Empowering Positive Partnerships: a review of the processes, benefits and challenges of a university and charity social and emotional learning partnership

Abstract

'Working in partnership to transform society through education' is the inspirational mission statement of our Faculty of Education. But what can and does 'working in partnership' mean in practice? This paper outlines a partnership development story with a charity and a university Faculty. There is limited research surrounding academic partnerships with social enterprises, although no shortage of claims to be 'working in partnership'. This is a research informed review of a social and emotional learning partnership between the charity Family Links and Canterbury Christ Church University which we suggest has had a profound and positive impact on individuals and organisations. We draw on theory based partnership evaluation frameworks and partnership review data, including filmed interviews with project participants, training evaluations and action research case studies to tell this story and discuss the processes, benefits and challenges of our partnership. The impact of key actors' personal responses to participation and subsequent empowerment as agents of change is highlighted. The active nurturing of emotional leaders and agreeing and reviewing protocols at all levels are key review recommendations. The complexity of measuring improved wellbeing outcomes for learning communities as a desired goal is also highlighted.

Key words:

partnership; university; social enterprise; social and emotional learning; leadership of change; emotional leadership; relationships; synergy.

Introduction

This paper discusses a review of a research informed partnership between the charity Family Links (FL) and Canterbury Christ Church University Faculty of Education (CCCUFoE). The social and emotional learning (SEL) partnership, now in its seventh year, has had a profound and positive impact on individuals and organisations and is moving into a new phase with opportunities to broaden engagement and impact. During this time, both FL and CCCUFoE, as dynamic organisations, have undergone considerable developments. Despite some of the seismic changes both organisations have lived through, the 'partnership' has continued, indeed it has grown stronger.

Interorganisational relationships are common features of institutional life (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Casey, 2007). With the increased responsibility for the training of teachers shifting from universities to schools in England in recent years, effective partnerships with schools are now non-negotiable for university providers of initial teacher education (ITE). As a consequence of this shift, there is considerable

literature available which explores the benefits, challenges and processes of university-school partnerships (Douglas and Ellis, 2011; Parker et al., 2012; Walsh and Backe, 2013; Miller, 2015). However, there is limited research surrounding academic partnerships with third sector partners, including voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises, and more research is needed to understand both the benefits and limitations of these types of interorganisational relationships (Bell et al. 2015). Learning how to understand the development of such partnerships underpins this article. Linked to this is the development of a theoretical model and evaluative framework which is fit for purpose as we seek to evaluate these unique partnerships.

Background

FL is a national charity dedicated to creating an emotionally healthy, resilient and responsible society. The charity believes every child and parent deserves the best chance in life and aims to enable parents and teachers to become more effective, caring and confident in raising and teaching emotionally resilient and socially competent children (Family Links, 2015). Since 1997, FL has trained over 10 000 parent group leaders who in turn have reached over 120 000 parents. The FL education programme 'The Nurturing Schools Network' has trained staff in over 350 schools and over 4000 trainee teachers from six ITE providers.

The Nurturing Programme underpins FL training activities. Developed by American child psychologist Dr Stephen Bavolek in the 1970s, the programme is built around four constructs: self-awareness and self-esteem; appropriate expectations; positive discipline; and empathy. The Nurturing Programme uses these constructs as building blocks of emotional intelligence and relationship skills and recognises empathy as the cornerstone of all positive relationships.

CCCUFoE has been developing a partnership with the charity since 2009 when FL delivered two days of workshops for Teach First primary pilot participants. Feedback from some of the trainee teachers indicated that putting into practice strategies shared during the workshops had a dramatic impact on classroom learning relationships and on outcomes for children (Family Links, 2011).

Motivation theories and research into the impact of SEL approaches on pupil achievement, progress and long term mental health underpin the content of the workshops. Participants are also encouraged to prioritise their own emotional well-being. Recent research evaluations of workshops delivered in other settings (Khan, 2016) are in line with outcomes of the pilot initiative with trainee teacher's self-confidence in managing challenging behaviour and their understanding of the connection between emotional health and learning improving following attendance.

The partnership has grown and flourished over the last 7-year period. Each year, we set out our list of partnership development aspirations in a collaborative planning meeting. In recognition of this growth, an FL/CCCUFoE partnership project group was established in July 2013 to further embed this development, including identification of further opportunities for research and knowledge exchange collaboration. The introduction of the 'group' took the development of the partnership into a wider circle, a distributive leadership of partnership development.

Outcomes from the partnership during this period include action research workshops, impact case studies, tutor self-study research and the embedding of the Nurturing Programme constructs within a new teacher education Mentor Development Programme.

A significant outcome has been the development of a Post Graduate Certificate (PG Cert) SEL. The course has a distinctive ethos based on shared values and principles and is designed to enable students to explore their own professional and personal issues, concerns and dilemmas in the context of the challenges of everyday practice and the changing demands of organisational and national policy. The course draws on expertise within the FL partnership and offers wider networking opportunities and access to case studies and research, including through an online SEL resource repository.

At a national level, CCCUFoE and FL took on the role to co-chair the Fair Education Alliance (FEA) Impact Goal 3 (IG3) working group (2014). The FEA is a national coalition, with representation from the education, business and charities sector, united in closing the achievement gap between rich and poor. IG3's aim is to ensure young people develop key strengths, including emotional wellbeing and mental health, to support high aspirations. Co-chairing this working group was only possible because of the depth of the partnership.

The FL/CCCU partnership is therefore developing a potentially strong position through its wider networks to influence local and national education policy in respect to SEL. From our initial starting place, we were ambitious in our aspirations for the partnership, we saw the potential for this partnership to 'transform' society through education and have consistently held the lens up to ourselves and plan for development.

<u>Purpose of this study</u>

As part of the ongoing commitment to development, a review was carried out by the project steering group following the launch of the PG Cert SEL (2016). The purpose was to examine the processes that had led to the successful outcomes with a view to sharing recommendations with partnership development teams in both organisations and at the same time inform a review of a memorandum of understanding between the partners.

Specifically, the review sought to consider the following key questions:

- How does this partnership relate to theory definitions of partnership?
- What are the benefits and challenges of informal and formalised partnerships between HEIs and charities?
- What are appropriate evaluation methods?
- Are there any unique characteristics of the existing partnership that have contributed to its success and if so, could these be replicated?

Literature Review

<u>Defining Partnership</u>

Douglas (2009) argues that although partnership working is a key and obligatory concept throughout the public sector, there are multiple meanings and no common agreed definition. Brinkenhoff proposes a theory based definition of partnership based on his review of the literature (we have added emphasis of key concepts emerging through our review):

> 'Partnership is a **dynamic** relationship among diverse actors, based on **mutually agreed objectives**, pursued through a **shared understanding** of the most rational division of [labour] based on the **respective comparative advantages of each partner**. Partnership encompasses mutual influence, with a careful balance between **synergy** and **respective autonomy**, which incorporates **mutual respect**, equal participation in decision-making, **mutual accountability**, and **transparency**.'
> (2002: 216)

However, Brinkenhoff raises three key issues with this definition of the ideal partnership:

1. the extent to which the defining elements can be put into operation;
2. they may not be universally appropriate;
3. their justification is subjective and values-based.

Mindful of the complexities in interpreting the multiple definitions of partnership, Douglas suggests that 'working together' is 'as close to a definition as it gets' (2009:3) and considers partnership to be both a process and mindset. The evaluation framework we have deployed has thus been constructed to take account of this. Our review (2016) sought to understand both the processes of our partnership and the mindset of key players in its development and success.

Empowerment of key actors

Saltiel refers to the 'magic' of collaborative learning partnerships which can transform ordinary learning experiences into dynamic relationships and result in a 'synergistic process of accomplishment' (1998:5). Through her use of the term 'synergy', Saltiel refers to the power to combine the 'perspectives, resources and skills of a group of people and organisations' and thus a key mechanism through which partnerships gain advantage over individuals as agents of change. However, as Ryan and O'Malley (2016) point out the potential for such partnerships is not necessarily obvious at the outset and it may not be possible to predict any pitfalls that might arise. Future success is likely to have much to do with the key actors in the process and they suggest more research is needed into the role such leaders play in a partnership's success.

Our partnership leaders (including students, tutors and teachers) share a common desire to put social and emotional well-being at the heart of teaching and learning through research informed practice. Our review highlighted the synergistic research relationships (Kaasilav and Ludovic, 2015) between our organisations and between individual project members and the impact of key actors' personal responses to participation on their empowerment as agents of change.

Finding that much of the research seeking to measure the impact of cross-sector social partnerships discussed impact at either a macro (societal) or meso cross-sector

partnership (inter-organisational) level, Kolk et al. chose to focus their attention on the micro perspective (individual interactions between and within organisations). Whilst acknowledging that partnerships are 'first and foremost meant to address the social good (macro level), and the partnering organizations (meso level)' (2010:125), they also recognise implications for the individuals who interact at a micro level. Focusing primarily on macro or meso level impact may underestimate the 'trickle-up' and 'trickle round' impact (Kolk et al, 2010:214) that can emerge from personal and positive outcomes for individuals participating in partnerships. Engaging in a partnership that seeks to promote and model SEL should be a positive experience for participants and if as a consequence individuals are empowered with self-belief as leaders of change the 'trickle' up and round effect of positive dissemination can quickly lead to impact at many levels. Research into successful school leadership suggests that self-belief may be an important bridge between the potential to lead and subsequent high performance (Rhodes, 2012).

Challenges

Bell et al. (2015) explain what they describe as a 'unique partnership' between De Montfort University (DMU) and Macmillan Cancer Support (MCS) whilst recognising the challenges of partnership work, particularly in respect of bureaucratic differences between the organisations. As Eddy suggests partnerships do not operate in a vacuum; 'the organizational context of each organization contributes to alignment of the partnership, and this overall context is juxtaposed with the mission and structure of each involved institution' (2010:16). Eddy cites other contributing contextual factors including:

- the partner's need to leverage resources;
- the role of the champion's belief in the cause;
- the ease with which actions and decisions can take place.

Equality in decision-making is a challenge for partnerships, particularly if there is a power imbalance between partners (Brinkenhoff, 2002; Ebersöhn et al. 2015). Brinkenhoff suggests that power imbalances are likely to originate from one partner controlling the majority of the resources, in which case 'true equality in decision making can be skewed' (2002:225). Similarly, Sinclair (2011) argues that the influence of groups within a partnership depends upon what currency and assets they bring to negotiations.

Drinkwater (2012) speaks of a 'cloud' hanging over universities' charitable work with a need to put a monetary value on any activities undertaken. There is an inevitable tension between the social change driver for our partnership and the 'cloud' of the expectation of future income-generation attached to higher education innovation funding submissions. Social partnerships address issues extending beyond the boundaries of organisations and traditional goals (Googins and Rochlin, 2002). Such partnerships require an active involvement from all participants as agents of change and a resource commitment that is more than monetary.

Reflecting on both the successes and issues of the partnership between Plymouth University and Brain Tumour Research, Burden acknowledges that 'embracing the core values of another organisation while remaining true to your own requires a careful

balancing act' (cited in Choice, 2015 n.p.). Their partnership achieved this by focusing on shared values and by respecting each other's brand via a dual brand policy, designing a new logo in which both brands were equally represented.

Burden describes the university's partnership with the charity as 'mutually enriching at many levels' but emphasises the importance of being open-minded and flexible. Allowing the relationship to evolve, rather than setting their strategy in stone from the outset enabled the partners to be reactive and creative. 'Some of the most inventive and successful activities we have carried out to date would not have been possible without this level of flexibility' (Choice, 2015 n.p.).

Similarly participants of the DMU/MCS partnership explain that 'both organisations contributed to the 'flow of ideas' and were able to 'flex and adapt to accommodate new thinking and innovative ideas' (Bell et al. 2015:532). The nature of the relationship is described as 'different' from other university collaborations and 'organic'. Given the dynamic nature of partnerships, this ability to be flexible and allow the partnership to evolve organically is crucial to its success, particularly as organisations may speak a different language, share different cultures and operate on day to day basis within different worlds (Googins and Rochlin, 2002). Even where both partners have the same wider goal, their interest in the partnership may be very different. The members may begin with a consensus but circumstances change and each organisation may be pulled in different directions by both internal and external political, professional and organisational drivers (MacDonald and Chrisp, 2005). This is particularly the case where there are implicit or explicit areas of competition such as when partners jointly plan and lead externally funded research and training events. Furthermore, Douglas (2009:16) highlights 'partnership overload' and 'partnership fatigue' as powerful risks for social change partnerships.

Evaluation Frameworks

Evaluating 'unique and 'organic' relationships is challenging, not least because of the subjective and value laden biases likely to cloud any interpretation of relative success. Macdonald and Chrisp's (2005) findings that much of the literature available on cross-sector partnerships assumes its merits and focuses primarily on its procedures is hardly surprising therefore.

Brinkenhoff (2002) proposes a framework for assessing partnership work in progress. Firstly, a developmental evaluation approach, one that seeks to improve work in process and ensure good partnership practice and a second theory-based evaluation which aims to test the theory that partnership contributes to performance or outcomes.

Brinkenhoff (2002) argues that partnership practice should be assessed on a relative scale as the desired goals and relationship preferences will vary, the concept of the ideal partnership may be impossible to fully implement and judgements are likely to be extremely subjective. He suggests however that the degree of partnership can be assessed according to the presence of what he sees as its defining dimensions: *mutuality* and *organisation identity*:

- *mutuality* - encompasses the spirit of partnership principles and 'can be distinguished as horizontal, as opposed to hierarchical, coordination and

accountability, and equality in decision-making, as opposed to domination of one or more partners' (2002: 217).;

- *organisation identity* - what is distinctive and enduring in each partnership organisation; not systems and processes but rather an organisation's core values and supporting teams. It forms the foundation for partnership as both mutually shared core values and the uniqueness of what a partnership can offer drives organisations to work together.

Methodology

We adopted and adapted Brinkenhoff's framework as a review tool since it recognises the inherent challenges in measuring a partnership's success against different organisational priorities, whilst presenting a set of workable criteria for identifying key dimensions of successful partnership. We drew mainly on formalised participant questionnaires, interviews and leadership reflections and focused primarily on meso and micro levels impact evaluations. Although the aims of our formal partnership centre on enacting change at a macro (societal) level, at the point of writing we are not in a position to share on-going evaluation data at this level. Pointing schools to reliable tools for measuring the impact of SEL interventions identified through rigorous research reviews is a priority of our work with our FEA IG3 partners. It is a task fraught with complexity, not least because of the various conceptual dimensions of wellbeing (Watson et al., 2012; Cooke et al., 2016; Allin & Hand, 2017).

In reviewing the processes of partnership we drew on Sargent and Waters' (2004) Framework of Academic participation that suggests that collaborations go through specific phases (initial, clarification, implementation, completion) that operate in cycles. We also considered the key roles of three groups of leaders categorised as operational leadership, emotional leadership (Goleman et al., 2006) and leadership of change (Durrant, 2012).

An initial review of the early stages of partnership emerged through an informal developmental evaluation ('How is this working for you/us?' 'How are we feeling about the partnership?' 'What is the impact on individual and organisational wellbeing?' 'What's in it for us/others?') akin to the informal review of developing friendships. This subjective approach (which continues) supports a more rigorous and formal theory based evaluation process focusing on key performance/outcome indicators. There is inevitably a tension between the informal and subjective evaluation of continuing friendships and the higher stakes performance based evaluation of formal partnerships. Through these evaluations we considered *mutuality* with reference to the processes and mindsets that have been instrumental in our partnership progress to date and the extent of our enduring *organisation identity*.

Opportunities for data gathering occurred in both informal and formalised situations.

Informal and unplanned for the purposes of project evaluation:

- social meetings;
- informal discussions;
- informal emotional check-ins.

Formalised although not specifically planned for the purposes of project evaluations:

- module evaluations;
- mentor development evaluations.

Formalised and planned for:

- journal reflections (e.g. a steering group member's co-current journaling for a masters' dissertation on leadership resilience);
- steering group meetings;
- project events (e.g. conferences, information sharing gatherings, action research);
- business plan reviews;
- participant questionnaires;
- participant interviews.

Permissions were sought for the inclusion of participant data in project evaluations and all individuals filmed as part of an interim research evaluation were invited to review the video recordings and had the right to withdraw before the final version was published on the web. Every effort was made to ensure that participants did not feel under duress to participate. Participants freely volunteered to share personal and professional impact and to have their names included as authors of transcripts.

Findings

Initial Stage

Sargent and Waters (2004) suggest that the initial phase of partnership focuses on the motivation for participant involvement. These motivational drivers include intrinsic factors - building friendships and relationships and the personal benefits of working together - and instrumental factors - specific knowledge, access to data, complementary skills, status/esteem - (Buys and Bursnall, 2007). Our initial partnership centred on academic participation (an FL led two-day workshop and follow-up for Teach First participants). Initial motivational drivers included:

- joint recognition of a gap in the training provision;
- a shared desire to support teachers in managing their emotions and promoting positive behaviours in classrooms;
- the HEI's accountability for the success of a pilot programme;
- the charity's desire to work with key players in teacher training to support social justice aims.

As FL delivered their input without charge, there were no cost factors clouding the HEI's interpretation of the outcome of the intervention. Evaluations suggested profound, or indeed 'transformational', impact on both participant and classroom relational and performance outcomes (Family Links, 2011). Participants commented that the training 'was highly relevant to the contexts in which [they were] working in', 'confronted issues' and 'offered practical responses'.

These positive evaluations led to further FL input on post graduate and undergraduate teacher training pathways, which received similar positive feedback from students and tutors.

> '[the training] made me think more about giving children choices and using empathy to create secure and trusting relationships between ourselves and children in our class'.   (undergraduate student teacher)

The Head of the School of Teacher Education and Development at CCCU, explained the rationale for our developing partnership as an imperative given the stresses of the standards agenda operating within classroom contexts:

> 'This is really absolutely fundamental to the kind of work we think is really important for everybody that works with us on any kind of teacher development programme…that particularly in the context of primary education, the social and emotional well-being of the community of the classroom is critical to the success of that community…targeting students as individuals and also their impact on the social and emotional well-being of their pupils is right at the middle of what we want to be doing' (CCCU, 2016)

Given that both parties acknowledged weaknesses in the evaluations of the impact of the Nurturing Programme at this initial stage it is significant that the HEI's desire to further the partnership was largely driven by shared values and a degree of 'gut instinct':

> 'talking about what Family links was about it felt right...it aligned with our priorities, our vision for our students. It felt like a natural partnership … that we all wanted the same thing.' (Head of Partnerships filmed interview CCCU, 2016)

Clarification Stage

During the *clarification* stage the partners establish aims, set goals, explore key issues and consider timeframes. Partners need to be clear about the goals and committed to what each organisation hopes to accomplish both individually and in partnership (Foss et al 2003; Nathan, 2015).

A common language is a key indicator of *mutuality*. In the context of social and emotional learning there is a range of overlapping and/or contested terminology - social competencies, character, key strengths, social and emotional learning/skills, emotional literacy, resilience, social and emotional intelligence, emotional health and wellbeing, grit, growth mindset. Our common language is social and emotional learning, defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2012:4) as involving 'processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions'. Our common values include empathy, respect and empowerment, and both our missions aspire to transform individuals and enrich communities.

Implementation Stage

Roles and responsibilities are identified in the *implementation* stage at which point business plans are established. Douglas (2009:12) likens the initial and clarification stages as a courtship sequence followed by an exchange of 'partnership vows' – 'a rite of passage from being on their own to being together'.

Protocols are collectively agreed by participants at the start of our project activities. In the context of a more formal recognition of a partnership between a university and a third sector organisation protocols can take the form of a Memo of Understanding (MOU). Our 2015 MOU established three key areas for future co-operation - social and emotional health, partnerships with families and research and knowledge exchange. Due diligence is crucial before entering any formal understanding with a partner. Our due diligence procedures included university staff participating in and evaluating FL training opportunities, critical debate around the research behind the Nurturing Programme, regular opportunities for FL to become involved in university led events, such as partnership conferences and research themed discussion groups, in addition to regular formal and informal steering group discussions.

Completion Stage

The fourth stage, involves collaborators evaluating the extent to which the project has met the agreed outcomes. Buys and Bursnall (2007) point out that these outcomes can be: objective, such as conference papers (Cobb & Haisman-Smith, 2015; Cobb & Shearman, 2016) and research publications; and subjective, for example the personal and relational impact of partnership and learning outcomes such as research and knowledge exchange (FEA, 2016). As the model is cyclic, evidence of completing business plan outcomes is not evidence of completion of the partnership's mission. This cyclic model only partly captures the process of partnership which is an iterative rather than linear orderly progression of steps (Eddy, 2010) and does not fully reflect the various degrees of developing partnerships, from the fledgling informalities of beginning relationships through to the recognition of a common understanding in an MOU or a more formal collaborative agreement.

Leadership of Synergistic Partnerships

Lasker et al. argue that the type of leadership needed to produce synergy is in stark contrast to what they define as 'traditional leaders' who have 'a narrow level of expertise, speak a language that can only be spoken by their peers, are used to being in control, and relate to the people with whom they work as followers or subordinates rather than partners' (2001:193). They suggest partnerships require 'boundary-spanning leaders who understand and appreciate [the] different perspectives, can bridge their diverse cultures, and are comfortable sharing ideas, resources and power'.

Our review categorised three groups of partnership leaders.

Within the *operational leadership* group are individuals leading on key aspects of the partnership identified through project business plans, such as joint planning for action research workshops, the recruitment of research interns, marketing of events and the submission of conference proposals. *Operational leadership* occurs at various levels

in each organisation. For instance, CCCUFoE students volunteered to lead the filming of our 2015 'talking heads' project evaluation interviews.

Lasker et al. suggest that leaders of synergistic partnerships need strong relationship skills to encourage respectful, trustful and inclusive relationships that are co-constructed within an open-minded environment where differences of opinion can be shared. Goleman (2002) argues that great leadership works through the emotions and that the leader's primal task is to drive emotions in the right direction. Our review identified a second category of *emotional leadership.* Each project activity begins and ends with an awareness of emotions through an opportunity for members to share successes, anxieties and other emotional states, modelling key features of the Nurturing Programme approach. This openness enables meetings to operate within an awareness of individual needs and for different participants to act as *emotional leaders* steering the discussion and adjusting the emotional thermostat.

Leadership of change includes not only members of the Steering Group who have a focus on the overall mission of the partnership but also the leaders of change emerging from our jointly organised student, teacher and tutor action research workshops. For example, teachers are leading change in their schools through setting up parent group workshops and other family engagement projects and through SEL action research. Other examples include university tutors engaged in self-study projects and embedding Nurturing Programme principles on teacher education and mentor development programmes.

Our review of participant feedback suggests that personal response to the unique ethos of project events is a key driver for leading change. For example, the Faculty Director of Masters Programmes at CCCUFoE, explained through a filmed evaluation interview (CCCU, 2016) her personal response to participating in an action research event (her first experience of a partnership workshop which she co-led with the charity):

> 'Experiencing a workshop with Family Links … is so distinctive, the model is a different kind of teaching…what happens is immediately you come into the room you experience a different atmosphere because the social and emotional parts of the learning are being attended to right from the very first second…it changes your mind-set very, very quickly and I found that most powerful.'

She cites her personal response to participation as a key driver in the successful validation of the new PG Cert SEL.

Conclusion

This article seeks to move partnership research evaluation into possibly new areas. Whilst university faculties of education, across the sector, have long histories of working in 'partnership' with schools, here we tell the story of working in partnership with a charity organisation. This is a different story of partnership. Our review, which we acknowledge is limited by subjective biases, suggests that commitment to shared values, emotional empathy, concepts of uniqueness and gut feelings are strong drivers for the leadership of SEL partnerships. At the onset we were ambitious, driven and committed leaders who wanted to 'work together'. We willed the partnership to work. 'Mutuality' was a key principle and barriers were creatively overcome.

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We remain committed to sustaining a long-term social and emotional learning partnership mindful of the likely tensions and dilemmas of more formal collaborative agreements and the need for and complexity of rigorous evaluation of the partnership's impact to effect social change. This is possible, despite the turbulence of both organisations contexts because it is at the core of each partners 'identity'. The enduring nature and continued growth of this partnership is attributable to alignment of mission, belief and values.

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