
Evaluation of the Schools Linking Network

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Introduction

NFER was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE, formerly the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)) to conduct an independent evaluation of the national pilot of the **Schools Linking Network** (SLN). The evaluation was focused on three key objectives:

1. To collect data on the **types of school linking** activities taking place in LAs and to evaluate the **processes** (at LA and school level) that are administering and supporting the school linking
2. To measure the **impact** and **outcomes** of school linking at different levels (i.e. on pupils, schools, staff, and local communities)
3. To consider the **sustainability** and **cost-effectiveness** of school linking beyond the pilot phase.

Key findings

- Local authorities (LAs) played a critical role in supporting the SLN programme schools. This included auditing local needs and cohesion issues and agreeing on priorities, then linking schools and providing three days training and support.
- Overall, the programme was successfully implemented across most of the schools. However, LAs and schools faced some issues around matching link partners (with some schools not being able to link with the type of school they originally envisaged).
- Most LAs and schools were planning to continue linking activities into the future.
- School linking can have a positive impact on many aspects of pupils' skills, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours, particularly their

respect for others, their self-confidence and their self-efficacy, as well as broadening the social groups with whom pupils interact.

- There is mixed evidence for the programme's impact on pupils' knowledge and understanding, their willingness to express their opinions, and perceptions of school and wider community climate (e.g. perceptions of the incidence of bullying).
- The programme is more likely to have an impact if there is sustained involvement (two or more link visits) of pupils in the programme, and impact beyond those pupils directly involved in linking activities is likely to necessitate a deliberate and sustained dissemination effort within the school.
- There is evidence that school and local authority staff also benefit from involvement in the intervention.

Background

In 2007, to support the implementation of the duty on schools to promote community cohesion, funding was provided by the DCSF, in partnership with the Pears Foundation, to launch a national school linking programme in England, overseen by the Schools Linking Network (SLN). SLN developed from a model of local school linking which was originally established in Bradford in 2001 and Tower Hamlets in 2006, and aims to "*facilitate links between schools in England to help children and young people explore their identity, celebrate diversity and develop dialogue*". School linking brings schools in different communities together in the belief that, under the right conditions, increased contact between school children from diverse backgrounds and neighbourhoods can have a positive impact on attitudes and '*reduce mutual prejudice and wariness between groups of children based on cultural, religious, or ethnic differences*'. In this way, school linking can contribute to strengthening integration and cohesion at the local level.

The national pilot evaluated by NFER was designed to extend the linking programme beyond Bradford and Tower Hamlets, and to allow other local authorities (LAs) to establish similar programmes in their area. To date, around 40 LAs have been working with SLN. The latter provide a ready-made model, resources, support and training to the LAs, who then design and administer the programme in a way that is locally relevant for their schools and communities. SLN also operates a National Gateway to allow schools to link directly and independently of their LA, and works with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who are seeking to establish local linking initiatives.

Research Methods

The evaluation was based on a *two-stage, quasi-experimental research design*. During the **first ‘pre’ phase**, NFER collected baseline evidence from pupils and schools in order to measure pupils’ prior attitudes towards, and experiences of, cohesion and integration, as well as schools’ policies towards cohesion and their plans for school linking. This baseline data was then used in the **second ‘post’ phase**, to measure the types of changes that had taken place and the impact of school linking. **Quantitative and qualitative evidence** was collected in each phase, though the quantitative strand of the evaluation is based on secondary school pupils only.

Quantitative

- A **two-sweep survey** of pupil knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and behaviours before and after participating in school linking activities. The survey was administered to pupils who were participating in the linking activities, as well as those who were not. In addition, the survey was also administered in a matched comparison group of schools *not* participating in SLN. A sample of 3902 pupils responding to both the pre- and post-surveys was achieved – 1536 from SLN programme schools and 2366 from comparison schools.

Qualitative

- Eight **case-study clusters**, six drawn from LAs that had recently signed up to SLN through the LA-based route, one made up of schools drawn from the Gateway-based route, and one using schools participating in school linking via the NGO route. In each case study, in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers who were involved in school linking, members of the school’s senior management team, and, where applicable, the local organisers (i.e. strategic manager and the operations manager in the LA or NGO). In addition, focus groups were conducted with a selection of pupils who were participating in the linking activities.

Findings

Types and processes of school linking (at LA and school level)

- All three types or models of school linking – Partnership, Gateway and NGO – can develop effective practices, but the evaluation found that the Partnership model (between SLN and LAs) was more successful in this respect than the other two models. LAs and their staff and, in turn, schools and school staff, appreciated the level of support provided by the Partnership model throughout the linking process and, in particular, the access to expert training and resources.
- The Partnership model was the most common approach to school linking but, in reality, it comprised a myriad of practices and

processes on the ground. This is because LAs and schools adapt the SLN partnership model to fit their particular contexts and circumstances.

- There are three interrelated stages of the linking process – start up, running, and maintenance and sustainability – and each of these stages has key challenges.

Impact and outcomes of school linking

- School linking is a new, complex and challenging area. The practice and processes of school linking are still emerging through the national pilot.
- The key determinant of the impact and outcomes of school linking for pupils is the intensity of the school linking experience. The survey evidence showed that linking had greater impact where pupils linked with pupils from their partner school two or more times during the year.
- The evaluation uncovered primarily positive outcomes for pupils, schools and LAs. This was due to linking being carefully planned, conducted and reviewed. However, there were a small number of examples of negative outcomes, where linking was less carefully thought through and merely reinforced existing attitudes and stereotypes about particular groups in society.
- There is evidence that school linking can impact on pupils' knowledge and understanding, skills, attitudes, dispositions and behaviours, particularly those concerning self-confidence and self-efficacy. However, the picture is mixed about the impact of school linking on particular aspects and attributes, such as their willingness to express opinions and perceptions of school and community climate.
- There is evidence that involvement in school linking can have an impact on participating LA and school staff in terms of their CPD, opportunities for self-reflection, and learning about their pupils through observation of them interacting with pupils from partner schools and their attitudes.
- The impact and outcomes of school linking are greater where the co-ordination role is shared at both LA and school level.

Sustainability and cost-effectiveness of school linking

- There is an interrelationship between cost-effectiveness and sustainability. The sustainability of school linking going forward is dependent on its cost-effectiveness, and vice-versa, for LAs, schools and funders.

- The pilot phase of SLN was viewed as highly cost-effective by participating LAs and schools, both primary and secondary, in relation to its impact and outcomes achieved.
- LA and school staff believe that for school linking to be effective and sustainable there is a need for money to support the whole process of school linking, i.e. to pay for coordination of links at local/LA level, CPD training and support for schools, the school coordinator's time, monitoring and evaluation and post-link activities.
- There is evidence from the evaluation that collecting and using monitoring and evaluation evidence can assist with issues of sustainability and funding at LA and school level, both within and across LAs and schools.
- The chances for the sustainability of school linking at school and LA level can be improved if conscious attempts are made to embed the learning and outcomes across the school curriculum and to link the learning to other LA programmes and initiatives.
- The majority of LAs and schools involved in the evaluation had plans to continue their involvement in school linking beyond the pilot phase in 2010/11 and had already secured funding and staffing to enable this to happen.

Recommendations

Types and processes of school linking

- 1. Review the differing types or models of school linking:**
Consider in more detail the particular strengths and weaknesses of the Partnership, Gateway and NGO models of school linking in relation to the changing context of policy and practice. There should be a particular focus on the diverse ways in which LAs operate the Partnership model.
- 2. Manage the expectations of LAs and schools about the focus of school linking:** some LAs and schools, driven by the particular local context and lack of ethnic and cultural diversity, have begun to broaden the focus of school linking to incorporate further aspects such as religious/interfaith and socio-economic/class. There is a need to manage such expectations and decide the extent to which such broadening, particularly the religious/interfaith dimension, should be a feature of all school linking going forward.¹

¹ Interestingly, since this evaluation was completed the Schools Linking Network (SLN) has begun working closely with the Three Faiths Forum to establish a national model for interfaith linking as part of the schools linking programme going forward.

- 3. Address the challenge of recruiting more schools, particularly secondary schools, and making links across neighbouring LAs:** Much of the current school linking involves primary rather than secondary schools and takes place within, rather than across, neighbouring LAs. With the issues addressed by school linking of particular relevance to older pupils there is a need to address the question of how more secondary schools could be encouraged to participate in school linking. Also, with neighbouring LAs providing greater diversity of contexts and schools there is a need to explore the potential to set up school linking across neighbouring LAs.
- 4. Focus on improving the processes of school linking:** The evaluation outcomes underline the importance for effective school linking of having linking processes that cover pre-linking, linking and post-linking activities. There is a need to use the learning from the evaluation to focus on improving these processes.

Impact and outcomes of school linking

- 5. Give more thought to impact and outcomes:** Though the importance of impact and outcomes is articulated through SLN's CPD training and support, it is clear that this is not always translated through into actual practice on the ground. There is therefore a need for those involved in school linking to give greater thought to what the desired impact and outcomes of such linking are, particularly for pupils, schools and communities, and decide how they can best be achieved in practice.
- 6. Improve the collection of monitoring and evaluation data, and explore how it can be used for greater impact:** The evaluation underlines how the outcomes of monitoring and evaluation can be used to promote school linking to wider audiences, within and across schools and LAs. It suggests the need to explore how such sources can be used for greater impact at national, local and school level.

Cost-effectiveness and sustainability of school linking

- 7. Explore the cost effectiveness of different types and processes of school linking against impact and outcomes:** The outcomes of the evaluation highlight how those involved in the SLN pilot phase view school linking as highly cost-effective. There is a need to explore the cost-effectiveness of the

different types of school linking (Partnership, Gateway and NGO) and of the particular processes (pre-linking, linking and post-linking) going forward against impact and outcomes.

- 8. Address the uncertainties about the sustainability of school linking going forward:** It is imperative to address the uncertainties that LAs and schools already involved in school linking have going forward about their ability to continue being involved in such activities beyond 2010/11. There is a danger that if these uncertainties continue then the experiences and momentum of school linking built up during the pilot phase will be dissipated and lost, making it difficult to retain existing links in LAs and schools and attract new ones.

Evaluation of and research on school linking

- 9. Make full use of the strengthened evidence base:** The evaluation strengthens the evidence base concerning the types, processes and practices of school linking at LA, school and pupil level. It provides considerable food for thought and action for future policy and practice at all levels - SLN staff, LA staff, school leaders and teachers, and children and young people.
- 10. Look to take the evaluation design further:** Look to follow-up the pupils and school and LA staff who participated in the SLN pilot phase at a later point to gauge the extent of any on-going impact of school linking on pupils, schools and LAs, and to assess the extent of sustainability.

Final Word

In an evaluation of this nature, it is fitting that the last word should go to those most closely involved in the processes and practices of school linking.

'If the teachers are on board and enthusiastic, they completely make the project, they make it happen'. (LA strategic manager)

'The CPD is essential. It's been a fabulous opportunity for staff to network and to share their experiences and that has been one of the biggest learning points in the whole project because they have been able to share their experiences and inspire colleagues'. (LA operational manager)

'I think a lot of them [our pupils] have developed an awareness of other cultures and people from other backgrounds. Again,

we're a very white school and most of our influences are European, so it was healthy for them to mix with people with different backgrounds and values.' (School Linking Coordinator)

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

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