

WE SHARE WHO WE ARE BEFORE WHAT WE OWN

DAVID PYLE

David explains why a paternalistic approach to school linking was challenged and how it has been replaced with a drive for equal participation and shared curriculum development.

Wrestling with a donor mentality

'Shades of Geldof and Madonna,' I whispered to myself, 'should we really be trying to save the world?' We had just reached our destination – Kanthenga School in Malawi – after a one-and-a-half hour journey from our luxury hotel in Kasungu. Any potential hardship from the searing heat and rough terrain had been mitigated by our air-conditioned, four-wheel-drive Land Cruiser. I had been involved in African development projects for 20 years, yet nothing in my experiences seemed as inappropriate as the scene that greeted us: 500 pupils surrounded the vehicle and heralded our arrival with outstretched hands and mellifluous, deferential chanting.

By the time of our visit in October 2010, Weald Community Primary School, Kent, had enjoyed three years' association with Kanthenga School. The two schools had been introduced by 'Starfish Malawi' (a Christian charity and non-governmental organisation), a funding stream had been established through a British Council school twinning grant (see web panel), and single teacher reciprocal visits had taken place between 2009 and 2010. However, while the forming of relationships had set the foundations for successful partnership work, very little had been achieved in the shape of shared learning and curriculum development. The attitudinal stance of pupils, staff and parents at Weald CPS was, essentially, paternalistic. School fundraising events were based on the premise that there was a quality of life gap between the schools that needed to be bridged. Funds had been raised for the construction of two teachers' houses, and container loads of clothing and educational resources had been shipped regularly to Malawi to address issues of perceived poverty. Through its various communications, the Kanthenga community subtly pointed out areas of material need (new classrooms, a church roof, classroom furniture and books) and



Working together to plant sustainable seeds. Photo © David Pyle.

appeared content for Weald CPS to dictate the agenda for the visits.

It was clear that, if our partnership were to be sustainable in the long term, this sense of dependency would need to be challenged before it became further entrenched. A critical element was to steer priorities away from material assistance and cultural exchange towards equal participation in joint curriculum work. Integral to this process would be the abandonment of the donor-recipient mentality, and, as a corollary, the adoption of attitudes surrounding equity, cultural appreciation and social justice.

Sustainability through equity

The Weald-Kanthenga Partnership developed a three Cs policy to effect a fundamental shift in thinking and action: 'Common vision', 'Cultural appreciation' and 'Collaboration and sharing experiences'. The first step towards building capacity and longevity into our school link project was the re-negotiation of the Partnership Agreement and its reframing around three central pillars:

1. friendship and communication based on an equitable relationship
2. development of joint collaborative work within the curriculum of the UK and Malawi, impacting on learning within the school communities, and

3. material assistance (where deemed appropriate) in contributing to equity and sustainability (equality of person/ inequality of resources).

Between 2011 and 2014, we embedded a global outlook into the vision, values, branding and development plans of Weald and Kanthenga Schools. We continually challenge assumptions and stereotypical viewpoints in relation to school linking through assemblies, parent information evenings and informal conversations. We developed a 3-year curriculum-based programme, which focused on the British Council principle that 'generational improvement in rural life is best achieved through both knowledge-based and experiential learning' (see web panel). In order to maintain equity between Weald and Kanthenga, the Partnership alternated leadership on curricular topics covering a range of environmental themes (2011–12: Land Use; 2012–13: Water; 2013–14: Energy). These foci for study were promoted under the acronym KISS (Keep It Simple Scheme), which involved both school communities in undertaking practical conservation activities within their school and surrounding environments.

Specific projects included the development of a water-harvesting system and the manufacture of eco-energy bricks. Sustainability was viewed as the key educational message, and the curriculum project was designed to foster frequent exchange of ideas on the projects piloted in both schools.

Reaping the benefits

Formalised curricular planning across the two schools has ensured the highest levels of peer learning and assessment, and the opportunity for accelerated progress and raised attainment has been manifest. Of equal (or, perhaps, greater) value has been the impact on pupils' development of critical and creative thinking, communication skills and participation in decision-making. Detailed evaluations indicate significant positive change in pupils' outlook – especially with respect to common humanity and engendering a belief that people can make a difference in working towards a sustainable world. Our recently-launched 2014–15 Joint Curriculum Project is focused on the global issue of 'Inequality', through which pupils will examine the complexities of the concept across broad areas of study.

The major linchpin for the success of the Partnership is easily-accessible, regular and reliable communication between pupils, staff and members of the wider Weald and Kanthenga communities. In this regard, government grants and school/community fundraising initiatives have been, and will continue to be, directed heavily towards enhancing communication channels. The installation of solar panels, computer hardware and booster aerials at Kanthenga School have provided the means for regular direct dialogue via Skype.

Join together: all our hearts as one

We believe that the current Weald Kanthenga Schools Partnership provides a useful template for equitable and meaningful schools linking. (Our ten tips for a sustainable Partnership are listed in Figure 1.) The focus is, unequivocally, on shared learning within a framework of equality and mutual respect. The emphasis on making technological improvements to communications media means that interaction between the sister schools can take place frequently and in line with the demands of the curriculum. More recent reciprocal visits have cast aside the former paternalistic model of bestowing Western teaching and learning methods on a 'less developed' society. However, face-to-face contact is still hugely important for teachers and pupils in planning and evaluating shared learning experiences and in ensuring that the aims and methodology of the Partnership's work are understood and disseminated throughout the schools' respective communities. Enabling parents to take part in visits has also proved a powerful tool in raising awareness, shifting attitudes and harnessing commitment to the Partnership's vision. For everyone concerned in the Partnership there is a growing recognition that equity can only be truly reflected in reciprocal visits when



Learning about water harvesting. Photo © David Pyle.

indigenous conventions and hospitality are embraced fully. This has involved visitors being accommodated within each school's community, thus immersing them, as much as possible, in all aspects of the local culture.

Challenges still exist in the 'risks of paternalism and perpetuating a colonial mentality' (Bourn, 2014), but it is a moral imperative in education to prepare pupils for life in a globalised world and to

demonstrate why and how we are able to learn from other cultures. In the words of the American writer and social activist, Robert Alan: 'Inter-cultural dialogue is the best guarantee of a more peaceful, just and sustainable world'. The pupils we are teaching today will be engaging in this dialogue, and effective school twinning provides them with an appropriate platform to develop their capacity for global learning and cultural appreciation.

1. Leadership priority: get the Head teacher on board
2. Vision and values: embed global learning in the school's ethos/moral purpose
3. Relationships: establish professional rapport with partner school
4. Attitudinal change: seek to eliminate paternalism
5. Equity: promote equality in the Partnership and foster a spirit of cultural appreciation
6. Fundraising: explore alternative funding streams and focus on the project's aims
7. Communication: open up channels for regular dialogue
8. Shared learning: create a joint curriculum programme of learning that serves both school communities
9. Global dimension: ensure global issues feature across the curriculum
10. Awareness: spread knowledge of project to parents and wider communities.

Figure 1: Ten top tips for a sustainable school link project.

Note

In 2014 Weald County Primary School was accredited with 'Expert Centre' status by DfID. The School is now responsible for a programme of support to enhance teaching and whole-school approaches to global learning in a network of 25 schools (see web panel).

Reference

Bourn, D. (2014) 'School linking and global learning – teachers' reflections', *DERC Research Paper no. 12*. London: Institute of Education University of London.

WEB RESOURCES

British Council: www.britishcouncil.org
Starfish Malawi: www.starfishmalawi.com/
Weald CPS: www.weald.kent.sch.uk/curriculum/weald-kanthenga/

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