



Reflections on developing international links

Ideas for consideration and teacher experiences

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Reflections on developing international links

This paper takes a practitioner's view of establishing professional relationships between schools in different countries. Excellent advice on international links is provided by the British Council, and this paper seeks to support that by drawing on the experience of teachers who benefited from the International Research Associates Programme of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The writers see the benefits of developing sustainable long-term relationships with schools overseas as:

- broadening educational and leadership horizons
- sharing best practice
- providing an international dimension to professional development
- building cross-national partnerships for staff and student learning
- providing exciting new opportunities to engage staff and students in international events
- developing an international view of school development

While the rhetoric of developing international relationships for schools is positive, the reality of establishing links is much more complex. If links are to move beyond simple visits by headteachers into deeper curricular and organisational learning, what needs to be considered? This paper is structured to:

1. outline some general leadership points and then
2. consider the experience of a UK school that embeds international links by facilitating links for its teachers with another school. The teachers who engaged in these international relationships use their "teacher voice" to draw on their experiences to provide two case studies of teachers who are establishing links for their schools.

General leadership and management points

Establish a clear purpose

Clearly international links are attractive, but it is important to define initially what the school would like from them. Is the school trying to broaden the educational horizon of staff and students? Is it benchmarking and sharing curriculum best practice? Is it trying to provide professional learning opportunities for its staff? It is important to define a focused set of objectives at the outset.

Start small – don't try and be over-ambitious.

This follows the first point in that, to build credibility and firm foundations for the future, an initial success is required. For example, a small joint class project between the two schools is a good way to build links and confidence.

Links are challenging – it is difficult, and it takes time to build a sustainable partnership

Within schools there is miscommunication and misunderstanding because of different assumptions and different information. This can be multiplied when the partner is a long way away. It is important to clarify assumptions and take time to build relationships and a joint understanding.

You need enthusiasts to make it work

As in most change initiatives the headteacher needs to be an enthusiast, but there need to be "product champions" in the school – teachers who are committed to make the effort and make the links work.

Links are easy to start but difficult to sustain

A good question to ask is: where do you want the link to be in three or four years' time? The initial euphoria of a foreign trip needs to be accompanied by effort and commitment to build a meaningful set of activities that will develop a lasting relationship. Are a sufficient number of staff involved so that someone leaving will not have a detrimental effect on the school? Does the school understand the purpose and celebrate the achievements?

If you want links to work you need to plan extensively

The need to gain maximum benefit and value from the links means that meticulous planning has to take place to cover all aspects that will ensure the success of visits and links. Regular check points have to be established to ensure that the schools can monitor progress and remedy any problems. Both schools have to be involved and committed to funding the process.

Talk – keep communication going at all times

Effective communication is the way to build relationships that work over time. The idea of conversations both at the professional and personal level is the means of building relationships that last.

Link at different levels in the school

Links should not be confined just to headteachers. If a central objective is effective networking to develop the learning of both staff and pupils, then those staff and students need to be involved.

Remember the 80:20 rule

There is a danger of thinking that we do things better in England and of taking a superficial view of what happens internationally. It is useful to remember the 80:20 rule. Even if you think that 80 per cent of the time you do things better at your school, and only 20 per cent of the time your partner school does things better – can you capture the 20 per cent? This needs to be the mindset of all at the outset of the link. What are the critical things you need to capture to improve your school?

Technology is the key support mechanism. Links through simple video camera conversations, e-mails and conferencing on such systems as Skype or 'Click to Meet' are the backbone of keeping links going. Establishing technological links early is vitally important for sustainable long-term development.

Case study 1: a guide to developing international links Lynn O'Neil and Elaine Lovatt

Introduction

This guide is intended to act as a simple aide-memoire to help ensure that your trip to a school in another country runs smoothly and effectively. The suggestions offered are based upon the personal experiences and subsequent reflections of teachers following their visit to an elementary school in Los Angeles in April 2006.

Practicalities of the trip

- *Travel and accommodation.* In addition to your own research of the area, speak to your link school well in advance of your trip before booking accommodation or car hire. Make sure you have some idea of:
 - the location of the school and its surrounding neighbourhood to make sure that the area you will be staying in is safe
 - what public services are like in the area (will you be able to use the local bus service/taxi/train etc or will car hire be necessary?)
 - what local restaurants/cafes etc are like – again, will you need to travel to find food?
 - evening entertainment – what is there to do when you have left school (sightseeing, shopping, shows etc): will the host school arrange this?

Once you have all of the information, make informed bookings or reservations. Whilst listening to the valuable advice of your link school, it is worth considering their different viewpoints in terms of, particularly, travel. Are you a confident driver in the UK? If so, don't be afraid of hiring a car – our LA colleagues were horrified at the thought of us staying 17.5 miles away from the school and estimated that we would have to leave our hotel at 3.30 am to get to school in the morning! However, allowing more time for rush-hour traffic, our journeys proved to be far less challenging than driving along the M25 on a Monday morning!

Building relationships before the trip

- Contact the school's headteacher well before the visit – introduce yourself and determine who your link teacher will be. Discuss the itinerary for the visit – make sure you make clear any of your school's requirements for the trip (doing this by e-mail leaves a permanent record of what is agreed, but of course using the phone is much more personal!). To ensure a professional approach, finalise the arrival time at school for the first day, ensuring that all parties are fully aware of the itinerary (ask for a copy before the visit).
- Contact your link teacher as soon as you have their details – find out about them as well as their class (ages, hobbies, nationalities etc) – it's good to have an idea of some of the things that make them tick!
- Obtain contact telephone numbers for your link teachers and make sure that you are aware of any changes that you may need to make to the numbers when dialling from a UK mobile phone.

- Prepare two "pack-ups" to be given to your link class and teacher. Some suggestions are:

For your link class:

- drawings/letters from your class to your link teacher's class
- CD/video of your class and the other classes within school
- token gift for the class (tea towel/framed photo etc)

For your link teacher:

- itinerary for visit expectations of host school
- leaflets of appropriate hotels for return visit
- a range of local maps (including directions to school)
- details of forthcoming entertainment (theatre, music, historical tours etc)
- ideas for eating out (a selection of menus would be useful to provide an idea of price)
- train/bus timetables, taxi firm contact numbers

It's really important to make contact with your school as soon as possible – with the benefit of hindsight we feel that we should have made a much more concerted effort to do this prior to the visit. Unfortunately, the practicalities and demands of everyday teaching life significantly detracted from our success in this area and we feel that, given the opportunity again, we would ensure that we had a much more sound knowledge of the people and the school, and their agenda for the itinerary of the visit.

During the visit

- Upon arrival, make a courtesy phone call to your link teacher.
- You may suffer from jet lag from the journey, so ensure that you either take an alarm clock with you or ask your hotel's reception to give you a wake-up call.
- Arrive at school in plenty of time! When at school:
 - Take as many photographs as possible (after having of course asked permission to do so).
 - Take notes of any particular areas of interest; ask for details of any relevant books or publications.
 - Visit as many classes as you can, talking to teachers, children and other adults within school.
 - Ask to talk to staff at the end of the day – we found this time particularly useful and the most insightful in terms of providing the opportunity to ask questions and clarify understanding of the strategies that we wanted to pursue further once back in the UK and to understand the different education systems.

Post-visit

- Send thank-you note to link teacher and class, developing a relationship between classes. Identify a partner for the children to make the relationship more personal and meaningful.
- Having reflected on observed practice and agreed on possible areas to pursue further, lead a staff meeting and encourage discussion with colleagues, agreeing strategies to trial and identifying a clear timescale.
- Continue to communicate with your link teacher to make sure that their visit to your school is as smooth and professional as yours was!

Conclusion

Spending time before your visit to forge links and relationships is, in our opinion, the key to a successful visit to an international school. Clarifying expectations of both parties is essential prior to your visit, and although this may seem yet another demand on your busy timetable, it is time wisely spent and should not be overlooked.

Case study 2: a guide to introducing and sustaining an international link

Michelle Barron and Mary Bolton

Introduction

As a teacher and learning support assistant we were given the opportunity to visit a primary school in Melbourne, Australia. The school was situated in Broadmeadows, Melbourne with approx 300 students, ranging from age 3–12, including 70 children in the kindergarten.

Prior to the visit

The following points are based on our experiences of an international link and are what worked for us.

- The headteacher needs to initiate the contact between the two schools.
- Both headteachers need to be highly committed and willing to maintain regular contact (eg e-mail) before the visit can take place.
- Once teachers from each school are chosen to take part, they need to make and maintain contact prior to the visit on a regular basis. We found this to be very beneficial as it gave us an insight into each others' schools and it made the meeting in Australia friendly and welcoming. Because of the commitment of the Melbourne teacher, the information exchanged prior to the visit and regularity of e-mails and telephone contact was invaluable.
- It helped that the teacher in Melbourne had previous experience of working with other schools internationally and therefore had many suggestions about maintaining a link.
- The teacher in Melbourne also sent us travel information from our hotel to the school, which helped enormously whilst there.

During the visit

- As a result of the travel times provided, there were no problems finding the school. We were greeted at the train station by the headteacher and the link teacher, which immediately made us feel comfortable.
- After the introduction and tour of the school we immediately began discussing how to make a link between our schools and how it would be sustained.
- At first, three days seemed a very short space of time to get things set up and organised; however, this turned out to be ample time.

The initial conversations we had were focused on a quick way for children to be in contact with each other. Handwritten letter writing was out of the question as we knew the children would immediately lose interest as a result of receiving an extremely slow response to their letters.

Our conversations quickly moved on to the use of IT, eg e-mail, webcam etc. We were concerned that our lack of IT capacity could cause problems with the link. We decided to focus on our similarities rather than differences, and we found that we both had internet access and could therefore find solutions.

Our initial idea was to set up a link with a very small number of children, making the project a privilege for the children to be involved. This would also make it easier to manage. With only 12 children involved, if they are not committed then they can be easily replaced by another child. Our aim was to keep it simple and straightforward.

Video-conferencing

With this motto in mind, we decided to set up a video conference with the chosen or elected students. This in itself brought up the first problem of the 9-11 hour time difference between schools. This was solved by deciding to hold a breakfast club in England and a teatime club in Australia.

Owing to the lack of facilities at our school we were given a free website that enabled videoconferencing, which still needs to be tested. Failing that, we thought about holding the conference at the local secondary school. The date was set whilst at the school, which focuses all involved by having a deadline in sight.

E-mail

Because videoconferencing was a new and exciting idea for our children, we were concerned that they would have too many questions to ask and it would make the conference call more difficult to manage. Therefore we thought it would be beneficial to initiate a first contact via e-mail. This generated our second problem.

We again focused on our similarities, and Broadmeadows suggested that they set up e-mail accounts for 12 children and a teacher on their website. This will not only allow us to access e-mail at school but at home. On reflection it was decided that e-mail from home could not be monitored and was therefore not a good idea, and that all e-mail in school must be copied to the class teacher. The e-mail accounts were set up and tested during our visit to the school in order to eliminate further issues on our return to England.

Travel buddies

A further suggestion put forward by the Australian school was to set up a "travel buddy". This was an idea which involves more children but is still very simple and easy to manage. The travel buddy involves the exchange of a native animal such as a kangaroo. The buddy would be sent with a bag and accessories for a different child to take home each night. The child would write a diary entry for the buddy. The completed diary and buddy would later be returned to the home school.

Points that made the visit easier

- The headteacher made himself available for questions and discussions for the three days we were visiting.
- The teachers and staff were more than happy to discuss anything with us, and most of the time answered our questions before we could ask them.
- The head, staff, and in particular the link teacher, made the effort to socialise with us during the three-day school visit as well as on our return to Melbourne a week later.

After the visit

On reflecting on our visit to Australia, we have thought about the most important aspect of making an international link work. In our experience, so far, it has been the relationships between the two linked teachers. It is important to maintain strong relationships between them.

Since our return we have had numerous e-mails, text messages and a phone call from Australia, keeping the project firmly in mind. Without both parties supporting each other, we honestly don't think it would work.

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