North-South Educational Partnerships

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Final Assignment 1

Seeding without gardening
A critical reflection on a Norwegian School exchange programme

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0. Introduction

According to Martin (2007), schools links are widely considered as a positive thing to do. They are "either about learning (about, from or together) or about development (helping or being helped)" (Najda in Leonard 2008:65) – and both helping and learning are largely uncontroversial activities. However, if implemented in an unreflected way, school links can have no or even negative educational impact through reinforcing stereotypes and post-colonial power relations (Fricke 2006). "Helping" is particularly problematic, not only because development aid is not in the mandate or expertise of a school, but, as Andreotti (2006) argues in her plead for a "critical global citizenship education", a uncritical take on "development" can contribute to an unbalanced relationship between a "powerful giver" and "grateful receiver", to the detriment of the learning objective of school partnerships.

This short essay will line out three key issues to be considered in successful school linking, and apply them on the case of the Norwegian school exchange programme, in order to assess its educational value based on an evaluation done by Garden (2003).

1. Key issues for successful school linking

Fricke (2006) proposes four types of school linking, the extremes being an "incidental link", based on charity or touristic approaches and potentially harmful to building a global mindset, and a "sustained partnership", where "thinking schools" partner in equity to build a "global literacy". Considering post-colonial thinking (Andreotti 2006, Sharp 2009) and intercultural theory (Fennes et.al. 1997, Gundara 2000), three aspects seem to be key in order to get closer to such a "sustained partnership" approach to linking.

a. Power and discourse – the postcolonial perspective

According to postcolonial theory, critical literacy is a crucial element in global education – and thus in international school linking – in order to question, understand and consciously consider power and domination in personal and institutional relations. This reflection should include historical and colonial legacies as well as economic, political, institutional and linguistic aspects. An open and critical approach to questions of power however can lead to irritating and or even conflictual situations

(Bond in Fricke 2006), which require a high level of trust, respect and (self-) confidence.

b. Similarities and differences – the intercultural perspective

When it comes to international encounters, a lot of emphasis is put on differences between the cultures, e.g. through Hofstede's empirical classification of whole nations according to a set of five cultural dimensions (Fennes et.al. 1997). Indeed, the exotic appeal of the unknown can be an important driving force when setting up school links. However, the concentration on differences as a starting point can contribute to reinforce stereotypes and a "two world" concept (us - them), while global education should strive for a one-world vision (Young 2010). Differences don't exist exclusively between the linking schools, but also within the schools themselves, or between schools in the same country. In this sense, "it is as important to explore the similarities as the differences" (Oxfam GB 2007:13), and the exploration of similarities can be an alternative starting point to explore each other's (institutional and personal) lives. From the similarities, the partners will also discover differences, but the basis could be a more equal partnership.

c. Learning together – the educational perspective

Kumar (2007) argues that development education should be seen as a dialogical learning process, in which a community of learners (including the teachers) enquires and collectively seeks solutions for change. Such a conception of global learning, strongly based on communication and partnership, seems particularly relevant when the "community of learners" is spread over two schools on different continents, as in international school partnerships. An open dialogical conversation on what is learning and education seems to be the basis for what Fricke (2006) refers to as "global literacy" and "thinking schools" (both crucial elements for the "sustained partnership" type of school linking) and should be established both within the participating institutions and between them, leading to a common vision on learning, which could form the basis for mutual learning through the linking programme. Such continuous dialogical can also create the basis of mutual trust needed to address possibly irritating questions of power and discourse as described above.

2. The Norwegian case

The Norwegian school exchange programme, analysed by Garden (2003), allowed since its creation in 1995 over 60 schools in Norway and economically less developed countries to exchange several 1000 staff members and students through mutual learning visits: A mixed group of students and teachers visits the partner school in Norway or the partner country during a short stay of ca. two weeks. These visits aim to contribute to international responsibility, to develop cross-cultural pedagogics and to enhance young Norwegians knowledge and positive attitude about countries in "the South".

a. Power

How does this programme address questions of power and discourse? A conceptual cornerstone of the Norwegian approach is the principle of equality and reciprocity. Consequently, aid and charity are banned from the programme: Based on the conviction that a giver / receiver logic would undermine the proclaimed equality in the programme, no fundraising or transfer of goods from a Norwegian school to a partner school is permitted. However, the report states that "charity and aid [..] flow within [..] the programme, although 'unofficially' and unreported" (Garden 2003:24). As a matter of fact, dramatic imbalance in financial resources exists between the partner schools, and the pure and simple "ban" of charity from the programme does seemingly not help to address these questions in an open and constructive way in the sense of Kumar's (2007) dialogical learning.

Aside the financial inequality, there is an imbalance concerning autonomy and implication in the programme: "Norwegian schools tend to be more active [..] Norwegian students take more initiatives, sometimes even planning their own visit" (Garden 2003:24). Furthermore, the motivation to engage in the programme seems to come mainly from Norway (volunteer teachers are at the origin of the programme, funding comes from Norway), the motivation of the non-Norwegian partners remains unclear.

Also, the "one country – the South" partnership principle is likely to reproduce a colonial pattern: A rich country provides the programme (i.e. the resources) and picks its partners from a broad range of other countries. "The South" in all its diversity and complexity is in one category vis-à-vis a powerful partner – even if the

principle of "equality and reciprocity" is at the core of the programme (as in the Norwegian case). However, considering the factual imbalance in financial resources, motivation and implication as well as institutional power, such equality is difficult to apply. Garden (2003) suggests to allow aid related to the partnership itself (e.g. for setting up communication capacities), but there is no proposal on how to address the question of inequality and power in a more substantial way, for example through joint and facilitated training.

b. Similarities and differences

The obvious central difference, despite the equality and reciprocity approach, is the imbalance in access to financial resources. The evaluation claims that, while the "rich poor gap might be painful to observer", the "issue could be tackled [well] both pedagogically and socially, resulting in mutual understanding and long lasting friendships" (Garden 2003:24). This is rejoicing, but there is no explanation on how precisely these positive outcomes where achieved. What is the character of these friendships, on what are they based? We can assume that participants discover similarities and common points (which are at the basis of any friendship), but there is no evidence of any systematic approach to dealing with this.

The report highlights triangular partnerships ("south-south-north") as a good (but challenging) practise, which can contribute to a more balanced conception of intercultural encounters towards a "global citizenship", by exploring similarities and differences in a more complex and less dichotomic manner.

c. Learning

The explicit objective of the Norwegian programme is to establish "cross-cultural pedagogics". This sounds great, but there is no evidence how this is put in practice. The core of the programme are short term exchange visits, with seemingly documented positive effects on the participants, but the spill over to the wider school and community remains random and depends a lot on the particular situation and engagement. Also, the programme objectives state learning of Norwegians about the "South" as objective, and not learning about Norway – or, simply, joint learning about global interconnectiveness. There remains an important bias in resources and institutional power between the partners, and the limitation to the programme to (sometimes touristic) exchange visits of less than two weeks, with the participation of

a very limited number of students and teachers from each school, does not provide the basis for what Fricke (2006) calls "sustained partnerships". These can and certainly do emerge sometimes, but this is not part of the programme and thus not supported or monitored.

3. Conclusion

The Norwegian programme has a number of interesting and promising features, e.g. the long term and board application of the programme, the documented long-term effects on personal relations and life choices or the strong emphasis on reciprocity and equality, rejecting any aid based approach. However, power and domination cannot be deconstructed by simply banning charity. A systematic and proactive approach to these questions would require facilitation and training for the participants in Norway and partner countries, but this is not part of the programme. In order to facilitate the emergence of lasting school partnerships for a mutual learning benefit, the programme would need to consider elements like curriculum links or whole school approaches to global citizenship education, as outlined in the Oxfam GB (2007) guidelines. By limiting the approach to funding mutual visits of a very small and limited number of school members, without embedding these in a boarder and long-term school partnership development, the programme seeds possibilities for something bigger and possibly more meaningful than a two weeks trip South or North, but what emerges from these seed remains random and largely unknown to the institutional agency.

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