

Independent State School Partnerships in England – Challenging Boundaries and Embracing Differences

Margaret Hunnaball, King's College London, United Kingdom

The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The UK Government's Department for Education provides state-maintained primary and secondary school places for young people in England. Some parents, however, choose private education, sending their children to fee-paying independent schools, which are not subject to the same government control. These typically have smaller classes and superior facilities to state schools, and although they educate only 7% of all pupils, their alumni occupy a proportionally higher number of seats in government and places at top UK universities. Furthermore, many independent schools hold charitable status, bringing them significant tax benefits, further extending their financial advantage. In 1997 the Labour government charged independent schools with sharing their facilities and their teachers with local state-maintained schools. The first 'independent state school partnerships' (ISSPs) were centrally funded the following year, and by 2017 the Independent Schools Council reported that 88% of its schools were involved in some form of partnership with schools in the maintained sector. While private education divides the main UK political parties, ISSPs have received support from both Labour and Conservative governments since their introduction. There has, though, been little research into their nature or their worth. This paper considers the findings of my study of three English ISSPs, exploring the relationships between schools and the ways they are embracing differences between them. It explores the nature of joint working and what the headteachers, teachers and pupils involved in them understand by the term partnership.

Keywords: Partnership, State-maintained School, Independent School, Mutual Benefit, Relationships

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In this paper I shall briefly outline the English education system and introduce independent state school partnerships (known as ISSPs). Key terms collaboration and partnership will be considered and my reasons for studying successful partnerships. I will share some insights gained from a review of school documents, semi-structured interviews, and observations of partnership activities to consider how ISSPs are crossing sectoral boundaries, by building bridges and embracing differences between schools.

The UK Government's Department for Education provides state-maintained primary and secondary school places for young people in England. Some parents, however, choose private education, sending their children to fee-paying independent schools, which are not subject to the same government control. These typically have smaller classes and superior facilities to state schools (Green et al, 2011), and although they educate only 7% of all pupils (ISC, 2016), their alumni occupy a proportionally higher number of seats in government and places at Oxford and Cambridge Universities (The Sutton Trust, 2017). Furthermore, many independent schools hold charitable status (Fairbairn, 2017), bringing them significant tax benefits, further extending their financial advantage, and exacerbating opposition to them.

ISSPs and Partnership Working

When New Labour came into power in 1997, independent schools feared losing their charitable status, but in his drive to raise educational standards the then Prime Minister Tony Blair chose 'partnership not confrontation' with them (Peel, 2015, p.8), and charged independent schools with sharing both their facilities and their teachers with local schools (DfEE, 1997). This was not only to help raise standards, but as a contributing factor in independent schools demonstrating public benefit, and so retaining their charitable status. Twenty years later, the Independent Schools Council (ISC, 2017) reported that 88% of its schools were involved in some form of partnership with schools in the maintained sector. In 2017, Lucas et al, conducted a 'rapid review' of ISSP activity and impact', and they defined an ISSP as 'any deliberate collaboration or association of two or more schools, whether formal or informal, short or long-term, wide-ranging or focused'. Through my research I am working on formulating a more grounded and specific definition of partnership in this educational cross-sector context.

While independent state school partnerships are widespread in England, they are under-researched, so my theoretical framing of successful partnership has focussed on English National Health Service and policing partnerships. These were introduced by New Labour at the same time as ISSPs, feature cross-sector working between public and private organisations, and have been researched more extensively. The literature revealed a number of common features across successful partnerships. Key among these were: shared objectives (Hunter and Perkins, 2014); 'mutual values and trust' which Dhillon (2005, p.211) considered to be the 'social glue' that hold organizations and individuals together'; 'transparent lines of communication within and between partner agencies' (Carnwell and Carson, 2004:9); commitment (Johnstone et al,2009); resources, including all partners using 'their own resources jointly... for mutual benefit' (Powell & Dowling, 2006:309); and the 'engagement of senior management' (Perkins et al, 2010:105).

Potential barriers to partnership working can be found in 'cultural differences' (Hunter and Perkins, 2014:44), which can result in 'cultural stereotyping between professionals', and also

in ‘significant disparities in power’ (Wildridge et al, 2004:8), which can not only inhibit the establishing of a partnership, but can destabilise its activities. All of these features and barriers were considerations for me as I headed into my study.

Powell et al (2001:57) claim that partnerships ‘evolve over time’, so I chose to look at established partnerships, whose structure and processes were more open to scrutiny than those more recently established, which may still be in the early ‘stimulating and rewarding’ phase (Audit Commission, 1998:29). I conducted a qualitative study in two phases. In the first phase, I conducted documentary research and semi-structured interviews with headteachers and partnership coordinators. This was followed by observations of partnership activities, semi-structured interviews with staff involved in them, and pupil focus groups. In total, I conducted forty-three semi-structured interviews and five pupil focus groups. Each partnership, school and participant has been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms in my study.

Three English ISSPs

My research explored three partnerships, with different structures, different ways of working and different levels of mutuality:

Leslie Independent State School Partnership, or LISSP, was established over 15 years ago, and is what the DfE (2018) labels a ‘hub and spoke’ partnership, with secondary school ‘spokes’. LISSP was initially funded by a DfE grant and when that ended Franklin School, the independent school at the hub, took over the funding. Franklin School’s coordinator organises and runs the partnership.

Maxwell Schools’ Association, or MSA, is another ‘hub and spoke’ partnership, this time with a vast number of primary school ‘spokes’. The youngest of my partnerships, its work is externally funded by the independent school’s central body. This partnership’s activities are also directed by the independent school’s coordinator.

Finally, Napier Schools Together Group, or NSTG. Over twelve years old, this is what is described by the DfE as a ‘broad area partnership’. Like LISSP, this was initially funded by a DfE grant; but when funding stopped the NSTG schools decided to continue by putting in equal payments. The partnership employs a coordinator to run its programme of activities, who is not affiliated to any of the schools,.

Table 1 shows the participants from my telling cases whose voices are heard in this paper:

Participant	ISSP	Role
Alan	LISSP	State school headteacher
Amber	MSA	Independent school pupil
Bobby	NSTG	State school coordinator
Carolyn	MSA	Independent school headteacher
Dawn	MSA	State school teacher
Dylan	NSTG	State school former pupil
Jazmin	NSTG	State school pupil
Kathryn	MSA	State school teaching assistant
Kieran	NSTG	State school pupil
Matthew	LISSP	Independent school coordinator

Mia	LISSP	State school coordinator
Patrick	NSTG	Founding state school headteacher
Sasha	NSTG	State school former pupil
Sharon	LISSP	State school headteacher

Table 1: Participants

The Nature of Cross-Sector Working between Schools

It is clear from the literature that there are fundamental differences between state-maintained and independent schools. State-maintained schools are funded by the government; budgets are tight, with headteacher Alan, telling me that ‘there just isn't enough money in the system’. By contrast, independent schools are funded by fees, and while not all have the gothic spires associated with Eton College, they are more affluent than their state neighbours. Independent schools also typically have smaller classes (Aldrich, 1996), and their teachers are more likely to ‘be specialists in shortage subjects’ such as Latin or physics (Green et al., 2008, p.383). Other studies have found that independent school facilities tend to be of a higher quality (Tapper, 2003) and they offer more extra-curricular opportunities (Benn, 2012). This means that if schools are to work together effectively, they must build bridges and embrace their differences, ensuring that they do not reinforce inequalities.

The Lucas et al definition of ISSPs that I shared earlier described the partnerships in terms of collaboration, but I consider collaboration and partnership to be different things, the first an act and the second a relationship. This reflects the meaning adopted by Carnwell and Carson (2004, p.4) who ‘distinguish between what something is (a partnership), and what one does (collaborate or to work together in a joined-up way)’.

LISSP and NSTG are partnerships between secondary schools and my data revealed that their participants saw cross-sector working as a relationship. In NSTG, all schools shared a clear mission. They all made equal annual financial contributions and were involved in both strategic and operational aspects of the partnership. Even in LISSP, where activities were organised and funded by the independent school, state partners felt they had influence over the programme on offer. In my third ISSP, MSA, the independent school is secondary, working with local state primary schools. The independent school sets the annual programme, arranges funding and also organises and runs the activities. The school’s headteacher Carolyn, acknowledged that their working is collaboration. She told me that schools were ‘*collaborating* together on something rather than a formal partnership’. MSA was the youngest of my ISSPs, and relationships between partners were not as strong as in LISSP or NSTG. This may be explained by Bourne’s (2017:41) finding that ‘Building strong trusting relationships from scratch or developing existing relationships between independent and state-funded schools takes time’.

One of the aims of my research was to explore the meaning of partnership, as those involved in ISSPs experience it. In both LISSP and NSTG there was an emphasis on schools being equal partners. State head Sharon said LISSP was ‘a partnership of *equals*’, while founding state school head Patrick emphasized that NSTG was ‘shared partnership... [schools] were doing it together’. In exploring the meaning of partnership, I asked the pupils in my focus groups for their views. Their responses reflected a remarkable understanding of the relationship between schools from the two sectors. The NSTG student leaders built on each other’s contributions to collectively generate an insightful interpretation of partnership as: the coming together of two or more parties for the mutual benefit of all (Dylan) on equal footing,

so they... receive an equal amount (Kieran) [but where] they give as much as they can, rather than an equal amount (Sasha).

The students were comfortable with some schools giving more than others, which happened in their partnership through use of facilities or some teachers contributing to activities as part of their school commitments.

Distilling my data into a succinct meaning of partnership, I consider it to be 'a relationship in which parties work together as equals for mutual benefit'. Furthermore, I found that the stronger the relationship, the greater the equality and mutuality between partners.

Embracing Differences through Activities

To consider how schools embrace their differences I shall consider some of the activities that I encountered in my fieldwork. As discussed earlier, independent schools typically have superior facilities, teachers with expertise in shortage subjects and, additionally, they do not have to follow the National Curriculum (Aldrich, 1996). In my study, I encountered activities that drew directly on these differences.

In some activities independent schools shared their facilities and resources with state school pupils. LISSP organised a Spring Play, where partner schools each prepared an act, which were then drawn together in a production held in the independent school's theatre. State school coordinator, Mia, emphasised the impact the play had on the local community, 'those scheduled rehearsals where everybody's together I think there is something so powerful about that because you realise it's not just about you and it's not just about your school'. Mia's headteacher, Sharon, told me that 'being able to go into a theatre... that *is* really important and that is part of their [pupils'] aspiration'. The Spring Play was also important to the independent school, hosting coordinator Matthew described it as 'a huge highlight of the year'.

MSA ran a science day for year five girls from local state primary schools, held in the independent school's science laboratories, with its sixth formers acting as mentors. One of the mentors, Amber, said that this activity gave 'children who are still in primary school an experience and an understanding of what you can do in science'. Both primary staff participants spoke positively about being given access to 'those brilliant labs' (Dawn) and the 'equipment they have we may not have' (Kathryn). Sharing facilities does not always involve the independent schools acting as hosts, though, the NSTG summer school I observed was hosted by a partner state school with modern buildings and sophisticated IT facilities. Summer school coordinator, Bobby, told me that spreading events around the schools was important because it 'demonstrates to parents to students, to staff that it is a partnership and they are, the state schools and the independent are actually working together'.

As I mentioned, independent schools do not have to follow the government's prescribed curriculum, and some partnership activities introduced state school pupils to new subjects through sharing the specialisms of independent school teachers. Examples of this I saw were Latin courses offered to secondary school pupils in LISSP, and a GCSE Astronomy course in NSTG. These were subjects that were offered in the partnership independent schools but not in the state partners. NSTG pupil, Jazmin, told me that this allowed state school pupils to 'experience things that you never would be able to otherwise'.

Further advantages associated with independent education include cultural capital and the impact this has on university aspiration and application (Walford, 2003). Independent school pupils dominate entrance into top universities, and their application support and advice processes are typically regarded as better than those offered to state pupils (Benn, 2012). In LISSP, I encountered a three-year programme for first generation university applicants, who were given experiences aimed at enriching their cultural capital and raising their university aspirations. This was delivered through activities such as workshops and theatre trips, alongside university visits and support with applications. The state school coordinator from Huxley High School claimed that ‘the programme gives great opportunities for students that otherwise might not have the chances to develop cultural capital and really gain in depth knowledge of university life’ (quoted in the Franklin School partnerships brochure).

In some activities I saw a more overtly two-way exchange of expertise between schools. In NSTG masterclasses, state and independent school teachers worked collaboratively to plan and deliver courses. In LISSP, one of the state school headteachers led a leadership skills development course, with sessions for both independent and state school teachers. School leaders from schools in both sectors were involved in delivering sessions on the course. In this partnership, I also found shared governance with the head of a partner state school on the independent school’s governing body and independent school governors in two state partner schools.

Challenges of ISSP Working

While the meaning of partnership working focussed on equality and relationships, cross-sector working was not without challenges. Wildridge et al (2004) warned that power disparities could be barriers to effective partnership working, and in LISSP and MSA, the balance of power was clearly with the independent schools. In LISSP, this power differential was acknowledged. Strong relationships and trust enabled this differential to be known, understood and accepted by state partners. The MSA partnership was still emerging, with relationships less well formed, and there was some lingering mistrust from primary partners about the independent school’s motives for offering them free activities. These outreach activities could be regarded as ‘paternalistic patronage’ (Wilde et al, 2016:315), or a form of bestowing opportunity to the less advantaged, seen by Kenway and Fahey (2015:95) as a ‘gift economy’. While primary partners filled places on MSA activities, they were not prepared to enter into formal partnership with the independent secondary school, and only two primary members of staff were willing to participate in my research.

Another challenge came from differences in political ideology. Peel (2015:4) claimed that independent schools polarise opinion, ‘extolled for their standards of excellence on one hand and reviled for their social exclusiveness on the other’. Founding head Patrick told me that some state heads were hesitant about joining NSTG ‘from a philosophical and political point of view’. This was recognised in the partnership’s third-year self-evaluation, which claimed that some teachers ‘harboured suspicions or even antipathy to professionals in another sector’, but went on to assert that they had ‘confronted those feelings and seen them superseded by understanding, appreciation and respect’. While this seems persuasive, it must be noted that this was an internal evaluation, more likely to be positive in its tone. Patrick attributed headteachers putting aside their political views, to the partnership being ‘educational’ not ‘political’.

Conclusion

While private education divides the main UK political parties, ISSPs have received support from both Labour and Conservative governments since their introduction. They allow pupils in both sectors to cross-border, each gaining glimpses of the world of the other, while then safely returning to their own. While independent state school partnerships challenge the limits of each sector's boundaries, they do not, and cannot, mitigate the inequalities between them. Across my three ISSPs, I met teachers and headteachers who pragmatically set aside their personal politics to enable their pupils and teachers to benefit from joint activities. Through building relationships and offering activities that bring mutual benefit, ISSPs are helping these schools to embrace their differences.

Acknowledgements

This research project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable support and wisdom of my supervisors, Professor Meg Maguire and Dr Jane Jones.

References

- Audit Commission (1998). *A Fruitful Partnership: Effective Partnership Working*. London: Audit Commission
- Benn, M. (2012). *School Wars: the Battle for Britain's Education*. London: Verso.
- Bourne, M. (2017). *Independent State School Partnerships (ISSP) – impact of and lessons learnt. Research report*. London, DfE.
- Carnwell, R. and Carson, A. (2004). The concepts of partnership and collaboration. In *Effective Practice in Health, Social Care and Criminal Justice: A Partnership Approach*. Eds Ros Carnwell and Julian Buchanan. Maidenhead : Open University Press
- Department for Education (2018). *School partnership model diagrams*. London: DfE.
- Department for Education and Employment (1997), *Excellence in Schools*. White Paper. London, DfEE.
- Dhillon, J. K. (2005). The rhetoric and reality of partnership working. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol 29, no3, August 2005, pp211-219.
- Fairbairn, C. (2017). *Charitable status and independent schools*. London: House of Commons Library.
- Green, F., Machin, S., Murphy, R. and Zhu, Y. (2008). “Competition for Private and State School Teachers”. *Journal of Education and Work*, volume 21 no5, pp383-404.
- Green, F., S. Machin, R. Murphy and Zhu, Y. (2011). “The Changing Economic Advantage from Private Schools”. *Economica* 79: 658-679.
- Hunter, D. and Perkins, N. (2014). Theories and concepts of partnerships. In *Partnership working in public health* (pp. 19-52). Bristol: Policy Press at the University of Bristol.
- Independent Schools Council (2016). *2016/17 key figures*. London: ISC.
- Independent Schools Council (2017), *Celebrating Partnerships: Report of cross-sector work between independent and state schools*. Issue 2. London, ISC.
- Johnstone, S., Ackers, P. & Wilkinson, A. (2009). The British partnership phenomenon: a ten year review. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 19:3, 2009, pp260–79
- Kenway, J. and J. C. Fahey. 2015. “The gift economy of elite schooling: the changing contours and contradictions of privilege benefaction.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (1): 95-115. DOI:10.1080/01425692.2014.970268
- Lucas, B., Stoll, L., Greany, T., Tsakalaki, A. and Nelson, R. (2017) *Independent-State School Partnerships: An initial review of evidence and current practices*. London: Eton College.

- Peel, M. (2015). *The New Meritocracy: A History of UK Independent Schools 1979-2015*. London: Elliott and Thompson.
- Perkins, N., Smith, K., Hunter, D. J., Babra, C. and Joyce, K. (2010). 'What counts is what works'? New Labour and partnerships in public health. In *Policy & Politics* vol 38 no 1 pp101-17.
- Powell, M. and Dowling, B. (2006). New Labour's Partnerships: Comparing Conceptual Models with Existing forms. *Social Policy & Society*, 5:2, pp305-314
- Powell, M., Exworthy, M. and Berney, L. (2001). Playing the game of partnership. In *Social Policy Review 13: Developments & debates: 2001*, pp39-61. Bristol: Policy Press
- The Sutton Trust. 2017. Mobility Manifesto 2017. London: The Sutton Trust
- Walford, G. (2003). Introduction. In ed Geoffrey Walford, *British Private Schools: Research on Policy and Practice*, pp1-8. London: Woburn Press.
- Wildridge, V., Childs, S., Cawthra, L. and Madge, B. (2004). How to create successful partnerships-a review of the literature. *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, vol 21, pp3-19.
- Wilde, R. J., Green, F., Taylor-Gooby, P. and Wiborg, S. (2016). Private Schools and the Provision of 'Public Benefit'. *Journal of Social Policy* (2016), vol 45, no 2, pp305–323.

Contact email: margaret.hunnaball@kcl.ac.uk