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Wesley D. Hickey

University of Texas at Tyler

Janice M. Achtem

Willows Elementary School at Victoria, British Columbia

Joyce Nuner

Baylor University

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International Partnerships: A Model for Educational Organizations

Wesley D. Hickey, Ed.D.ⁱ
The University of Texas at Tyler

Janice M. Achtem, Ph.D.
Willows Elementary School at Victoria, British Columbia

Joyce Nuner, Ph.D.
Baylor University

Opportunities exist for faculty and students within educational leadership preparation programs to participate in international initiatives within developing countries. One way to do this is through collaboration with organizations that already have an established presence in the country. Working within these organizations provides opportunities for learning and research for the educational leadership program. If done well, such work also helps host organizations meet their mission and goals. An understanding of effective behaviors in international partnerships may benefit educational leadership programs that develop these types of service opportunities. The behaviors mirror the scholar-practitioner philosophy, of which some prominent educational leadership programs adhere, through addressing pragmatic needs within a local context.

International development can be powerful, yet precarious, complex and full of potential pitfalls. Service that has as its objective systemic cooperative benefits must be professional, humanistic and respectful; making a lasting impression and leading to sustainability. The support should be about building strong relationships with people and of genuine use to the people that are being served. It should grow organically and build on existing knowledge (Black, 2002). If not properly planned, however, well-meaning international efforts, specifically in the field of education, can be detrimental.

Crossley (2001) suggested that some educational efforts neglect the impact of local cultures in strategic planning. He stated, “Too often internationally inspired educational innovations fail because they are not well fitted to the local context in which they are to operate, and to real needs, values, and priorities” (p. 226-227). This is a significant challenge for organizations working to create positive change in a foreign country. These organizations dedicate financial and human resources with the intent to improve local conditions. However, without a contextual understanding changes introduced may fail to be incorporated systemically, or worse, increase conflict due to lack of cultural awareness. Groups attempting to introduce educational improvement strategies in another culture must be cognizant of where and how they are doing their work. They must understand the culture in which they are working, including how the people live, work, and learn.

Contextual understanding, along with imperatives of social justice and democracy, are foundational factors of scholar-practitioner leadership (Jenlink, 2005), as well as desired outcomes in any educational initiative. This suggests that a scholar-practitioner approach may be

ⁱ **Dr. Wes Hickey** may be contacted at WHickey@uttyler.edu. Dr. Hickey served as the third Co-Editor for *School Leadership Review*.

one beneficial element to include in a systemic plan for international educational partnerships. The purpose of this study was to examine educational improvement initiatives using international partnerships. The researchers used personal experience in working as international partners in the Toledo District of Belize to provide a reference for effective behaviors. This exploration contributes to a model for international organizations to use in improving educational opportunities within developing countries, which in turn could further the efforts of educational leadership programs as they develop global initiatives.

Lessons from International Partnerships

International partnerships are common in higher education, and lessons from these initiatives suggest strategies for systemic change in developing schools. Amey (2010) asserts that any lasting change that comes from international partnerships must be embedded in the culture of the local institution. Failure to take into account the cultural expectations of the institution in creating cooperative strategies for improvement may limit the systemic impact.

Development of a cooperative environment with shared expectations among local leaders and international partners requires consistent communication. Even minor program changes can create problems with effective administration of partnership initiatives. Jie (2010) relates this problem in the following statement:

Partner institutions should constantly revisit their expectations for collaboration to ensure a shared understanding around potential outcomes and preferred strategies. In doing so, they may find nuance differences between how the partners perceive these shared goals, even if they use similar rhetoric. Leaders and involved staff members should attend to these issues through tactful and open communication, yet be direct and specific. (p. 53)

This type of communication requires a concerted effort to maintain relationships throughout the partnership. A nuanced understanding can only occur through ongoing efforts to balance power and is unlikely to be developed through a one-time service initiative.

The influence of this service may also increase factors related to social justice. Al-Kazi (2011) has stated that international partnerships have assisted in increasing the power of women in Kuwait. Other partnerships have done the same with women in India (Razvi & Roth, 2010) through influencing traditional expectations within the workforce. This research suggested that international partnerships may be able to assist marginalized groups in developing a democratic voice.

Improvement of democracy and social justice among those who are marginalized is one goal of scholar-practitioner leadership (Jenlink, 2005). Educational administrators often take a scholar-practitioner approach to domestic issues (Gale 2010; Starratt, 2010), but the characteristics mirror many of the needs within international partnerships. These include using pragmatic contextual research-based strategies for organizational improvement within a democratic imperative.

Scholar-Practitioner Leadership

Scholar-practitioner leadership assists schools through placing emphasis on the importance of context (Horn, Conway, & Williams, 2007). This addresses the concerns of Crossley (2001) regarding the need to understand the local culture, but this leadership addresses other factors important for systemic change in any organization. Scholar-practitioner leadership, at its foundation, is more than a style; it is a philosophy (Bourgeois, 2010).

Scholar-practitioners are influenced by scholarship (Hickey, Gill, & Brown, 2011) that often comes in the form of action research. Many researchers strive to conduct studies that can be generalized to larger populations; however this is not a primary consideration within the philosophy of the scholar-practitioner. Action research is valued at least as much as the decontextualized studies with generalizable results. The reason action research is valuable is because of its narrow focus on specific problems within the organization (Smith, 2010; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

This narrowly focused research provides data for organizational improvement within the context measured. The scholar-practitioner views research primarily as a method for local improvement. This data is important because each organization has unique challenges that may require creative pragmatic solutions that are not evident in a more global approach (Thompson, 2010).

A scholar-practitioner will use the data derived from action research to assist locals in finding solutions for their own problems. This involvement is foundational for international partnerships. Effective international development projects are participatory in nature. Listening respectfully and making sure the local people are involved in the planning, designing and assessment of any development project that involves them or their people is critical. A genuine partnership must exist for ultimate change to occur and a project to achieve success. Such participatory projects can fall into two categories - as a means or as an end. Claever (2002) suggested that participatory development as a means can be seen as a tool for achievement. As an end, it is seen as a process which enables people to improve their lives and the lives of others. Participation as a means is a short term project where locals' involvement in the process often dissipates when outsiders depart. Parfitt (2004) agreed, especially where power relations were concerned. The notion of the powerful and the powerless stays intact when participation is used as a means; no different from traditional top-down models of development (Parfitt, 2004). When considering participation as an end, Parfitt pointed out that there is a transformation in these power relations between the outsiders and the insiders, enabling the locals to feel empowered and liberated. Freire (2003) suggested this liberation of the oppressed, from the oppressors, as critical in the emancipatory approach to development. This placement of power has always plagued the international development scene, especially when using the participatory approach. When one group feels less powerful than the other, a genuine partnership is difficult to create. Power is actually a negative influence in this case and should, if possible, be removed from the development arena.

Participatory action research is a process by which people influence decisions affecting them. Hall (2001) defines participatory research and development as a process integrating social investigation, education and action – all geared toward supporting organizational or community

settings. Potentially powerful, this approach can include people's involvement in decision-making processes, in implementing and evaluation the programs as well as in sharing in the benefits of the programs developed. A further goal is to enable people to present, share, analyze and augment their knowledge as the start of a process – enhancing the knowledge and competence of participants, making them more likely to sustain the development action (Williams, 2004). Participatory development looks intimately at the role of knowledge and learning. It is about whose knowledge counts, creating information for social change, recognizing indigenous and ancient knowledge and learning to be allies (Hall, 2001).

Participatory development is society-centered (Pieterse, 2001), as well as democratic and people-centered (Burkey, 1993; Brohman, 1996; Carmen, 1996; Maser, 1997; Ife, 2002). It encourages local people to be actively involved in the process of development (Black, 2002). It aims not to extract local knowledge for analysis elsewhere, but to mobilize indigenous capacities for the self-management of projects (Chambers, 1994).

Although the perceived power of one over the other may never be erased, outsiders must not be discouraged from working with insiders in the developing world. It does propose, however, that outsiders become educated before commencing such work. If they fail to do so, the risk of inadvertently further oppressing the already marginalized strongly exists. Effective work by outside organizations amounts to more than just consulting locals or encouraging their input. It requires a shift in thinking of those coming from the outside.

International assistance that fails to develop into a partnership creates the undeniable contention that those providing assistance possess the power and control. It could be argued that although many countries have benefited from this type of assistance, the imbalance of power has forever plagued the insider/outsider relationship. In addition, many outsiders engage in the process without being well informed about the cultural contexts in which the support is directed, resulting in less than successful programs.

The scholar-practitioner strives to tip the power balance in favor of the insiders. Insiders must no longer be the passive receptors of outsider programs but design their own initiatives. Outsiders may provide service to support the changes, but they must work within the context provided. Ultimately, a genuine partnership supports the planning of local stakeholders.

Lessons from an Educational International Partnership in the Toledo District

Belize is a recently independent developing country with a long history of international development assistance. Belize is attractive to many organizations in both Canada and United States as it is relatively close in proximity, English speaking and tropical. Over the years, outsiders have worked in many arenas, including education, to help improve programs and increase human capacity. Historically, Belize has accepted most international educational assistance without regard to the potential efficacy of the initiative. This is potentially problematic and suggests that educational leaders in the country need to carefully examine and select organizations wishing to work in their districts and design ways in which they can assist with issues specific to the schools and its communities.

The educational assistance offered in the Toledo District has been considered by locals as important, in part, due to the material resources that are often connected to such projects. The Toledo District of Belize is the poorest in the country with most families in villages relying on subsistence farming for survival. The population of these villages is mostly Mayan, which makes up 75% of the region (Richardson, 2007). Despite its natural beauty, the district of Toledo is the least developed of all the districts and has been plagued by chronic poverty for a variety of reasons, including lack of education and infrastructure. The majority of its population still relies on kerosene and lives in thatch-roofed huts, while most other Belizeans use electricity and live in concrete homes (Teachers for a Better Belize, 2009).

In 1997, the district of Toledo in southern Belize entered into a partnership with a small non-governmental organization called Teachers for a Better Belize (TFABB). This partnership of volunteer educators from North America and Belize coordinated teacher education workshops and distributed school supplies in the Toledo District of Belize. The initial goal was to equip Toledo's primary school teachers with the education and supplies needed to help their students achieve educational success. In 2000, Belize's Permanent Secretary of Education visited the workshop and proclaimed it a model for the other regions of Belize.

Throughout its twelve year history TFABB has carefully considered its role as an outsider in Toledo, learning how to be most effective in the insider's world. Members of TFABB readily admit they were challenged with this in the infancy of their work. By presenting pre-packaged material to the local teachers during the first few years of their efforts (roughly 1997- 2000), they failed to engage the participants in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of their projects. Much knowledge was simply transferred from the outsider (North American volunteer) to the insider (local teacher in Toledo). Kanu (2005) and Zajda (2004) cautioned against this type of action, where transferring of educational ideas and practices to developing countries is done without taking into consideration factors such as the traditional beliefs and cultural values. This early methodology employed by TFABB was top-down in nature and resulted in workshop audiences filled with relatively passive local teachers.

Through repeated trips to the country, members of TFABB learned more about Toledo and its people. They realized that to be more effective, they needed to enlist the local teachers into the education efforts. It was one thing to read about a place and learn about its culture, but to spend three consecutive summers in the region attempting to facilitate teacher workshops was quite another. Interacting and communicating with the educators in their rural communities was very different than reading about their education system on a comfortable couch in the United States. Local Belizean teachers working with TFABB, for example, were highly skilled at "thinking on their feet" and were able to make connections between material presented and the real world of a Belizean classroom. They would often "re-word" ideas presented to make them more meaningful and relevant for the participants.

The local teachers' confidence grew as they participated more fully each year. Specific, abundant and valid local knowledge that teachers brought to the planning process each year was considered a necessary ingredient in the relationship. With the local teachers taking a more significant leadership role, a true partnership was realized as well as *perceived* by the workshop participants. Local teachers could see that individuals from their own communities could indeed

take leadership roles in facilitating a successful workshop. The in-depth knowledge of the local education system and student population that Belizean leaders brought to the workshop was essential. Providing opportunities for local educators to become actively involved in their own professional development helped them to take ownership in the process. Local teachers continued to provide the critical and much needed link to the insider's world, rarely visible to the outsider's eye. For example, local teachers' concerns centered on: the role of management, the lack of professional autonomy, language issues, multi-grade teaching, planning and limited supplies. Also of interest were the rudimentary requests of the teachers relating to the format of the workshops such as: longer breaks, free lunches, earlier dismissal, and transportation to and from their villages, all indicative of their priorities and the way in which they view their world. Despite their desire to attend the workshop and learn something they could take back to their classrooms, of greater importance was that they would be fed a decent lunch, have some time to relax and talk to colleagues and be able to get home in time for an evening meal with their family.

A Model for International Educational Partnerships

This model for effective international educational partnerships accounts for previous literature and the authors' personal experiences. There are characteristics that include parallels with the scholar-practitioner philosophy of educational leadership. The characteristics of the model include understanding context, building relationships, evaluating effectiveness, and assisting locals in moving toward autonomy. This model is an open system that interacts as a whole, and as such, has blurred boundaries of influence (Johnson, 2007).

Understanding Context

The need for understanding local context and culture was a common theme throughout the manuscript. Simply put, understanding the subtle cultural meanings allow any outsider to work more effectively with locals. Insiders understand context better than any outsider. Partners should be active listeners in the dialogue regarding needs and approaches to educational change. This communication helps visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural context within which they are working. Ultimate decisions, however, should be deferred to the insider leaders who will be working in the school after the international partners are gone.

Outsiders within the international partnerships can increase their contextual understanding of the region through additional methods. First, arriving early may provide the outsider some time to acclimate to this new environment. Spending time with the locals, observing their customs, and initiating respectful dialogue all have roles in cultural understanding. This process can be assisted by traveling with experienced outsiders. These individuals may be able to provide information that allows the novice partner to avoid cultural faux pas.

Arriving early and spending time with those who have been in the country are initial steps to increasing contextual and cultural knowledge, but partnerships are not developed in single trips. Anyone who wants to create authentic international partnerships must be willing to be involved over time. Becoming one of the experienced visitors ensures a better understanding of the local

region, as well as provides the opportunity to build upon relationships vital for creating influence.

Building Trusting Relationships

Building trusting relationships is the primary factor in developing a contextual understanding of the local school and community culture. As stated previously, such relationships are not built through a one-time initiative but by commitments to ongoing support. As relationships are built, a contextual understanding of educational needs improve. In addition, strong relationships set the tone for better communication.

Communication occurs through personal visits, both formal and informal, to local teachers and leaders while in the country. Traveling to the surrounding rural areas to meet with administrators sends a signal of personal and professional concern. There are no shortcuts to building these relationships. Partnerships cannot be effective among strangers. A strong level of trust must be developed through collaborative efforts at communication.

Communication in international partnerships is the foundation for strong relationships and leads to the ability to plan collaboratively. The outsider must be supportive of the needs of the insider and allow for local decision making. This helps with trust. Furthermore, trust is built when promises are kept. Outsiders must be aware of their role in any plans and follow through with the agreement. Even small promises build upon this level of trust. Outsiders must do what they say they will do. In the case of international partnerships, the burden is on the outside partner to go above and beyond in all efforts to follow through on commitments and to communicate clearly.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Planning for systemic change includes the use of generalizable scholarship in educational reform, but also takes into account pragmatic solutions related to the specific school. Evaluating effectiveness at increasing student achievement is unique to the school and the foundational behaviors in this model of understanding context and building relationships is key. This becomes a form of action research.

Participatory action research, in the spirit of scholar-practitioner leadership, embeds the evaluation into the imperatives of increased social justice and democracy. It provides a voice to all students as processes of marginalization are critically examined. The researchers do not behave as impartial observers on the fringes but as change agents that use their role to examine and influence the balance of power.

This action research provides information regarding an ever-changing open system that is being influenced by multiple stakeholders, including the partnership. In the spirit of Collins and Porras' (2001) hedgehog concept where organizations protect their mission, the research helps keep the school focused on the vital components related to student achievement.

Promoting Local Autonomy

Individuals who become part of a partnership, including those within educational administration programs, have a desire to make a difference. This often makes it difficult to avoid professional involvement using the authority that comes with advanced education and years of practical experience. However, it is improper behavior and is likely to damage relationships for the outsider to take on the role of the authority figure. The balance of power must lean to those who make a difference on a daily basis – the local teachers and administrators.

This may sometimes be difficult because the locals are accustomed to deferring some decisions to outside “experts”. Stepping out of the forefront and encouraging locals to become actively involved in all aspects of any educational change has the greatest influence. This starts with any decision related to the school. Communication regarding strategic approaches to school improvement must be decided by the local stakeholders. A lack of local ownership regarding planning ensures failure regarding the educational initiative.

Discussion

Groups of well-intentioned individuals come to Belize every year to assist the local people with a variety of projects related to education. They spend little, if any, time learning about the country before they arrive and often come with preconceived ideas about what will and will not be effective in the area they are planning to work (Achtem, 2010). In order to be effective, outsiders must be more than just “well meaning” transmitters of knowledge. They must work alongside local people to gain a deeper understanding of the culture in which they are working. Black (2002) captured the essence of development assistance by claiming that it is something done *with* someone and not *to* someone. Top down projects emphasizing expert and novice relationships will do little good in developing countries. Instead, respectful and trusting relationships involving genuine partnerships should be the goal. Although paramount, building such relationships among all parties in a development project can be challenging and does not happen overnight (Heffernan & Poole, 2005) it is necessary for long-term success.

Outside organizations must be cautioned against believing they are entering a country to “fix” something and should not operate from a place of power and control. Those who work to prepare individuals to volunteer internationally would benefit from encouraging their volunteers to tap into the relevant local knowledge that already exists and realize that each person involved in the process brings necessary knowledge to the development table (Achtem, 2010). Including the local people in development projects is the basic premise behind the international partnership model.

International partnerships are fundamentally about power. Global initiatives that assist developing countries must recognize their role as visitors. Interactions must not be based on the outside coming in as the authority seeking to save the country but as true partners who take into account the importance of local power and influence. There are important resources, both physical and intellectual, that an international partner may provide in an educational initiative. Such outsiders must, however, understand that local autonomy is imperative.

The global initiatives at many universities are increasing international service opportunities, including those within educational leadership programs. These opportunities may provide greater benefits to developing countries if they are imbedded within existing partnerships. This suggestion emerges from the model presented. The importance of context and relationships cannot be ignored. International studies and leadership literature consistently align these factors with success in any initiative. Working in collaboration with an agency or organization that already has an established presence in the foreign country can provide access to local leaders until consistent involvement can aid in the development of personal relationships for the educational leadership program.

This personal involvement in the educational outcomes of the partnership is a part of participatory action research within scholar-practitioner leadership. Scholar-practitioners participate in the research with a desire to influence outcomes toward greater social justice. The qualitative and quantitative data assist leaders in understanding the influence of initiatives. This data assists in understanding where desired objectives are not being met, and may provide leaders with the information needed to plan for pragmatic solutions.

These solutions will be more effective if they are the result of insider planning. The partnership should be service-oriented and lead toward insider autonomy. The teachers and administrators in many developing countries are accustomed to some level of international assistance, and this can be beneficial if carried out in a thoughtful and supportive manner. Partnerships that do not focus on context and building relationships are often harmful, largely due to the power imbalance. However, if international partners focus on service that addresses the needs of the region, as perceived by the locals and supportive of their autonomy, it can influence lasting systemic change.

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