

Learning from international links between schools:

an overview of what works



As a global organisation CfBT appreciates the benefits of international awareness amongst the staff and students we work with. Keen to learn how best to foster global awareness, CfBT embarked upon a research study with schools in the UK, India and Kenya, to look at the impact and educational benefit of school links for teachers and pupils. The study focused on four different dimensions of links:

-  organisation and management,
-  the effects on learning for teachers and students,
-  equity and fairness within links, and
-  the costs and sustainability of different link approaches.

Key areas of learning for those involved in links, or interested in getting involved in links are presented within this leaflet.



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“Links often fall down because there is not enough preparation done at the beginning.”

Good Practice Network

“Partners should build ongoing evaluation systems into their partnerships.”

Good Practice Network

“We were in charge. We had continuous evaluation through weekly sessions.”

Secondary pupil, UK

“We were able to work together on common projects. Although the approach was different, the goals were the same.”

Secondary student, India

“The link has enhanced pupil self esteem, boosted teachers’ morale, and enhanced cohesiveness amongst diverse communities in the school.”

Teacher, Kenya

Study approach

The study collected data via a literature review and through a series of in-depth interviews with students and teachers in 21 UK schools and nine schools across India and Kenya. A range of schools were selected to participate, including a mix of primary and secondary in both the UK and overseas, and those who were at varying stages of link programmes. These interviews were supplemented by an online questionnaire.

What is Linking?

Linking is the process by which communities across the world form sustained partnerships. At school level this is a link between the staff and students in a school in one country with others in a school in another country. Whilst there is not one standard approach to school links, common features include: shared aims, including improved understanding of one’s partners, mutual learning and exchange of ideas. The format of links varies substantially according to specific aims of links. Some links remain ‘virtual’ or correspondence-based, often centred around specific learning objectives or projects, whilst other links incorporate study visits and exchanges for both teachers and students.

Summary of key findings

Organising links

- International link projects are easier to institute in flexible curricular environments which encourage thematic, interactive work. Primary schools in the UK tend to adopt more flexible approaches to links, integrating learning within cross-curricular projects. In countries with a more rigid curriculum teachers can have difficulty integrating link activities, so links are often run as extra-curricular clubs.
- A modular structure, clear time frame and procedures for eliciting, sending, receiving and collating mail is vital to success.
- Links flourish with the dedication and enthusiasm of staff. They require strong leadership, direction and high level support to grow and truly embed, particularly at a school-wide level. Visits are helpful in instilling this enthusiasm and support.
- Links require preparation and ongoing support. Networks and peer-to-peer guidance from colleagues with link experience are a valuable resource for teachers managing links.
- Sustainable links had a monitoring and evaluation framework with outcomes jointly agreed with partner schools from the start of the link.
- Students are an integral part of the review and planning process, assessing progress and taking ownership of the link.



“You learn things which will be with you for the rest of your life.”

Student, UK

“It made me reflect on my own teaching.”

Teacher, UK

“[The link] has provided a lot of exposure – personal and professional. I feel confident in organising programmes, realised my competency in working with a team, and enhanced my understanding of another culture.”

Teacher, India

“Exchanging things (paintings, drawings), helped pupils to appreciate diverse cultures, break and change stereotype beliefs and increased enjoyment of being in school.”

Teacher, Kenya

“It made us think more about different cultures and how they live. We are more alike than we think!”

Primary student, UK

Student and staff learning

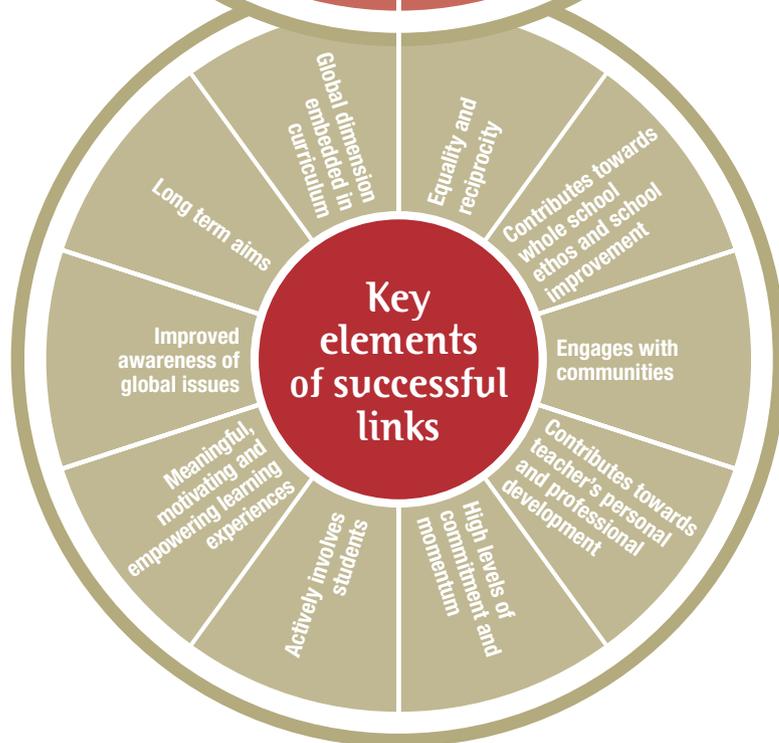
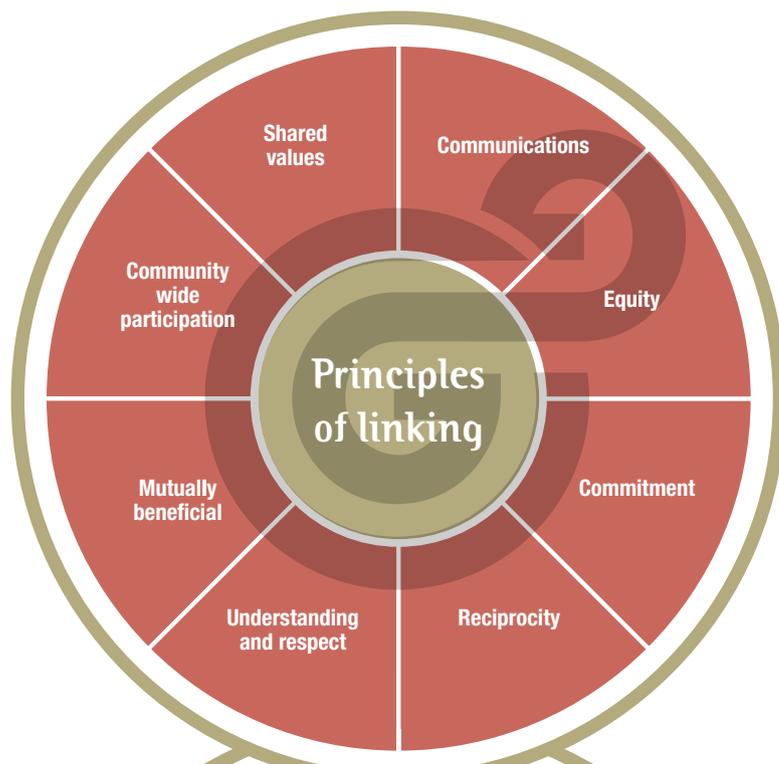
- 🌐 Learning for staff and students is multi-faceted. For both it includes an improvement in global awareness.
- 🌐 For students, learning also includes additional subject knowledge and improved confidence and communication skills.
- 🌐 Teachers recognise diversification in teaching practice and improved management skills.
- 🌐 Teacher development is an understated aim, but a well-recognised outcome of link programmes for teachers in all countries.
- 🌐 Visual communication (through pictures, photographs and videos) is essential to bring links to life. In particular, personal elements of communication (handwritten letters and pictures) are appreciated by students.
- 🌐 Use of technology is beneficial, but a partnership does not have to depend on technologically advanced communications to be successful.
- 🌐 Interaction does not move much beyond superficial conversation if the primary focus is on technology rather than subject matter.

Equity and fairness within partnerships

- 🌐 Link agreements are a positive platform for discussion with partners to agree on shared objectives, vision and expectations for the link and then articulate this common understanding.
- 🌐 Open communication channels and frequent contact are crucial for mitigating problems and addressing challenges.
- 🌐 It is helpful to share financial accountability between both schools.
- 🌐 Working with an experienced partnership organisation that has programme staff in both countries does not guarantee equal partnership, but can offer guidance and a structure to help both partners share the benefits.
- 🌐 Showing videos and then having discussions with students about them helps students in separating stereotypical views from those that are more authentic.
- 🌐 Feelings of inequality may arise from unchallenged assumptions about wealth.

Link agreements are signed by both schools, detailing the objectives, scope and nature of the link. They typically include the overarching aim and visions for the link, principles for partnership, specific objectives and an outline of how the link will operate. More specifically agreements may include: methods for partnership (such as which forms of communication will be used and how frequently communication should take place), a timetabled plan of activities with expected outcomes, an outline of the resources available, clarification of roles and responsibilities, evaluation strategies and exit strategies.





Sustainability and costs

- ☞ Links on average last between two and three years.
- ☞ Links are sustained by effective communication, shared commitment and project-focused activities.
- ☞ It is difficult to introduce educational objectives once fund-raising takes hold.
- ☞ Students and teachers overwhelmingly thought links were good value for money.
- ☞ Embedding links across the school to maximise impact requires planning from the outset.

"Schools need to be open and transparent about contentious areas. They must share the negative side to improve the partnership."

Good Practice Network

"Definitely value for money! It's the best CPD I've ever had, and that's even before I think of the impact on colleagues, pupils and the school as a whole."

Teacher, UK

Recommendations

- ☞ Explore many different media for communication, especially visual and more traditional forms. Do not overemphasise the role of technology within links.
- ☞ Establish partnership agreements to form a common foundation between the schools – grounded in shared expectations and objectives.
- ☞ For sustainability and broadest impact, embed the link across the school and wider community where possible, emphasising shared ownership from the outset for all involved.
- ☞ Involve students in setting up and driving links forward, including involvement in decision-making and review.

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In Kenya: Eli Mambo Primary School, Gatura Primary School, Egerton Primary School, Parklands Arya Primary School, Precious Blood Secondary School and Eburru Secondary School.

In India: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Public School, Pranava School and Ramadevi Public School.

References

Good Practice Network (2007). Conference for global school partnerships and links. 14 June 2007. Accessed 18/11/09 from <http://www.britishcouncil.org/globalschools-resources-orgs-goodpractice.htm>

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