UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet) and Peace Education

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INTRODUCTION: THE AIMS OF ASPNET

The UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet)[i] is a global network of over 7,900 schools and colleges in 176 countries who have come together in order to promote UNESCO's ideal of peace and contribute to the quality of education. The network was created in 1953 with 33 schools, and is now one of the oldest and largest educational networks in the world. Membership ranges from nursery to secondary and teacher education institutions.

The network is coordinated from its headquarters in Paris, and each country also has a National Coordinator for Associated Schools. Interested schools may apply to join the network and must commit to following one or all of the following four study themes:
  1. World concerns and the role of the United Nations
  2. Education for sustainable development
  3. Peace and human rights
  4. Intercultural learning.

The reason for having the word 'project' in the title is that Associated Schools are invited to create innovative pilot plans, design new teaching materials and methods, and develop exchanges between students and teachers internationally. The aim is for the schools to be a 'laboratory' for innovation, so that projects can be shared across the network and so that there is a multiplier effect. In this way, it is hoped that ASPnet schools can influence education reform and improve the quality of education.

Schools are invited to participate in the network in different ways. They can launch activities on any one of the themes above, take part in 'flagship projects' that are generated from UNESCO Paris (such as the Transatlantic Slave Project, Sandwatch or World Heritage), participate in UNESCO campaigns or observe the International Days and Years celebrated by UNESCO and the UN; and act as experimental centres for testing and validating teaching and learning materials produced by UNESCO or its partners.

Advice to schools also includes "having as their foundation democracy and participation in structures and teaching methods" – that is, that being an ASPnet school cuts across all aspects of school life, and is not only about temporary participation in high profile events or international exchange visits.

THE GLOBAL REVIEW

In 2003, to evaluate the operation and impact of the ASPnet after fifty years, a Global Review was commissioned and conducted by an independent team from the Centre for International Education and Research at the University of Birmingham, UK (Davies, Harber and Schweisfurth 2003). Although most participating schools were 'ordinary' rather than elite, the review found a huge variation in the types of schools and their resource levels across the world. A great range of projects and other activities were also catalogued during the review process. At the school level, the strengths of ASPnet membership included providing added value in terms of gains in innovative teaching methods, the climate of the school and intercultural understanding. Students in Associated Schools knew something of UNESCO and even more about human rights and peace. Of great importance was the legitimacy that a UNESCO badge gave to schools for their work in peace, rights, sustainable development and heritage, particularly in countries or regions where such subjects are not normally a part of the curriculum. In the words of some of the teacher respondents, ASPnet creates "a sense of

belonging to an institution committed to peace"; there is a "culture of engagement," we are "free to emphasise global issues – not bound by test scores."

There was also a reported belief that the impact of ASPnet membership extends beyond the school into families and the community. Examples of community-based participation included cultural events such as festivals, exhibitions, parades and performances; campaigns such as protest vigils, peace marches and petitions; community conservation measures like beach cleaning, preservation of monuments and recycling; and caring activities, for example working with the elderly, orphans, war veterans, disaster victims, and HIV/AIDS sufferers. Schools felt they acted as role models to other schools in the locality.

However, some shortcomings were that not all schools that were officially in the network were active, not all submitted reports, and not all principals or other teachers were knowledgeable and supportive. The UNESCO ASPnet office in Paris was understaffed and under-resourced, which led to difficulties in communications and the process of schools receiving materials. There is a dilemma about the increasing range of work that comes under the ASPnet umbrella. There was evidence that some teachers used the menu of options available to associated schools to avoid topics that might be sensitive or unacceptable. It was disappointing but perhaps not surprising to find examples of schools in countries experiencing violent ethnic conflict concentrating on issues of litter and industrial pollution or the preservation of national monuments. Yet there were also pertinent questions coming from low-income countries regarding the reasons why money was being spent on preserving old buildings when there is so much poverty and need for housing now.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT ASPNET?

A key and growing issue in ASPnet is distinctiveness. Within schooling and curriculum development internationally, there is now growth in many of the areas that used to be limited to ASPnet schools – for example, environmental concerns and heritage. Additionally, human rights education and peace education are now part of citizenship education in many countries. With increasing globalisation and international communications, "twinning" or international dual degree programs, and exchanges are increasing swiftly, with a new emphasis on schools being part of an international and interdependent world. In the UK, for example, a recent Department for International Development (DFID) booklet listed over 20 organisations promoting global links, of which ASPnet was only one.

An important question, then, is whether the UNESCO ideals are embedded in all international educational exchange activity. The Global Review found that schools saw twinning as very beneficial for participants in terms of increasing their intercultural understanding and, often, language capacity – but that might be true of any exchange. Schweisfurth (2005), examining the "Learning to Live Together" aim of ASPnet, pointed out that the usefulness of networks in terms of building real intercultural understanding depended on the commitment of stakeholders, the treatment of culturally sensitive issues and the cultural interpretation of certain subjects.

A network, as opposed to bilateral exchange, should be a site for joint action. This would necessitate a high profile for ASPnet internationally, so that at the national level it could wield influence. Both horizontal and vertical connections are significant in a network. The Global Review found, however, that ASPnet was not always widely recognized beyond its members. Sometimes national Ministries of Education were not even aware the network, let alone able to identify areas of impact on educational policy or quality. One might assume that a network of this size and age would have forged a very distinctive furrow in educational thinking over the years.   While UNESCO itself has no authority to impose changes in national educational policies, connecting and supporting the work of 7,900 schools across the world should have a considerable global impact.

There are a number of reasons why this may not be the case.   One is that of autonomy. As with all UN agency memberships, UNESCO National Commissions set their own goals and priorities and raise their own finances. There are no templates for activity or scales of operation, nor are there anything but miniscule resources available from Paris headquarters. This autonomy also links to the problem of finance – to coordinate the network in terms of an international research dissemination programme that would showcase ASPnet on a permanent and highly visible basis is beyond the reach of the current office (at the time of writing, 2 members of staff!).

Secondly, within any country, the National Coordinator plays a pivotal role – yet such Coordinators may be doing this job on a part-time basis, along with other portfolios. He or she may not have the background or personal networks for dissemination in the media, and the media want headline stories. It is difficult to keep them interested in schools and colleges routinely doing good work, however beneficial for individuals or the society.

A third area related to distinctiveness is that of Education For All (EFA) and the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs). UNESCO is designated as the lead player in the EFA agenda, and therefore wants all of its projects to contribute to this, including ASPnet. Yet ASPnet should be about the *quality* and content of education, not only the access and drop-out figures that are emphasized by EFA, and would have distinct ideas about the meaning of educational quality. In short, it would be important for the efforts of ASPnet not to be subsumed under the EFA/MDG agenda.

ASPnet's real distinctiveness gives rise, ironically, to a final problem. The first of its study themes – the work of the UN--is what makes the network different from many other global links schemes. Yet lately the whole of the UN has come under considerable scrutiny, with a number of governments expressing concern over UN mismanagement and lack of impact. Under these circumstances, national governments may not prioritise UNESCO's projects, particularly in terms of funding and support for the National Commission. Thus, it is important for ASPnet to show that it can raise critical awareness of the work of *all* important international organisations and agencies, which could be significant for the global and economic awareness of future world citizens.

ASPNET AND PEACE EDUCATION

Does ASPnet have a distinctive role in peace education? On a general level, it naturally does, as it is part of the UNESCO's promotion of a 'culture of peace' which should be reflected in both the ethos of the school and in particular initiatives including International Peace Days and The UN Decade for Peace and Non-violence. These events do receive a high profile in some countries, particularly in Latin America. ASPnet students participate in marches and demonstrations for peace, as well as engage in conflict resolution in the community. Across all the respondents in the Global Review process, when asked about future priorities, education for sustainable development, preventive education (HIV/AIDS) and education for youth leadership were all mentioned, and yet peace education and intercultural education remained the top priorities.

The Paris ASPnet office does encourage schools to work in the area of peace, most notably in their Peace Pillar Awards Initiative (PPAI). After a competitive process, awards in the form of a glass sculpture were awarded to 64 schools in 2000 for their outstanding contributions in areas of education for the culture of peace, respect for human rights, democratic participation, understanding, tolerance and solidarity and international peace and security. A publication of 'Best Practice' followed. The Global Review team were somewhat ambivalent about the idea of promoting peace through competition, and were worried about those schools who did not receive awards or recognition in the book; similar concerns were raised about the UNESCO-backed Mondialogo project, especially as this involved on-line work to enter the competition and therefore excluded many of the ASPnet schools. It is a continuing debate as to whether any motivation to initiate and engage in peace work in schools is

acceptable, and certainly the Peace Pillar program was exceptional and inspiring in many ways.

How powerful ASPnet – or any other network - can be across borders and through conflicts is another question, however. Countries that viewed themselves as occupied or oppressed sometimes had a different reaction to peace education initiatives than those that were more secure. Peace can be a very controversial issue: as Schweisfurth (2005) pointed out,

> the more important a topic is, and the greater the imperatives of introducing it – such as peaceful conflict resolution in war zones, or anti-racism in divided societies – the more likely it is to be controversial. Obviously, where teachers might put themselves at risk by covering sensitive topics in a locally-unacceptable way, this is a predicament that needs to be understood. However, discomfort with the prospect of teaching controversial issues is also a factor, and in-service education in this is recommended. (p. 232)

In addition to teacher education, one area for future work might be using the network more for research or 'laboratory' role. For example, educational materials have been trialled in the general UNESCO areas of HIV/AIDS, world hunger, desertification and the Olympic truce. In 2002, following experimentation in 80 countries, a 'Peace Package' for elementary schools was distributed internationally, including a handbook for teachers, activity cards, a poster, a colouring book on Mahatma Gandhi and cartoons for peace. It also included the manifestos that had been produced by children when they wrote appeals to leaders at the UNESCO regional peace festivals in 1995, some of which are very politicised. It is time to update this, but perhaps more urgently it is time to use the network to develop and trial some secondary-level materials. Again, ASPnet's contribution would need to be distinctive, as there are a growing number of peace education materials available. Learning the skills and dispositions to hold governments accountable are of great importance. Peace education within an international organisation requires more than just interpersonal skills and "being nice to each other," and the ASPnet materials need to reflect the work of the UN, critically if necessary.

REFERENCES

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[i] The main work of ASPnet and of their various national organisations can be accessed through the website: www.unesco.org/education/asp. Related websites would be www.ibe.unesco.org and www.timeproject.org.