



Municipal partnerships and learning – Investigating a largely unexplored relationship[☆]

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ABSTRACT

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Despite high expectations towards the relationship between municipal partnerships and learning, there is still a serious lack of research and conceptual clarity in this field. To talk about possible learning benefits has become a standard procedure, whereas the 'real' learning below the surface of these regularly perpetuated assumptions remains largely unnoticed. In order to contribute to a conceptualization of this largely unexplored relationship, municipal partnerships are described as a relevant context for individual learning. To further specify the field, the concept of informal learning is being introduced, offering new perspectives for research in individual learning within municipal partnerships. This will be complemented by a literature review of recent research that is of relevance in the field of (informal) learning and municipal partnerships. As a result of this review it is highly recommended to appreciate individual learning in municipal partnerships in order to foster the further development of the relationship between municipal partnerships and learning which despite broad support is all too often unduly disregarded.

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Introduction

Municipal partnerships are manifold – each and every partnership is unique. The same applies to concepts of learning and education directly or indirectly related to partnerships. A review of recent literature (e.g. Bontenbal, 2009; van Ewijk & Baud, 2008; Hewitt, 2004; Tjandradewi, Marcotullio, & Kidokoro, 2006; Wilson & Johnson, 2007) reveals several notions of education and learning in the field of municipal partnerships amongst its protagonists as well as amongst researchers, e.g., with regard to the relation between individual and organizational learning. While most of the studies investigate whether partnership activities can enhance local development, whether they can contribute to organizational learning and/or capacity building, etc., only a few explicitly deal with individual learning (e.g. Wilson & Johnson, 2007).¹

However, municipal partnerships can be very stimulating fields for individual learning. This is why municipal partnerships have been identified as highly significant contexts for development education (e.g. von Schwanenflügel, 1993) and, later on, for global education and education for sustainable development (e.g. Brouns,

Ott, & Scherhorn, 2002; Devers-Kanoglu, 2007, in press). With a special focus on the inherent chances for individual learning in municipal partnerships, educational sciences can add to a further conceptualization of the field.

For this purpose, it is helpful to analyze the different objectives of getting engaged in municipal partnerships, in order to develop a basic outline of the field. Education and learning are just two of the many different intentions which might be involved. Therefore, one relevant guideline to explore education and learning in the field of municipal partnerships can be drawn from the 'intention' related to the activities carried out in municipal partnerships (see Table 1).

The importance to distinguish between the aims of education/learning and other intentions lies in the fact that on the one hand, learning can be a conscious and intended benefit from being engaged in municipal partnerships. Here, learning is driven intentionally either by the learner him-/herself and/or via support structures developed by policy makers, educationists, or initiatives which intentionally foster municipal partnerships as contexts to facilitate learning (for example in the field of capacity building or global education). Therefore, such partnerships are to a certain extent occupied with manifold pedagogical objectives. Along these lines, a broad range of learning is likely to be fostered, appreciated and evaluated, as per predefined standards and norms. Indeed, beneath this intentional learning there can also be a learning which happens unintentionally or 'by the way'. Therefore, this concept bears the risk that individual learning is ignored, if it doesn't refer to the predefined intentions and schemes of evaluation.

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¹ This will be described more in detail below.

Table 1
Matrix of intention.

Intention	Intention to learn/educate	Intention to act/cooperate
Learning	Intended learning ■ Can be evaluated. Unintended learning ■ Might be ignored.	Unintended learning ■ Might be ignored.

In many other cases, there will be different priorities to engage in municipal partnerships (in Table 1 generally referred to as the 'intention to act/cooperate'). Even though not being intended, it is most likely that in these cases there is learning as well. This learning is strongly related to the process of cooperation itself, seldom recognized, and as such it is highly implicit. It might not become conscious to the learner and to others as well.

The importance of appreciating individual learning beyond pre-defined standards and norms becomes obvious, if one takes into account that throughout the years, educationists, politicians, activists, etc. have built up expectations regarding possible learning outcomes that still lack empirical verification. Since different stakeholders associate diverse intentions and aims with the concept of learning, individual learning as well as its support structures gets caught in the crossfire of different expectations. At worst, the lack of conceptual clarity might lead to stagnancy or even regression through the repeating of the dominant 'must have learned' theme again and again. In this regard, empirical research can be the key for breaking free from the above-mentioned incantations. It is astonishing that contrary to its prominence in municipal partnerships, research activities which explicitly focus on (individual) learning are still scarce.

Hence, in the following I am going to outline the shapes of municipal partnerships as a framework for learning, based on my PhD research. In this research, I explicitly focus on informal learning of individuals being involved in municipal partnerships from the perspective of educational sciences, particularly adult education. Based on a case study, and using a qualitative approach following grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I intend to 'map' the field of informal learning in municipal partnerships. Without being obliged to educational programmes or other pre-defined intentions related to learning, I try to derive from the data what people can 'really' learn from being engaged in municipal partnerships and how this learning takes place. As the research is still ongoing, the following outline of municipal partnerships as a framework for learning is based on assumptions derived from literature and preliminary findings.

Municipal partnerships as a framework for learning

From 2007 onwards, half of the world's population will be living in urban areas (UN-HABITAT, 2006), while additionally, 70% of the cities all around the globe are taking part in city-to-city international cooperation programmes (United Cities and Local Governments, 2004). Furthermore, municipalities are a melting pot of very different contexts and life worlds. For these reasons, the municipality as well as municipal partnerships can be perceived as highly accessible and very potent sites for learning.

In order to further define municipal partnerships as a framework for learning, the focus of this paper will be on North–South partnerships that have their priorities in the field of sustainable development and cooperate on issues of mutual interest. In the ideal case, they are located in the field of (Local) Agenda 21 and integrate different groups and stakeholders on a local level: besides the local government, other groups on a local level should be involved as well. Following the analytical framework provided by UN-HABITAT & WACLAC (2003: 11), active participants can be local authorities, NGOs and CBOs, the private sector, academic/research, education,

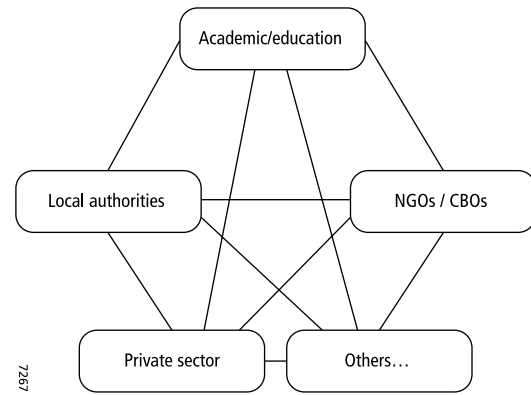


Fig. 1. Intra-municipal cooperation as a site for learning (modified from Devers-Kanoglu (in press)).

etc. The importance of cooperation on a local level can be derived from ideas incorporated in the Agenda 21, where local authorities are identified as playing "a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development" (UNCED, 1992, Agenda 21, chap. 28.1). The Agenda 21 also calls upon the local authorities to learn from their citizens, local organizations and private enterprises through dialogue, consultation, and consensus building (UNCED, 1992, Agenda 21, chap. 28.3).

Municipal partnerships of this kind can be perceived as unique frameworks for cooperative action amongst different individuals and groups on a local level as well as with their respective partners abroad. This framework proves to be very complex as the PhD research, on which this paper is based, indicates. A closer look reveals that there are at least two sites for interaction and learning:²

- 'Intra-municipal' cooperation which takes place through interaction and partnerships amongst individuals and groups on a local level, as illustrated below (see Fig. 1).

As a result of cooperation and partnership activities within the municipality itself, intra-municipal cooperation can already provide a broad basis for learning on a local level. It can be assumed that there are strong links between individual learning and local conditions, like knowledge relevant to the local level with strong references to local action and tasks arising within the municipality. Intra-municipal cooperation can ideally be found in both municipalities.

- 'Inter-municipal' cooperation which materializes through interaction and partnerships between the respective municipalities, groups, and individuals involved.³ This can result in a complex inter-municipal network, as illustrated below (see Fig. 2).

It can be assumed that within the respective municipalities some fundamental conditions are shared amongst most of its members and groups involved, for example a common culture, the surrounding environment, etc., even though the individuals and groups might strongly differ in other aspects, for example with respect to professional background, organizational aims, subcultural fragmentations, different living conditions, etc. These fundamental intra-municipal conditions constitute a common frame for

² In the following, I closely refer to Devers-Kanoglu (2007, in press).

³ Cooperation is likely to occur between similar partners like local governments or NGOs, but due to an embedding into the broader intra-municipal context, it also becomes more likely that cooperation integrates groups and individuals from different institutional backgrounds.

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