

## Thinking about linking?

In this thinkpiece **Margaret Burr** asks: What sort of thinking goes into linking? How much thinking really does go into linking? Do we do enough thinking about linking? Do we really think before we link? The piece includes the author's stories and personal anecdotes about linking, which highlight some of the issues and potential pitfalls.

**Margaret Burr** is the Head of the Humanities Education Centre in Tower Hamlets. She has been involved in various forms of linking in schools for 20 years and she recently developed the ***Toolkit for Linking: opportunities and challenges*** for UKOWLA (UK One World Linking Association) and the coalition of international agencies, BUILD (Building Understanding through International Links for Development). She is currently co-ordinating the 'Southern Voices in linking' project funded by Oxfam which aims to identify the barriers to greater involvement by Southern partners in links.

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*Linking is not easy: most of us enter it without knowing much about it.*

Stroud Consultation report, 1988

This paper seeks to raise awareness of the challenges of linking between groups and communities, as it is only by recognising and acknowledging the potential pitfalls of this process that linking can be a positive, constructive and mutually beneficial experience.

Linking aims to create relationships between diverse cultures, which should be of benefit to both partners. The links may be at many different levels from twinned towns and cities to health institutions, women's groups, college and schools. Linking covers different forms of engagement from visits, exchanges of staff to email or solidarity links which all have the potential to enable us to learn more about each other and to help to break down barriers.

There has, however been little assessment of the impacts or benefits of linking initiatives. In my experience in education many who are alert to and challenge issues of inequality and prejudice are unaware of these issues within links, and so do not engage with, or seek to question, activities within links which can undermine and threaten such efforts.

There is a perception, particularly with links between schools in different parts of the world, that linking is a 'good thing', and it is difficult for those who have not looked closely at links to understand that the reality may be very different to that which is envisaged. The general premise behind linking is that the world would be a better place if we all had a greater understanding of each other; an achievement which linking can potentially fulfil and it is seen as churlish to find fault with something so seemingly 'beneficial' and 'worthy'.

Global interdependence is a reality today. However the asymmetrical and complex nature of interdependence with the imbalance in distribution of power, wealth and resources has to be recognised. Linking is widely promoted as a means of raising awareness of development issues and it can help to promote genuine understanding and respect for each other's society and culture and lead to greater international understanding and justice for all. However such benefits are not automatic. Linking can be positive, and mutually beneficial, but it is a complicated, challenging and time consuming process. Without careful planning and consideration, linking can result in a negative experience for all participants.

The following quotes show some of the issues that can arise in linking:

*No one tests the depth of the river with both feet.*

Ghanaian proverb

*When you suggest a link, are you offering us a relationship or do you just want to sell us your language and culture?*

Nidaa Al Ghazal, Lebanon

*We are trying to make our lives better. The North needs to think about how it is contributing to our problems, with its governments, its systems, its authority. The imbalances make our lives a bit too hard for us in the South.<sup>1</sup>*

Peter Kisopia, Kenya.

*The most important thing is that the South is recognised as having a contribution to make to the North.*

Peter Kisopia, Kenya

*We feel embarrassed about partnership if we talk about it purely in material terms. Partnership is really about sharing our common humanity: working together for a better world.*

Paul Nyathi, Zimbabwe

*Let us share who we are before we share what we have.*

Sithembiso Nyone, Zimbabwe

*We want to be there when things happen, when decisions are made, when policy is developed. We want a genuine dialogue and saying 'No' is as much a part of dialogue as saying 'Yes'.*

Musa Njiru, Kenya

*First you came to us as missionaries, then you came to us as colonisers, now you come to us as linkers.*

Participant Conference on linking, 2002

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'North' and 'South' are used to refer to countries which are also sometimes categorised as 'developed' and 'developing'. This is done with a recognition that any such dichotomy is problematic. It is, however, believed to be useful in the context of this thinkpiece.

The rationale for linking is straightforward, and possesses a certain logic when based on models of intercultural dialogue and sharing. Linking is also part of a development agenda for many. However links are major undertakings, which tend to consume the energies and resources of those involved, rather than fuelling a broader understanding of communities and the global context. It is crucially important that participants are aware of these issues before a link is embarked upon, and are absolutely clear on what their priorities and objectives are.

Thus, for example, if development awareness and an understanding of interdependence are seen as an important outcome of the link, then it must be explicitly clear from the outset how the link will help achieve this, and what needs to be in place for this to happen.

Although long term sustainable links are an ideal, all relationships are based on factors which are elusive and unquantifiable and these factors may not be apparent in the early stages of a link. A project-based approach with communities and groups working on a common theme of mutual benefit and interest may be more beneficial and may evolve into a long term relationship.

There has been little research or investigation into linking and its effects generally. Real benefits do exist; however, it would appear on closer investigation that such potential may remain unfulfilled. According to Nigel Ringrose of UNDP, over half of links fail. Failure can be an opportunity for learning and growth, but the unacknowledged dimension with failure in linking is that two parties are involved, and the outcomes for the Southern partner particularly can be very damaging.

A British Council country linking officer came to a meeting in the UK with a message for UK teachers, from the teachers in her own country, to 'Please stop dumping us'. Similarly, one school link was stopped by the UK partner in the second year of the grant because the head teacher of the UK school left. There was no negotiation with the school in the Gambia, simply an email informing the head teacher there that the link was stopping. The grant for the third year was returned to the funder.

We need to acknowledge that linking is a problematic area which, without considerable education and training, lends itself to encouraging patronising relationships and perpetuating and reinforcing stereotypes. The 'mission to civilise' remains a reality. In such links Southern partners are seen as unable to progress or develop without external help or aid of any kind. The legacy of colonialism as reflected in the superiority complex of one and inferiority complex of the other still exists and is a real barrier to true partnership. For example, the link teacher of a linking award-winning UK school, when asked in an evaluation workshop about the process of evaluation with her partner school,

replied that they didn't do any evaluation with the partner school because 'they wouldn't understand'.

Impact assessment and evaluation of linking involving all participants is vital, but only of value if it provides partners from Southern based organisations and members of the relevant diaspora with the opportunity to have their voices heard. Within the UK we are fortunate in having active and engaged diasporas and many from the South living and working here. Partnerships must be set up in such a way as to ensure that partners are able to voice their concerns and speak out. We need to engage more with diaspora groups but also to recognise that such involvement does require funding. It is too often assumed that such groups will contribute their time and have the capacity to do so without any recompense.

Listening to perspectives on development issues articulated by those experiencing global inequality are crucial for increasing understanding.

The key areas of concern raised by contributors from Ghana, Malawi and Sierra Leone to the Southern Voices in Linking project on school linking were:

- Attitudes due to former British colonisation;
- No transparency on financial matters;
- No freedom in decision making;
- Commitment;
- Understanding of the link;
- Cultural differences;
- Inadequate communications;
- Lack of resources.

Recognition of these perspectives and an exploration of the opportunities for learning from Southern communities, which would so often appear to be neglected or missed, would strengthen and increase the success of links. Learning about, for example, differences in priorities, relationships in families and support within communities, managing with limited resources, is lost in an exploration of high tech solutions and a focus on the absence of material wealth. It is important to recognise that such differences may also be reflected in the different expectations, wants and needs of partner communities in a link.

Because of the lack of impact assessment there is little evidence to support claims that links do lead to positive change for communities in the South or greater understanding of global

development issues in the North. Links by their nature are localised relationships, and only some of the interdependence issues and challenges facing Southern communities, both positive and negative, will be present within the community or reflected in the interaction between partners. There needs to be more understanding of interdependence and understanding that actions within the UK do have an impact elsewhere in the world. Links need to explore the causes of poverty and injustice and not shy away from these areas which many perceive as too political and controversial. Real development awareness means engaging with the famous quote by the Brazilian, Dom Helder Camara:

*When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint, when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.*

Linking with the primary aim of development awareness in the UK can lead to a focus on the needs of the North rather than on engagement and prioritising of communities in the South. There is a very real danger that the Southern partners and communities simply become a resource for the North. As one Ghanaian teacher said: *'When you come to us you are a visitor, when we come to you we are a resource'*. This problem is also evident in the school links which fulfil the curriculum needs of the UK school but fail to address the needs of the partner school. It is also evident in the teachers who are keen for their pupils to recognise how fortunate they are and how important it is to help those 'poor, poor children' through their fundraising efforts. Such efforts are then interpreted as 'active citizenship' within the school, again of benefit to the Northern community and creating little or no further understanding. As the German proverb notes, *'charity sees the need, not the cause'*; failure to engage in explorations of 'the cause' will not lead to a greater understanding of global inequality and injustice.

Reasons for the imbalance of power and differing access to resources within links need to be explored, examined and questioned. This is not only because such issues will affect the functioning of the link, but also that they will contribute to a means of greater understanding of the perspectives and realities of partners. If they are not examined then there are likely to be difficulties in the link.

Can a relationship where the main focus for the UK school is to fundraise, or in one case to send old school uniforms out to a school, really be called a link? Even if partners don't want or need materials which have clearly been dumped, they may not refuse them because, in the future, they might not receive materials which could be useful.

Within this context it is hardly surprising therefore when Southern partners are unwilling to openly criticise a link, even when invited to do so.

A significant and symbolic moment for me was hearing that in December 2004 there was a grand ceremony at a school in The Gambia on receiving a gift of computers from a UK school. The computers were a 1992 Dell computer, a 1988 RM Nimbus machine and a 1981 BBC microcomputer. This out-of-date equipment arrived with a tangle of cables from many machines and did not even have any accompanying software, discs or instructions. Arriving in January 2005 I had to tell the teachers how useless this gift was, but although clearly disappointed and upset they did not note this in the questionnaire on linking that they were completing, until assured that the source of information would remain anonymous.

Links are generally, although not always, initiated in the North. From discussions within the Southern Voices in Linking project and in research for the *Toolkit for Linking* it is clear that differences in levels of commitment to the link are widespread. Many Southern partners see Northern partners as maintaining the link to the level of external funding available, whereas Southern partners, once they have agreed to participate, will commit to the link from the outset often with whole community involvement. There needs to be more exploration of the importance of funding to linking and the sustainability of links when the funding ceases. How many links are still there one, two or three years after funding finishes?

The following anecdotes illustrate some of these issues:

A Headteacher expressed interest in linking with a school in a particular country after hearing a presentation, and a colleague commented that she already had a link with a different country, to which the Headteacher replied: *'Yes, but the funding for that link is coming to an end'*.

During a school linking training session some teachers complained about having to buy lunch for their visiting partner teachers; that the expense was not covered by their grant.

In the UKOWLA *Toolkit for Linking* we recommend linking within the UK before attempting to link with a partner in another part of the world. As the Community Link Newsletter, 1988 Learning from Linking asks, *'Why do you want to link with an Indian community several thousand miles away,*

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*when you never say more than “A Guardian please” to the Indian family who run the shop at the end of the road?’*

A UK/UK link not only has the potential to contribute to community cohesion, but linking within a country enables partners to experience the difficulties inherent in the ‘mechanics’ of linking. In practical terms this means experiencing the stresses and strains of maintaining communications, clarifying roles and responsibilities, partnership agreements and ground rules, etc, without the additional pressure of an unfamiliar context such as that of a Southern community. The School Linking Project started in Bradford, now the School Linking Network, recognises the value of linking schools with very different intakes of students, within and across local communities in the UK.

Linking can make a difference but as the quotes and anecdotes in this thinkpiece illustrate, approaches for links which are not based on mutual understanding, reciprocity and respect are not welcomed, although they may be tolerated. This is not the basis for good, sustainable links and partnerships. Without a rethink on linking these problems will continue and the potential for greater understanding will continue to remain unfulfilled.

### **References:**

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Oxfam (2007) Building successful school partnerships

Leeds DEC (2006) Just linking: a guide to linking schools

MUNDI (2005) Good practice guide to whole school linking

THET (Tropical Health and Education Trust) (2005) Links manual

UNVP and IULA (2003) Ringrose, Nigel Closing the gap: a guide to linking communities across the globe for international solidarity and mutual benefit and personal communication

UK One World Linking Association (2007) Toolkit for linking: opportunities and challenges



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## Appendix: Toolkit for Linking: opportunities and challenges

This example of a 'Think, Reflect, Question and checklist' is from the Partnership leaflet.

### **THINK:**

Think about the characteristics of a true partnership.

### **REFLECT:**

Consider whether your linking relationship is a real partnership and the steps you can take to improve the relationship.

### **QUESTION:**

Whether you have allowed your partner a real voice?

### **Checklist**

- ✓ Goals for the relationship – what do you want to achieve?
- ✓ What strategy will you adopt to achieve those goals?
- ✓ Have you looked at power inequalities and how they were constructed historically?
- ✓ Who will be responsible for what?
- ✓ What will any diversion of resources mean for the partner organisation?
- ✓ What will be the accountability in each direction?
- ✓ How often will you review the agreement to make sure it still fits your requirements?
- ✓ Who might you turn to if the relationship breaks down or there is serious disagreement?
- ✓ What can be done to reduce dependency on specific individuals?
- ✓ Do you have procedures to review the partnership regularly?