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Building Bridges:

A study of independent-state school
partnerships

The Independent-State Schools Partnership Scheme has been in operation since 1998. What are the factors that have led to successful school partnerships?

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F U L L P R A C T I T I O N E R E N Q U I R Y R E P O R T

Contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1 The Independent-State Schools Partnership Scheme	3
1.2 The schools involved	3
2. Previous research	5
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Evaluation studies	5
2.3 The independent school perspective	6
2.4 Local authority involvement	6
3. The nature of the partnerships	8
3.1 Diversity of activity	8
3.2 Shared enthusiasm	8
4. Planning the activity – building the relationship	10
4.1 Motivation	10
4.2 Two sectors	11
4.3 Planning the project	11
4.4 Securing the relationship	12
5. What drove the partnership?	13
5.2 An equal partnership	13
6. Sustainable partnerships	15
6.1 The next step	15
6.2 Funding	16
7. Benefits to the schools	17
7.1 Mutual gains	17
7.2 Did it make a difference?	18
8. The critical elements: ensuring success	20
8.1 Lessons learned	20
9. Conclusions	22
10. Methodology	23
10.1 Gathering the data	23
10.2 The interview format	23
Appendix	25
Range of partnership activities undertaken by schools	25
Bibliography	26
Acknowledgements	26

1. Introduction

1.1 The Independent-State Schools Partnership Scheme

The Independent-State Schools Partnership scheme (ISSP) has been in operation since 1998, with over 600 schools being supported in the first five years of the scheme. The seventh round of the scheme will begin in autumn 2004, with funding of £1.6 million from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) being allocated to support successful bids. There has been a number of reports into the scheme, most notably the evaluation reports published by the University of Leeds in 1999 and in 2001. In addition, the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and the Local Government Association (LGA) have commissioned their own studies of the partnership activity. However, none of these studies has looked closely at school level to determine what makes a successful partnership work well. What this research asks is:

- What are the key elements that contribute to successful independent-state schools partnerships?
- How did the school leaders involved manage the successful partnership?
- What did the leaders see as the benefits of working together?
- Did working together make a difference to their school and the way that it operated?
- What elements of the partnership were sustainable in the longer term?

By interviewing the school leaders involved, this research sets out to establish the key elements that lead to successful partnership activity. Given that there can be underlying assumptions involved in our perception of each other, the research also looks at what motivated the school leaders to establish links and to develop joint partnership activity.

The research was carried out between September and November 2003. The nine headteachers selected had all been identified as being involved in successful partnerships funded by the ISSP scheme. Some had been involved in a number of partnerships. The schools selected represent both those partnerships that are currently being supported by funding as well as partnerships that no longer have funded support.

1.2 The schools involved

The schools represent a wide geographical spread, from Monkseaton in North Tyneside, in partnership with Newcastle Church High School, to Shepherd School and Nottingham High School in the City of Nottingham. The schools were diverse in nature and the partnerships represented a wide range of activities. The research involved, for example, a study of language, musical, mathematical and ICT partnerships. The schools represented both the primary and secondary phase, as well as mainstream and special schools. It became clear during the research that the partnerships frequently involved very different schools in a joint activity. Urban schools were working alongside rural schools; large schools were working with small schools. The research focuses on the areas in which the schools were successful in undertaking fruitful projects.

The research is qualitative in nature, seeking to determine the key factors that have led to success in partnerships which leaders believe have been beneficial to their schools. The interviews focused on the leaders and what had motivated them to undertake the joint activity. Questions invited the interviewees to outline the benefits perceived and to examine the nature of an independent-state school partnership.

A further research issue concerned the ways in which the schools established links. The LGA report, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), highlighted the fact that activity is most often initiated at school level and so this study focuses on how that activity came to be successful. The schools selected represent both areas in which the Local Education Authority (LEA) took a lead and those in which the school initiated the activity.

2. Previous research

2.1 Introduction

The research detailed below is associated both with studies of the ISSP and with partnership activity in general. The Government scheme, established in 1998, has been subject to two evaluation reports by the University of Leeds (1999 and 2001), while in 2002 Loughborough University was commissioned to study sports-related projects supported by the scheme. A number of publications produced by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) have described the scheme and offered detailed case studies (*Partnerships in Practice: Building Bridges*, 1999).

The ISC have also published a study of school partnerships, *Good Neighbours* (1992, updated 1997, 2003) describes the extent to which independent schools are involved in partnership activities with neighbouring maintained schools and community groups.

From a different perspective, the LGA published a report (Smith et al, 2003), which examined LEA involvement in partnership activity either as an initiator or as a supporter of school-based links.

These offer evidence of the extent to which partnerships have become a part of the educational landscape and an evaluation of the activities in which schools have become involved. However, they do not address the extent to which successful partnerships contain common elements and the school leadership issues that are part of this activity.

2.2 Evaluation studies

A major evaluation of the ISSP scheme was conducted by the University of Leeds in 1999, with a further evaluation taking place in 2001. The reports concluded that the scheme had achieved a great deal, with partnerships between schools producing significant benefits:

The scheme has achieved, and continues to achieve, considerable success: it has brought schools together, and enabled them to run projects which have delivered a range of benefits to pupils, staff and, in some cases, the wider community; and it has helped to break down barriers between the two sectors. (Evaluation Report 2001)

The reports highlighted one concern that recurred in the interviews: the preconceptions that were brought to the fore when schools from the two sectors worked together. This was stated as being one of the major reasons for the lack of links between the schools:

One reason may have been the negative preconceptions that persist among some teachers, parents and others in each sector about the other, and with which some partnerships have had to deal during the early stages of their project. For the most part, these negative attitudes do not appear to be based on any specific adverse experience of schools, teachers or pupils in the other sector; they reflect lack of knowledge and contact, or recollections of cartoon or comic stereotypes. (Evaluation Report 1999)

The funding available through the ISSP had allowed schools to work together in a fruitful manner, assisting those schools that wished to develop closer links. It had:

...made a difference, and has converted a desire for cooperation into the reality of partnership. It is not just a framework for collaboration, but a framework with funding; and this is essential.

This point was made by many of the school leaders interviewed as part of this research.

2.3 The independent school perspective

The Independent Schools Council publication, *Good Neighbours* (2003), concluded that sharing and partnership activity across the sectors was widespread and varied. Of the projects that had been supported by funding from the ISSP, around two-thirds had continued to maintain links and develop further projects. A similar proportion of schools that responded to the questionnaire felt that both sectors had benefited from the partnership, with independent schools being keen to ensure that this was the case:

There is also, in keeping with the basic principle of partnership, a desire to avoid a 'Lady Bountiful' approach and a recognition that benefit is two-way.

Many of the partnerships had originated at schools level, with many headteachers suggesting that direct approaches to schools were more likely to succeed than approaches to the LEA. One head went so far as to say,

Contact has been made at local school level. Authority not that interested.

Other heads felt that LEA involvement was a factor likely to promote success, with much depending on LEA personnel.

2.4 Local authority involvement

The Local Government Association commissioned a report by the NFER, published in 2003, which looked at the collaboration between independent and maintained schools from an LEA perspective. It produced a number of findings, which were reflected upon in the interviews conducted as part of this research. Half of the authorities involved in the report had consulted with the independent sector but only a third were aware of joint partnership activities. The report concluded that this was a result of the lack of a main contact person within the LEA, the low priority given to such activity at LEA level, misconceptions and the fact that activity was often initiated at school level.

Where facilities were shared, some LEAs were concerned that the misconception may spread that the independent sector was better equipped than the maintained sector:

One LEA officer felt that there were problems in establishing good working relationships between the independent and maintained schools. On particular he/she felt there was 'an issue over openness, honesty and trust on both sides'. The respondent felt there was 'a lot of talking to do' and that they needed to 'break down perceptions and barriers'.

Despite these difficulties, the report indicated many good examples of sharing and partnership, and concluded that the ISSP has increased communication between independent and maintained schools, improved pupil achievement and resulted in the dissemination of good practice.

The school leaders involved in this research have been involved in breaking down these barriers. In conclusion, it would be fair to say that previous research has highlighted many benefits of working in partnership, as well as existing preconceptions and assumptions. It has indicated that the benefits can be equally felt by both sectors. This research aims to develop those issues and, from a school perspective, seek out elements that are likely to lead to successful activity.

3. The nature of the partnerships

3.1 Diversity of activity

The schools visited as part of this research were involved in a diverse range of partnership activities. In some cases they met very specific needs in terms of school development; in others, the activity was event-driven, eg schools working together to prepare a joint concert. On occasions, the activity was focused upon an aspect of curriculum development or in meeting a particular school development need.

It was clear that all the heads and school leaders interviewed had considered very carefully what the benefits of the joint activity were likely to be. Having a clear objective had led to a successful outcome.

We wanted to raise the status of maths, and the profile of the subject, in our two schools... The confidence of the youngsters at (our school) was assisted by working with (our partner school's) students... They benefited from each others' experience and support and guidance.

The activity had been defined at the outset and having a shared understanding of the extent of the activity had led to successful outcomes. This was equally the case when the schools concerned had previously been involved in some joint activity. Those interviewed felt that it was critical to discuss the extent of the partnership at the outset. This was evident in a partnership which focused on professional development in ICT:

We had always had some links with (our partner school)...We are at the two extremes across the whole city. We have the students who are probably the least able in the city while (our partner school) has probably the most able... The ICT development worked really well for the teaching and support staff.

Given that the schools were from different areas and sectors, it was not surprising that the activities were diverse. A specialist language school was working with an independent partner to produce materials that assisted pupils to tackle an Open University module and this had produced significant benefits for both schools. In another partnership, two schools had worked together in advance of a joint musical concert while another partnership had worked on a project involving geography, science and English with pupils exchanging materials throughout the year. Technology had been used by many of the partnerships to assist pupils to communicate with each other.

3.2 Shared enthusiasm

The sense of enthusiasm for such links was a notable feature of many interviews. One head spoke of the benefits in a positive manner:

We used video conferencing to allow children to talk together and to look at their own poems, revise poems and work together (as well as) exchanging photographs. The children were enthusiastic about it, the teachers were enthusiastic about it. I think there was a mutual respect between the two schools at what we were trying to do. There was no kind of elitism on any side, no sense of any school saying we're better than you in any respect. Each teacher in both schools was enthusiastic about what they were doing and what they wanted to do – nobody had to be dragged along.

A considerable amount of energy was being channelled into the partnership activities in the schools visited. In one school there had been an arts partnership, a series of science lectures, joint concerts, a languages immersion day and a shared geography and ICT project.

Where the partnerships were most successful, heads saw them as forming an essential part of the school's educational development plan as well as producing significant CPD opportunities for the staff.

4. Planning the activity – building the relationship

4.1 Motivation

Interviewees were asked to identify the factors that motivated them to enter into the partnership. This question produced a wide range of responses. In some cases, respondents indicated that they were keen to take advantage of any scheme that may produce benefits for the school and its pupils:

From a philosophical point of view I am always alert to any opportunities that will assist our students and I do not have any hang-ups in terms of working with the independent sector or any other bodies for that matter. The overriding aim was to get the best for the students and to allow them to work with other cultures and students from a different sector.

One head identified this scheme as an opportunity to work with a partner to meet a clear need in terms of school development;

It was a need that I had at the time. We had to do something of significance to show the governors that we were not going to lag behind in technology. We saw the potential of the benefits for both of us in terms of working together. There was never any sense of one school leading the other – it was a partnership.

A number of heads, particularly those in the independent sector, indicated that working with a school from the other sector was something that they felt to be a very important part of their overall school mission:

I believed in it intrinsically. I have a background in state and private education...

The desire to be involved in activities that involved the wider community was expressed by all of the independent heads interviewed. To some extent, this may be explained by the fact that being independent, they felt it important to build community links. One head explained that it reduced the 'sense of isolation' felt in being an independent school.

This point was developed by another independent head, who felt that having a maintained school background meant that there were 'no surprises'. Although it did not form a part of the research questioning, it was interesting that virtually all of the independent school leaders interviewed had worked in the maintained sector and they felt this assisted the partnership considerably during the early stages when the relationship was being established.

Another independent school interviewee cited the desire to be involved in the wider community as a motivation for entering into a partnership:

We as an independent school do all sorts of things with the local community...the general ethos is to look for ways that we can link into the world outside (our school). We felt this partnership could work to the benefit of the wider... community in our joint areas.

Some heads were convinced that the partnership would bring opportunities for their pupils, especially if it resulted in contact between the schools that fully involved their pupils and resulted in joint pupil activity:

If you are going to make progress, students need other experiences. For some students, having that opportunity to do that sort of work actually raises their motivation, raises their self esteem. They may not be very good at maths or history but they may have some other skills in working with people... this adds value to their learning experiences.

4.2 Two sectors

While the heads interviewed were convinced that working together could produce significant benefits, they admitted that initially there were some barriers to be overcome. They felt that there were some misconceptions, mainly based upon limited knowledge of each other:

I knew very little about independent education or independent schools. You hear many stories of elitism and so on but we went into the school and saw children very similar to our own and they were hard working but they had the same problems as our own. They had the whole range of academic ability and it was clear they could benefit from the expertise of my staff and we could benefit from the expertise of their staff. We could work for the benefit of each other's children.

An independent head expressed surprise that, when newly appointed to post, few maintained schools were keen to be involved in joint activities.

Until I came to be a head here I had never taught in an independent school. I hardly knew they existed; like a lot of people I did not know what an independent school was, and when I arrived I was quite surprised - not only at the total lack of any co-operation or communication but by the antithesis as well. I feel very strongly we are all individual in our own way – this school is different but I don't see why we should be outside the norm in any way.

Those involved in the partnerships came to recognise that the differences between the schools were not so great as to prevent good partnerships from being developed. Initial preconceptions were often dispelled quickly – one maintained head commented that he was interested to discover that resources were not more plentiful in the independent sector. Another head, who readily admitted that the initial motivation in entering into a partnership was a desire to access additional funding, said that the benefits of working together had become clear as the partnership developed and that a second partnership was not wholly dependent upon funding being available.

4.3 Planning the project

Once agreement had been reached and schools had entered into a partnership, it would be necessary for some initial planning to take place. As part of this research, heads were asked to identify the key elements of this period and to detail what took place during the planning phase. In some schools, face-to-face meetings, involving key personnel, took the ideas forward. Brainstorming sessions were held to firm up the activity. It was clear that there were differing approaches among the schools involved. In one case this was merely an extension of existing partnership work:

The planning was not difficult in terms of the project because we were already doing it anyway. This was an additional element that we needed to extent into other areas. In reality it was the linguists working together. They were keen to do this.

Where the initial activity had been conducted at senior management level, it was felt that the project had to be fully explained to the whole staff team to take the project forward. Staff needed to be kept aware of progress and given an opportunity to discuss the partnership fully. This was stressed by the majority of those interviewed. It was clear that, even though one person may be responsible for leading the project, whole staff support was vital to achieve a successful outcome:

The best way to plan a partnership is to have a lead school and a lead person. It doesn't matter which school. Before this you have to absolutely ensure that the head of the school has spoken to the staff and has got their agreement and support – that he has not simply told them that this will be good for the school and has made them do it for any reason... Failed partnerships are frequently ones where some poor overworked teacher has been told to lead the partnership and it then involves them with lots of extra work.

4.4 Securing the relationship

In most schools, a group of key staff was established to monitor the project. It was helpful during the early stages of the partnership if this group could meet socially and, in one partnership, the group met over a meal to establish a mutual understanding. Where staff had existing links, perhaps through subject meetings, this equally assisted in developing the partnership. One school felt that this relationship had been a major factor in creating a positive outcome:

The success of the project rested on the two (subject leaders) building a fruitful, enjoyable working relationship.

In one LEA, the initial meetings were organised by the Chief Education Officer. This resulted in more fruitful meetings as the previously mentioned misconceptions could be avoided.

He set up the meeting. It was important he took the lead as there were a number of independent schools complaining about giving all the time and maintained schools saying they did not want crumbs from the rich man's table. It mustn't be like that – if there is any of that it just doesn't work.

Ensuring that both sides of the partnership shared a common approach was felt to be a key issue during the planning stage.

Interviewees were consistent in their view that the most important element of the planning stage was to bring a wider perspective to the partnership by ensuring staff support for the project – without this the partnership could not prosper.

5. What drove the partnership?

5.1 Was there a lead person?

Heads interviewed had differing views on the need for a single person to take charge of the partnership. They all agreed that, once the project was established, it was essential for the head to allow others to take it forward.

As long as you agree in principle the parameters, then staff can go ahead and do it.

This was supported by another head who felt that, once the ground work had been done, staff should move the project on:

In a sense ... you are a beacon, responsible for the pioneering element. What you do is you set up people who then can take it on and drive it through. ...all I did was light the blue touch paper and then I retired... and the fireworks were dramatic. I was a catalyst but the results were inspirational because of the work of the teachers involved.

Despite this, some heads stressed the need for a driving force to keep a watchful eye on the development of the partnership. There was a need for an individual, or a lead team, who were fully behind the project:

You need a driver with energy and vision. This can be from either school.

In partnerships where the lead was felt to be shared, heads indicated that this had not taken away the need for there to be a committed 'drive' from the school leadership teams in each school.

5.2 An equal partnership

Those interviewed could all identify clear benefits resulting from the partnership. They were asked whether they felt the partnership had been equally entered into. This produced a number of differing responses. One head felt that this was not an issue – as long as the activity was delivered effectively, it mattered little if one school took a leading role and another followed. In the majority of cases, heads felt that the desire had been to build an equal partnership but they were unsure whether this resulted, partly because they could not evaluate the impact in their partner school;

In the general spirit of things, yes. I would like to think to think they gained something from it but I don't think their staff benefited as much as ours.

One head felt that, because the expertise necessary to carry the project forward had been present predominantly in the lead school, the partner was not able to enter into the partnership on an equal basis. This had not negatively affected the success of the project, as was supported by this statement from the partner school's head.

Staff development was greatly enhanced by the project. Staff were enthused and they felt it was the right direction for the school. It was focusing on new teaching and learning methods, which we had been keen to utilise. The clear focus on ICT was also in keeping with our school development. We were open minded with this project.... Everyone has a lot to learn from everyone else. We like to share ideas.

In order to ensure that the partnership met the declared objectives, and was of mutual benefit, it was suggested that monitoring should take place regularly throughout the year. For one independent head, this was a key issue as:

It is absolutely vital that partnership is not seen to be crumbs from the rich man's table.

None of those interviewed felt that this had been the case – they had seen benefits to both schools and the partnership had been a two-way process.

6. Sustainable partnerships

6.1 The next step

As the schools involved in this research were at differing stages of their partnership activities, replies to questions regarding the sustainability of their partnership brought a range of responses.

Schools involved in new partnerships, or where they were nearing the end of a project, were keen to develop upon the links, even though they appreciated that it would be difficult to continue working so closely in the longer term.

The real value will come if we are able to continue the link. The intensity of the activity is bound to die down because neither of the two schools can carry on funding coaches across the distance between them...I am hoping it will still settle into annual events or similar.

This was also seen in comments made by heads who accepted that funded partnerships could not continue to work in the same manner after funding was ended.

Even without funding...colleagues would still be in contact and would want to link up, either to pick up new ideas or by working with others.

Partnerships were seen as creating a climate of help and support that would be continued beyond the duration of the funded programme:

This did a lot to help us break down barriers and is an example of an excellent partnership. Partnerships have lots of spin-offs.

Those schools that had been involved in projects that had been supported during the early years of funded partnerships formed two distinct groups – those who had continued to work together and those who had discontinued the partnership. Where the partnership had produced real gains for the schools, there was a desire to build on the success.

At the end of the first year we (both heads) said this is good, let's do more of this, and we invited more schools to join us and if anything this went even better.

In the longer term, maintaining this enthusiasm and success presented some difficulties. If a key person moved on, particularly a head with great enthusiasm for the partnership, the activity could dwindle.

One of the problems can be if the instigator of the project moves on there can be a hiatus. Somebody else can come in to take the partnership on who hasn't quite got the same original goals and doesn't see things in quite the same way.

Building on a partnership, where there were principally two schools involved, could prove to be a challenge. School-based issues eventually presented themselves:

There is some continuing activity although there are some practical difficulties due to timetabling.... We may have lost a bit of impetus.

Despite this, all heads involved felt there were longer term benefits – especially for the pupils involved. Schools with a longer term experience of partnership work, being keen to continue, often overcame this by adding new partners to an existing project or looking to develop new partnerships.

6.2 Funding

The schools involved in this research had all been successful in bidding for support from the DfES Independent-State Schools Partnership fund. When asked how critical to the success of the partnership this funding had been, two distinct responses were given. Several heads indicated that the activity would have taken place in any case – indeed in some cases this had been taking place for some years. Other schools felt that the funding was a prerequisite. Of the former, the following response was typical;

It was not a huge amount. It did create a focus and the bidding process firmed up the existing activity. However, we would have had some joint activity. Teacher non-contact was essential in driving the partnership and this would otherwise have been a difficult issue.

Even where heads felt the funding to be a critical factor, the desire to work together was seen as more significant.

The funding is critical initially to get it off the ground but the true essence of partnership does not necessarily lie in the funding but in the relationship that is built – and this relates to both the students and the teachers.

Practical issues such as the transportation of pupils where schools were some way apart meant that some of the partnerships could not have taken place without funding. Heads recognised that the funding was not a true measure of the work that was undertaken and there was always going to be some impact on the school budget. The funding allowed for the partnership to operate effectively. Even where the benefits were clear in terms of the provision of resources through the funding stream, it was clear that heads felt the real benefit was in terms of the positive influence on staff and pupils.

The benefits were that we could buy equipment for the school as well but we understood straight away that the main costs were transport costs. There were material benefits but I honestly think that there were benefits in terms of the children experiencing dance, performing in a 60-piece orchestra, to be working together in producing a high profile event...it was magnificent.

7. Benefits to the schools

7.1 Mutual gains

One of the aims of this research was to determine whether the schools involved in partnership activity had found the benefits to be mutually positive. Interviewees were asked to detail the benefits of partnership work and the responses generally supported the link. It was evident in the replies that the heads saw the partnership between the sectors as being beneficial in a wider context.

The more we share, the more we listen to each other, the better... Sharing resources, knowledge, information, celebrating achievements – this is what partnerships do well. The good thing about partnerships is that they work at different levels – in the staff room, at curriculum level, within CPD, cross-phase and also within the bigger picture.

This ‘bigger picture’ was alluded to by virtually all of the respondents:

It is communication. In many cases imagined barriers [and] psychological barriers have now been breached and now people are now looking in a holistic sense [at] how can we actually do our job best in terms of empowering and enfranchising our children, regardless of sector. They are saying “why don’t we share things for the mutual gain of our children?”

For some heads, they saw the partnership as an opportunity for their pupils to work alongside pupils from a different sector; the social implications of the activity were referred to on a number of occasions. A secondary head in a maintained school commented:

Our pupils were a little bit in awe at first... because the pupils from [our partner school] speak with such assurance but they realised that their maths was every bit as good, sometimes better than their students.

In this case the partner school had reached very similar conclusions.

I could see huge benefits for the students... I imagine that our students are probably familiar with students from a similar background, everything from the fabric of a comprehensive school to the real mix of students there. I could see that as a positive eye opener...it was also very good for the students to see that that many of the students there were better than themselves.

A primary head, again from a maintained school, reflected upon the opportunity that the partnership presented for the pupils and staff to work alongside an inner city independent school in the following way;

Staff learned a great deal about working together with other schools. My staff are very good at working together as a team but they had had no experience of working together with other schools... They benefited from the experience of others and the staff from the other schools benefited from working with our staff.

We are in a middle-class leafy suburb and it was nice to get the children to work with inner city children. If we don’t go out to the inner cities then our children will have no experience of different environments and different cultures.

In those cases where the partnership had worked towards a major production, heads felt that the aspirational nature of the activity had produced significant gains for the pupils. Many of those interviewed felt that the greater understanding, which had resulted from working together, had been a notable feature of the partnership. This had resulted in partnerships that had produced benefits in equal measure for both the public and the private partner.

The project may help to dispel some mistaken beliefs about independent schools. It may dispel the notion that they are a 'Lady Bountiful' sort of thing entering into partnerships with state schools. We do not see ourselves as... teaching our state partner how to do things. This was entirely the opposite – we really admire what [our partners] have been achieving.

In all of the partnerships covered by this research, the schools were definite in their view that the activity had produced mutual benefits to both partners.

7.2 Did it make a difference?

Interviewees were asked whether the activity had made a real difference to their school. The responses reflected the fact that in some schools the partnership had involved a major aspect of curriculum development while in others it had not been such a key part of the school's programme. Even where this was the case, heads felt it had produced some change.

We have become more open. We have focused more on schools working in partnership.

Some heads felt that the project had created lasting friendships among the staff and pupils involved. In the case of specialist schools, partnership activity was now a deeply ingrained way of working – the benefits of working in partnerships had been proven and were an accepted way of operating. One head spoke of the 'tangible benefits' of working as partners and felt that it had made a 'lasting difference'.

Even where this was more difficult to quantify, respondents felt that the partnership had made a real difference.

It is bound to [make a difference] although it is hard to define exactly the ways in which this is the case. I think of my own experiences; I get encouragement from seeing the ways that other professionals work in different situations, doing the same job; I think I get confirmation of my own methodology and ways of working and learn...but how can I tell how I have absorbed it.... Students carry a personal memory of an experience or an encounter....which can affect them in the longer term...

Where the partnership had involved a project that had produced a material gain for the school, it was easier to identify the lasting change. When this had not been the case, heads could easily identify an area that had been affected by the activity – either in terms of CPD for staff or in an area that had been developed for the benefit of the pupils.

7.3 A different model

The ISSP fund supports joint activity involving at least one independent and one maintained school. As part of the interview questions, heads were asked to reflect on a different model. Would it have been different if the partnership had involved two maintained schools or two independent schools? Could this produce partnerships that were as successful and fruitful? For many respondents, this would not have made any difference to the way that schools could operate as partners: "As long as no one feels threatened, there should not be a problem."

Another head felt that the school was happy to work with any partner that approached them in a positive manner. Most of those interviewed, however, took a contrary view. They felt that the essence of this sort of activity was in appreciating the gains that accrued by working with a partner from another sector.

The project is much more interesting and vital when it is a link between two slightly different traditions. There is a lot of point to the independent-state schools link. I'm not quite sure there is much point to two independent schools coming together.

One head felt that working alongside a partner maintained school could not achieve the same gains.

That would be a different ball game. We would lose something. What makes the partnership work so well is that you have the opportunity to work with colleagues from a different sector and to see that they have the same concerns, the same problems, the same needs as we have. It would not be as valuable because part of the benefit is that you actually get together with a school that you have no knowledge of beforehand so you have to... see what they have done and what they are doing ...working with the other sector has great benefits.

An independent sector head felt that competition would become an issue if the partnership was established with independent schools working alongside each other;

Competition is the difficulty. There are no real difficulties when the schools are from different sectors because competition is neutralised in this relationship.... I could not see such a partnership working as there would be two forces pulling in opposite directions.

Even when Heads could see such a scheme working, they did not feel the benefits would be so clear;

"It could work... but... part of the importance of partnerships is that the partners are different and therefore they have got different things to offer. The differential gains would not be as apparent if two independent schools were working together. There needs to be a difference to open your eyes to things you have not seen.

8. The critical elements: ensuring success

8.1 Lessons learned

Given the benefit of hindsight, would our school leaders have done things differently? What lessons had been learned as the partnership developed? While it was evident that all of the partnerships visited had felt the activity to have been successful, they were asked to reflect upon the partnership and to identify things that may have been done differently. Many felt that they now appreciated the need to plan well in advance of such activity. Critically, there was a need to ensure collective agreement among the staff well in advance of the partnership;

In hindsight we should perhaps have had more planning and involved more people so that there [was greater] ownership in both schools. It tended in this case to be more at senior management level...staff needed to fully understand each other's schools.

Even when the partnership had been driven by a lead person, it was still important for staff to be involved fully.

People need to feel part of it...it mustn't be driven by one person. It has to be joint even though there does need to be a lead. I host the first meeting and then pull back.... You cannot have one school just pushing and pushing otherwise there is no partnership.

A number of heads identified the need to identify the objectives at the outset and to keep these in mind during the period of activity. Equally, it was important to have a clear idea of what should occur at key stages of the project.

A clearer schedule of meetings would have helped. At times it was a bit ad-hoc. It was organic, it grew. The absolute focus was not really clear at first....

Despite these observations, those interviewed felt that the partnerships had proceeded effectively and had achieved fruitful outcomes.

8.2 Creating successful partnerships

Finally, interviewees were asked for their opinions on what produced successful partnerships. Given that they had experienced a successful partnership, what had they felt to be the factors which had led to this success? The responses were varied but a number of common themes emerged. Principally, there was unanimity in stressing the need for a clear commitment from the head and the management team of the school. The project had to be regarded as a priority.

It must have the heads' backing....From a management point of view you need to make it a priority and build in the support necessary.

[There needs to be] ...commitment from the highest level; someone saying 'Let's do it'.

The head must ensure that this commitment and support is met with an equally positive approach from the staff. Many heads stressed the need to ensure that the project was fully supported within the staff team.

You could have a dominant head who says, 'I want partnership, it's going to happen,' but if the people who are actually at the pit face aren't that keen, the whole thing will subsequently founder.

Heads felt that the team working on the partnership, as well as governors and parents, needed to be fully convinced that this was worth doing: "There must be a willingness on the part of the staff involved – they need to see the benefits."

This was on the understanding that, for the partnership to succeed, the energy and drive of the staff team would be vital. One head commented that it was important for the staff not to see this as simply extra work – they had to be convinced that it was for the benefit of the school.

Many respondents stressed the need to ensure that both schools appreciated the objectives of the project and were supportive of the principles of partnership:

Respect for your differences and a celebration of all the things you have in common. The ethos of both schools was that we are both about achieving. A common set of values is important.

You must be able to work together as real partners – there must not be any one agenda.

It was important that both schools should see common benefits. In the case of these partnerships, involving a funded element brought a third party into the equation and this needed to be considered.

It needs to be the right step, the right priority for the institution at that time. There needs to be a negotiated methodology between the funder and the partners that recognises the current situation for all the partners and moves them forward in a way which is consistent with each partner's needs at that time.

Virtually all of those interviewed stressed the importance of commitment to the project and a desire to see it through to its conclusion. This is summarised in the final comment.

Commitment to the very essence of partnership....Belief in why you are doing it, the enthusiasm to sustain it....talking all the time to those involved...taking the time to show that you are appreciating what staff are doing.

9. Conclusions

All respondents expressed a great deal of support for the principle of cross-sector partnership activity. It was clear that they had approached their projects with considerable enthusiasm and energy. There was a clear commitment to ensuring success, and this drive and determination had secured positive outcomes.

The ISSP scheme had, in the opinion of those interviewed, achieved a great deal and they were of the opinion that it had helped to break down barriers. Previous research had highlighted the preconceptions that many school leaders and LEAs have in relation to their understanding of the independent sector. The maintained heads interviewed referred to these misconceptions in the interview responses, often commenting that the partnership had helped to dispel these misunderstandings.

The scheme is supporting a wide range of activities, with schools determining the extent to which the activities relate to their school objectives. In many cases, schools are building upon existing links, developing them as funding allows, although schools are also approaching the scheme as a broad canvas that allows them to design a programme to meet their mutual requirements.

From this research, it would be reasonable to conclude that:

- Successful partnerships require the full support and commitment of the head.
- It may be helpful to have a lead person overseeing the partnership activity.
- Staff need to be convinced of the benefits and be involved in the planning stage.
- It is important to set the parameters at an early stage and to plan the activity effectively.
- Staff need to be kept fully informed as the partnership develops.
- The principles of partnership need to be clearly understood by both partners.
- Having a common set of values is more important than having a similar background.
- Partnerships can be longer term, although this may involve introducing new partners or redefining the activity.
- Schools are approaching partnerships with a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment.
- Partnerships are successful when they are seen to be mutually beneficial.
- Partnerships can lead to culture change.
- Successful partnerships often involve schools that are very different in nature.
- It is helpful for the LEA to be supportive.

Finally, it has been a privilege to be able to visit schools where the principles of partnership have been so successfully established. The results of this successful activity were evident, as was the enthusiasm, drive and energy for such work.

10. Methodology

10.1 Gathering the data

Conducting a qualitative study of this nature with an open mind initially presented some difficulties. Having been involved in a successful independent-state school partnership, it was essential that this research was conducted without bias. This research does not set out to establish new concepts and theories – the focus is entirely on establishing what those involved feel to be the key elements of their partnerships. As such it is ‘descriptive’ in nature.

Denscombe (1998) deals with the need to keep an open mind when the researcher brings some experience of the subject matter to bear on the research. An open mind does not need to be a blank mind:

It is informed about an area, but open to discovering new factors of relevance to an explanation of that area, rather than restricting the scope and vision of the research to whether a hypothesis based on existing theories had got it right (or not).

The research focused on nine in-depth taped and transcribed interviews of approximately one hour for each of the school leaders involved in the study. Questions were deliberately posed in an open-ended manner, eliciting the views of those involved in a such a manner as to be able to determine what made these partnerships to become successful.

Those selected for interview had completed a self-evaluation exercise as part of the monitoring of the ISSP scheme and had been identified by the DfES as being involved in successful partnership activities. Therefore, research questions were phrased to determine the elements that had been responsible for this success, as well as the leadership implications of the activity.

10.2 The interview format

Each school leader was interviewed during a session lasting approximately one hour, with the same questions in each case. They were selected to represent the range of partnerships in which school were involved. School leaders from both primary and secondary phases were interviewed.

Those interviewed were asked to describe the activities involved in the partnership, detailing the nature of the first contacts between the schools and the planning process attached to both the bid and the resulting activity.

The research focused predominantly on the motivation and the leadership of the activity rather than the mechanics of the partnership. In phrasing questions in this manner, the researcher was keen to ascertain what ‘drove’ the partnership. Had, for example, the partnership been equally entered into? Had one school taken the lead, with the other school acting as a passive partner?

Given that the activity had been a success, the research questions were posed to seek out the perceived benefits for the organisations. Had the partnership made a difference to the school?

As the partnerships were funded, the questions were framed to seek out the views of the school leaders on the question of funding. Had it been a critical element? If funding had ceased, were there sustainable elements of the activity that survived beyond the funding?

As the partnerships involved schools from the maintained and non-maintained sectors, the questions also sought the views of the school leaders on the nature of working alongside partners from a different sector.

Finally, school leaders were asked to sum up the critical elements that they felt were central to ensure a successful partnership.

It should be made clear that the researcher did not personally know any of the nine school leaders prior to this project. Their selection was on the basis as described above. The researcher had no prior knowledge of the schools involved or the partnership activity in which they were involved.

Appendix

Range of partnership activities undertaken by schools

Listed below are the activities undertaken by the schools involved in this research. Most, but not all, of the activities were funded by the ISSP scheme. Some schools had been involved in a series of partnerships.

Two schools had worked at primary level on a partnership involving English, geography and science using ICT links. In English, the focus was on poetry writing, with some video conferencing. Geography project work involved a study of rivers using digital photos and map work. Pupils exchanged science investigation work.

A follow-up year developed the partnership, involving four schools in a performing arts venture. A joint Christmas celebration in the cathedral took place, and the town hall was hired for a massed choir event in front of parents from the four schools.

ICT training had been the focus of a partnership between a large independent school and a special school. This project involved the two teams of staff working together and the partnership had also resulted in a community action day.

A secondary partnership, with a focus of modern foreign languages, resulted in two schools working together to design materials for Year 9 students. This additionally involved working with the Open University to allow students to take a module from an OU undergraduate course.

A secondary music and expressive arts partnership led to a joint production involving three schools. A strings academy and a jazz improvisation workshop had resulted. A resident composer was employed to lead practice sessions, which culminated in a performance to parents and invited guests.

Another secondary partnership focused on maths, with students working on an open-ended mathematical investigation. Findings were presented at an evening presentation. E-mails and chatroom links had assisted the project.

Two schools had worked together on a GCSE composition project, involving choirs and musicians from both schools. A saxophone group had been established and there had been an additional focus on popular music and ethnic music. Students has been transported to each others schools to work on the project.

Other partnerships involved:

- A two-day Year 12 business conference
- Christmas science lectures
- A languages immersion day for primary school pupils
- A Key Stage 3/ICT project

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