

COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION BRIEFING NOTES

Prepared by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education

A grouping of voluntary and professional bodies committed to education development in the Commonwealth

No. 12. SCHOOL AND COLLEGE LINKING IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Summary

International community-based partnerships (CBPs) are becoming increasingly popular. There are many impressive examples of joint work across the Commonwealth between towns, schools, hospitals, churches, black and ethnic minority (diaspora) groups, local authorities and others. There is a growing understanding that these international partnerships are important in supporting social cohesion, in helping to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and in promoting international peace.

Partnerships between schools and higher education institutions have a particularly important role to play. By bringing a global dimension to the curriculum, they can help to develop the skills and attitudes of the young and encourage them to become active global citizens.

The Commonwealth with its historical, cultural, political and infrastructural commonality has a special potential for fostering and supporting the development of educational partnerships within its boundaries.

Historical context of North-South Partnerships

Following the 1939-45 war, a deliberate attempt was made in Europe to ensure that conflict never broke out again. The 'twinning' movement between town and district councils in Germany, France and UK was one result of that initiative. In 1971 the CBP concept was recognised by the UN when the General Assembly passed resolution 2861 in support of city-to-city partnerships (C2C).

In the 1980s there was a growing concern over the imbalance between the "rich" North and the "poor" South, as described in the Brandt Report "North South – A Programme for Survival". This and televised images of natural disasters and social deprivation in the South led to community-based NGOs in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean exploring the potential for the development of international partnerships for solidarity and mutual learning.

Further impetus was given by the growing mobility of populations and the presence of people from all over the world particularly in many Northern countries. There was a need to understand the cultures, faiths and social structures of the communities from which migrants came. International CBPs could help to provide that understanding and to build social cohesion.

Many different groups formed partnerships with partners abroad that embraced technical cooperation, mutual learning and professional development. They included:

- Faith-based organisations, particularly the Christian churches in the Commonwealth
- Local authorities forming partnerships for decentralised cooperation
- Hospitals and other health care institutions
- Schools and higher education institutions.

Many of these CBPs were, and to some extent still are, based on providing educational and technical assistance from 'rich' northern communities to 'poor' communities in the South. But as Southern partners have found platforms to voice their concerns about this paternalistic approach and their status as the "recipients of charity", the mutuality of benefits have become better understood and more explicitly reflected in partnership frameworks.

If you wish to accompany us in the long term on our journey of development as equal partners recognising that we have a role to play in your journey of development you will be most welcome! Sithembiso Nyoni, Zimbabwe. UKOWLA conference 2001

Recently there has been more interest in educational partnerships across the Commonwealth and beyond. The vocabulary is expanding. 'Development education' and 'the global dimension to the curriculum' have become established terms in the language of education in the UK.

The analysis of partnerships between schools and communities in this paper tends to focus on what is happening between one member state, the UK, and other Commonwealth countries. This is because the UK has developed a variety of programmes and organisations for school linking in the past few years, and information is relatively plentiful. Initiatives in other parts of the Commonwealth are less well mapped, apart from the UNESCO Associated Schools Projects referred to below. One purpose of the Consortium in commissioning this Briefing Paper and joining with others in sponsoring a Commonwealth Conference on school partnerships in December 2006 in Cape Town is to encourage mapping of activity in school partnerships across the Commonwealth.

The UNESCO Associated Schools Project (ASP)ⁱ encourages schools across the globe to become part of a network that focuses on learning around human rights, intercultural and environmental issues and the bringing of these into the curriculum. School partnerships (twinning) for the exchange of materials, teachers and pupils is central to the programme. UNESCO is also active in promotion of higher education partnerships, particularly through its UNITWIN programme.

Canada's e-PALS Global Networkⁱⁱ connects students in 191 countries via pen-pals and cross-curricular work.

*Link Community Development*ⁱⁱⁱ is based in South Africa but has offices in Ghana, Uganda, Malawi, Scotland and England. Its school partnership programmes have mostly involved a UK partner, but LCD now plans to expand its programmes within and between developing countries as a part of its support for education in the South.

What is happening within the schools?

School partnerships are about relationships between school communities (pupils and teachers). Communication is key and may take the form of postal exchanges e.g. “pen-pals”, or where schools have telephones and access to IT, exchange of information and curriculum work is possible. If reciprocal visits can be arranged, this dramatically reinforces understanding between pupils and teachers in different countries.

The personal nature of the relationship and empathy/understanding between the partners is crucial. Beyond the value of personal friendships, and the sense of solidarity that develops, there are valuable educational benefits in broadening horizons of learners and teachers and collaborative curriculum work. In addition the partnership may include efforts to mobilise resources for infrastructural and professional development in the partner schools. Examples of all these abound.

At primary and secondary level, joint curriculum work tends to be a major element in link activity. It can cover every curriculum area whether language, technology, drama, music, RE, geography or art and design. Working together on these areas brings a vital dimension to children’s learning and adds to their understanding of the global context in which they are living.

At primary level such work has included a comparison of “my journey to school” or “my diary for the day”. Secondary school pupils in six different Commonwealth countries have done a project on the Road Map to Peace in the Middle East led by Gemin-i^{iv}. Where schools have access to IT this has made such joint curriculum work much more accessible to all.

The best school partnership programmes are based on:

- equality of opportunity
- joint and shared planning
- teacher and pupil reciprocal visits
- joint curriculum work
- mutual learning

Opportunities are available for teachers to gain accreditation for the work they do through their partnerships.^v

“Despite the huge difference in resources available to our partner school in England as compared to what we have here in the Transkei, academic standards here are rising through the solidarity and the exchange of people and ideas and the process of reflection we have gone through. Headteacher in Transkei Secondary school

We have brought ‘the global dimension’ into every aspect of the school curriculum whether Music, Drama, RE, Science, Geography, Art and Design or Modern Languages through the partnerships we have with schools in Ghana, India and China– Link officer, Polesworth International School, UK

What are the Issues?

1. Why do it in the first place?

The visit that I made to our partner school in UK has changed my life. It was so exciting and I learnt so much!
Pupil from Makunduchi school Zanzibar following a visit to Aston School in Sheffield

An education system/policy perspective on this question would emphasise issues of global interdependence, and the need for international understanding. Global issues of climate change, international trade agreements or genetically modified organisms, and diseases such as bird ‘flu and HIV infection are recognised as universal. Global education helps young people to put their lives in the context of the world in which they live and enables them to become active global citizens. Educational partnerships, and school linking specifically, have been seen as an important means to “bring the world into the classroom”. The IT revolution, enabling easier access to all kinds of communication and distance learning, and the increased mobility of people across the globe, have greatly enhanced the scope of such partnerships.

But what about the individual school’s perspective? Schools and colleges and their heads are already often over-stretched, having to meet targets, prepare for examinations and/or inspections. Resource-starved schools struggle simply to “keep going” with inadequate resources, poor infrastructure and lack of time. For them, international partnerships, while appealing in theory, may seem to be too much of an extra burden in practice.

If ways can be found to overcome these challenges, the rewards in terms of adding an exciting extra dimension to the life of the school, to the pupils and teachers can be immensely rewarding. There are examples of schools in which the whole ethos of the school has changed as a result of their international partnerships. Teachers have been able to use their partnerships for their personal and professional development and schools have earned credit in school inspections from their partnerships. Teachers will often remain in a school rather than moving on because of opportunities that international partnerships offer. This creates greater stability in the school.

2. With whom should a school link?

Good sense suggests that schools should form partnerships with institutions abroad, that are working at a similar level to themselves. It is useful to build on existing relationships and contacts that families and organisations/ businesses in the local community already have. Are there other community-based partnerships through the local church or mosque, the local authority, neighbouring businesses, parents, immigrant families who could help the school to form a link?

If there is no obvious direction in which to look, a school may wish to use a linking agency or resort to a school partner-finding website like the Global Gateway.

Some schools have developed “triangular partnerships” with partners in more than one country, say . between a school in India and schools in UK and Ghana.

3. Resources

Partnerships between schools with very different resources, facilities, teaching methods, e.g. in UK and

Africa, can add to the learning at both ends of the relationship. But disparity in resources has its pitfalls.

The expectations of the two schools may be very different. A 'Northern' school may see the link as a real opportunity for raising awareness of global issues and "bringing the world into the classroom". The partner school in the 'South' may see the partnership more in the context of Education for All and the MDGs and more specifically see the partnership as an opportunity for obtaining much needed resources in terms of books and computers.

If the link is simply based on the transfer of resources from rich to poor, this can stand in the way of schools working together on the basis of equality and may limit the opportunities for them to learn from the rich differences in culture, arts, history, economics, language and sociology.

4. Bridging the gap - a Partnership Agreement.

It is essential that these differing perceptions of the link at both ends are recognised. Discussion between teachers in both schools is needed. This may benefit from having an outside facilitator, and should lead on to the writing of a partnership agreement to be signed by both Heads. The agreement will cover the basic tenets of what the relationship is about, and may also develop into a strategy for what the schools want to achieve over the next few years, what resources will be required to carry out that strategy, where responsibility for action lies, how achievements are going to be measured and what should happen if the relationship unravels.

5. Sustainability

The commitment of the head teacher, the senior management team and the governors, and writing the link into a school development plan, are important for a link's success and its sustainability. School partnerships have sometimes failed because they have been dependent on the enthusiasm of an individual teacher who may later move on to another post, so precipitating the link's collapse.

Involving the local education authority may release resources and bring in other international networks in the area. Involvement of the wider community through the PTA or the governors can attract additional human, in-kind and financial resources to the partnerships. It can also extend the educational benefits that the link is bringing to the school to others in the wider community. All this will add to the sustainability of the link partnership.

Clusters of schools, such as several feeder primary schools and a secondary school, may develop a counterpart relationship with schools in another part of the Commonwealth. This arrangement will add to the likelihood of sustainability and enables children to maintain the relationship throughout their schooling.

6. Impact Assessment

Teachers and pupils in schools with international partnerships will talk passionately about the impact that the link has had both on their own professional and personal development and on the school and the wider community. But this evidence is largely anecdotal rather than based on evidence. The Department for

International Development (DFID) in the UK is funding a study of impact on teachers and learners in India, African countries and UK led by Cambridge Education Foundation and the UK One World Linking Association (UKOWLA see below) and to be carried out by the Institute of Education in London and Makerere University, Kampala. This will be of great value in the forward development of these school partnerships.

All the above issues are addressed in a 'Toolkit for Linking' on the UKOWLA website^{vi}.

School partnerships: the UK case

The UK has a long history of engagement in CBPs, not just in education. As long ago as 1984 the **UK One World Linking Association (UKOWLA)** was formed in response to the growing interest in partnerships particularly across the Commonwealth. UKOWLA provides a platform through newsletters, publications and conferences to discuss the underlying principles, opportunities and challenges that CBPs can provide. It is also part of a recently formed coalition of some 50 international NGOs, BUILD^{vii} (Building Understanding through International Links for Development) devoted to bringing North South partnerships into the mainstream.

Britain exhibits a blend of voluntary activity backed up by government through political encouragement and provision of financial support. The government departments responsible for education and for international co-operation have both been active in this respect.

The UK **Department for Education and Skills (DfES)** published its International Education Strategy, "Putting the World into World Class Education" in 2004, stating that international partnerships between schools and higher education institutions are crucial to its strategy. The Department's most recent implementation plan for the Strategy sets an ambitious target that every UK school should have an international partnership by 2010.

The Global Gateway website was set up by the UK Department for Education and Skills and provides a partner-finding resource for schools across the world.

The UK **Department for International Development (DFID)**^{viii} has recognised the importance of raising awareness of development issues and has set aside funding through the Development Awareness Fund. In July 2006 a DFID white paper stated that:-

- "The UK will double our investment in development education, as we seek to give every child ...the chance to learn about issues that shape their world
- Set up a scheme to help..... build partnerships with developing countries".

DFID's Global School Partnerships programme^{ix} led by the British Council with Cambridge Education Foundation, UKOWLA and VSO involves some 850 schools in UK, partnered with schools in 13 Commonwealth countries in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Grants are given both for reciprocal visits by teachers and learners, and for curriculum development. Teachers at both ends of the partnership can get support to acquire accreditation for their international work.

DFID also funds DelPHE (Development Partnerships in Higher Education)^x a worldwide programme designed to develop the capacity and resources of higher education institutions through joint research programmes, exchanges of ideas and professional development. It is designed to contribute to attainment of the MDGs. This new programme was launched in 2006.

The **British Council** has played a leading role in managing UK Government programmes and the Global Gateway Website^{xi}. It has a number of international programmes, supported by its offices throughout the Commonwealth, focussing on schools and young people.

The Council has recently introduced the Connecting Classrooms programme^{xii} that supports partnerships between clusters of schools in two sub-Saharan African countries and the UK on the basis of equity, providing opportunities for young people to explore each other's cultures through the curriculum.

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VSO^{xiii}, which now recruits volunteers from several countries in the world, and not just the UK - has recognised the role that volunteers can play in bringing 'global education' to a wider audience, both during their service abroad and afterwards, on their return home.

BBC World Class^{xiv} has created the media climate to encourage partnerships for some 1,800 schools across the Commonwealth since 2005.

The key role of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth encourages learning in a global context. It has much to offer in the drive for international collaboration in education. The Commonwealth came about through international mobility and migration of peoples and constitutes a natural arena for the formation of school partnerships. Its shared language, history, traditions, democratic institutions, and educational structures, offer rich opportunities for creating networks and partnerships. Indeed the majority of school partnerships are between schools in Commonwealth countries, very frequently including schools in UK.

School and colleges partnerships chime well with the theme that Commonwealth Heads of Government chose for their most recent Meeting in Malta – *Networking the Commonwealth for Development* – in 2005. In Malta the Commonwealth Peoples Forum, representing civil-society groups called on Heads to:-

Urgently ensure adequate budgets to guarantee the right to free, quality, universal schooling, with a priority for girls, and further strengthen

the Commonwealth Education Fund, encouraging twinning relationships between all schools in the Commonwealth. Promote respect for diversity, pluralism, human rights, gender equity and tolerance for all cultures and beliefs through quality education.

The Commonwealth Consortium for Education, in association with Link Community Development and other partners, is devoting its second Conference in Cape Town in December 2006 prior to the 16CCEM, to school and college partnerships in the Commonwealth. It will explore ways in which partnerships can contribute to member countries' efforts to reach the MDGs in education, to broadening the education experience of learners and teachers in Commonwealth schools and colleges and to strengthening Commonwealth bonds. In particular the Conference will examine opportunities for school exchanges in the South, within and between countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific.

Commonwealth Ministers could take a number of steps to promote school partnerships by, for example

- Welcoming the development of such partnerships in principle and urging member countries to facilitate them.
- Identifying the key principles that should form the basis for such links.
- Outlining possible steps that might be taken to encourage South-South links
- Asking the Secretariat to work with civil society in mapping the extent of current linking activity in the Commonwealth.
- Direct the Secretariat to prepare a report on these matters for consideration at the Commonwealth People's Forum in Uganda in 2007 for forwarding to the CHOGM.

More information

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ⁱ www.unesco.org/education

ⁱⁱ www.e-pals.com

ⁱⁱⁱ www.lcd.org.uk

^{iv} www.gemin-i.org

^v www.camb-ed.com/cef.asp

^{vi} www.ukowla.org.uk

^{vii} www.build.org.uk

^{viii} www.dfid.gov.uk

^{ix} www.britishcouncil/globalschools

^x www.dfid.gov.uk/funding/delphe.asp

^{xi} www.globalgateway.org.uk

^{xii} www.britishcouncil.org/connecting-classrooms

^{xiii} www.vso.org.uk

^{xiv} www.bbc.co.uk/worldclass
