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Social capital and modern language initiatives in times of policy uncertainty

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Abstract: Language professionals across the United Kingdom have long been apprehensive about low levels of participation in language learning, as well as disparities in gender and social class of language learners. However, the distinct policy contexts in England and in Scotland have led to divergent [re]actions with regard to this common concern. This article traces the policy paths taken by the respective governments since the start of the 21st century. The development and impact of a major funding programme in England, the 'Routes into Languages' initiative, are outlined, assessed and contrasted with the situation in Scotland. Using Putnam's notion of social capital (durable networks between people from different social groupings) as a powerful means to implement change the authors demonstrate that in England considerable and beneficial links across previous educational divides have developed as part of the 'Routes' initiative, despite the continuing threat of transient policy contexts. In Scotland, the implementation phase of the new 1+2 languages policy might provide the impetus to develop a comparable initiative to 'Routes'. Arguably, a sea change in attitudes to language learning is unlikely to happen without durable and sustainable social capital between staff in school and university.

Keywords: modern languages, cross-sector collaboration, higher education, secondary education, social capital, England, Scotland, United Kingdom

Introduction

Time and again, studies of subject preferences and subject choices at secondary school indicate that languages in the UK generally, and in its four constituent countries – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – are not popular options and that attitudes towards language study are similarly unfavourable in comparison with many other subjects (e.g. Colley & Comber, 2003; Blenkinsop et al, 2006). Indeed, the UK has been described as being 'in the throes of a huge linguistic slump' (Bawden, 2013). Attention has also been drawn to the narrow social profile of languages students: Uptake of languages for GCSE (the optional school-leaving exam for 16 year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) tends to be markedly higher in independent than in state comprehensive schools, especially where there are high numbers of pupils from poorer families (Davies et al, 2004; Dearing & King, 2007; Tinsley, 2013a). Similarly, pupils at independent and selective grammar schools are around twice as likely to study languages at Advanced Level (the school-leaving exam for 18 year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Cambridge Assessment, 2009). These imbalances continue into higher education across the UK where it has been noted that specialist languages provision is offered in fewer institutions and is increasingly concentrated in elite Russell

Group universities and among mainly female students from more favourable socio-economic backgrounds (Footitt, 2005; Hudswell, 2006; Bawden, 2007; 2013; Coleman, 2013). Geographical differences in participation have also been found to exist. In the secondary school sector, pupils in London and South East England are more likely to take a languages GCSE than those in the North East (CILT/ALL/ISMLA, 2010), and in higher education around one third of undergraduates studying languages are similarly to be found at universities in London and the South East. In terms of diversity of language provision, the regional coverage in English universities of languages outside the 'big three' (French, German and Spanish) is, at best, very uneven (Footitt, 2005). In connection with all of the above, the decline in the specialist study of languages has become a source of considerable anxiety (Kelly & Jones, 2003; Bawden, 2007; 2013) resulting in a 'crisis of confidence' amongst higher education (HE) language professionals about their subject (Worton, 2009: 6). Barriers to participation continue to be regarded as substantial, not least because of perceptions of a lack of public understanding of the importance of language learning (Worton, 2009: 38). All this is despite substantial evidence pointing to the adverse impact of the scarcity of language skills on the UK's economic and diplomatic capabilities (British Academy, 2013; Pawle, 2013).

Social capital – opportunities and challenges

We find Putnam's (2000) conceptualisation of social capital, which focuses on the importance of social networks and reciprocal relationships to effect positive change, a useful analytical tool. Putnam and others (e.g. Baron et al, 2000) showed how the trust that people build up between one another whilst they create social networks and interact through them can lead to greater cohesiveness and a sense of community, thereby enabling individuals to do more collectively than they could on their own.

Doughty & Allan (2008) distinguished between three different types of social capital, bonding, bridging and linking. As envisaged by Putnam (2000) bonding social capital involves close support from members of a group with similar identities and interests thereby reinforcing that sameness among the group members. Like family units language professionals within a school or university may have strong bonding social capital because of a shared sense of commitment to their subject. However, such relationships tend to be more inward-looking. Bridging social capital is said to be more conducive to effecting change than bonding social capital (Schuller et al, 2000) because it involves connections between heterogeneous groups, for our purposes between language professionals working in different sectors such as secondary and tertiary education, or between language staff from diverse, and often competing, universities. Linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001:13-14) assumes that individuals with different amounts of power, e.g. senior management and other staff or lecturers and students, can connect in a mutually beneficial way by leveraging resources, ideas, information and knowledge within a community or a group. For example, it could be argued that the prior existence of bridging and linking social capital in the form of the then Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) and its associated networks facilitated the establishment of the 'Routes into Languages' initiative in England (and later Wales), as outlined below.

Doughty and Allan's case study exemplified how the staff development team of the then Scottish Further Education Unit purposefully encouraged the creation of bridging social capital through careful design of professional development sessions, which in turn led to a more inclusive practice amongst FE lecturers. On the other hand, the government's heavy reliance on the development of social capital to implement policies has been criticised (e.g. Cardini, 2006; Dhillon, 2009) because the largely short-term nature of policies, coupled with financial under-resourcing left many projects in danger of collapsing once initial funding was withdrawn. Indeed, as Dhillon (2009) exemplified, it is only when sufficient trust between partners has been built up that social networks can be sustained in the long term and are able to persist in the face of policy fluctuations. In this paper, we compare the extent to which the distinct language policy contexts in England and Scotland have helped to support the establishment of different levels of bridging or linking social capital amongst the respective HE language communities. We then examine to what extent the resulting networks of cross-sector collaborative activity amongst HE language professionals in England have been able to counteract some of the negative factors affecting language provision as outlined earlier. Finally, we look more closely at the potential for similar initiatives in Scotland in light of its new 1+2 languages policy (Scottish Government, 2012b).

Distinct policy contexts...

Since the constituent countries of the UK each have their own educational system, there have also been distinct policy initiatives with regard to language learning, although the greatest differences can be found between England, Wales and Northern Ireland on the one hand, and Scotland on the other. For the purpose of this article we concentrate mostly on the juxtaposition between England and Scotland as they are the main drivers in distinctive policy development and are therefore more likely to engender distinctly different re/actions from language professionals. Taking as our retrospective starting point the publication of the last UK-wide inquiry into language provision (Nuffield Inquiry, 2000), we note that in England (and Wales) this was followed by the development of national languages strategies (DfES, 2002, Welsh Assembly Government 2003; 2010), which made an economic as well as a socio-political case for languages and set out to increase the numbers of young people studying them. In Scotland, the government accepted most of the recommendations from the report by its own Ministerial Action Group on Languages (Scottish Executive, 2001) which presented similar arguments. At the same time, both sets of reform effectively abolished the compulsory status in post-14 education that modern languages had enjoyed until then, either legally (in England and Wales) or consensually (in Scotland). It seems that the population was not convinced by the positive proclamations, however, because the following years saw a decline in uptake of language qualifications at and beyond the statutory leaving age in both countries, which has continued, although the drop has been more pronounced in England than in Scotland (e.g. Tinsley & Han 2012; SCILT 2013). Languages are widely perceived to be difficult and, in England, also suffer from severe grading at both GCSE and A-level (Coleman, 2013).

Policy contexts have shown themselves to be of a transient nature with frequently changing educational and assessment priorities. For example, in England, following the publication of the National Languages Strategy, languages were identified as strategically important and vulnerable subjects in English higher education (HE) while in Wales they were declared to be subjects of broader importance (HEFCE, 2005; Hudswell, 2006; HEFCW, 2008) alongside other disciplines, notably Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (the so-called STEM subjects). However, immediately after the election of a new UK government in 2010 commitment to the National Languages Strategy appeared to wane. At the same time, the Coalition Government introduced the English Baccalaureate, which is a wrap-around qualification for 16 year olds including a language among five GCSEs. This resulted in an immediate and significant rise (20%) in modern language entries at GCSE (Tinsley & Han, 2012). More recently, the Government announced that languages will be statutory from the age of seven in England's primary schools (Department for Education, 2012). It is too early judge how these initiatives will develop, and whether they will be more successful than preceding policies in changing attitudes to language learning. In Scotland, the policy directives have been more muted. After a hiatus of several years, a draft strategy had gone out for consultation (Scottish Executive, 2007) but its implementation was abandoned after the establishment of a new government following general elections to the Scottish Parliament in May 2008. The Scottish Government confirmed its intention to put in place, over the course of two parliaments (equivalent to ten years) measures that will allow every primary pupil in the country to study two languages in addition to their mother tongue, i.e. not necessarily English, and has largely welcomed the report by the Working Group (Scottish Government, 2012a; 2012b). One key recommendation, making language study to Higher Grade a compulsory element of initial teacher education, would have repercussions in provision for several Scottish universities that currently offer initial teacher education courses.

...provoke divergent professional responses

In England, the publication of the National Languages Strategy in 2002 (DfES, 2002) was followed by a report on the National Languages Strategy in Higher Education (Footitt, 2005), which recommended the organisation of a partnership project of universities in each English region to provide modern languages outreach provision involving schools and colleges, effectively encouraging the establishment of bridging social capital. At that time, although cooperation between universities, schools and colleges existed, it was 'uncoordinated, ad hoc and dependent upon enthusiastic staff and students' (Davis, 2006: 4). Despite this lack of coordination, existing language organisations at that time including LLAS, the University Council of Modern Languages and CILT, the National Centre for Languages were able to work in partnership to develop a bid to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which led to the establishment of the Routes into Languages programme. Routes into Languages has a remit to increase and widen participation in language learning to include groups who have hitherto been less involved (i.e. students from socio-economically challenged backgrounds and boys). Thus

the establishment of the 'Routes' initiative can be seen as a successful example of leveraging resources through bridging and linking social capital.

The Routes into Languages Programme has undergone various iterations with regard to funding. Initially, it was funded solely by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Subsequently, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and its successors, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Education (DfE) provided additional funding until March 2011. HEFCE twice extended its financial support by a further year and, as of August 2013, committed itself to three years funding for a new Routes into Languages project following an open call for proposals for a demand-raising programme in languages. The new Routes programme continues the focus on increasing and widening participation in language learning but additionally prioritises promoting mobility (specifically the year abroad) among undergraduate students of all disciplines.

In Scotland, language incentives initiated by government have arguably encouraged the creation of bonding capital across the teaching profession in schools through initiatives such as the Glow intranet. However, the building of bridging social capital between schools and universities has been limited (cf. Doughty, 2009). Although HE language practitioners have, independently of one another, attempted to create bridging social capital by organising promotional events such as competitions, language days, and master classes for senior students, there have been no nationwide initiatives of strategic collaboration. In other words, despite Scotland's smaller population size, cooperation between establishments in different education sectors exists but has remained uncoordinated. Indeed, true to the warnings given by Cardini (2006), the short-term nature of policy incentives in Scotland in the 1990's has meant that a number of initially successful instances of cross-sector initiatives failed in the medium or long-term (Doughty, 2011).

It must be recognised, nevertheless, that since the advent of the new Scottish Government in 2008 there has been a greater focus on languages (as well as science), culminating in the current 1+2 languages policy. True to its manifesto commitment (SNP, 2007: 11) the Scottish National Party instigated the introduction of a Scottish Science Baccalaureate and a Scottish Languages Baccalaureate in 2009. The latter award requires candidates to study two languages to Higher/Advanced Higher Grade, and to complete an Interdisciplinary Project (an Advanced Higher Grade unit) which demonstrates the relevance of languages in one of five broad contexts. However, the introduction of the language entitlement policy in 2001 had led to a curtailment in language provision, as outlined above. Consequently, few establishments are still able to offer the necessary range of languages to potential candidates and uptake of the Language Baccalaureate award, although rising, has been low in comparison to its 'sister' award in the Sciences. In England, the positive impact on GCSE entries of the English Baccalaureate could prove to be short-lived as the qualification has been amended to include languages as one of eight subjects rather than five, which could result in schools no longer needing to specifically promote languages.

The Routes initiative – achievements and remaining challenges

Establishing bridging and linking social capital

Under the umbrella of Routes into Languages in England, nine regional consortia of more than 60 universities formally cooperate to promote languages. Each consortium consists of one lead university working with a range of partner universities. Three main types of partnership have developed, all of which can be said to fall into the bridging social capital category:

- University with university
- University with schools and colleges;
- Universities with organisations and businesses in the wider community.

A small central team based in LLAS at the University of Southampton co-ordinates, manages, and evaluates the overall scheme but the devolved structure has enabled each region to develop its own profile and expertise, to focus on particular themes and issues and to pilot different types of activity with a strong emphasis on trying to enthuse young people to study languages. The new Routes programme which came into being in August 2013 has as its main focus those activities which have proved successful over the preceding years. These include:

- Sustained interventions in areas of high socio-economic deprivation which are aimed at raising attainment such as mentoring schemes and learning languages in conjunction with another subject area (e.g. Business or Sport);
- One-day events which are intended to motivate learners such as taster days, careers events, sixth form conferences and cultural events;
- Activities which involve student language ambassadors
- National and regional language competitions such as the Foreign Language Spelling Bee, the Mother Tongue Other Tongue Poetry competition, the Language Factor Song competition and the Pop Video competition;
- Activities to promote the year abroad such as adopt-a-class.

Consortia will also be able to devote a proportion of their resources to developing and piloting innovative activities as part of the new programme.

Routes into Languages activities have helped to develop bridging social capital within each region but consortia also cooperate across regions to provide support to schools that are situated close to regional boundaries. Bridging social capital is similarly evident in the contribution that school teachers have made to increasing the reach and impact of Routes activities, for example by cascading film training received to other schools in their locality (Canning et al, 2010) and by their involvement in extending the reach of another activity, the foreign language Spelling Bee which was designed by teachers in conjunction with a Routes consortium. Under the auspices of the new programme, each

consortium will lead on developing activities in a particular thematic area. For example, one consortium will concentrate on languages in areas of social deprivation while another will emphasise languages for culture, history and society. Ideas and resources from these thematic developments will be disseminated across the national Routes network in another example of bridging social capital. Significant cross-border collaboration between Routes partners in England and Wales also shows how bridging social capital can be extended across diverse policy environments.

So what of linking social capital which involves engagement with groups of differing status? This is evident in the representation that schools have on regional advisory boards and steering groups, which has given school teachers a stake in the planning and delivery of activities. This has been particularly important in instances where schools have better knowledge of local circumstances than universities and where universities may lack understanding of school timetables and other issues. A particularly advantageous form of Routes collaboration, and we would propose of linking social capital, has been identified for pre-university learners who are benefitting from the availability of impartial information and advice available via the collaborative approach of Routes, rather than being subjected to institutional marketing (SQW, 2011). Thus, even just three years into the initiative, Worton considered that Routes had brought into being 'innovative and potentially sustainable cross-sector partnerships' (*ibid*: 8). In Dhillon's terms it would seem that Worton believed sufficient trust had been built up between some institutions to survive beyond prime funding.

Positive impact

Nationally, more than 225,000 pupils in 2,016 schools had been reached by the programme by 2012 (Schechter et al, 2012). The success of the Routes programme in building a collaborative model and fostering the establishment of bridging and linking social capital are arguably based to a large extent on the 'shared norms and values' (Dhillon, 2009: 701) of participants, manifested in a love of languages and a strong desire to enthuse young people to study them. The sharing of ideas and good practice across the consortia has become one of the key strengths of the programme.

So what of the impact of partnership and collaboration with regard to the original aims of the Routes programme, i.e. to increase and widen participation in language study? All consortia have conducted pre- and post-event evaluations throughout the life of the project (SQW, 2011) and there is a growing body of data to indicate that Routes is having a longer-term favourable impact on attitudes to languages, including in schools with low uptake (Canning et al, 2010; McCall, 2011a, 2011b; Handley, 2011). Surveys of first-year university students suggest that around three quarters of those who have participated in enrichment and outreach activities such as those organised by Routes believe that such engagement had improved their views of language learning (Gallagher-Brett, 2012a; 2014). Evidence is also beginning to emerge which implies that Routes activities may be more highly valued by learners attending low-achieving schools (Gallagher-Brett, 2012a, 2012b). Measuring the effects of the programme on the numbers studying languages has proved more difficult but there are, nonetheless,

positive indications of an impact on uptake at GCSE. Teachers have reported increased numbers at GCSE in their schools following engagement with Routes (Canning et al, 2010; Gallagher-Brett, 2012b). Handley (2011) tracked groups of students who had participated in Routes activities in North-West England and found sustained improvements in attitudes, which converted into decisions to study languages post-14. A particularly interesting development in the North West has been the resulting increased uptake in French, German and Spanish GCSE following engagement with activities in languages such as Arabic and Urdu. Furthermore, evidence from some schools in socially deprived areas demonstrates that the programme is helping to keep GCSE going (Schechter et al, 2012).

Challenges

The Routes into Languages Programme has been able to show a positive impact on specific schools and individual learners but it is more difficult to demonstrate a global impact on the numbers studying languages across England. Although elements of the policy environment are clearly favourable to languages, notably the commitment to primary languages, other policy challenges pose potential threats. The introduction of greatly increased university fees in England from 2012 appeared to result in an immediate and substantial drop in the numbers of students wishing to apply for the longer four-year languages degree (UCAS, 2012). This is a situation in which collaboration, however well-intentioned, could find itself under increased tension from competition and institutional fights for survival.

On a practical level, notwithstanding the support consortia provide to each other across regional boundaries, geographical difficulties have not been entirely overcome. English regions do not represent cohesive geographical communities so it is not always obvious how schools in one county can work together with universities which are located at some considerable distance. Universities are not evenly distributed across the country and this can be problematic for schools in some rural areas. However, this is being proactively addressed in the new programme as consortia seek to extend the geographical coverage of their activities and to involve those universities which have hitherto not participated in the programme.

As a result of the aforementioned difficulties, widening participation and convincing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds of the value of language study look set to remain key challenges for the HE languages community. Evidently, sustained interventions over a period of time are required to effect positive change in languages in socio-economically challenging environments (Schechter et al, 2012). Building relationships, fostering a climate of trust and establishing bridging and linking social capital in these areas takes an investment of time, effort and money so local initiatives, however successful in the short-term, require some central support mechanism if they are to be sustained long-term.

Implications for Scotland

With the implementation phase of the 1+2 languages policy now well under way, Scotland has the potential of moving to a more favourable situation with regard to languages education in schools, although the prospects for languages in the tertiary sector remain uncertain. It would therefore be useful for policy stakeholders to consider and to reflect upon the successes and challenges of the 'Routes' initiative. For example, 'Routes' has provided a range of possible collaborative models that enable the development of bridging and linking forms of social capital both horizontally (i.e. between formerly competing institutions) as well as vertically (i.e. each university working with schools and colleges in their areas to develop distinct profiles and to respond to local need). Whilst geographical barriers may similarly represent a problem for Scottish universities, the establishment of the University of the Highlands and Islands, which is formed from a collection of dispersed educational establishments, may go some way to alleviate this particular challenge. Crucially, we believe, unless the Scottish HE community can be enabled to develop its cross-sector collaborative potential, the policy's transformational potential will not be fully realised.

Concluding Remarks

Making the case for languages to young people could be compared to Galileo trying to convince the authorities that the earth was moving around the sun rather than the other way around. Whilst recent commissioned reports by the British Academy and the British Council respectively have tried to counter the taken-for-granted assumption that 'English is enough' (Tinsley, 2013a; Tinsley, 2013b) there is arguably still a need to develop a range of projects that convincingly demonstrate the necessity of using languages other than English for communicative purposes *despite* or even *because of* the status of English as a global language. Through the establishment of sustainable social capital between the secondary and tertiary sector this becomes more easily achievable. Students in higher education are more likely to experience this need, although it may not necessarily 'translate' into language study on a full-time basis. However, they could help make these experiences come to life in the languages classrooms of secondary or primary schools, as appropriate. University students can also reflect back on their earlier language learning experiences and let teachers in school know what kind of approaches worked best for them, and why. There are a number of media vehicles that could be used to disseminate the findings from successful 'Routes' case studies, which could be supplemented and supported by cross-sector workshops.

Certainly, the Routes initiative has shown that the bridging social capital created through targeted government funding has had positive impact. The evidence suggests that positive policy proclamations with regard to languages in an Anglophone context need the solid underpinning of a coordinated approach to tackling 'common-sense' perceptions of irrelevance in light of the rise of global English. We have also seen that whilst both England and Scotland share concerns about levels of modern language provision and attitudes to language learning, the distinct policy contexts in each country

have engendered different responses from HE language staff. Transiency that characterises both policy contexts means that anxiety about provision remains an on-going problem in both countries, so Cardini's and Dhillon's concerns with regard to durability of social capital networks hold true. Worton's depiction of a 'crisis of confidence' in modern languages (Worton, 2009: 6) is still applicable, and the levels of trust which have undoubtedly been developed may not be sufficient to enable HE language professionals to transcend adverse policy contexts. In a HEFCE evaluation (Curtis & Cartwright Consulting, 2011), it was concluded that languages remain vulnerable in English universities, and arguably this also applies to the Scottish situation. Governmental school policies in both countries still limit the extent to which universities can act. However, the Routes initiative has clearly demonstrated that language staff in both HE and school can develop a much better understanding of each other's concerns and respond more appropriately. In Scotland so far, there has been insufficient impetus to marshal the loose networks that exist between language staff across the universities into coordinated and concerted action over a longer period of time. Nonetheless, as we have argued earlier, the 1+2 languages policy can provide the impetus for strategic discussion and decisive action with the ultimate aim of enabling the revival of language provision across all sectors.

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