

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship

Australia 2005

James Postle (Fellow 2005)

Developing Partnerships Between Independent And State Schools

Introduction

The aim of this Fellowship was to research ways in which sustainable partnerships between schools of different sectors could be achieved. Australia is sufficiently similar to the UK in terms of culture and education systems and research centred on successful examples of partnership in Sydney and Melbourne.

During the course of the Fellowship four independent schools were visited, six state schools and one catholic school. In addition, discussions were held with Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith and Ms Nicole Mockler (University of Sydney), Professor Brian Caldwell (University of Melbourne), Dr Wendy Cahill (organiser of iNet), and Dr Gerard Calnin (formerly University of Melbourne). In Queensland, a three-day international conference on Reputation Management and Marketing in Education also provided useful insights into the working of the sectors and was relevant to tertiary education as well as all schools.

During ten-day stays in both Sydney and Melbourne, it became clearly apparent that the partnerships, networks and coalitions all had common features, which provided for sustainability. A wide range of schools and key authorities in this area were visited, with notable and appreciated generosity of time and hospitality at all stages and in all places visited.

Summary of Fellowship Findings

There proved to be five common factors/conditions for the successful development of sustainable partnerships:

1. Catalyst and continuing support of a credible outside agent.
2. Support and leadership of the Principal / Headteacher.
3. Geographic relationship of partnership schools.
4. Involvement of like-minded staff in the partnership schools.
5. Practical, relevant application of the partnership with a measurable outcome.

Elaboration of Fellowship Findings

1. Catalyst and continuing support of a credible outside agent.

The role of the outside agent in establishing links between schools is crucial, both to the initial set-up phase and then in maintaining momentum. Schools often suffer from inertia and few will look far outside their gates to establish partnerships without the prompting of an external body, be that government-led with funding (e.g. Independent-State School

Partnership Scheme, UK) or from a private sector based philanthropic source (e.g. Sutton Trust, UK).

Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, Sydney

This is a successful, growing and sustained partnership between schools of all sectors operating in Sydney since 1999. Demand for membership outstrips current capacity.

It has grown out of the academic work of Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith who is based in the University of Sydney, Centre for Practitioner Research, Faculty of Education and the development of methodologies, which have engaged with the perceptions of students and staff. As well as promoting evidence-based practice, she has also developed an interactive community of practice sharing methodologies, building research capability within their own and other schools (*Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn, Groundwater-Smith & Mockler 2003*).

Professor Groundwater-Smith has been employed as ‘Researcher in Residence’ in a number of the schools (also seen as an ‘Academic Friend’). The formative three schools were Methodist Ladies’ College (MLC), Loreto Normanhurst, and SCEGGS Darlinghurst, all of which are girls’ independent schools that have worked on evidence-based research with Professor Groundwater-Smith from 1998/9. This group was keen to share practice and ideas with like-minded schools, and this spread to other schools in the state sector drawn together through links with Professor Groundwater-Smith

Susan Groundwater-Smith was regarded as vital to the creation of the partnership – contacts with schools of different sectors would have been unlikely without her. She has brought:

1. Her academic credentials and highly regarded work in education research.
2. The backing of the University of Sydney.
3. Her established links with all the schools from her work with them.

It was felt that the partnership was consolidated and strengthened by having someone who was ‘neutral’ and who would keep them all ‘on track’, setting deadlines and with some expectation of outcome from their work.

‘The fact it is ‘real work’ and projects – this is reporting something tangible and with clear practical outcomes was important’ (*MLC School*).

‘Without the catalyst of Susan Groundwater-Smith it would be hard to see how links would have been made’ (*Asquith Girls’ High School*).

iNet, Melbourne

International Networking for Education Transformation (iNet) is the international arm of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (UK). In Australia it is based in Melbourne under the leadership of Dr Wendy Cahill.

According to the iNet web site, its mission is ‘*to create powerful and innovative networks of schools that have achieved or have committed themselves to achieving systematic, significant and sustained change that ensures outstanding outcomes for all students in all settings.*’

'iNet as it develops ...is based on the commitment to the power of Principal-led networks of committed professionals willing to share knowledge, exchange views and use networking to transform schools'.

'iNet (Australia) as part of this global network is committed to strengthening the capacity of school leaders to work across sectoral boundaries'.

www.sst-inet.com.au

A striking feature of iNet has been its ability to cross the sectoral divides between government and non-government schools. This has largely been due to Professor Brian Caldwell's notion of 'Transformation of Education' for all students and for all settings. His philosophy has been that all should be able to improve their outcomes if this new educational vision is embraced, and iNet (Australia) has grown from his work in Victoria and his international contacts.

Many of the independent schools have become involved in iNet due to his *personal* contacts. However the growth of the networks has also been brought about some *chance* developments. Three principals from neighbouring schools in Ringwood (a government, a catholic and a private school) were brought together by chance at an iNet meeting – prior to this they had little contact.

Dr Wendy Cahill has also had personal contact with most of the principals and in similar fashion to Professor Groundwater-Smith in Sydney, Dr Cahill co-ordinates iNet. She has the advantage of University credibility behind her to go with her background as Head of an independent school.

iNet, through a shared goal of transforming education for all students, has brought together schools from different sectors in a growing network. I was able to attend a one-day conference held in the private Melbourne Grammar school and led by the principals and senior teachers from both a catholic and government school.

Outside of Victoria it has taken longer for iNet to develop momentum, with some reluctance for Catholic and Government Principals' organisations to talk to each other. Some suspicions remain between all sectors.

2. Support and leadership of the Principal / Headteacher

The role of the principal in sustaining partnership is crucial. The principal provides sustainability as part of the leadership function, and their on-going support and enthusiasm for the partnership is essential.

At MLC (Sydney) the Principal has been in position for 15 years and is very supportive. MLC funded and co-authored the Groundwater-Smith & Mockler book *Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn*, showing commitment to the coalition and its development. At MLC it was felt a critical mass of staff would continue the partnership now, even if the principal changed as the school had a reputation for practitioner research. This has taken years for such a culture to establish but new staff are now attracted because of it and senior staff value its role in the school.

The Principal at Glenmore Park High School (Sydney) had been a member of the Professor Groundwater-Smith coalition at two previous schools. Now in post for a year and a half, she

has brought this culture with her and her role in sustaining and implementing the partnership has been in evidence. She was instrumental in selecting and grooming a member of staff for a role with Asia Travel (Year 9 project) combined with applying for and using grant money.

The priorities of a school may change with a principal who is new to such culture. The new incumbent at Asquith Girls High School remained committed to focus group feedback on their learning programme, but felt the coalition must continue to meet the school's needs.

At Thomas Aquinas (Melbourne) there had been no partnerships or links with local principals of other sectors before their involvement with iNet; contact was merely occasional and informal.

Ken Thompson, Principal of Gladstone Park (Melbourne) has been unusually entrepreneurial in his work to forge partnerships between schools and the local community with some pioneering work with the Hume Global Learning Centre. This has been an aid to bringing about changes in teaching by having contact with other schools and hearing of similar work being done elsewhere. Links can build confidence from global perspectives and academic research, using these to validate decisions.

iNet has also sustained contact with entrepreneurial principals in all sectors. The principal is the key to initiation of bringing schools together - the entrepreneurial leader needs to be the 'hunter and gatherer', seeking out the best ways to resource the programme and links with other schools. The principal needs to be using a distributed model, aiming to develop the internal learning environment whilst developing this external focus.

Some principals felt that in the early years in a leadership role, their main focus would be taken up with dealing with management issues – once the correct people had been put in place internally, then a greater external focus could be developed. One principal suggested that schools who feel they know where they are going and are more confident, may be happier in a network than those who are struggling. However, Ken Thompson at Gladstone Park felt that even a struggling school must have networks and maximise the use of external stimulus to help pull out of a lowly regarded position – there is always a value in external networking regardless of the stage the school is at.

Through iNet, much of the work that has taken place between sectors has been established via personal contacts. Often it has been stimulated by co-operation and initiative between enlightened principals from all sectors e.g. Melbourne Grammar, Tintern in Ringwood etc. Some independent schools can exhibit 'we don't need them' vibes and do not see how the network can be of benefit to them. One principal of an independent school was a member of iNet but was not active within the network; the strategic development of the school was more aligned with local TAFE College and University and there was little time for other links. The development of partnerships did not have strategic interest or purpose to this school and the principal questioned its value. The principal did not know her opposite numbers at local schools - mainly as they were rivals in the marketplace: this was a definite barrier to co-operation (see condition 3 below – 'Geographic relationship of partnership schools').

Brian Caldwell agreed that independent schools may not have the *motivation* to be involved within a very competitive market. However, he felt that 'good principals are good educationalists' who would enjoy exploring different practice and sharing ideas. Before iNet, the only partnerships between sectors were profession-based via the Australian Principals' Organisation. Principals have not been working effectively across the sectors and

there are still sensitivities in evidence – a recent example being that of the government school principal who refused to attend an iNet conference as it was being held at an independent school.

The entrepreneurial, visionary work by principals like Mike Phillips and Ken Thompson is a clue as to the possible future role of school leaders. The CEO model is one which is also becoming more common – this can work but the principal must deliver benefits to the school and be able to demonstrate the benefits of their absence along with serious distributed leadership within their management teams. It depends upon the qualities of the individual school as to what works best.

Brian Caldwell felt that entrepreneurial heads particularly require:

1. A vision about children.
2. A capacity to build networks.
3. Are comfortable with distributed leadership.

There is little doubt that without the support and leadership of the principal, any partnership, network or external focus will be hard to sustain.

3. Geographic relationship of partnership schools

The relative location of the schools and their pupil compositions has had a key bearing upon the sustainability of the partnerships researched under the Fellowship.

Early attempts by Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith in Sydney to link schools together within a precinct (following the Federal initiatives of the Network of Schools in Australia c.1996) floundered as schools in close competition (of all sectors) felt less inclined to share practice with rivals. The present coalition has schools spread far wider and rarely in direct competition (e.g. schools close by may be single sex girls / boys). ‘Safe’ geographical separation between schools of similar genres has been a major factor in developing the coalition and maintaining a feeling of security and trust when the schools have met to share their work.

One government school principal in Sydney stated how he was not keen to work with either the local coeducational independent school or girls’ independent school due to the attitudes he perceived they held and the nature of the competition in the local area. He was, however, happy to link with schools of different sectors located further away.

Competition surrounds Geelong College, with two catholic schools next door and the independent Geelong Grammar feeder junior school on the road opposite. The College has some sporting links with the Grammar and other local schools but little else, and there is little doubt that they are competing for numbers. The amount of competition within the area has worked to the detriment of collaboration and the principals have little contact.

Competition between the sectors is high in some areas of both Sydney and Melbourne. However, competition was perhaps even greater within the sectors themselves. This inhibits some closer partnership with ‘competitor’ schools and confidence is higher in having a partnership where there is no threat to enrolment. The work between the three local schools in Ringwood in Melbourne seemed at odds with the findings from Sydney, however the reasons why these three had worked together became clearer on closer inspection.

1. iNet had brought together three enlightened and entrepreneurial Principals who were all well established in their schools and willing to advocate collaboration.
2. The three schools are ‘fishing in different ponds’ for their market share: Ringwood is an over-subscribed government school; Aquinas is a catholic school – 70% funded by the government – low fee level around \$3500 a year; Tintern is a high fee level school costing around \$15000 a year. Therefore they are not in real competition.
3. The projects they have collaborated upon have had a clear benefit to all parties.

However, it was acknowledged that even between these three schools, pragmatic recognition of the underlying nature of competition does exist and must stifle genuine partnership.

Ringwood also has a network of four local state schools initiated by the principal, Michael Phillips. Developed from altruistic motives and designed to benefit the state schools in the area it is unusual in its creation and has few of the usual suspicions that often exists between competing schools. However, this is due to a well-established and entrepreneurial principal operating with like-minded and supportive colleagues.

4. Involvement of like-minded staff in the partnership schools.

In schools that have embraced partnership, coalition or networks, there has been some genuine curiosity emanating from the staff to go and see what the other sectors and schools have been doing. As the staff at MLC (Sydney) summed up, there has been ‘something in it for them’. In their case as a part of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, they have shared a common focus of improving teaching and learning. They wished to be involved with similar schools with common work – often this was with other Girls Alliance schools. Contacts were also made through colleagues in local or cross-sector schools. They felt it was the *human* element that drives the links and their own Uniting Church background added the sense of duty to assist. A culture of Professional Development work had existed earlier with relations with St. Ives Primary school.

A feature of the coalition is its domination by girls’ schools and indeed no boys’ or independent coeducation schools are presently members. The philosophy between the girls’ and boys’ schools tends to be very different and whilst many boys’ schools have a substantial tradition of Alumni funding, girls’ schools may be more proactively inclined to seek new links. Boys’ schools acknowledged that they often have a wider focus on other areas of the curriculum. MLC School and Newington College (Sydney) are brother and sister schools, yet only have contact for music, drama and some social development with little staff or academic partnership.

The Head of Music at the boys’ independent school Newington College (Sydney) further illustrated the importance of linking with similar-minded staff. SYNERGY is a professional percussion group based in Newington, able to access top level musicians. The Music Department at Newington has sought to widen access to the group with other schools (of all sectors) sharing this resource. Their motive in this has been to improve the level of percussion in the state and engage the community, whilst also developing Newington’s reputation for music. Professional contacts established the partnership; the staff saw the opportunity and jumped at it. The uptake from other schools to be involved has been variable and depended to some extent upon personal contacts from the staff themselves, although this project is still in its early stages.

Moderate fears were expressed by a government school principal as to what independent schools might gain from being part of the partnership. It could be seen as a way to encourage impressive staff in the government sector to apply for jobs at their schools; in NSW, government school principals do not recruit their own staff as this is handled centrally by the state whilst independent principals are free to recruit directly.

The co-operation of the staff involved is crucial to the success of any partnership. The principal's role is to ensure that appropriate staff with enthusiasm and beliefs in the benefits of the partnership are chosen to work on it. These personnel must be matched with a project, which is recognised by all constituents as having relevant, practical outcomes (see condition 5 below).

5. Practical, relevant application of the partnership with a measurable outcome.

As the Principal of Asquith Girls' High (Sydney) outlined, it is crucial for any partnership that it must have relevancy to the school agenda for sustainability. This was echoed by the Head of Senior School at Newington College (Sydney): the outcomes and benefits to the school and particularly to the children must make partnership worthwhile. A key question is how this will be achieved? Clear outcome of goals and practical benefits are needed otherwise why is this relevant?

Sustainability is linked with perceived outcomes. This is where the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools in Sydney has maintained its momentum and focus: by bringing the schools back to reflect together upon their progress and measure their outcomes.

Ringwood, Thomas Aquinas and Tintern schools in Melbourne have each held iNet meetings and staff have presented at iNet Conferences. This has led to the schools co-operating on some issues common to them all. A joint musical conference was held, a student code was developed amongst the three schools as to the behaviour at parties, sharing of some VET programmes and whilst the mechanical programme at Ringwood has been used by Tintern students, Ringwood students have attended the hospitality programme at Aquinas. These are examples of practical and relevant areas where partnership has had a direct and measurable purpose that is mutually beneficial.

iNet uses practical workshops for staff with a clear focus on relevant, practical and current strategies (e.g. the Nine Gateways) developed from the academic world, with a focus of peer teacher delivery of information. Professor Brian Caldwell agreed 100% that partnership work must have practical outcomes and that specific benefits needs to be ensured.

Conclusions

This Fellowship sought to better understand how successful, sustainable and meaningful partnerships between schools of different sectors could be developed. It is interesting to conclude with how networks and coalitions are achieving this in Australia and how the future of cross-sector work may lie in this area.

Professor Brian Caldwell neatly summarised the key differences between partnerships and networks:

- A Partnership implies a union, which intends to be relatively enduring, relatively formal and may have written agreement which also implies commitment.

- A Network may be enduring but can be a temporary arrangement between any number of schools and like-minded staff. Schools and their staff have freedom to move in and out of network as developments change – with the opportunity for wider (global) networks of schools to be involved in.

Partnerships are by their nature very personal, individual and binding agreements. Without state funding or incentives (which are currently unavailable in Australia) it is hard to find either the motivation or sustainability to develop them. In the UK the Government has promoted cross-sector work since 1998 with the Independent-State school partnership scheme. As a result of this, 600 schools have been involved in the first five years of its existence and in 2004 £1.6 million was available for funding partnerships between schools. Many initiatives have worked well. In 2003-04, 29 out of the 46 partnerships established that year were visited by HMI.

‘HMI judged that a majority of the partnerships were very effective in realising their objectives. Whilst it is too early to say how effective the partnerships are generally in contributing to the raising of standards, the signs are encouraging.’ (Ofsted 2005 p1).

However, there is evidence that the take-up and bidding for partnerships is geographically patchy and a number of LEAs have chosen to not be involved. (Ofsted, 2005 p2). A number of partnerships have continued after the funding has concluded. (Ofsted, 2005 p1).

Without this type of Government initiative, Australian schools have been involved with the development of other (arguably more sustainable) forms of cross-sector work in the guise of coalitions and networks. iNet has drawn together principals and staff from schools from different sectors to be involved in practical discussion on ways to bring about educational transformation. This echoes the way in which the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools has developed, bringing schools together to share ideas and practice regardless of sector. Once trust and personal contact has been established and the value of the work has been demonstrated, some more localised partnership between schools with a similar mindset and approach to education (regardless of sector) is likely to develop.

Independent schools in the UK have the opportunity to tap into a ready-made network in the guise of the Specialist Schools Trust – with the potential for further international links via iNet. However, at present only two independent schools in the UK are members of the Trust.

Schools find it difficult to establish and develop meaningful partnerships with schools of other sectors without the incentive and support of an external agent. Perhaps networks, providing continuity, support and a supply of like-minded individuals is the future of cross-sector work between independent and state schools. As principals and teachers move from school to school and take on new leadership roles, networks can be the means by which personal contacts are maintained and ideas and current thinking disseminated – on a national and international scale.

References

Groundwater-Smith, S & Mockler, N (2003) *Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn* University of Sydney, Division of Professional Experiences, Partnerships and Development Faculty of Education.

iNet Website www.sst-inet.com.au

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