Evaluation and Program Planning 55 (2016) 35–45

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Evaluation and Program Planning

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/evalprogplan

Planned approaches to business and school partnerships. Does it make a difference? The business perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 December 2014
Received in revised form 27 October 2015
Accepted 17 November 2015
Available online 28 November 2015

Keywords:
Enterprise
Broker
Education
Business
Organisation
School

ABSTRACT

In many countries, schools are encouraged to link with business to add authenticity to learning.

The number of these business–school partnerships has shown a marked increase over the last twenty years. Traditionally researchers investigating these partnerships have focussed on the schools' perspectives (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010, pp. 32–33), however this New Zealand research has focused solely on the business perspective of established school partnerships. The study used a mixed methods approach utilising both online survey and semi-structured interviews. Ten out of the forty participating businesses surveyed used a brokering organisation as a way of developing and maintaining these partnerships and some developed rationales to support the partnership. This study investigated the value of using brokering organisations, rationales and designated staff to support business–school partnerships. Findings indicate that brokers and designated staff play a very effective role in enhancing business–school links, and more benefits are perceived when a rationale has been established. It is anticipated that these findings will support the development and success of business–school partnerships.

1. Introduction

In 1987 economic success was linked with the health of environment by the United Nation's now famous Brundtland report (officially titled "Common Future" report) (WCED, 1987). Partnerships with business were seen as beneficial for students (Ballen & Moles, 1994). Thirty years later economic, social and environmental influences resulting from the Brundtland report were still evident in many nations. Social and environmental and economic pressures encourage companies to promote corporate social responsibility strategies (Steurer, Langer, Konrad, & Martinuzzi, 2005). Between 2002 and 2005 a new five-day entitlement for enterprise learning and work related learning was established (Davies, 2002). These were quickly included in the school inspection process of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (Asher, 2005). In 2008 over 300,000 English companies engaged with education through the government funded National Education Business Partnership Network (Mertkan, 2011). Businesses and communities are now seen as important sources of resources and expertise for schools (Lonsdale & Anderson, 2012; Sanders, 2001). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report titled *Learning for jobs* (Hoeckel & Schwartz, 2010), the *Wolf report* (Wolf, 2011) and the Harvard School for Graduate Education's document titled *Pathways to prosperity* (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011) identified the need for business involvement in education. From 2013 it became a requirement that schools needed to increase their engagement with employers and to ensure that all young people were provided with work experience (Mann & Dawkins, 2014). In order for schools to make their own decisions they must have access to good quality evidence on what works and why it works (Mann & Dawkins, 2014, p. 5).

Partnerships can be diverse and complex, resulting in research which often appears fragmented across various sectors such as business, economics, management and sociology (Carvalho & Franco, 2015). This research can be underpinned by a broad range of overlapping or disparate theories such as the Transaction Costs Theory (Williamson, 1981), Resource Dependency Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), Organisational Learning Theory (Levinthal & March, 1993) Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 2012), Resource Dependency Theory (Davis &

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2015.11.002
0149-7189/

Cobb, 2010; Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & De Colle, 2010; Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003) and the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Epstein, 1995).

In many countries schools are strongly encouraged to ensure learning is situated, authentic and meaningful to both learner and context (Carvalho & Franco, 2015). As a way of connecting with communities of practice and mirroring the real world schools often develop business–school partnerships (Lanzi, 2007). "Highly effective schools have high levels of parent and community engagement... research makes quite clear, support from those beyond the school gates is an essential part of preparing learners for the twenty-first century" (Lonsdale & Anderson, 2012, p. 1).

School partnerships with a community of practice can be achieved in many ways, either in person or virtually. Teachers can contact an expert to gain content or process knowledge, a general understanding of industry, or possibly to gain skills or general confidence. Teachers may also visit an expert hoping to gain resources to support children's learning (Storper & Venables, 2004). This may be in the form of videos or photos which enable a process to be viewed without the time, logistics and health and safety issues commonly involved if a site visit is undertaken, or it may be via off-cuts, donations or technical support (Lanzi, 2007; Levinthal & March, 1993; Starbuck, 2001). These experts can provide advice to both teacher and students. They can assist with enterprise competitions (Mann & Dawkins, 2014) and assessment by providing feedback on the process and the solution. Some schools use experts to 'judge' solutions in either formal or informal settings e.g. a mock 'Dragon's Den' (Lee, 2008). Another benefit of community and business links which is often overlooked is the passion and enthusiasm portrayed by these experts. They can make the mundane exciting whilst the noise and smell of an industry visit (often an assault to the senses) can leave long-lasting memories (Storper & Venables, 2004). Students can receive mentoring and tutoring (Mann & Dawkins, 2014; Sanders, 2001), undertake work experience placements to re-engage the pupil in learning, assist the pupil to research a specific assignment, assist enterprise learning, provide careers experience and support work related learning in general (Asher, 2005; Lonsdale et al., 2011; Mann & Dawkins, 2014; Sanders, 2003; Wolf, 2011). Businesses can assist students to gain 21st century skills (Sanders, 2003) as well as providing curriculum enrichment and real-world resources (including work-related learning qualifications) (Mann & Dawkins, 2014).

For the purposes of this paper the term 'business–school partnerships' refers to 'connections between businesses and schools that are forged to promote students' social, emotional, physical and intellectual development'. This definition was adapted from the 'school–community partnership' definition provided by Sanders (2001). However achieving business–school partnerships is no small feat, and although teachers are generally supportive of business links, they are also keen to accept assistance (Carvalho & Franco, 2015; Davies, 2002). Urban schools are able to find financial support and resources from private enterprises much easier than their rural counterparts (Buasuwan & Thongthai, 2012; Carvalho & Franco, 2015). This difference has been attributed to a lack of co-ordination and lack of understanding by rural school staff on the methods for obtaining support (Buasuwan & Thongthai, 2012) and difficulties in sourcing, developing and sustaining business–school partnerships (Education Review Office, 1996).

It is not just schools wanting to link with business, businesses too are often keen to support education initiatives as a way of addressing their social conscience and corporate responsibility (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Du et al., 2010; Eweje & Palakshappa, 2009). Businesses are becoming more accountable to the key stakeholder groups with their complex links and relationships (Steurer et al., 2005). As well as demonstrating their social corporate responsibility these partnerships may also include benefits such as an enhanced business reputation, promotion of the company image, increased profits and at times reduced costs (Large, 1997). Rationales for involvement with schools may include providing resources to successfully educate students, to prepare and provide the nation's workforce with 21st century skills, for student well-being and to build and maintain healthy communities (Sanders, 2003).

In 1994 the American School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) was created to support and fund programmes which supported partnerships between business and education. In 1998 an American study investigated 327 businesses with established school links (Hoff, 2002). Some of the key findings from this study included the need to have a dedicated person to co-ordinate the partnership, for the schools to co-operatively develop partnership goals with the business, and to formally and regularly report back on progress. The study also suggested that schools and businesses should look beyond donations and equipment in order to develop partnerships which could have more significant influence on students' achievement (Hoff, 2002).

For many decades businesses in developed countries have established school partnerships with the desire to support education (Cramer & Landsmann, 1992). Given the social and economic importance of partnerships between education and business, it is essential to encourage the establishment of these links and ensure they are sustainable and long term. External agencies have taken the role of brokers in order to assist the development and sustainability of these partnerships. Either a school or business may initiate assistance from a broker. The role of a broker can be varied but generally entails mediating links between groups of people, including mediating any conflicting values and expectations between the groups (Hill et al., 2013). In the UK there has been a marked increase in the numbers of pupils working with training providers and sector skills groups which has resulted in a greater need for closer cooperation with employers and brokerage agencies (Asher, 2005).

The majority of business–school partnership research has investigated the benefits to the school and its students, with minimal research investigating the benefits to the business. An Australian study by Figgis (1998) focused specifically on the benefits for businesses when linking with schools, however this research was restricted to student work-placements. Although this form of business–school partnership is common in high schools it is not the only approach and almost never occurs in primary (elementary) school. Minimal contemporary research has investigated alternative approaches into business–school partnerships.

2. The research context

New Zealand education has undergone a great deal of recent change (Fancy, 2006; Lee, 2008). Many of these changes have been for economic as well as educational reasons (O'Neill, 1996). These changes began in 1993 when the New Zealand (NZ) Ministry of Education introduced a national curriculum framework (Ministry of Education, 1993a). This framework identified strong links between education, the economy and the workforce. The first page emphasised the priority placed on this with the statement "if we wish to progress as a nation and to enjoy a healthy prosperity in today's and tomorrow's competitive world economy, our education system must adapt to meet these challenges ... We need a workforce which is increasingly highly skilled and adaptable" (Ministry of Education, 1993a, p. 1). The stated aim of learning was "to enable students to achieve their potential, to continue learning