment, however, predominates the partnership due to role overlap in M&E and infrastructural maintenance, their conflicting philosophies and goals of education, their stated commitment to the partnership conflicting with their actions, and their understanding of accountability in education. In sum, there is some alignment between the church and the state in the envisioning and delivery of education, but resource scarcity, poorly defined roles, and competing interests, among other challenges, largely pull the actors out of alignment with education goals. As the current political cycle comes to an end and a new one begins under mounting union pressure to enforce the coverage of teacher pensions and gratuities, there is a need to finally address the church-state education system in Belize. As several respondents summed, it is just a matter of who will bell the cat.

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