

LINK COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: LINKING DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Link Community Development (LCD) is an international education-focused development organisation working in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa and Uganda towards improving education for children. LCD works to improve schools and the quality of education they deliver to build the capacity of district departments of education so that they can better meet the needs of their schools and communities. LCD also aims to support government education policy by using lessons learned at the grassroots level to inform national and regional strategies. In the context of its development work LCD delivers two programmes with a development education perspective. The first is our Link Schools Programme (LSP) which offers schools in Ireland and the UK the opportunity to link with a school in Africa. The second is a Global Teachers Programme (GTP) that provides a personal and professional development experience for teachers centred on a five week placement in an African school.

This paper presents a brief overview of our educational programmes in Africa, of our development education programmes, and attempts to illustrate that these two aspects of our work are integrated, with each adding value to the other.

School development in Africa

LCD has adopted an explicitly rights-based approach to educational development that is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). LCD believes that education is a basic human right, fundamental to breaking the cycle of poverty and creating a just society. Education increases opportunities and empowers people to participate in decision-making. LCD assists children and their communities to realise their right to quality education regardless of gender or any other disadvantaging factor.

LCD works to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by improving access to quality education, which

is central to reducing poverty and enhancing individuals' opportunities to develop and sustain meaningful livelihoods. More specifically, LCD's work contributes to the second MDG, achieving universal primary education, by working toward school improvements such as gender equality in primary education of the highest quality.

To enhance the sustainability of its work, LCD always works within legitimate local structures. We favour working in countries where there is a decentralised system with strong local government working in partnership with district departments of education. Our work takes place at a number of levels: we work with schools to enable them to improve the quality of education they deliver; we work with district departments of education to build their capacity so that they can better meet the needs of their schools and communities; and we work to inform national policy, through the development and documentation of sustainable and replicable models for planning, service delivery and capacity building at both district and school level.

LCD works within existing resource parameters and specialises in capacity building and support both at school and district level. LCD also specialises in developing and strengthening local planning, decision making, monitoring and accountability systems again at school and district level. Central to this approach is a monitoring and evaluation tool called School Performance Review (SPR; see box).

School Performance Review (SPR)

What is SPR? It is a way of finding out how well schools are performing in the areas of leadership, management, teaching quality and community involvement.

Why is it needed? Schools and district departments often have little information to show them the things they are doing well and the areas that need more attention, making it difficult to plan ahead and place scarce resources.

How is it done? Each year data is collected by LCD and district officials on different areas of school life. Once data has been collected, findings are shared with each individual school.

What is the result? SPR provides an opportunity for all education stakeholders to actively contribute to the development of their school. Schools share SPR findings with the whole community and together they can effectively plan ahead. District staff can engage with schools during the planning process.

The SPR model consists of the following annual cycle of activities:

1. Data collection using nationally-approved monitoring instruments to assess school performance against a range of quality indicators for teaching and learning, management and governance;
2. Data analysis using nationally approved quality indicators;
3. Preparation of a report for each individual school, and a summary report for each district, providing clear feedback on the quality of its performance and including specific recommendations for school improvement;
4. Facilitation of a SPR Meeting at each school which enables concerned stakeholders to engage with the report, assess the performance of their school, and plan actions for school improvement. This process culminates in the drafting of a School Development Plan for each participating school;
5. Facilitation of a district conference at which concerned stakeholders engage with the district report and plan actions for school improvement. This process culminates in the drafting of a District Improvement Plan for Education;
6. Supervised implementation of the School and District Development Plan;
7. Targeted training and capacity building activities that address needs revealed in reports.

The most recent advance in the SPR model is the addition of the ‘Child-Friendly School Instrument’. A Child-Friendly School is one which: (a) respects the rights of the child, (b) is effective and efficient, (c) is gender sensitive, (d) is healthy and (e) is a safe and protective place. The school should engage pupils in gender-specific focus groups and evaluate factors in school affecting enrolment retention such as sanitation, safety, gender sensitivity, health promotion and the quality of extra-curricular activities.

Connecting schools North and South

The Global Teachers Programme (GTP) is a 15-month programme for practicing teachers and principals. The highlight of the programme is a five-week placement in an African school (one which LCD is already supporting) where the teachers do two things: first, they help LCD with its school improvement programmes in Africa; second, they learn first-hand about life in an African school, so that when they return to Ireland they can

use the experience to teach pupils in their own schools about life in Africa and development issues.

In addition to helping LCD with its work and assisting teachers to become better development educators, the GTP also offers teachers and principals the opportunity to develop their leadership, management and training skills. Their work in Africa typically involves acting as coaches and mentors to African teachers and principals in areas such as literacy, school administration and school development planning.

LCD's Link Schools Programme is designed to foster mutual learning between Irish/UK and African schools. It aims to transform pupils and teachers alike into global citizens who have a clear understanding of issues of global concern. In addition to providing schools with a Link Schools Pack and facilitating correspondence between linked schools, LCD also organises activities each year for schools on the programme and provides ongoing support to linked schools. Schools can join the programme whether or not they are involved in the GTP. In addition to enabling schools to learn about each other and gain a greater global awareness, LSP also enables Irish and UK schools to assist LCD with school improvement work in Africa in a variety of ways.

From educational development to development education

LSP and GTP take place in the context of LCD's school improvement work. For LCD the starting point is not development education but school improvement in Africa. However we recognise that our work with schools in Africa provides us with a platform for development education activities and with a way of integrating educational development in Africa with development education in the global North. Since our priority is school improvement in Africa, we seek to ensure that LSP and GTP support this work.

Our interventions in African countries not only provide a framework for LSP and GTP, they inform the activities which take place in both programmes. Our key competency is capacity building and our capacity-building interventions are informed by SPR which identifies needs at school level and informs local school development planning. It also informs a broader analysis of common problems facing many African schools such as the need for improvement in school management, community involvement in school support, improved teaching methodologies in the areas of literacy and numeracy and for initiatives to address the impact of HIV in schools.

We structure both LSP and GTP so that they can help, rather than hinder, our programme teams in Africa trying to address these issues. Global

Teachers are not filling a gap in classrooms but working with schools and LCD in Africa on issues identified through the SPR monitoring and evaluation framework. Thus teachers from Ireland and the UK mentor and workshop with local teachers on literacy, school administration, school development planning or other relevant issues, while gaining a greater understanding of Africa and development issues. When they return home, under the mentorship of LCD in Ireland, they use this experience to bring development education alive for children in their own classrooms, in addition to sharing their experience with a broader audience within the education sector.

Similarly LSP activities arise out of SPR and are designed and structured to address the different needs of schools in the northern and southern hemispheres. Obviously development education is often a priority for Irish and UK schools and a school link is a valuable tool for learning about development and global awareness. But correspondence between the schools enables them to learn about each other while also providing valuable english-writing experience for African learners, which we know through SPR, is a priority for many African schools. Other events are similarly designed to address the educational needs of the African school, while at the same time raising awareness of issues of justice and equality in Irish and UK schools.

Irish and UK schools are charged a fee for their participation in LSP, and a portion of this money is used to provide limited funding to African schools to address funding gaps in their school development plan, which will have been developed out of SPR. Irish schools are in effect supporting their African counterparts by implementing locally developed plans. Moreover, should an Irish or UK school decide to undertake additional fundraising, this is managed by means of a special project, whereby the funds are used to address a need which has been identified by the African school through SPR and its school development plan.

Conclusion

LCD's primary focus is school improvement in developing countries. While we recognise the importance and value of development education, LSP and GTP have broader ambitions. LSP and GTP are about development education *and* development, about engaging Irish and UK schools and teachers as partners in school improvement in Africa. For LCD, the most important measure of the success of LSP and GTP is the extent to which they

add value to our school improvement programmes. Ultimately we feel that LSP and GTP benefit from being embedded in our educational development work, and their quality in terms of development education is enhanced as a result.

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