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Global school relationships. School linking and future challenges

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Alison Leonard

Global School relationships

School Linking and future challenges

Abstract: The process of School Linking has attained a raised profile in UK Development Education circles in recent years. This paper reviews recent literature and issues¹. It sets out to answer these research questions: What is the interest in North-South School Links for people in the North and the South and what are possible contradictions? How is the School Linking process currently evaluated? Arising from these research questions, the concluding section seeks to identify the challenges for further Links and potential research topics in the field.

Zusammenfassung: Schulpartnerschaftsarbeit zwischen Nord und Süd hat in den letzten Jahren im Kontext des Globalen Lernens in Großbritannien an Profil gewonnen. In diesem Beitrag wird ein Überblick über die aktuelle Diskussion gegeben. Zudem werden Forschungsfragen thematisiert: Was sind Interessen und Ziele in der Schulpartnerschaftsarbeit und was sind mögliche Widersprüche dieser Arbeit? Wie wird diese Arbeit evaluiert? Anschließend werden die zukünftigen Herausforderungen dieser Arbeit benannt.

Introduction

Estimates suggest there are currently between 1000 and 1700 UK schools participating in links with 'Southern' schools almost all located in Commonwealth nations which are former British colonies, predominantly African². Schools have numerous reasons for developing such relationships. UK schools' reasons include firstly specific development

of new teaching resources and materials for classroom use, generally to enhance learning about global issues. Secondly, links are established as part of wider educational initiatives, to foster improved understanding of diaspora communities, ethnicity and multi-culturalism in the UK, and to challenge stereotypical beliefs and prejudices. Thirdly, they are established to develop a sense of global citizenship. Finally, links are founded to build relationships, friendships and real, personal contacts, and from a desire to help Southern partners. For Southern schools the main reasons for involvement are not significantly different. Resource gain from the North, an emphasis on learning from and about the North, and cross-cultural learning are more frequently stressed by Southern partners. Qualitative benefits to UK pupils' learning range from developing empathy for those in developing countries to grasping abstract concepts. Knowledge and understanding from authentic sources, developing a rounded perspective of development, a greater immediacy in learning, openness to development issues and motivation for pupils to take action in their everyday lives are also gained (Fricke, 2006; Knowles, 2000).

It is important to clarify what is meant by a School Link before two research questions can be addressed. The context in which the term is used here is a School Link refers to a link between schools in the UK and Africa, Asia, Latin America or the Caribbean. Such links can be informal or part of a more formally structured arrangement. This definition was arrived at after reviewing current publications of the British Council, the official agency principally responsible for helping UK schools to establish School Links and after in consultation with Mike Carrick, former Membership Secretary of the UK One World Linking Association (UKOWLA).

Figure 1 summarises aspects of the School Linking process which indicate whether schools enjoy and participate in a link, or have developed their relationship into a partnership.

Based on the experiences of Southern and UK participants in the School Linking process, this paper sets out to answer two research questions: What is the interest in North-South School Links for people in the North and the South and where are possible contradictions? And, how is the process of School Linking currently evaluated?

Interest in North-South School Links for people in the North and the South

The process of schools forming relationships between the economically developing or Southern and economically

School Link	School Partnership
Time scale/sustainability Short term or long term	Long term
School Personnel Limited A few key 'missionary' linkers	Integrated across teaching staff, School Management and wider School Community
Pupils' or students' involvement Limited aware of link	Universally aware
Nature of activities Project Data sharing Subject specific Resource donation	Integrated across School curriculum School exchanges Joint resource creation
Reciprocity Reciprocity and equality of decision making may be aspired to.	Reciprocity and equality of decision making aspired to Junior and senior or equal partners.

Figure 1: A School Linking Continuum⁴ (Leonard 2007)

developed or Northern parts of the world can be fraught with difficulty or even controversy. An association between schools, described as a School Link, can encompass a wide range of participants and phases in education, from early years (under 5) and primary (first stage compulsory education) through to secondary (aged 11 and over). A School Link can explore aspects of learning and understanding, beyond the confines of the taught curriculum: these might include developing an awareness of the richness of the other's culture; enjoying the opportunity offered by an exchange visit; pupils and teachers talking together as equals, potentially developing personal friendships or actively sharing new experiences. 'What's in a name?' may appear an insignificant aspect of these relationships, yet until educational researchers, policy makers and practitioners can agree on how they perceive these relationships at a basic level it is likely that misunderstandings, misleading applications, misconceptions or the persistence of outmoded models of such relationships may continue. Must all links be long-term, fully reciprocal partnerships embedded in the curriculum? According to the UK's British Council these are critical aspects of any School Link. If these characteristics are not demonstrated do the parties involved not have a link? Whitehead (2006) argues we should value outcomes from short-term associations, not just long-term links, and effective links need not be embedded in the curriculum. Doe (2007) conducted an audit "for as many UK international school links as could be found: tracing 1,667 overseas partnerships in 1,310 UK schools involving 105 different countries". What remains uncertain is the status of the associations he traced. Why does this matter? If we are to evaluate the Linking process it is important that researchers can construct representative samples for their analysis; if we can't agree on how many such links exist, it is very hard to ensure this in our methodology. Doe's audit implies that little has changed since Leonard's request to confirm total numbers of links known to the British Council elicited the response: "There are currently 960 schools on the database. Not all of them are active. I will say that the number of secondary schools will be between 40 and 50%. Unfortunately the database is not able to produce such stats (Oluwole, 2003)." Ukwola refers insistently to school 'links' in its literature, and is careful to justify why many such associations can not automatically be defined as partnerships, a point argued forcefully by Gaines (2006): "I think School Linking has dangers. It runs the risk of being superficial, or patronising, or short-lived, or uncritically benevolent... It runs the risk of reinforcing things as they are."

Several observers warn that School Links could be left behind educationally, representing archaic, paternalistic, outmoded attitudes to development. Development Education in the twenty first century aims to raise awareness and understanding of how the global affects the local, how individuals, communities and societies affect the global, exploring global debates and concepts, such as interconnectedness, globalisation and interdependence. Particular care must be given to clarity in the application of School Linking terminology. Within the classifications lurk dilemmas which cannot lie dormant if we want the Linking process to sit alongside, complement and facilitate these big global debates, to seize the potential for good which Linking could engender. Is it a backward step

to claim that when a Southern school embraces the opportunities offered by an association with a Northern one, they enjoy a partnership? If we apply the term partner loosely to schools whose associations are merely links are we glossing over uncomfortable evidence that schools may be far from equal? Martin (2007) exemplified this potential power-imbalance: "First you came to us as missionaries, then you came to us as colonizers, now you come to us as linkers" (Quoted from a Ukwola conference participant in 2002). Taking the 'global dimension' into difficult debates which Bourn (2006) challenged Development Educators to explore, participants must respond to notions of educational change and tackle controversial, contentious issues. Proponents are seeking to develop a re-imaged concept; might School Linking be left behind? Disney (2004), Martin (2007) and Andreotti (2006 and 2007) all warn of this danger.

Yet Southern schools may still be willing to participate in such Links, as may Northern counterparts. To carelessly apply the term "partnership" devalues those relationships which are genuine "partnerships". Bourn (op. cit.) and Hicks' (2005) pleas for Development Educators' application of greater conceptual clarity and rigour must be evident in our application of Linking terminology. If we are describing Links in which we acknowledge that parties do not enjoy equality, that common goals are not necessarily intrinsic to the association, yet valuable educational opportunities can develop and pupils, teachers and members of the wider school community can explore global concepts such as interdependence, citizenship and stewardship, diversity, sustainable development, social justice, values and perceptions and human rights⁶, why perversely claim that a 'partnership' exists? Why not apply the term 'School Link' and acknowledge that until the financial element of the relationship and the role of linked schools in decision making is one of equality it is unhelpful, inappropriate and misleading to claim they enjoy a partnership?

Establishing the agreed purposes and criteria for the Linking Process, identifying distinctions between types of Linking relationships, adapting of the Linking process model to avoid stagnation and clarifying whose values are appropriate when selecting criteria for evaluation are important aspects of understanding the status and motivation for Northern and Southern schools in the Linking process. Controversy can persist, possibly restricting the progress of a School Link along a Linking continuum, but perhaps schools should decide for themselves if they can accommodate such contradictions.

Evaluating the School Linking process

"How do we avoid, what we call in the trade, just an enthusiastic 'victory narrative' without a robust evidence base?" (Gaines, 2006, p11). Several aspects of evaluating School Links will be pursued here: How does Linking impact pupils' learning? What time-scale should be used to judge the impacts of School Links? Is there a controversy in the identification of effective School Links? What evaluation exists at the Southern end of Global School Links? Finally, is there a need for comparative analysis of different types of School Links?



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Impacts on pupils' learning

Advocates of School Linking (Benn, 2006; Brown, 2005; Knowles, 2000; Leftwich, 2006; Short, 1999) celebrate benefits for participating Northern pupils, however there is little literature focused on empirical analysis. Leonard's research in British schools (2004 and 2005) revealed that some statistically significant differences in pupil learning about Development Issues did occur when schools formed educational alliances, although her analysis failed to distinguish between Linked schools at different stages on a School Linking continuum. The quality of teaching and learning in the "Global Dimension" was affected positively by the presence of a School Link. However, proponents may be disappointed by some learning outcomes, such as the persistence of pupils' perceived Development stereotypes. Her analysis was restricted to pupils studying Geography at Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14) and therefore its claimed impacts were narrowly

defined. Williams (2006) queried: "Was it the links that made the difference or were these linked schools predisposed to a greater commitment in this area anyway?"

There remains a need to investigate further the nature of impacts of the Linking process, not only on the quality of pupil learning but on wider aspects, including those on teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) and the transfer of understanding gained to the wider community in which Linked Schools sit, at both ends of a North/South Link, as advocated by Burr (2003 and 2006): "Linking provides a unique opportunity for young people to engage with, and learn from, others. It can facilitate direct involvement in an issue... It can help to broaden horizons, stimulate involvement and most importantly provide young people with a voice and make them aware that they, themselves, can effect change. The benefits of Linking are often clear for schools in the 'North', but for Southern partners the benefits are not so clear and each link needs to be considered carefully."

Assessing the impact of the Linking process

The need for an evidence base is forcefully advocated by several commentators (Doe, 2007; Egan, 2006; Fricke, 2006; Gaines, op cit; Heyes, 2006; Leonard, op cit and Schirmer, 2006) to underpin future policies, including best practice

advice for linkers. We need to pursue a range of participants over a longer time-scale than has presently been attempted: beyond pupils and teaching staff currently in Linked schools. Should we know, for example, how participation in School Exchanges and study visits subsequently impacts on pupils, teachers and other participants? Such long-term follow-up of Linking participants is more difficult than present procedures, yet it should not be ignored. If we are to understand how the link impacts on participants over time, is there also a need to assess the financial efficacy of different elements and manifestations of the Linking process?

The majority of the existing evidence base is of short-term impacts of the Linking process, often conducted in response to requirements imposed by funders of Linking initiatives⁸. Does such evaluation pose difficult, controversial, contentious questions about the Linking process? If negative responses could be seen to threaten future participation in an alliance which brings educational advantages and possibly financial benefits, will participants' positive criticisms be recorded

officially, or might they remain unvoiced, for fear of threatening the Linking process? Such a potential compromise of the evaluative process is probably most likely to apply at the Southern end of a schools' global link, since the fund-holder certainly for links supported by Global Schools Partnership (GSP) is the Northern partner⁹. How can this encourage reciprocity in a Linking relationship? Is there an inherent risk that Southern participants may feel compelled to minimise formative criticism demonstrating neocolonialism? (Andreotti, 2007) Could this hinder a Link's progress towards equality in decision-making and movement along the Linking-Partnership continuum?

A large scale two year evaluation of School Linking in England and Wales was initiated in Autumn 2006¹⁰. Amongst its intended outcomes are a mini report on 'the state of the field', and a full report on 'how school partnerships influence schools'. It remains to be seen whether this study will create the 'robust evidence base' Gaines and others seek; will interviewees feel able to be objective in their responses? Might the data collection replicate the 'short-termism' of much existing evaluation? Is there a danger that another 'victory narrative' emerges?

Controversy in identifying Effective School Links

Six potentially controversial aspects of Global School Relationships will be considered: whose values are selected in evaluation? Is 'action' a desirable outcome of the Linking process? Is equality possible, desirable or essential? Who benefits from the Linking process and is reciprocity necessary? Can School Links result in 'thin', superficial understanding and how are the impacts of Linking relationships isolated from pre-existing dispositions?

How to assess participation in Linking relationships can be viewed as a values-laden conundrum; whose values or perceptions matter? Educators conducting action research, and reflective classroom teachers, refine their planning in the light of observed, sometimes unintended learning outcomes. This is promoted as good practice. If School Linking participants similarly refine projects, personnel or practices, straying from planned, agreed criteria, does that diminish the Linking process? Are the views of all pupils and others in a Link canvassed, or is evaluation restricted to teachers or even Linking coordinators? Are long-term influences considered at all?

The dilemma of participants taking positive action is often central to School Linking relationships (Andreotti, 2006; Disney, 2006; Doe, 2007; Fricke, 2006; Leftwich, 2006; Martin, 2006; Osler, 1994; Williams, 2006) the educational drive for Northern pupils to "play an active role as future citizens and members of society" is identified by Martin as central to "why there is controversy over School Linking". Are such effects potentially reinforcing paternalism? Scandinavian participants are so wary of such outcomes that fundraising for Linked schools is not permitted. If such stringent constraints were imposed on all School Links would some Northern or Southern participants still engage in the Linking process? If a Link is effective at improving resources, and benefits schools, is that a desirable outcome, mutual benefit, charity in practice or is it creating a dependency relationship? Leftwich evaluated her School Link¹¹. She explored impacts on students and how CPD

contributes to personal, departmental and school developments at the Northern end. Her major concern was: Equality whilst remaining ever aware of the cultural differences and emphases. All grants are led by the Northern partner and the grants are all Northern created and written as well.

What evaluation exists at the Southern end of Global School Links?

Doe identified similar concerns are shared by Southern educationalists, particularly, when schools form *ad hoc* links, through measures such as DfID's Global Gateway: "Success ... depends on the perception of mutual benefit ... suspicion was expressed by some that the expansion of UK school partnerships was intended to enrich the UK curriculum rather than benefit schools in partner countries." He referred specifically to South African assessments, one questioning "if there was any real benefit from North-South partnerships – particularly those based on the idea of exporting first-world technical expertise to the expertise-poor"¹², while another regretted that political rhetoric was not matched by current Linking practices. Williams' evaluation, (op cit)¹³ again examined Linking outcomes for Northern students. He found that Linking events generated a 'thin' understanding of Development Issues, alluded to by Bourn (2006) "we can say that there was an impact on the older students", but there remained an inherent difficulty identifying exactly what had caused the change in attitude his students reported. It would appear that this dilemma might compromise other researchers' efforts to isolate and distinguish impacts of School Linking from pre-existing dispositions. Andreotti (2006) argues that if we fail to examine the complex "web of cultural and material local/global processes and contexts" we may end up promoting a "civilizing mission", reproducing colonial power relations. She advocates moving towards an approach based on critical literacy and independent thinking, which crystallized into the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) initiative, a methodology for the introduction of global issues and perspectives in education and potentially a new pedagogy for Development Education (Alexander, 2005).

Writing in the context of projects which could help to break down perceptions of the "ThirdWorld or South as a monolithic bloc", Osler (1994) raised eight questions before such projects should begin, three directly related to funding issues. She also encapsulated a challenge for teachers as educators, which Andreotti's methodology relies upon, claiming educators need to "recognize that the deficiencies of our own education" may compromise efforts to become effective development educators, warning further of dangers if teachers fail to address questions of development at an adult level.

Comparative analysis of Global School relationships

Perhaps future School Links may be part of multi-agency relationships, requiring a financial commitment by participants to maintain the relationship. Such models already exist, (Link Community Development (LCD), 2006; Whitehead, 2006) yet DfID's policy currently conspires against these initiatives dove-tailing with other DfID educational projects

funded in Southern countries. Is this compromising the most effective application of funding?

School Linking, by its nature, frequently strays into the complexities of North and South relations. Should funding be focused on empowering teachers and monitoring the outcomes of their CPD, rather than on promoting pupil to pupil involvement? A further controversial aspect of School Links, is where they are located in the South. Several researchers question whether a desire for Northern participants to communicate with the Southern end using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) may skew the location of Southern participants to locations in urban areas, which enjoy such facilities, possibly further disadvantaging educational provision in Southern rural areas (Cutler, 2005; Petersen, 2005). Petersen was not constrained by Northern 'anti-assistance' rhetoric; arguing that wider participation and benefit from observed improvements in teaching and enthusiasm and participation from pupils could result.

Funding ICT provision in Southern schools may represent a laudable aspect of a Global School relationship, but could it be viewed as 'technological paternalism'? How many outdated, 'cast-off', unused Personal Computers, for example, lie languishing in Southern schools, shipped and donated by Northern participants? Do Northern donors research implications before donating equipment?

A School Link isn't essential to developing your pupils as global citizens. School Linking shouldn't be developed simply to tick the box marked 'global citizenship' (Temple, March 31st 2006, p 14).

Martin (2006) forcefully warns against Linking as a 'panacea' for Global Citizenship. Like Fricke and Temple (2006) she cautions against School Links which "quickly become educationally meaningless", but concludes the process "can be challenging in an exciting and enjoyable way for all involved". She reviews how different ideologies and values affect School Linking, suggesting that the driving forces for the process provide their own cultural, political, ideological and educational contexts and "this is where some of the tensions begin". Martin urges clarity in the educational reasons for linking; claiming teachers should engage with and question their own assumptions and values about Development Issues, echoing other researchers' advice that learning takes time and is "profoundly affected by different cultural expectations". She does, however, cite Scott's work (2005) indicating that when participants have incompatible value-sets learning can be particularly useful if teachers and pupils then challenge their prejudices and reassess their views, but cautions that intercultural contact does not necessarily lead to this type of learning.

Multi-agency¹⁴ and cross-phase Links- combining primary and secondary schools and Institutions of Higher Education and Teacher Training- may prove more effective relationships than the "North/South" Links which dominated the last thirty years of UK School Linking (Colgan, 2004; Egan, 2006; Newell-Jones, 2005; Stevens, 2004; Whitehead, 2006). Perhaps traditional bilateral models of Linking should be rethought; South/South, (Doe, op cit) North/North and urban/rural models (Heyes, 2006; Komeja, 2006) deserve evaluation. A financial commitment incurred by Northern participants, to ensure the

maintenance of School Links could prove useful in promoting long term developments in a Linking relationship.

Conclusion and future challenges

Practitioners, supporters, policy makers and researchers should apply care in how they define school associations. In defining terminology for the School Linking process a continuum of relationships is proposed: participants may embark on a link, which can develop into a partnership – but even then the association may have junior and senior, rather than equal partners. There remains a need for the educational research community to create an evidence base on effectiveness of a variety of Linking relationships; to investigate further the nature of Linking impacts, not only on the quality of pupil learning but on wider aspects, including those of teachers CPD and examine its reach into the wider community; Southern evaluations are notably lacking and should be prioritised.

To pursue a large-scale longitudinal study of the School Linking process an opportunity exists for researchers to revisit the 516 participants established under the auspices of the "On the Line" project (Atchison, 2001; Leonard, 2004; Moore, 1999; Temple, 2006). It would be interesting to evaluate the evolution of new links between Irish Schools and their Southern partners; since historically many Irish/Southern links have been associated with a 'missionary background' a 'charitable colonialism' element may complicate these links (O'Keeffe, 2006).

To provide authoritative advice on good practice researchers must isolate the characteristics which promote effectiveness, even if such analysis reveals surprises, questions current orthodoxy, funding and policy, or may radically challenge the location of School Links. There is an urgent need to assess which type of relationship is most effective, whilst remembering that impacts in the wider local community too should be considered during the evaluative process.

Finally, in the political context, evidence on the impacts of UK political initiatives suggests that Northern Schools may embark on School Links in response to UK government imposed criteria, including curriculum changes. The creation of Links which may result from such large scale initiatives is questionable in terms of the depth of understanding which emanates, whilst some Southern educationalists even doubt that mutual benefits accrue. The role of Links in helping to raise educational attainment is an aspect of the School Linking process which should be analysed at both ends, over a longer time-scale than has presently been attempted.

Annotations

¹ This references had been shared during a seminar at a UK Development Education Association (DEA) conference Development Education: Practice, Policy and Theory: Challenges for the future" (2006).

² Doe claimed that two thirds of these are found in only five Southern countries.

³ These links were referred to as North/South links until May 2003, rarely in the literature were they 'South/North' links; in itself this gave precedence to the 'North'. The British Council has now adopted the title "DfID Global School Partnerships" for this work, partly in response to Southern objections to the old branding.

⁴ Indicator Linking-process characteristics are shown in italics.

⁵ Doe drew on the BBC *World Class website*, entries to *The TES Make*

the Link Awards and relationships known to various Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Link support agencies and Development Education Centres. However he noted: "The continuation of all the links found in this search for known links cannot be assumed. In each case a link was counted if there was a public record of its existence and the identity and location of the school could be confirmed."

6 Identified as strands of the "Global Dimension", since publication of the Department for Education and Skills' s (DfES) policy document in March 2005.

7 These may include members of an extended School community, such as parents, ex-pupils on gap-year work placements and Governors, or staff members of Institutions of Higher and Further Education. A gap-year here refers to pupils who take a gap between their school and Higher education or graduates who take a gap between graduation and embarking on permanent paid employment or further training.

8 Such as the UK' s Department for International Development' s (DfID) "Global School Partnerships" programme. (GSP).

9 Of Doe' s 1,667 overseas partnerships identified earlier 1331 were GSP supported.

10 Described by its lead researcher, Edge (2006) as "A Study of the Impact of North South School Partnerships on UK/African and Asian Schools", this is funded for its first year by the UK' s DfID.

11 Polesworth High School, in the UK, is linked with Pampawie in Ghana; this was instrumental in Polesworth being awarded International Secondary School of the Year in the TES/HSBC "Make the Link Awards" 2006 (GSP, (2006) News Issue 3).

12 Some definitions of the Global Economic Divide substitute "IT resource Rich" and "IT resource Poor" to replace terms such as MEDC or EMDC and LEDC or ELDC.

13 The two schools were linked following the researcher' s participation in a Link Community Development (LCD) GlobalTeacher placement in 2001. Oldfield School in Bath is linked with Mtengwane Senior Secondary School, situated in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

14 NGOs, Development Education Centres and other support agencies.

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