

The Challenges and Benefits Presented by Partnerships within Rural Education in Wales

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implementation of partnership working in education in rural Wales, contributing both to advancing critical understanding of the dynamics and experiences of partnership working in rural areas, and to the development of rural education policy and practice. By direct liaison with key stakeholders, the benefits and challenges faced by current partnerships are addressed and considered in detail. The main benefits of partnership working centre around greater efficiency being achieved, enhancing choice to the learner, allowing equity between different representatives and enriching understanding through the pooling of resources. The overriding challenges are based upon geographical difficulties, securing funding and ascertaining accountability. The article concludes by suggesting a number of core principles that should be addressed whilst drawing up a partnership agreement. Finally, the paper summarizes that an effective, well-planned partnership can result in many benefits for education sectors in Wales.

Introduction

The following article considers the challenges and benefits presented by partnerships within rural education, specifically those within rural areas in Wales. Consequently, this research contributes both to advancing critical understanding of the dynamics and experiences of partnership working in rural areas and to the development of rural education policy and practice.

Relevant literature

As this study concentrates upon the working of partnerships in education in rural Wales, prior to considering the opportunities and challenges proposed by relevant research, it is necessary to consider the definition of rural Wales. The National Statistics classification of settlement type and context, introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government in July 2004, identifies nine unitary authorities as rural in Wales, a unitary authority being an authority for the provision of all local services including, but not limited to, education, social work, environment and roads. The process of identifying these rural authorities is rather complex but is generally based upon the types of settlement per hectare (now usually calculated in square kilometres). The rural areas are then defined as the sparsest authorities. In Wales, these comprise the Isle of Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Monmouthshire.

Having considered a definition of 'rural Wales', a consideration of 'partnership' can be made. Partnership working in the context of this paper covers a broad spectrum of areas. This involves all facets of education (primary, secondary, further, higher and adult education) collaborating to provide an 'integrated education and training system' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2000).

Moving on to consider the actual dimensions of partnership working, it is important to note that such collaboration is being increasingly emphasized in education policy at all levels from pre-school education to lifelong learning. For rural areas the emphasis on partnership working presents both specific opportunities and specific challenges. On the one hand, partnership working can help to overcome some of the particular difficulties of rural education, including those presented by small school sizes and a dispersed client population. On the other hand, general models of partnership

working are not necessarily capable of being utilized in the rural context, with elements of the rural situation such as travelling times and accessibility presenting particular difficulties (Thomas et al., 2009).

Previous research on partnerships in rural Wales has highlighted challenges which include: finding appropriate partners; the consequences of an asymmetrical contribution of resources; consistency of partner representation; the time and resources required by partnership meetings, accountability and the representation of community interests and the sustainability of partnerships with limited-term funding (Derkzen and Bock, 2009; Derkzen et al., 2008; Edwards et al., 2000: 2001; Wales Rural Observatory, 2006). Furthermore, Osbourne et al. (2004) suggest that in a rural environment spatial challenges, reduced human capital and reduced resources present further challenges to partnership working. The literature also advances the proposition that offering affordable choice and quality to learners in rural areas is challenging due to their relatively small numbers (ELWa, 2005; Mosley, 2003). Furthermore, offering equality of access to education services can be a geographical issue in rural areas, particularly when those without their own transport are considered (ELWa, 2005). Moreover, equality of access to education services can be problematical in rural areas as underprivileged groups are often hidden within well-off communities (Hatt et al., 2007). However, it could be argued that this could also be applicable to some urban areas. Nevertheless, some research has shown that learners tend to accept the travel implications involved in accessing education in rural areas (White et al., 2007).

Despite these challenges, however, a number of positive outcomes of partnership working in rural areas have been identified in the literature. Concentrating upon school-community partnerships, Kilpatrick et al. (2002) suggest that such links increase the training opportunities open to youngsters, improve school retention and have positive environmental and cultural benefits both to pupils and to members of the community. According to 'The Learning Country' there is a vision to encourage community focused schools:

We want to see a much closer relationship between schools and the communities they serve. We want schools to act as a community resource – not just in school hours but out of hours and in vacations as well. We see them as being integral to the community capacity building – providing a base for delivering, not just education and training (with links to FE and HE institutions), but also a range of other services like family support, health and enterprise promotion. We want to see them rooted in a wide community context; capable of taking genuine pride in

their achievements, and able to ensure that they are publicly recognised. (National Assembly for Wales, 2001: 25)

Despite this community focus being emphasized, in practice reports of secondary school sixth forms being merged into larger further education colleges and the creation of 'learning centres' is not uncommon. In January 2010, a suggestion that several secondary schools in Powys would be closed in order to form centres of vocational excellence was leaked to the press. It should be noted, however, that the County Council has said that a review of education will be conducted and that several options are being considered.

Research questions

Having briefly reviewed the current literature, two research aims arise:

1. What are the characteristics for a successful rural education partnership?
2. What are the benefits to and challenges faced by education partnerships in rural Wales?

Research methods

In order to address the two research questions identified above, in the first instance key stakeholders involved in rural education partnerships were identified. Following this identification, a seminar was held where the participants were invited to discuss their partnership with particular emphasis placed on its actual workings and the benefits accruing to and challenges presented by those workings. These key stakeholders comprised of representatives from Regional Planning, the Health and Wellbeing Community, Educational Services (including both children and adult learners) and Local Education Authorities. Following this seminar, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following key stakeholders:

- Widening Participation Development Manager and Faculty Advisor on Community Education;

- Director of Education and Community Service (from a rural County Council);
- a rural Local Education Authority representative;
- Children and Young People Partnerships' Coordinator;
- a headteacher from a small rural primary school;
- Director of West and Mid-Wales Widening Access Partnership (a rural area);
- Coordinator from Adult Education and Community in a rural local education authority.

During these interviews, the key issues addressed were:

- the history of the partnerships and the involvement of the participants;
- the aims and goals of the partnership and how these were arrived at;
- who the partnership involves;
- the specific opportunities and specific challenges of the partnership;
- what has been learned from the partnership;
- the influence of the rural perspective on the partnership.

For the purposes of this article, the issues of most importance are the challenges and benefits of the partnership, along with the specific rural perspective.

Findings and discussion

The main benefits of working in partnerships, gained from the seminar and the semi-structured interviews, throughout rural education sectors in Wales can be summarized in the bullet points below:

- greater efficiency – working in partnership allows for an integrated approach with members of the partnership each importing their own expertise;
- equity – working in partnership provides a structure for equal decision making and permits local communities to be equally represented;
- effectiveness – working in partnership enriches understanding, creates trust and increases the pooling of resources and skills;
- choice – working in partnership enhances the choice available to the learner.

All of the stakeholders were in agreement that partnerships in rural education were vital. The Adult Education representative from the Local Education Authority asserted that:

Working together is an unavoidable necessity if institutions are to utilize abilities and capacity. Partnerships offer benefits to individual institutions and to the learner.

The main benefits of partnership working appear to be related to the opportunity for increased networking, sharing of information and to secure funding. The key stakeholders held the unanimous view that working in partnership effectively led to an improvement in efficiency and effectiveness of services provided. The representative from the rural Local Education Authority suggested that in her particular authority there was an expectation for schools to cooperate in partnerships. The participant stated that:

there is an expectation that there will be collaboration, to be honest I feel that in the nature of the work we do in this authority, in the Education Department we expect collaboration.

The participant expanded upon this by advising that such collaboration was vital in rural areas in order to share good practice and to share the workload. Furthermore, the stakeholder went on to state that tensions in partnerships were reduced when all partners understood the necessity of having to work together in order to benefit children's learning. In answer to the question regarding the necessity of partnership working in rural areas, the participant emphasized that:

partnerships are key, key. It is not reasonable to expect small schools to deliver quality education on their own.

Interestingly, this stakeholder progressed to explain that she did not think that, in urban areas, there was the same pressure on primary and secondary schools to work together. She said that this is because, for urban schools, the catchment area is 'all over the place', whereas in this participant's area there were well-defined areas. Therefore, she suggested, working together was fundamental to 'our way of working'.

This point about improving resources was supported by the Director of Education and Community Service. He argued that the existing partnerships had increased opportunities for the children. For example, children having lessons together and children from small schools of perhaps twenty children experiencing a school where there were 150 children and

consequently being able to do things that they might not otherwise be able to do. He said that there were also benefits for the staff who became part of a bigger team and therefore had the opportunity to share ideas and obtain fresh perspectives.

The Director of West and Mid-Wales Widening Access Partnership explained that one needed to have pooled resources in order to offer a quality service, particularly in rural areas. She stated:

it is very clear that none of us individually can overcome the kind of multiple barriers that a lot of people face.

However, the seminar revealed that there were a number of challenges facing partnership in education. A number of these challenges related to strategic issues and the constituent partners having different cultures or values. The participant from the Adult Education sector from the Local Education Authority explained that:

in a rural setting the cultural, geographical and spatial map does not always 'agree'.

This point was supported by the Director of Education and Community Service when he said: 'travel can be a problem when schools work in federation in rural areas'. He added that the problem with travel was that it led to an increase in cost and, therefore, where possible he advised: 'schools should be close together'.

Furthermore, accountability often presented itself as an issue, particularly in relation to the decision as to which partner was responsible for what. This often led to unequal partners and this could make the workings of the partnership somewhat challenging. The participant from the Local Education Authority supported this by remarking: 'I think that it is key that everyone is accountable.'

The participants in the seminar were of the view that the main aim of a partnership was to have equal partners but quite often this democratic process broke down and this could lead to difficulties coming to the fore. In order to overcome this, the stakeholder from the Local Education Authority explained that the partnership needed an 'ownership'. She stated:

those involved should feel a true sense of ownership and really understand the value of the partnership, ownership should not be synthetic.

This quotation suggests the need for 'empowerment' where every partner feels that their contribution increases the strength of the partnership.

One concern also related to the difficulties created by differences between national and local priorities. It was evident that in rural communities partnership working could be problematical as communication between people from geographically diverse areas could present problems. The participant from the rural Local Education Authority stated that partnerships needed to have a 'status' and a 'focus'. She explained this by saying:

so that everyone is in a position to see the bigger picture, so that they can see the value.

Furthermore, she advised that in order to keep the partnership alive: 'You have to keep things on the boil all the time.'

Without this, according to the participant, the partnership could wither and die, mainly due to the busy lives that the partners led. The headteacher from the small rural school suggested that the most important ingredient for a successful partnership was communication. The Widening Participation Development Manager and Faculty Advisor on Community Education stated that the demands involved in the administrative duties of the partnership often presented challenges due to the other avenues of work that members had to undertake.

In relation to the actual workings of the partnership, the Local Education representative was of the opinion that aims and objectives needed to be clearly set down and that everyone needed to understand the reason for the partnership. She ventured:

It is important that aims and objectives are decided on and are made clear. That (the partnership) knows what it is aiming towards and that it (the partnership) also knows what it is aiming towards within the bigger picture. That the group is not simply engaged in a series of activities to get the funding, so that it (the partnership) is something with a specific purpose. That it is completely clear to everyone why we are working in partnership, to solve this or to develop something else.

In answer to a question relating to the practical challenges of sustaining a partnership, the stakeholder from the adult education sector from the local education authority stated that finance could be an issue. This was supported by the Director of Education and Community Service when, in response to this question, he answered: 'I can answer that in one word, finance.'

The Children and Young People Partnerships' Coordinator expanded upon this by stating that tensions sometimes arose when people's aspirations could be achieved by the resources available. He said: 'the main tensions I think are between aspirations and resources'.

Again this was supported by the Widening Participation Development Manager and Faculty Advisor on community education when he explained that: 'there'll always be points of tension and often it will relate back to the funding'.

Based upon the benefits and challenges derived from the seminar and the semi-structured interviews, a number of key questions can be proposed in order to ensure that an effective rural education partnership takes place:

1. Have all those bodies which will constitute the partnership been properly identified and given the opportunity to participate?

It is important for all groups having an interest in the aims sought to be achieved to have a voice. Steps must therefore be taken to ascertain such groups (for example, parents, teachers and community representatives).

2. Are the visions of partners agreed and shared?

Common purpose is the overriding requirement of a partnership. Without it no partnership can hope to function effectively. It is necessary therefore that the end result towards which the partnership is to strive is clearly defined.

For the avoidance of doubt and as a means of reflecting on the partnership's *raison d'être* a written and signed partnership agreement is desirable. The agreement should contain, as a bare minimum:

- a) the identity of the partners;
- b) the objectives of the partnership;
- c) the methods by which the attainment of the objectives is to be achieved;
- d) clearly defined targets against which the attainment of the objectives can be measured;
- e) upon whom the day to day responsibility for attaining the objectives will fall;
- f) a procedure for resolving disputes between the partners, ultimately by recourse to an outside party should the need arise.

3. Is a partnership the most effective way of achieving the desired outcome?

The formation and operation of a partnership is not a panacea for every problem that needs to be surmounted. Consequently, before such a course is embarked upon, careful analysis is required to determine whether an alternative vehicle for attaining the desired objectives would be preferable. For example, it could be that the objective to be achieved is best left in the remit of one of the would-be partners.

4. Are all partnerships efficient and effective?

The simple answer must be 'no'. However, steps can be taken to achieve these two ideals.

The representatives of the various partners should be compatible. The partnership requires realistic objectives and ideas for reaching them. There should be procedures to allow evaluation of progress and reflection upon its results.

5. Is an even representation available?

It is important that no partner or group of partners within the partnership dominates its decisions. The very essence of a partnership is the mutual sharing of ideas to reach a common goal. Consequently, each partner should have a voice in the partnership deliberations.

6. Is the necessary funding available to finance the work required to ensure that the partnership's aims become a reality?

Appropriate finance is imperative to enable the partnership to secure the means to fulfil its purposes. A lack of finance is likely to result in the partnership being unable to achieve the desired ends.

Conclusion

The challenges facing partnerships in education within rural Wales are many and varied. These include overcoming geographical difficulties, not only those caused by distance but also by topography, securing the appropriate funding to pursue the aims of the partnership and surmounting cultural differences within the designated area. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure that the parties are focused on accountability and that there is an evolving and projecting concept of ownership and empowerment. Implementing lines of communication particularly between participants who are physically distant from each other is a challenge. It is also important to formulate clear objectives and to secure any necessary funding.

Despite the challenges posed, a properly constituted and organized educational partnership can yield great benefits to rural Wales. The main advantages are the provision of greater efficiency, enabling those involved to be equal parties in the decision making process and resources and skills being utilized with greater effectiveness. Furthermore, partnerships allow an enhanced ability to secure funding and a facility to share the workload and exchange ideas.

In summary, therefore, an effective, well-thought and organized partnership can bring about many benefits for education sectors in rural Wales.

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