

The benefits, impacts and success factors for successful sister school relationships

*From DEECD Sister School Relationships Final
Report by Colmar Brunton, 2012*



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1. Background

The Victorian Government's 'Plan for a Multicultural Victoria' includes a focus on languages learning, global education and intercultural understanding. To prepare Victorian students for active interaction in an interdependent, globalised world, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) aims to support schools so that internationalising education becomes a reality in policy and practice in the daily life of all schools. One way of achieving this aim is by encouraging more schools to form sister school relationships with schools overseas and within Australia.

Accordingly, DEECD commissioned Colmar Brunton to conduct research into sister school relationships across Victorian schools.

2. Research Objectives

The research was built around the following key objectives:

- To define and document the benefits of sister school relationships to individual schools and the school education system more broadly
- To capture the contribution that sister schools make to languages learning
- To identify effective practice in sister school relationships including in other states and overseas, in order to be able to inform and advise future arrangements; and
- To capture the contribution that sister schools make to the internationalisation of school education.

3. Key Findings

Sister school programs have a significant positive effect on the global awareness, attitudes and response of students across both primary and secondary schools. These benefits are of greatest significance during the third year especially, once relationships had been well established and embedded within the school, nonetheless short-term benefits are also evident.

The research highlights the positive impact that such relationships can have across a range of areas for students, schools and the school community.

3.1 Benefits of Sister School Relationships

Sister schools contribute to:

- Intercultural understanding within the school community
- Increased global awareness and internationalisation within the school community
- Opportunities to better understand one's own culture/country
- Personal development of the student eg leadership, maturity, independence
- Improved ability of students to adjust to different situations
- Opportunities for sharing pedagogies and engage in joint curriculum development
- Opportunities for professional development
- Opportunities for reciprocal travel
- Enhancing the reputation of the school
- Improved competence and confidence in the use of technology by teachers involved in the program.

Sister schools benefited their students by getting them to look beyond their own world and understand the lives of other people in a genuine, meaningful way.

"When the Chinese kids come out here they are embraced as part of the culture and provide a kind of richness to our school. The main thing is that it centres on development of kids as a whole; being able to appreciate other cultures, to be able to talk and meet with people from other countries, learn about life in other places" - Government regional secondary school.

3.2 Benefits for Language Learning

It is well documented that personal communication can improve language learning. Established links between schools can provide an excellent opportunity for purposeful, genuine, authentic, personalised communication with a real audience that is responsive to the communication.

Approximately three quarters of principals and teachers that have a sister school relationship indicated that their relationship aimed to meet objectives around language learning and that these objectives were being met. The specific benefits of sister school relationships that related directly to language learning included:

- Increased understanding of the importance of learning languages
- Support for language learning
- Increased motivation/enthusiasm to learn a language among students
- Increased numbers of students continuing their language studies beyond the compulsory level.

Teachers reported their sister schools relationships gave students a sense of accomplishment when they found they could effectively communicate with their sister school classmates. The real life communication provided them with a sense of purpose for learning another language.

“The relationships are really motivating for learning a language; students will continue a language until year 12 having had that sort of experience, travelling to the other country, really enjoying it, feeling like they could communicate. However, when they travel over to us it probably has an even greater effect on the quality of the language skills of our students” - Government metropolitan secondary school.

3.3 Identification of Effective Practice

“The most effective partnerships are dynamic and interactive, work toward common goals, and are characterised by a high level of commitment among group members” – Jenkins.

Principals and teachers of schools with successful sister school relationships identified the following factors as important in ensuring the success of the sister school relationship:

- The program is a priority within the school and has the full support of the leadership team and a high level of support right across the school
- Matched expectations and objectives which are of mutual benefits to all schools participating
- The establishment of clear common goals
- The program to be driven by a Champion on each side but with shared responsibility across the school and succession planning in place
- Ideally face to face contact between sister school staff early on in the relationship and visits
- The development of mutual trust and respect
- Open and regular written, email or other forms of ICT communication
- Curriculum collaboration
- Financial support and adequate resources
- Utilisation of networks, sharing of ideas and resources between schools.

3.4 Important Factors for Sustaining Relationships

While the establishment phase is critical, often enthusiasm is high and good intentions are strong at this point, after a period of time, this enthusiasm can waver as other programs within the school can develop and take priority. Therefore, the maintenance of the relationship is critical to ensure ongoing success.

The quantitative results revealed that the following factors are extremely important in sustaining sister

school relationships:

- High level of leadership support
- Commitment to the partnership by both schools
- The program being a priority within the school
- Clear goals and objectives agreed upon upfront
- A team approach to supporting the relationship
- Adequate funding and resources
- Ongoing and regular communication
- A focus on planning of activities and collaboration
- The primary communicators on both sides should share a common language.

"It is definitely not about having the resources – you don't need much to maintain it and get it going – just a computer Skype link up. It is more about the school and the staff having the energy and effort to make it happen and to commit to it on going" – Government metropolitan primary school.

3.5 Effective Use of ICT to Support Sister Schools

Desktop research revealed that the number of sister school relationships is rapidly increasing, driven and supported by advances in information and communication technology (ICT), making communication quick and time-efficient.

"The creation of a global, web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration in real time, without regard to geography, distance or, in the near future even language, is open today to more people in more places on more days in more ways than anything like it ever before in the history of the world" (Friedman, 2005).

Ongoing and regular contact was an important factor in sustaining a sister school relationship.

The research revealed that although there were challenges associated with co-ordinating and planning ICT-based sessions with one's sister school, nevertheless schools that participated in activities such as shared blogs and videoconferencing greatly valued the benefits these activities provided.

"We started our relationship via the ePals website in 2008 but soon it was inadequate for our needs. We correspond by email, snail mail and Skype. Our first video conference was after just six months – an amazing feat as there is a 14 hour difference between Australia and Argentina. Our ICT skills have improved as we look for new and interesting ways to keep in touch – apart from PowerPoint, the kids have used PhotoStory3 for Windows, Movie Maker, Wordle, Animoto, Microsoft Research Auto Collage, once class created a wiki ... we used Move Maker to create cooking clips. Kids had to work co-operatively in groups to find an Aussie recipe, write a script, learn their part and be filmed doing the cooking." - Primary School.