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High-momentum international school partnerships: Lessons from 55 schools involved in partnerships between the Africa, Asia and the United Kingdom.

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Background

This paper presents the findings from our 2-year international school partnerships research study funded by the Department for International Development (DfID-UK). Our research explored the practice and impact of partnerships between schools in the Africa, Asia and the United Kingdom. Our first year of research included a survey of approximately 800 schools in the United Kingdom (North) and 800 schools within selected African and Asian countries (South). In the second year of our research, we embarked on an ambitious journey to gather more detailed qualitative data on partnerships from 55 schools in 12 countries. We explored how schools are engaging in partnership and the perceived impact on students, teachers, schools and communities. Our participating schools included a cross-section of schools representing primary and secondary, mixed and single-sex, urban-rural, state-privately funded and special needs. Our sample was drawn from schools located in all four countries of the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales), five countries in Africa (Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and Tanzania) and three countries in Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka).

This paper, drawn from our research data, presents our overarching conceptual framework and research methods. We highlight the overall findings on student, staff and community involvement. Finally, we report the distilled lessons from a set of partnerships that we believe are generating the most significant influence on their leaders, teachers and students. We have called these partnerships 'high momentum partnerships' and we believe that the experience of these partnerships will be of value to individuals, schools and organisations involved in partnerships.

Research Questions

Simply framing this research with the question: 'What is the impact of the international school partnership on various elements of your school and individuals?' would have only generated a simplistic picture of how participants perceive the influence of their partnership activities on students, teachers and whole schools. We would have been unable to attribute any perceived partnership success or failure to any factors and/or conditions that exist within and between schools that support healthy and productive partnerships.

Methods

To accomplish this work, we recruited a diverse team of international academics and research colleagues in 14 different countries. We balanced our sample selection across the previously mentioned criteria. Within each participating school, a member of our research team spent one day conducting interviews with school and partnership leaders, leading focus groups with teachers and facilitating activity workshops with students. For each school, we developed a 6-10 page case study outlining their own unique approach to partnership.

We conducted our cross-case analysis of the 55 case studies in three distinct phases. Phase one involved member of our international team working across all 55 case studies to identify the emerging trends related to partnership initiation and development, leadership and management and recommendations for future development. Phase two engaged our team in conducting specific analyses that led to the development of continental and phase-based analysis of the practice and influence of partnership on various stakeholders. Within this strand of work, we developed the following distinct analysis summaries: UK-Primary, UK-Secondary, Africa-Primary, Africa-Secondary, Africa-All Age, and Asia-All Age. Phase three involved our team in examining the perceived influence of partnerships on teachers, students and whole schools. To explore the influence of partnerships on

students, we re-analysed all 55 cases to understand more about student development of 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'understanding.' We also focused on student enjoyment. We also wanted to know more about the influence of partnerships on teachers and explored the content, depth of skills development. To understand the factors that influence 'high momentum partnerships' we created an additional layer of analysis that allowed us to explore both schools together and draw out their shared story of partnership. To accomplish this task, we re-analysed six partnerships that provide the most robust evidence of a mutually beneficial partnership, alongside an enthusiasm shared by the majority of the school and a commitment to maintain and support the partnership. Based on this pair analysis, we have been able to map out the main patterns emerging among partnerships that have built momentum and a track record of success.

Frame

Based on little previous research into international school partnerships and no pre-existing conceptual framework to guide our work, we developed a three-category model to support our research. The three categories include: input factors; in-school factors and impact. Our rationale for the INPUT category is our knowledge that the initiation (House, 1975) and sustainable implementation of change processes (Fullan, 2003) are often predicated upon building collective support (Hopkins, 1995) and making shared decisions about participation in the initiative (Datnow & Castellano, 2001). Our in-school factor category is designed to gather four types of information related to factors that may influence the perceived impact of a partnership. The first is related to the support that schools receive from their district/LA colleagues as research shows that initiatives that receive support from district/LA are more likely to succeed (Edge, 2005; Harris, 2002; Resnick & Glennan, 2002). The second is leadership, in order to recognize the impact the sustained, supportive and distributed leadership (Frost & Harris, 2003; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999) play in successful school implementation of reforms. We are particularly interested in who is leading the partnership, the recognition of their role, how it is prioritized within the school and the stability of leadership within the school. The third is the organizational characteristics. It is known that new initiatives are often difficult to embed within schools or organizations but certain factors influence its successful adoption (Fullan, 1999; Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004). The final category of information we are seeking is related to partnerships in general, which summarizes current research and thinking on the characteristics of positive partnerships between southern and northern organizations (Ashman, 2001; Fowler 1998; Johnson & Wilson, 2006). Assessing impact of any one initiative within this very complicated and congested reform climate is nearly impossible (Anderson, 1991). Based on the model presented above, we have constructed a set of measures that contribute to the success of initiatives in other contexts. As such, we have developing a model that will not only gather feedback on the perceived impact of partnerships but on the factors that influence impact as well.

Research findings

Here, we present findings related to partnership formation, leadership and management and communication between partners.

Partnership Formation. We found that early exchange experiences, or exchanges during the actual initial development of the pairings between schools, are the more prominent aspects in all the successful partnership formations. Other factors that appear to be fundamental to laying the foundation for successful partnership including: a personal connection; whole school involvement in the decision making process; a clear purpose; supportive leadership; and, a supportive organisation's assistance.

Leadership and Management. Throughout the cases, a strong leader, active school leadership support and staff support emerge as important factors in partnership success. Another important factor, which directly relates to the spread of engagement in the partnership across the school, is the value of teacher, student or parent partnership committees, and extra curricular clubs to support the leadership.

Communication between Partners. Across our 'successful' partnerships, schools use a variety of different communication methods, including post, email, and text message. Each partnership reports using more than one method to communicate. Other important communication-related lessons from our 'successful' schools include: Students email/text/letters; minimum monthly communication; and, overcoming the limitations of weak Internet connection.

This paper will be of interest to academics, policy makers and practitioners interested in the development of partnerships but also the implementation of school level reform and collaboration. In the full paper, we explore the following findings in support of future research, policy and practice work on domestic and international partnerships.

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