

Development Education Research Centre

Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning
Practitioner Research Fund Paper 2



A study exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on overseas school partnerships

Alyson Meredith
2022

Supported by



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Published by:

Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning in collaboration with the Development Education Research Centre (DERC), UCL Institute of Education, London, WC1H 0PD. The Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning (CCGL) programme is funded by the British Council and UK aid.

The British Council acted as contractors for this research and gave ethical approval for the research to be conducted. The Development Education Research Centre (DERC) advised on academic content as part of the activities of the CCGL Practitioner Research Fund, which runs from 2019-2022 with the aim of supporting educators in conducting research related to global learning and overseas school partnerships within schools. DERC was contracted by British Council to support educators in the research and writing process.

For further information about Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning, visit:
www.britishcouncil.org/connectingclassrooms

For further information about DERC, visit: www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-derc.

ISBN: 978-1-9996852-5-6

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This paper is written by Alyson Meredith and is a result of her own independent study. The author does not speak on behalf of the British Council and its consortium partners. All secondary sources of information have been acknowledged fully in footnotes and references and a bibliography of all literature used in the work have been provided.

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Abbreviations

CCGL	Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning
BC	British Council
DEGL	Development education and global learning
DFID	Department for International Development
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GL	Global Learning
GE	Global Education
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
KS1	Key Stage 1
KS2	Key Stage 2
KS3	Key Stage 3
MFL	Modern Foreign Languages
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations' Educations, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Acknowledgements

My school for giving me the support to complete this research.

Teachers and colleagues who have been willing to contribute towards the findings through questionnaires and emails.

Local Advisors engaging with schools to get them to participate in the research.

The British Council for allowing me to undertake this study.

My family for supporting me throughout.

Special thanks to Dr Fran Hunt and Dr Nicole Blum from UCL Institute of Education for their continued support and advice throughout the project.

Abstract

The aim of this research was to assess how the Covid-19 global pandemic impacted overseas school partnerships in 2020, through to January 2021. It was undertaken with teachers involved in the British Council Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning (CCGL) programme to provide insight into how and why partnerships have been impacted. It also looks at what these teachers perceive to be the challenges that make it difficult for schools to maintain partnerships in a time of global crisis and provides examples of how schools have overcome these challenges.

Online questionnaires were used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data and were distributed to teachers in UK using a network of British Council Local Advisors. 52 questionnaire responses were collected and analysed to explore the impact of the global pandemic on overseas school partnerships.

Contents

Abbreviations	2
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	6
Rationale	6
Research questions	7
Context	8
Policy context in England	8
International context	8
CCGL and related initiatives supporting overseas school partnerships	9
Covid-19 and schooling globally	10
Covid-19 and schooling in the UK	12
Literature review	13
Overseas partnerships	13
About global learning	16
Methodology	17
Introduction	17
Data collection methods	17
Data analysis	18
Ethical considerations	18
Limitations	18
About the research participants	18
Findings	21
Schooling for participating schools during the Covid-19 pandemic	21
Overseas school partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic	25
Barriers and enablers to overseas school partnership during the Covid-19 pandemic	32
Discussion	39
Conclusion	41
Responding to the research questions	41
Final reflections	42
References	44
APPENDICES	46

Introduction

The importance of global learning (GL) is not a new thing within schools. There is a need to effectively teach our students to become global citizens, fostering their ability to think critically and to develop a voice. One way to achieve this can be through the development of overseas school partnerships. These partnerships potentially give students the opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of the 'wider world', as well as consider the commonalities they have with each other. The Covid-19 global pandemic of 2020 and 2021 has further demonstrated that interdependence and shown how we are all interconnected. This report explores overseas school partnerships through the experience of the Covid pandemic.

Vicky Gough, Advisor to the British Council, describes the benefits of overseas school's partnerships:

At a time when Britain is re-evaluating its position on the world stage, it has never been more important to help our pupils be open to the world and to broaden their horizons. As teachers, educational leaders, and parents, it is vital that we allow the values of internationalism to inform our practice. We believe every young person should have intercultural and international experience. As the UK's cultural relations organisation, the British Council creates opportunities for schools and teachers in the UK and worldwide to connect and work together to share ideas and practices (Gough, n.d.).

The most recent Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning Programme (CCGL) was launched in September 2018 by the British Council. CCGL is a combination of various elements of the previous Connecting Classrooms Programmes and the Global Learning Programme (GLP), bringing global learning and international partnerships together under one programme for the whole of the UK.

This small-scale research is part of the CCGL Global Learning Practitioner Research Fund, an initiative to support research by teachers and school leaders. This paper aims to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has had on overseas school partnerships.

Rationale

Being a teacher who leads a cluster of schools (7 in the UK and 5 in Nepal), as part of the CCGL programme, I have seen the value of overseas school partnerships for both teachers and students. When UK schools largely closed in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I began to question how we could successfully carry on with our pupil collaborative projects and maintain meaningful relationships. I spoke to various teachers, in my role as a British Council Local Advisor and found that there was a real mix in how schools were engaging with their overseas school partners and the reasons for this seemed to be varied. It raised questions for me about how and if schools could maintain successful overseas school partnerships and meaningful pupil collaborative projects during a global crisis.

I chose the focus on school partnerships and the global pandemic for a number of reasons. These include my personal experience in the difficulty of keeping schools engaged during the time of school closure and my concern about how viable virtual partnerships are when working with schools overseas,

without the potential of visits. I wanted to see if through the research we could learn from each other. I am not aware of other research that has been done in this field up to now.

Research questions

This aim of this paper is to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on overseas school partnerships. In order to do this, I developed four research questions:

- How have overseas school partnerships been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What have been the barriers in school partnerships working together during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What factors have enabled partnerships to continue?
- In what ways have schools been able to continue pupil collaboration projects and has the focus changed?

In this paper I will provide some context for global learning in schools and consider the current situation in schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, including a literature review. I will explain the methods used in this study to explore the research paper and some of the limitations to the study. This will be followed by the main findings, using qualitative and quantitative results through the use of tables and graphs, as well as case studies. The final part of this research paper is a discussion of the findings, followed by the conclusions and responses to the research questions.

Context

Policy context in England

While the CCGL programme operates throughout the UK for the purposes of this study, I locate the research within the context of schooling in England because of the sample of respondents. Over the past few decades, school partnerships have become a feature of schooling in England. In the White Paper on International Development (1997), the UK government identified school linking as one of a number of strategies for achieving a 'global dimension' within schools and from 2000 these relationships were fueled by political support and funding from the government e.g., via the Department for International Development (DFID) and now the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

Currently there is limited coverage of international partnerships and global learning within the national curriculum in England. Schools' engagement in these topics tends to take place through externally funded initiatives such as CCGL and links to organisations such as NGOs, Development Education Centres and Church dioceses.

In 2014 the Department for Education (UK Government, 2014) published guidance on promoting 'Fundamental British Values' in schools, with schools being required to embed clear strategies for engagement. These values include an acceptance of difference in faiths and beliefs and an understanding of identifying and combatting discrimination, as well as an opportunity to look at democracy within the UK and compare this to other countries. Many schools in England have chosen to link these values to projects with their overseas school partners.

In 2019 Ofsted (the school inspection body) launched its new curriculum framework, and in addition to overall effectiveness schools will be judged on: quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development and leadership and management. Schools will be judged under three headings: intent, implementation, and impact. According to Bromley (2019):

Curriculum intent is about curriculum design, the emphasis being on how effectively schools provide a broad and balanced curriculum for all students, opening rather than closing doors to future success.

With this shift of focus there is an opportunity for schools to re-imagine their curriculums and engage in meaningful overseas partnerships, providing a broad and balanced curriculum for students.

International context

In September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs show a commitment to tackling pressing challenges faced in the world today:

All 17 goals interconnect, meaning success in one affects success for others. Dealing with the threat of climate change impacts how we manage our fragile natural resources, achieving gender equality or better health helps eradicate poverty, and fostering peace and inclusive societies will reduce inequalities and help economies prosper. In short, this is the greatest chance we have to improve life for future generations (UNDP, n.d.).

The SDGs provide schools with a tangible way to teach global issues and include global learning approaches. Overseas school partnerships often use the SDGs as a framework for learning, with a focus on thinking critically about how we are all interconnected. They provide an opportunity for countries to work with their own priorities and environmental challenges, often considering key concepts of poverty, diversity, interdependence, sustainability, democracy, and human rights as well as peace and conflict.

CCGL and related initiatives supporting overseas school partnerships

There are a number of approaches that support pupils to learn about global issues and develop international school partnerships in England. Historically, the Connecting Classrooms programmes (which have existed for a number of years) focused on school partnerships and the Global Learning Programme (2013-8) helped teachers to improve and increase global learning in schools. The CCGL combines elements from both of these programmes:

Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning (CCGL)

Schools participating in CCGL work with partner schools around the world to develop young people's knowledge, skills, and attitudes about key global issues. The programme aims to help schools enhance global learning within their own context and foster new relationships with other local schools and schools overseas. A key feature of CCGL is that it provides opportunities for pupils in the UK and in overseas partner schools to learn about and take action on global issues (related to the SDGs), as well as develop transferable skills. It also provides teachers and students the opportunity to learn from one another, to share experiences and improve understanding of the lives of others.

The CCGL school partnerships programme consists of six main elements: grants of up to £35,000 to support networks of schools and partnership projects between schools in the UK and schools in developing countries (included within this funding is the opportunity for reciprocal visits); professional development training for teachers and school leaders in the UK and developing countries; online partnerships plus access to teaching and learning resources; school and teacher level accreditation and awards (e.g. International Schools Award); advocacy and awareness raising at policy level; and monitoring and evaluation (British Council, 2018).

CCGL enables schools to work in one-to-one partnerships or as clusters of schools made up of an experienced Cluster Lead, Partner Schools and Network Schools. Participating schools have different roles on the CCGL. A Cluster Lead school is responsible for managing the overall CCGL project for their cluster. A Cluster Coordinator at the lead school is responsible for facilitating and managing the cluster, for using the self-assessment tool to assess the training needs of the schools in the network, and for planning any necessary training. They lead on planning reciprocal visits and other activities as well as managing the finance for the cluster and report writing.

A Partner School is an active member of a cluster working with their own overseas Partner School. A Partner School takes part in either a reciprocal visit or virtual partnership, collaborative projects, celebration events and training. Whilst Partner Schools have the opportunity to take part in reciprocal visits, Network Schools do not. Network Schools are often new to overseas school partnerships and take part in training and collaborative projects.

Within the framework of the CCGL, Cluster Lead Schools and Partner Schools are supported to undertake approved CPD courses suited to their specific school's needs, collaborative pupil projects, celebration events and either reciprocal visits or virtual collaboration.

CCGL schools need to take part in collaborative partnership projects based on at least one of the SDGs.

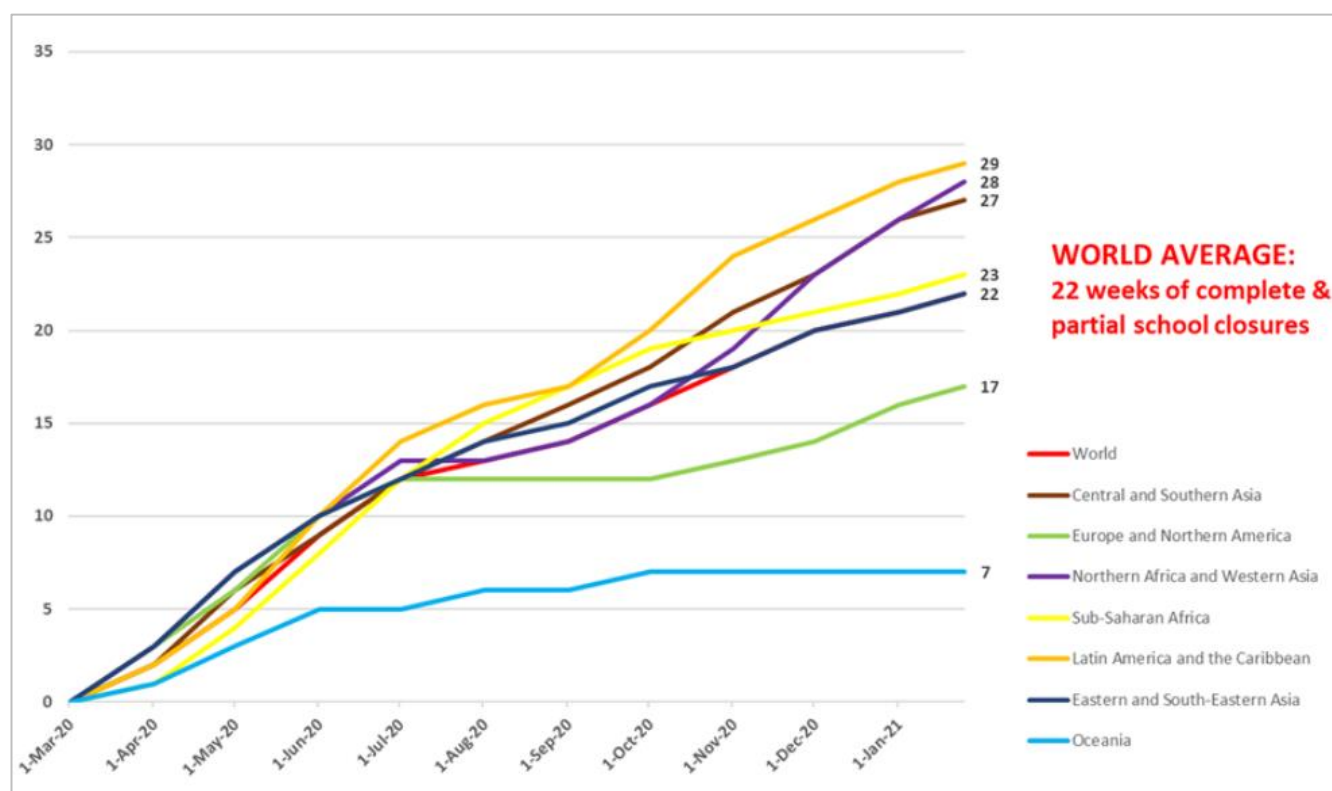
Covid-19 and schooling globally

Education has been dramatically impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting millions of children across the globe. Evidence from a variety of sources, including the UN and UNESCO, point to the fact that closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted around 90% of the world's student population, rising to around 99% in low and low-middle income countries (UN, 2020). From an educational perspective, it could be argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has created one of the largest disruptions to children's education in history. In a policy brief in August 2020, the United Nations said that nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and on all continents had been affected:

Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 90% of the world's student population, up to 99% in low and lower-middle income countries... Covid-19 has made educational disparities even greater for some of the most vulnerable (e.g., those living in poor of rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and displaced persons). They have suggested that learning losses 'threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress' (UN, 2020).

Although research is limited, concern over lost learning for many students in schools is growing. Figure 1 highlights the number of children impacted due to school closures globally from March 2020 until January 2021 (UNESCO, 2021).

Figure 1: Duration of complete and partial school closures in weeks by region (March 20 – Jan 21)



(Source UNESCO 2021)

Research from UNESCO (2020) showed that one year into the pandemic, over half of the world's population were still facing significant disruptions to their education. It was estimated that globally in 31 countries schools faced full school closures and another 48 countries schools faced part-time academic schedules.

Schools were closed for an average of 3.5 months (14 weeks) since the onset of the pandemic. This figure rises to 5.5 months (22 weeks) – equivalent to two-thirds of an academic year – when localised school closures are taken into account (UNESCO, 2020).

With regard to data from countries involved in overseas school partnerships, Table 1 maps the approximate length of overseas school closures (UNESCO Statistics, 2021). This data might change by region, as UNESCO states:

It becomes evident that governments have made efforts to shift away from nation-wide closures as the pandemic progressed (UNESCO, 2020).

Table 1: Approximate length of overseas schools' closures by country (Mar 2020 – Mar 2021)

Country	FULL closures (weeks)	PARTIAL closures (weeks) (i.e., children in some areas of the country were able to access education)
Egypt	16	4
Ethiopia	21	9
Ghana	10	30
Sierra Leone	11	3
Kenya	28	9
Malawi	18	8
Nepal	26	26
Uganda	37	13
Pakistan	23	11
South Africa	15	14
Tanzania	No data provided	No data provided
Zambia	8	10

(Source, UNESCO, 2021)

Covid-19 and schooling in the UK

Within the UK, schools have faced a number of similar pressures. During the first lockdown (March-July 2020) schools were largely closed and teachers had to rapidly adapt to new ways of teaching as well as providing support to families in need. Schools faced further closure for the majority of students from January 2021-March 2021.

During lockdowns, the UK government required teaching and learning to take place online where the education provided was to be the equivalent in length to the core teaching pupils would receive in school and this was to include recorded or lived direct teaching time (as a minimum KS1: 3 hours on average, with less for younger children, KS2: 4 hours a day, KS3: 5 hours a day) (UK Government, 2021). The introduction of keyworker provision alongside online teaching added to workloads for teachers and school leaders.

Many schools used a 'recovery curriculum' in autumn 2020, enabling students to settle back into positive learning habits, rebuild transferable skills and catch up on missed learning in core subjects.

Literature review

Overseas partnerships

About school partnerships

School partnerships are collaborations between schools, often operating across geographical borders and / or socio-economic differences. An overseas school partnership provides an authentic way for teachers and students to develop meaningful relationships that can engage them in global themes in a sustained and experimental way, through collaborative projects that can enable students to develop critical thinking and take action.

Overseas partnerships are not a new thing; but have existed for many years. According to Disney (2008) there has been a long tradition of student exchange visits in secondary education. She states that:

In the immediate post war years, these exchanges were seen as a significant way to encourage European harmony and reconciliation and were often organised by language departments (Disney, 2008: 37).

Since then, the purpose and format of overseas school partnerships has changed.

Overseas school partnerships take a variety of forms and often look very different in different schools. For some it forms an integral part of their curriculum whilst for others its focus is limited to a certain subject or project.

Who schools chose to partner with is likely to be based on a number of factors. Some schools form links based on relationships built up over many years, some have a compatible religious focus. When developing an overseas partnership Martin (2005: 3) suggests:

Teachers need to feel motivated on a personal level to take part in a school link. In addition, teachers' world view – their assumptions, beliefs, and values – will have a profound impact on that link.

Key debates about school partnerships

Literature highlights various factors that are important to school partnerships.

According to Disney (2008) equality in partnerships, enabling both schools to negotiate their own needs and benefits, is important. This is a move away from what Bourn (2014) identifies as the historical focus on charitable giving. It can be argued that, despite a move away from a charity mentality, many schools involved in overseas partnerships with schools in the global south are faced with the dilemma of whether to support schools financially where there is need. Whilst some schools see this as a positive way to 'take action' and address some of the issues of poverty and access to education in their overseas partner country others arguably, at times, feel a pressure to do so. As Martin (2005: 4) states:

Challenging the practice of giving aid is an extremely sensitive area. Firstly, there is enormous resistance in schools where this questions established practice which makes one 'feel that you are doing something good' (UKOWLA, 2006). Secondly, there is some evidence to suggest that 'Southern schools regularly see resource gain as one of the positive expectations and results of a school link' (Fricke, 2006). In other words, the current global political and economic systems support aid as a response to poverty and it takes a certain amount of courage, underpinned by strong principles, to challenge this particular status quo.

She considers what can be achieved by overseas school partnerships, but also provides evidence that teachers in her study were often dismayed at what children appeared to be learning from their school links, showing it to possibly have a negative impact through stereotyping (Martin, 2005). In my view, the decision of which SDG schools choose to focus on can have an impact on this kind of stereotyping - unless the teaching around it is done thoughtfully.

The challenge of inequality in relationships is highlighted in the research paper by Leonard (2012) where she mentions that:

The reality is that the Southern and Northern parties in a link are not equal in material terms... material differences (and hence inequalities and injustices) may exist between other schools that work collaboratively (Leonard, 2012: 37)

Additionally, Leonard (2012) thinks that some links can increase local inequalities in the south. For example, if one overseas school gains support through participation in programmes others may not, and such benefits are not spread. In addition, she suggests a major controversial aspect of school linking is the risk of dependency, particularly when funds are transferred. This is supported by Bourn when he says:

Linking experiences can reinforce notions of dependency and paternalism, increasing support for more charitable based approaches such as raising money for infrastructure development and resources (Bourn, 2014: 15).

He also states that there are concerns about unequal power relations in overseas school partnerships.

Research on barriers and enablers to school partnerships

There is various research considering the barriers and enablers for successful overseas school partnerships. Here I consider some of the main areas linked to this research paper.

Length of partnership and personal relationships: Leonard (2012) suggests the depth of friendship established by those within the partnership can support the partnership. She suggests that this factor may escape measurement when efforts are made to evaluate links as it is a non-quantifiable outcome. Similarly, Sizmur et al (2011:70) note the importance of relationships:

Whilst the culture of the Partner School obviously had a significant effect, perhaps an even greater factor affecting the success was the relationship that the UK teachers have with individual teachers at the Partner School.

In an article from The Guardian, a teacher from a school in Nottingham said that:

We talk about connecting schools, but it's really about connecting people. Find someone at the other end who's just as passionate as you are and take it from there (Picardo, 2021).

These relationships can obviously only come over time and this suggests that length of partnership does have an impact on overseas school partnerships.

Staff turnover: There is the potential with high turnover of UK staff, and increasing pressure on teachers, that an overseas school partnership may struggle.

Access to technology: Since the start of the Covid pandemic, there has been a push by the British Council for schools to adapt to online partnerships where possible. Whilst this can be of huge benefit for some partnerships, it assumes access to necessary equipment and the internet for the overseas school partners. As Leonard states:

The reality is that the Southern and Northern parties in a link are not equal in material terms; this truism lies at the heart of most South-North links... material differences (and hence inequalities and injustices) may exist between other schools that work collaboratively (Leonard, 2012: 37).

Depending on the location of overseas school partnerships, access to online platforms and the internet is limited. Where this is the case, it can act as a barrier for schools both in the UK and overseas.

Impacts of school partnerships

The impact of school partnerships varies from one UK educational setting to the next and the experience for overseas partner schools also varies greatly. Indeed, the impact of overseas school partnerships can be difficult to ascertain:

The tensions and contradictions within school linking and the relationship to global learning needs greater debate. All too often because of the pressures of funders and the need to demonstrate impact within the school, evaluations and studies in this area have tended to emphasise the positive contributions linking has made to a school, rather than open up the dilemmas and challenges many of them have faced (Bourn, 2014: 15).

One of the benefits of overseas partnerships is the opportunity to learn from one another, working together to tackle key issues faced around the world. For most it is based on mutual respect and a desire to widen the horizons of both educators and students.

Martin (2005) talks about one of the benefits of intercultural learning - it offers the opportunity to challenge prejudices amongst both teachers and pupils and often helps them to reassess world views. However, she also talks about it being a mistake to assume that intercultural contact will automatically lead to this type of learning. In addition to this she says that school linking can be controversial because of the varying demands of educational, political, and personal agendas. This could arguably be a barrier for some taking part in overseas school partnerships with conflicting viewpoints and agendas within a school.

Insights by educational practitioners and British Council staff suggest evidence of the positive effects overseas partnerships can have. Cook and Rolfe describe that:

Through an international partnership, the pupils get to apply what they learn in the class in a real-world context; it personalises their learning (Cook and Rolfe, 2018).

They go on to say that there is a growing agreement that schools should be communicating about values, life skills and attitudes, which will help them to be confident citizens in our increasingly global world.

About global learning

While global learning is not the focus of this report, it has strong links with school partnerships and therefore this section provides context to the work schools do.

Development Education and Global Learning (DEGL) is defined by DFID (2018) as:

Education that aims to inform learners about global issues, such as poverty, climate change, and the rationale for UK aid, and to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to live and work in a globalised economy and take action on sustainable development (DFID, 2018).

Approaches to global learning vary and there are a range of terms used to describe teaching and learning about global issues, which include: global education, development education, global citizenship education, as well as global learning.

Global learning focuses on equipping young people to live and work in an interconnected global society, providing them with the knowledge, skills, and values to support them in doing this. Bourn (2014) suggests a pedagogy of development education could underpin a global learning approach:

Deepening an understanding of different viewpoints and perspectives on development and global poverty; encouraging a critical reflection of teachers' and pupils' own perceptions of development, aid, and poverty; promoting an emphasis on learning that contextualises development and poverty themes with historical, cultural, and social traditions and frameworks of social justice (Bourn, 2014: 21).

What is clear when looking at global learning is that approaches are adapted to meet the learners' needs within particular contexts.

Methodology

Introduction

This research is a small-scale study into teachers' and schools' experiences with their CCGL overseas school partnerships as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It will examine specifically if and how their overseas school partnerships have been impacted by the pandemic.

Data collection methods

For the purposes of this research, data was collected from schools within the UK that have overseas Partner Schools in a variety of countries. The main data collection method was a questionnaire, through which I asked a series of quantitative qualitative questions (see Appendix). The focus of the questionnaires was on how overseas partnerships were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. It considered partnerships before the Covid-19 pandemic, and during the pandemic, covering topics such as enablers, challenges, and communication.

The questionnaire was set up and administered via Microsoft Forms. I chose online questionnaires because it was the most efficient way to reach a range of schools across the country. One of the issues with this was not being able to control how questionnaires were completed, with some questionnaire respondents responding on behalf of a cluster rather than their individual school.

In order to access educators working in schools with overseas partnerships, I wrote an email describing the research and including the URL link to the questionnaire. This email was distributed through the network of CCGL Local Advisors who work directly with schools who are part of the CCGL programme. Emails were sent to CCGL Local Advisors in December 2020 and January 2021, asking them to forward the email to the CCGL Cluster Leads. Cluster Leads were asked to forward the email to schools in their local network. Additionally, I sent emails to schools that I directly work with (in my role as a BC Local Advisor) along with the schools in my own CCGL cluster.

I had hoped initially that I would receive more questionnaire responses. However, due to a second country-wide Covid-19 'lockdown', and a return to remote learning for the majority of students, pressures on teachers increased and probably resulted in a reduced number of responses.

In total, by the end of January 2021, 52 completed questionnaires had been received and it is these responses that provide the base for this research. Information about the participants can be found in the 'About the research participants' section (page 18).

Both primary and secondary schools across the UK were approached to participate in the research. In order to give a reliable result with a rich balance of breadth to this small-scale study, it was anticipated that responses from between 30-40 schools would be needed.

Data analysis

The data gathered through Microsoft Forms was downloaded into Excel where it was cleaned and used for descriptive analysis. Using Excel, tables and graphs were created to show the responses. Qualitative responses were gathered and included to provide a more in-depth insight in responding to the research focus.

Ethical considerations

Within this research, a number of ethical considerations had to be taken into consideration. It was decided that participants should provide anonymous responses and respondents were given the option of whether to write their schools name (in order to identify location and type of school). I am not using school names in this report.

Information about the ethics was provided within the online questionnaire. The online questionnaire stated: *'To confirm all responses will be confidential and anonymised; no-one apart from me will see the individual data responses and it will be stored securely. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw. It should take around 10 minutes to complete.'*

Limitations

This is a small-scale study focusing on schools involved in the British Council CCGL programme only. Unfortunately, we only got responses from schools in England, so the perspective of schools from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are not included. Similarly, it would have been useful to have input from overseas Partner Schools looking at their perspective and how they feel the partnership has been impacted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, though this was not feasible with time constraints.

It would have been good to get more responses.

There were a small number of schools who were relatively new to partnerships and as such, some of the data differences may be as a result of this rather than a direct relation to Covid-19.

About the research participants

Participants who responded to the questionnaire were from schools in England, apart from one from Wales, and one overseas Partner School. All participants are taking part in the British Council CCGL overseas partnership programme. Table 2 shows that respondents come from a mixture of Cluster Lead schools, Partner Schools, and a Local Advisor (see page 9 for more information about the roles). The majority of responses are from Cluster Lead schools, meaning those schools oversee a range of partnerships and are generally more experienced at working on overseas partnerships. Each school works with a different Partner School overseas, so although some responses may be from schools in the same cluster, their experiences will be different.

Table 2: CCGL status of questionnaire respondents

Type of CCGL involvement	Number of questionnaire responses
Cluster Lead school	33
Partner Schools	19
Local Advisor	1
Total	52

Table 3 shows a breakdown of the type of schools from the questionnaire respondents. The large majority of responses were from primary schools. The 'other' is made up from, 1 Local Advisor, 1 Learning Trust (consisting of 19 schools, mixed Primary and Secondary), 1 group of schools, mixed primary/secondary.

Table 3: Type of school of questionnaire respondents

Type of School	Number of questionnaire responses
Primary ¹	42
Secondary	5
Mixed primary and secondary	4
Other	1
Total	52

¹ Including 3 SEND schools

Figure 2 shows schools participating in the study had partners in a variety of overseas countries, with higher numbers in Nepal, Kenya, Tanzania, and Sierra Leone

Figure 2: Location of overseas Partner Schools (N= 52)

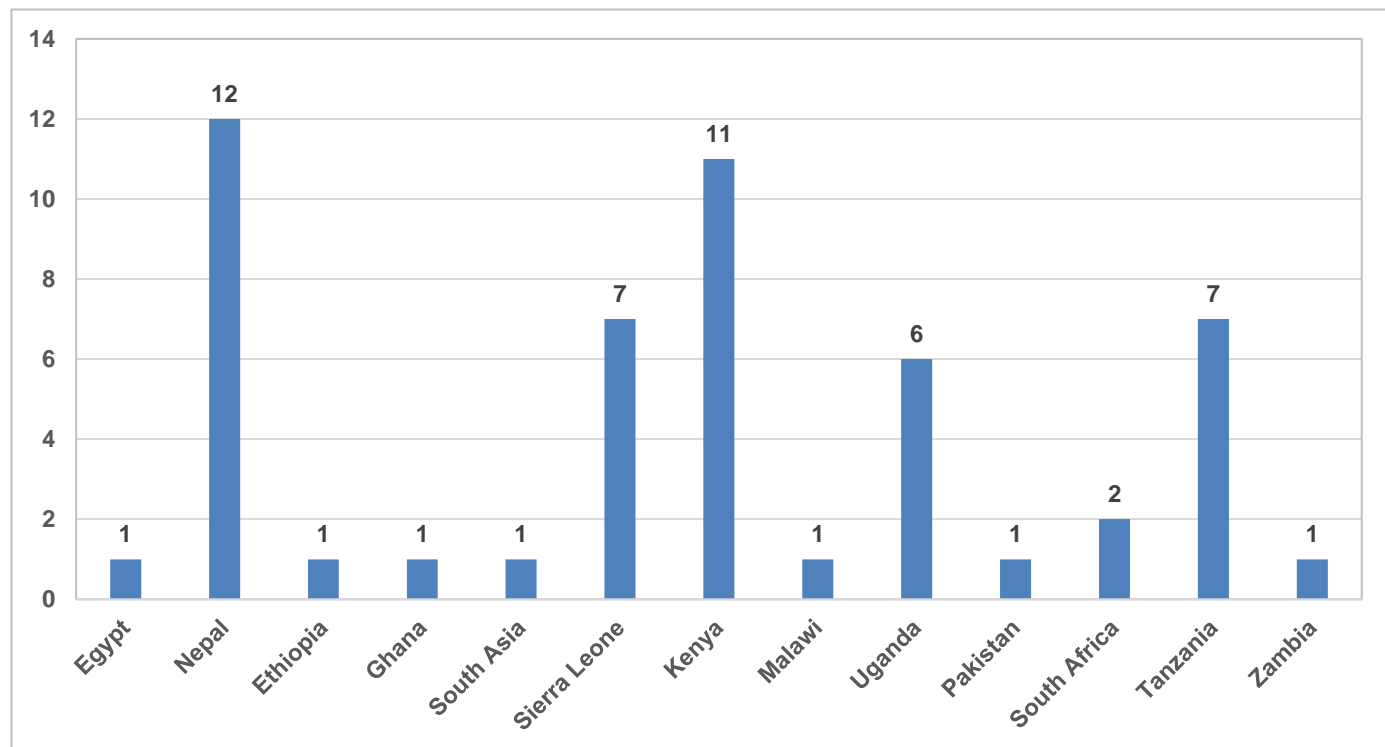
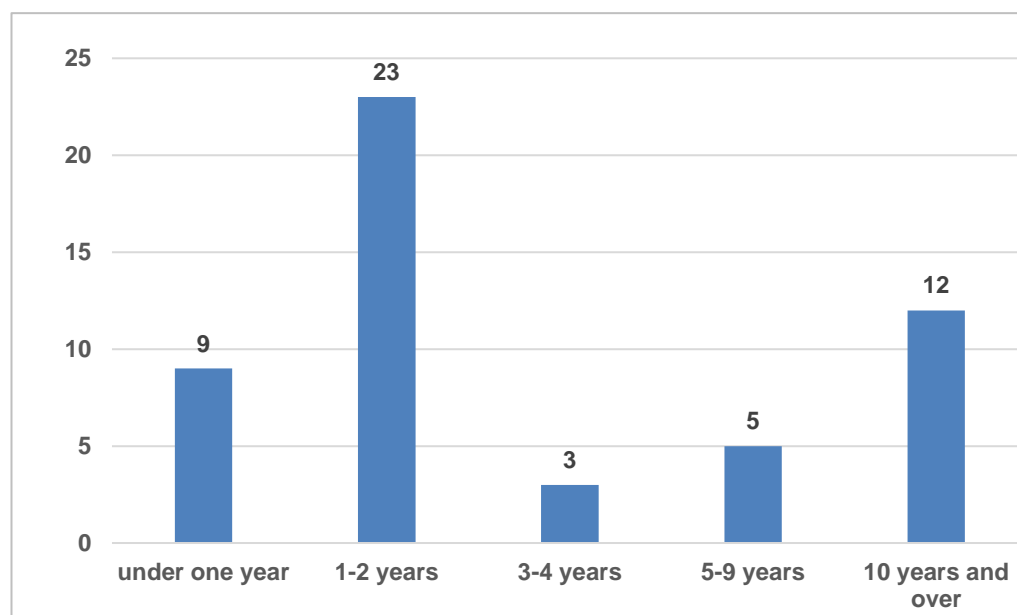


Figure 3 shows the duration of overseas school partnerships ranging from under 1 year to over 10 years.

Figure 3: Duration of overseas school partnership (N=52)



Findings

In this section I explore my findings from the online questionnaire and relate these to academic literature where necessary. I focus on these areas which relate to the research questions:

- Schooling during the Covid-19 pandemic
- The nature of overseas school partnerships
- Collaborative projects during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Barriers and enablers

Schooling for participating schools during the Covid-19 pandemic

In this section I provide an overview of schooling in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and overseas school partnerships. I will look specifically at school closures and access to teaching and learning for students in both the UK and overseas Partner Schools.

School closures in participating UK schools

Figure 4 shows that the majority of responding schools in the UK were closed for between three to six months between March 2020 and January 2021. Though some children still attended if they were eligible for a school place due to parents having key worker status.

Figure 4: Length of UK school closure for the majority of students (Mar 2020 - Jan 2021) (N=52)

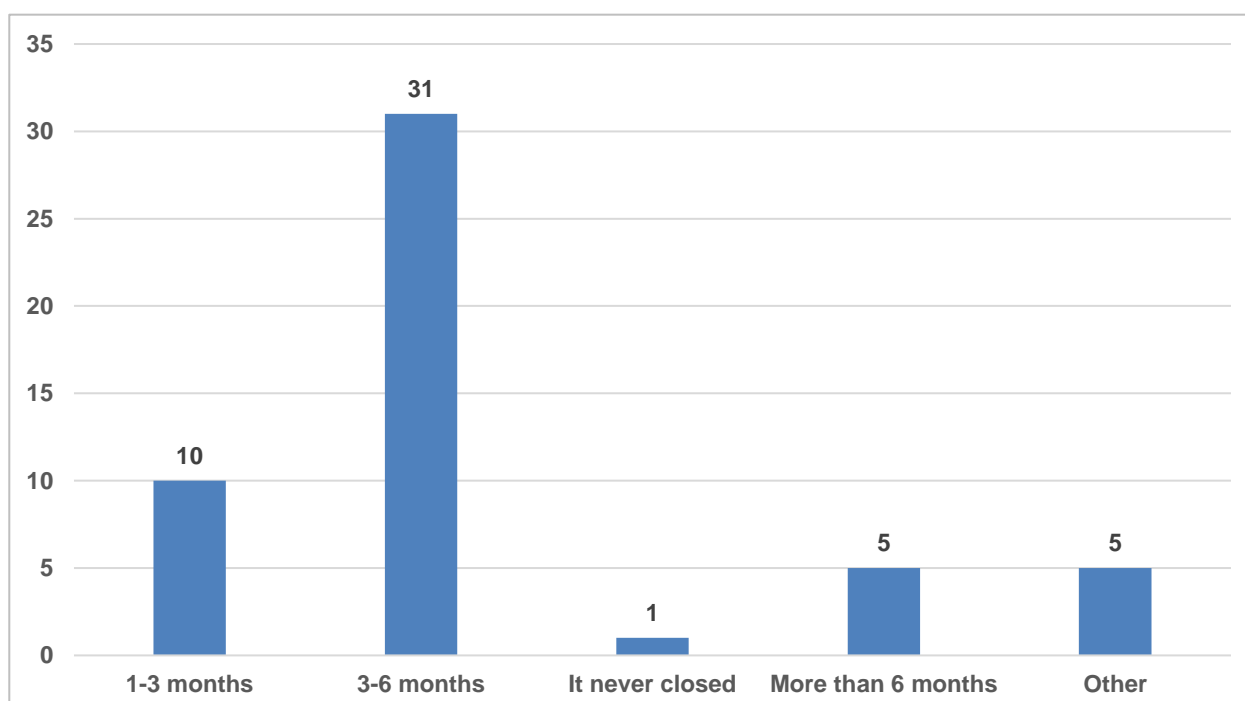
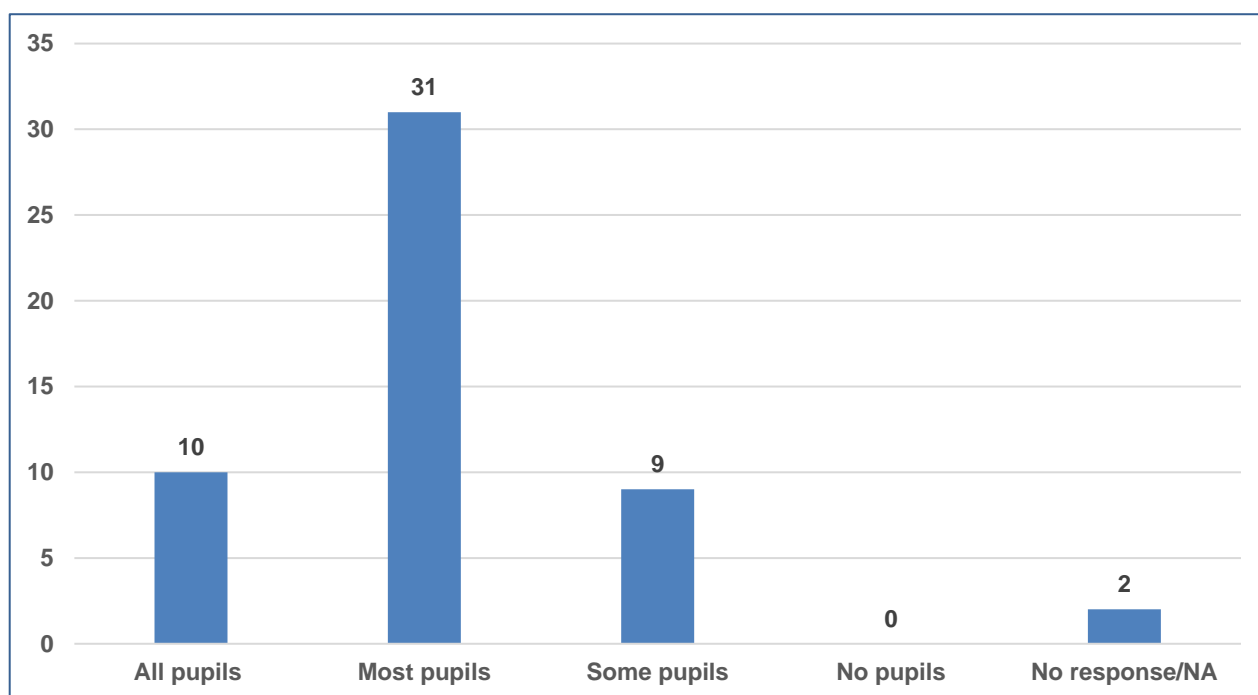


Figure 5 shows that despite school closures, the majority of students in participating schools in the UK were still able to take part in some form of teaching and learning. It is important to note though, that although students were able to access teaching and learning in the UK, this does not mean that all students engaged with this. In some UK schools (particularly at primary level) during school closures, the curriculum focus changed to concentrate on the core subjects of English and Mathematics.

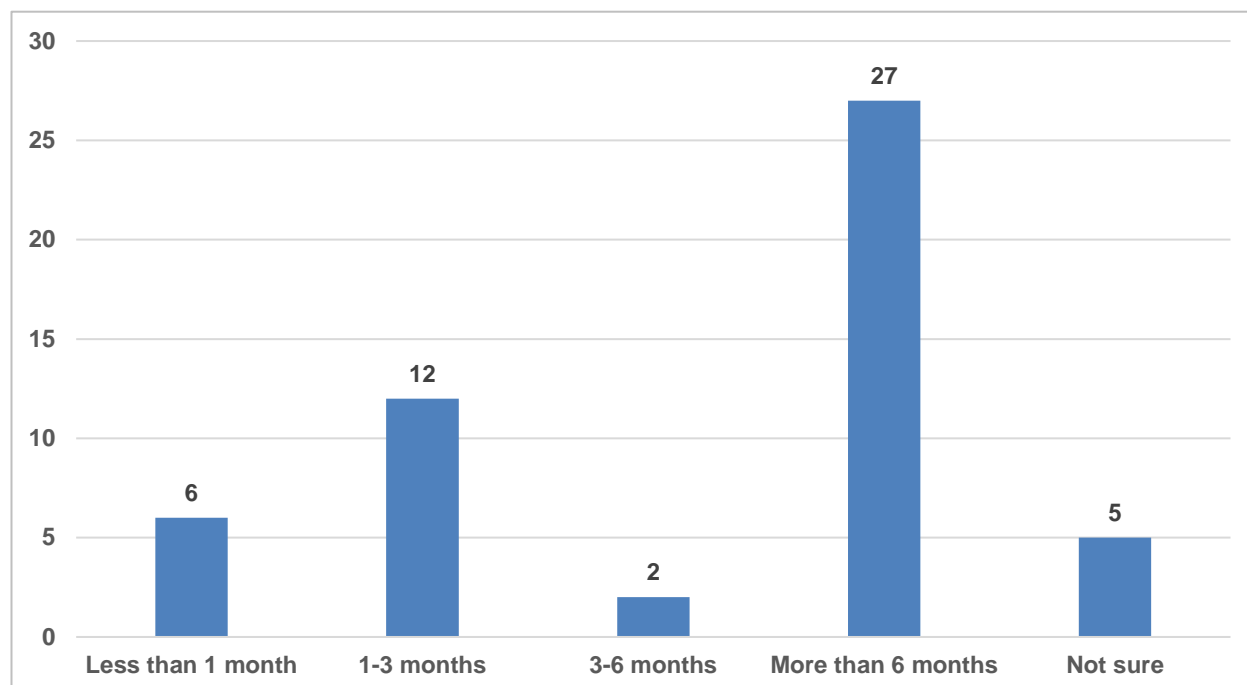
Figure 5: Access to teaching and learning for UK pupils during school closures for the majority of students (Mar 2020 - Jan 2021) (N=52)



School closures in overseas Partner Schools

Questionnaire responses on school closures and access to education are somewhat different for overseas Partner Schools. Figure 6 shows questionnaire respondents' understandings of the school closures faced by their overseas Partner Schools. According to these results, the majority of schools were closed for over 6 months (52%) or between 3-6 months (21.5%).

Figure 6: Length of school closures for overseas Partner Schools (Mar 2020 - Jan 2021) (N=52)



The data in Figure 6 tallies with data from UNESCO statistics (Table 1). Variations between UNESCO data and questionnaire respondents may be because UK partners were unsure of exact information, or because in some countries access to schooling varied.

Table 3 suggests that (according to UK respondents) most students in overseas partner schools were not able to access teaching and learning during the period March 2020 and January 2021.

Table 3: Questionnaire responses on access to teaching and learning for overseas school partners, during school closures (Mar 2020 - Jan 2021)

Access to teaching and learning during school closure	Number of schools	Percentage
All pupils	0	0%
Most pupils	4	8%
Some pupils	9	18%
Few pupils	16	31%

No pupils	10	20%
Not sure	12	23%
Total	51	

The evidence from the questionnaires shows that in both the UK and overseas partnership schools the quantity and quality of teaching and learning for many, or most students, was impacted. Moreover, it will have taken time for teachers to adapt to new forms of teaching and to learn how to use new online programmes. In some instances, teachers and pupils might lack access to online technology.

Overseas school partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic

In this section I will consider the nature of overseas school partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic and whether the focus has shifted away from the completion of collaborative projects.

Implications of Covid-19 and school closures on school partnerships

Schooling in lockdown has arguably provided challenges as well as opportunities for overseas school partnerships. The challenge of school closures is evident through the responses shown from Page 21-24. This in turn would have particular implications for overseas school partnerships.

In the UK during school closures, a 'recovery' curriculum meant a focus on English and Mathematics for most primary pupils, with less whole school or non-core related activities. In overseas partner schools, school closures meant a lack of teaching and learning for many pupils. It is unlikely there was a focus on overseas school partnerships for many during this time.

Indeed, evidence gathered from respondents' shows that 69% of respondents cited school closures as one of the main challenges faced when working with their overseas Partner School since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 10).

In qualitative responses, questionnaire respondents pointed to school closures being a major contributing factor that has impacted their overseas school partnerships in some schools:

It has completely stalled the partnership. The schools in Nepal have been closed for the majority of the pandemic and this has been detrimental.

It has simply been the issue of full school closures in Uganda, alongside huge demands on our staff in school.

This was not the case for all respondents. Some respondents suggested that school closures had given UK teachers more time to plan and prepare for collaborative projects, hopefully in turn having a positive impact on their overseas school partnership.

Type of partnership activity during the Covid-19 pandemic

All partnership schools communicated during the Covid-19 pandemic, but evidence suggests that for some the nature of the communication shifted. Figure 7 shows responses to questions about how UK schools communicated with their overseas Partner Schools before and during the pandemic. It shows that communication via email decreased in the six months after the Covid-19 pandemic began, as did the use of the postal service and student interaction. The number of questionnaire respondents using WhatsApp did not change, however the frequency did. The number of respondents using Facebook to communicate more frequently increased. It is evident from the questionnaire respondents that although communication has decreased in several areas, the use of Zoom and resulting face to face conversation between teachers actually increased. That said, video calling between students decreased.

Figure 7: Communication between schools from the 6 months prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and during the pandemic (Mar 2020 - Jan 2021) (N=51)

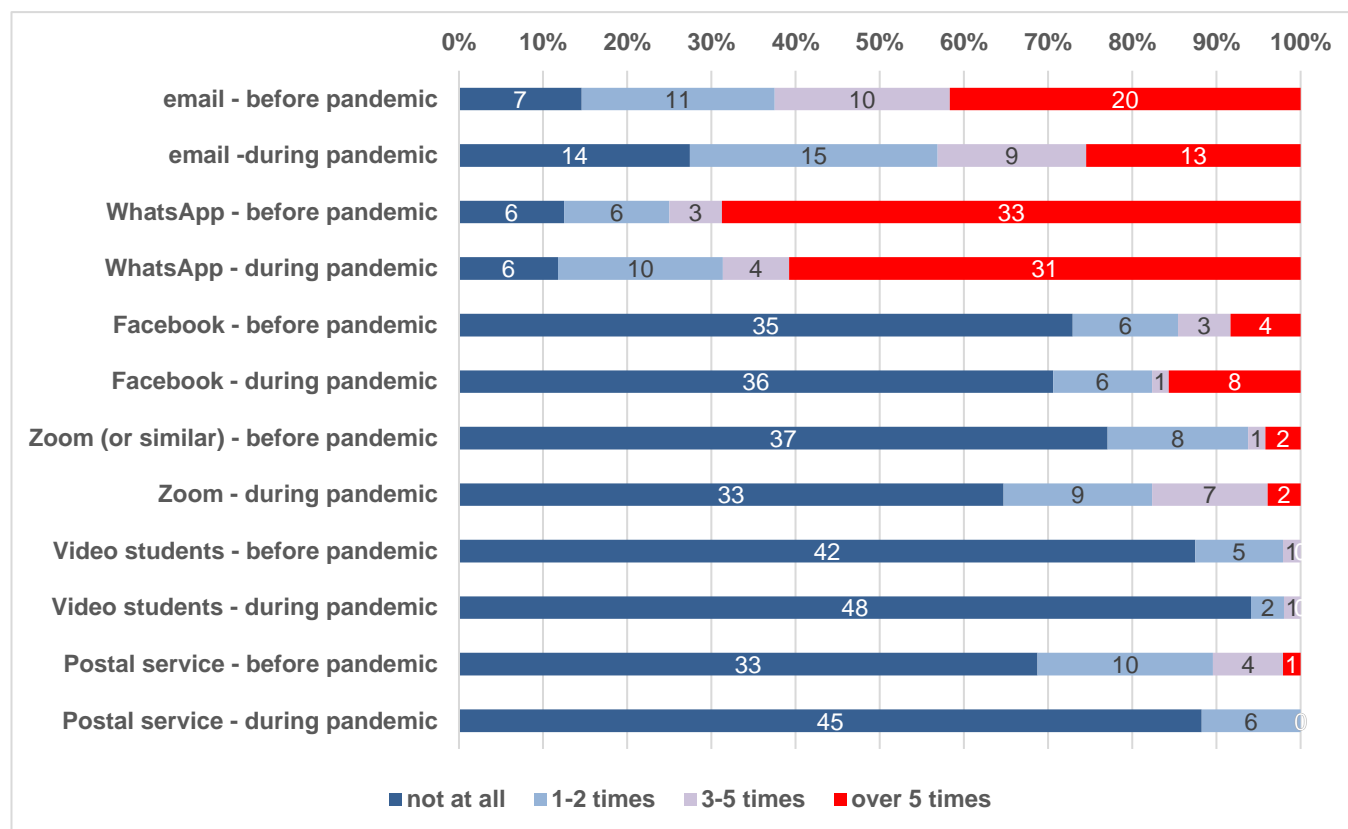


Table 4 shows the paired mean comparison for the various forms of communication both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, email and WhatsApp are the most prevalent forms of communication. As with Figure 7, it highlights that the only forms of communication that increased during the Covid-19 pandemic were the use of Zoom and Facebook.

Table 4: Paired mean comparison of communication type before and during the pandemic (N=47)

	Mean before pandemic	Mean during pandemic
Email exchange	1.91	1.30
WhatsApp communication	2.30	2.19
Facebook communication	0.51	0.60
Zoom (or similar)	0.34	0.55
Video call between students	0.15	0.09
Postal service	0.45	0.13

(Scale 0= not at all, 1 = 1-2 times, 2=3-5 times, 3=over 5 times)

For some, the focus and nature of communication changed during the pandemic. It often became more personal, with a focus on relationships and supporting each other, rather than collaborative pupil projects and training. Some schools indicated WhatsApp was useful in helping strong friendships and communication with their overseas Partner Schools. One respondent stated:

Official communication with our Partner School has been challenged by closures / partial opening and asynchronous school holidays however personal communication between myself and my SA contact has increased as we began to share daily Bible verses, prayers, and encouragements during lockdown.

Within my own cluster of schools, we organised several Zoom meetings between teachers in both the UK and Nepal. The aim of these were simply to check in with one another and talk about how we were all doing. It was insightful to gain an understanding of what was happening in schools both in the UK and Nepal and it has strengthened relationships between the teachers. Our use of WhatsApp also increased with regular conversations encouraging one another.

Qualitative questionnaire responses show that there were other forms of communication used by schools including other online platforms such as Google classroom, Microsoft Teams and ePals as well as sharing project work on school websites. Respondents stated:

The use of Zoom has really increased between schools, and they are using virtual platforms such as Google Schools and ePals to effectively plan school projects.

We have been able to share links to videos posted on our school website that were shared with parents to replace in-school concerts, harvest festivals, nativities etc.

One respondent said that although their pupil projects were on hold, students had still been able to take part in live Zoom sessions with their overseas Partner Schools.

Arguably the importance of the overseas partnership during the pandemic changed for some schools and the focus became more about catering for and looking after their own students. For example:

The priority and focus has shifted to managing 'safety' at school in terms of reducing risks and thoughts haven't focused on life outside our school community.

The focus in both schools has had to be the safety and well-being of the children and staff however, as a school, we have tried not to lose sight of the bigger picture and our global perspective.

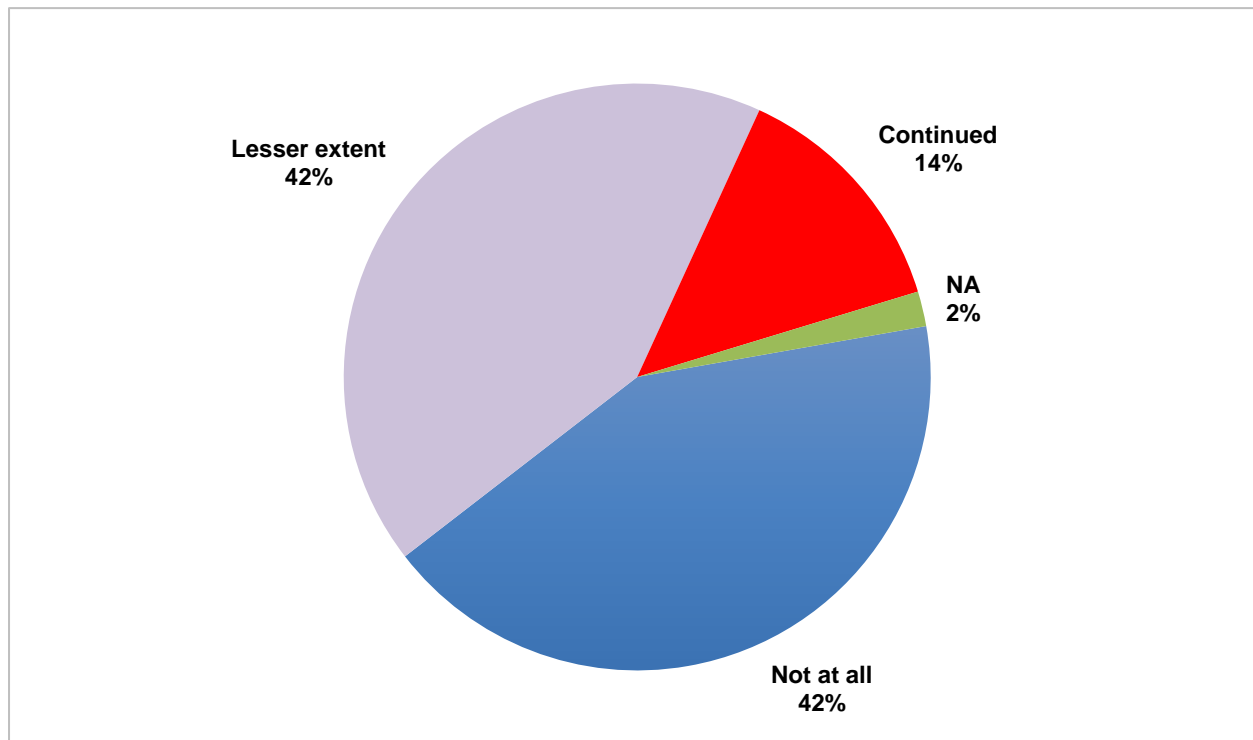
Additionally, a few schools talked about the nature of their partnership changing, from a focus on CCGL collaborative projects to supporting the immediate needs of the students in their overseas partner schools. This included schools getting involved in fundraising activities, such as the provision of food for orphan children, and finding ways to improve online communication.

Collaborative projects during the Covid-19 pandemic

In this section I will consider if CCGL pupil collaborative projects were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and provide two cases where schools adapted their original CCGL pupil collaborative projects, enabling them to continue to work effectively together.

From respondents it is clear that pupil collaborative projects were impacted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Figure 8 shows that only 14% of respondents were able to continue their collaborative projects as planned, with 42% of partnerships not able to work on their collaborative projects at all (8% these schools had previously completed their projects). Meaning about a third of schools were unable to work on pupil collaborative projects during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 8: Extent to which planned pupil collaborative projects continued during the pandemic (N: 52)



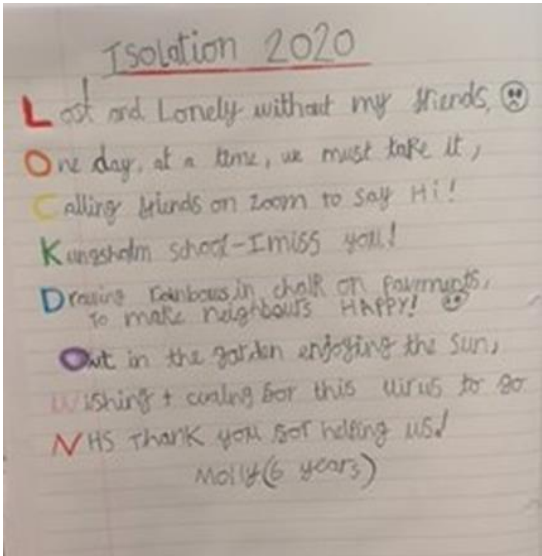

One respondent said that the Covid-19 pandemic had put their collaboration work almost a year behind schedule, but they were now finding ways to work together, albeit a little bit slower.

For some schools, the Covid-19 pandemic has meant a change of focus of their pupil collaborative projects. This included a new focus on reading and writing in line with new priorities at their own school (two schools) and 'life in lockdown' projects.

I will now provide some examples of collaborative projects during lockdown.

Collaborative project: Example one

Having started a project linked to SDG3 'Good health and well-being', my own cluster was able to adapt the planned projects and link them to children's lockdown experiences and mental-health and well-being. Although not all schools within the cluster were able to take part, we were able to share these with all Partner Schools and help keep the partnership and pupil collaborative projects going. We exchanged videos and poems under the theme of life in lockdown. Some of the work completed by the students in our partnership was shared with the British Council and used in the teaching resource 'Life in a pandemic' (British Council, 2020). Examples of this to follow:

 <p><u>Isolation 2020</u> Lost and Lonely without my friends 😞 One day, at a time, we must take it, Calling friends on zoom to say Hi! Kingsholm school - I miss you! Drawing rainbows in chalk on pavements, to make neighbours HAPPY! 😊 Out in the garden enjoying the sun, Wishing + waiting for this virus to go NHS THANK YOU for helping us! Molly (6 years)</p>	<p>Lost and lonely without my friends. One day at a time, we must take it. Calling friends on zoom, to say Hi! School I miss you! Drawing rainbows in chalk on pavements, To make our neighbours HAPPY! Out in the garden enjoying the sun. Wishing and waiting for this virus to go NHS thank you for helping us (Student, UK).</p>
 <p>Stay Home, Stay Strong.</p>	<p>In a time of crisis let's motivate ourselves and stay positive. Let's explore our new version of ourselves, Let's fight against the virus together, Let's again make this planet a better place to live, Stay home, Stay safe (Student, Nepal)</p>

Our private Facebook group page was also used to share work that the students had been doing at their schools. Although school closures meant that this work was not shared between all students, it helped us to feel connected.

Collaborative project: example two (qualitative questionnaire response)

The second example of a collaborative project is taken from a UK - Kenya partnership project. The project, based around SDG4 Quality Education, was put on hold due to school closures. However, the schools continued to complete various projects to keep the excitement of the partnership alive. Activities included a 'Big Draw' where both schools drew pictures based around what climate change and endangered animals meant to them. In addition to this, the schools drew maps of their local areas to exchange with each other and have even taken part in 'The Great Bird Watch' where both schools drew local birds for each to compare. Recently they have managed successful video calls to schools in Kenya

where students were given an opportunity to ask questions about climate. The teacher in the UK said that they even trialed a story time.

What is really impressive here is the fact that some students both in the UK and in Kenya were able to do these activities remotely. One school responded:

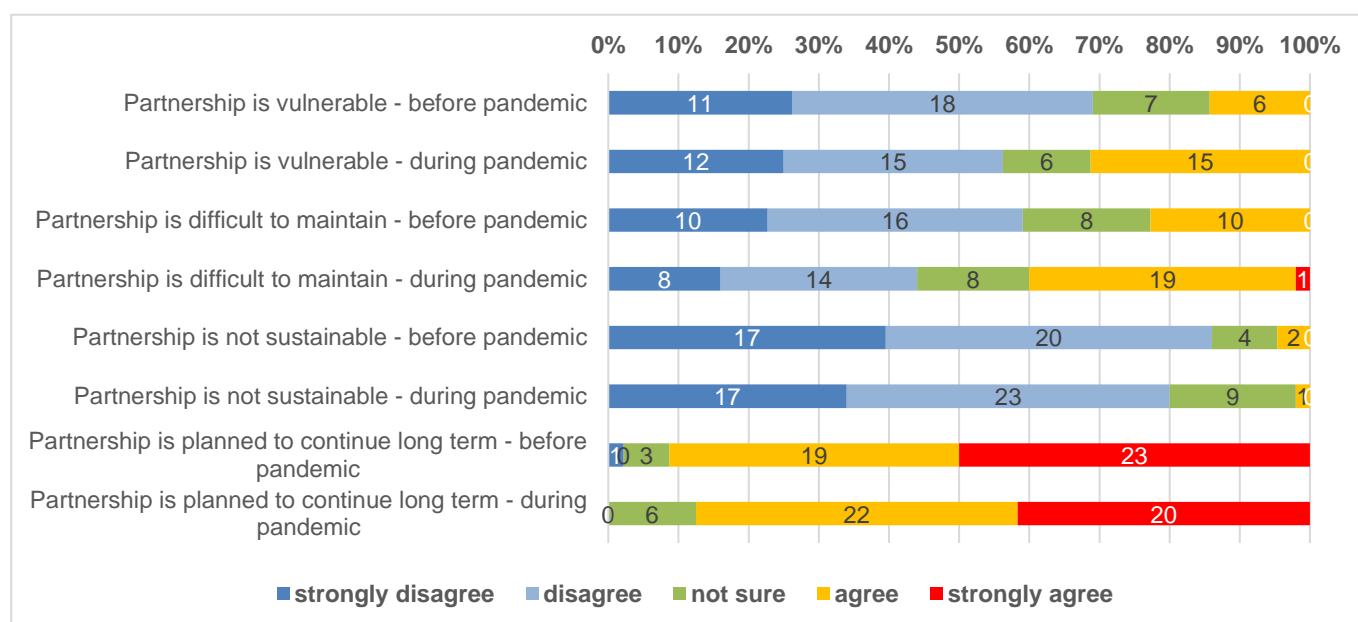
It has caused us to think flexibly and also has enabled us to think of more creative ways to meet our goals. It has also emphasised the need to use money to buy technology to include all learners.

Perceptions of the partnership before and during Covid-19 pandemic

Participants responded to a number of questions about their perceptions of the partnership before the pandemic and during the pandemic.

Figure 9 shows varied responses when looking at vulnerability and sustainability before and during the 6 months after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is evident from questionnaire responses that a number of respondents felt their partnership was vulnerable during the 6 months after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is a similar picture when looking at how schools felt in relation to how difficult the overseas school partnerships were to maintain. There was not a big shift in perceptions of sustainability, but what is not clear from the data is what schools understand by ‘sustainability’, and whether schools see this as sustainability for the duration of the project, or sustainability long term (or even environmentally sustainable).

Figure 9: Respondents’ perceptions of vulnerability and sustainability of partnership before and during Covid-19 pandemic



Reciprocal visits

For many schools taking part in the CCGL, reciprocal visits are an important element. All international travel was suspended under the Covid-19 pandemic and no visits could take place. The evidence suggests that the restrictions to international travel have had a negative impact on their overseas school partnerships. One Cluster Lead school highlights the impact of restricted travel within their own cluster and stated:

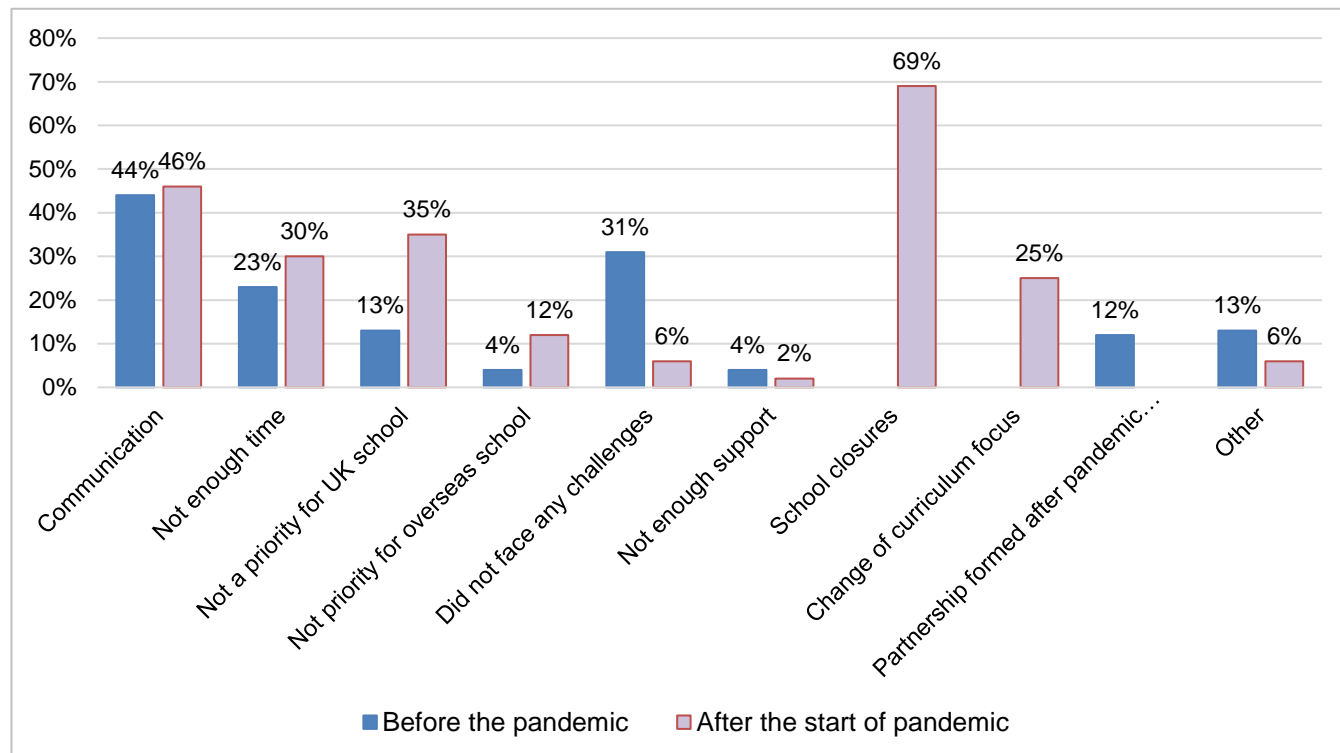
Our reciprocal visits have been on hold. The difficulty will be to re-establish the partnerships in other schools that do not see the link as a priority.

Barriers and enablers to overseas school partnership during the Covid-19 pandemic

In this section I will consider both barriers and enablers which have impacted overseas school partnerships as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This helps us understand what support partnerships might need and how we might better prepare them when engaging in meaningful overseas school partnerships in the future.

Figure 10 shows respondents' responses to a question about challenges for the partnership before and during the pandemic (respondents were able to choose as many responses as they felt were necessary from a pre-set list). These results clearly show a significant change in the challenges faced by schools when working with overseas partners after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The most obvious factor being school closures, which have impacted schools across the globe. However, there has also been an increase in a number of other challenges which are most likely linked to the pandemic, these include: a change in priorities within schools and changes in the curriculum. Respondents also indicated increased pressures on time, although this tended to be Cluster Leads rather than UK Partner Schools.

Figure 10: Comparison of challenges faced in working with overseas Partner School before and during the Covid-19 pandemic (N=52)



Qualitative questionnaire responses highlight the combination of challenges faced:

The level of challenge facing Head teachers regarding school closures and safety of pupils and staff is all consuming. Sadly, this has meant that the work of the partnership is not a priority but even more than that with pupils at home communication was significantly affected to almost nothing.

With the absence of reciprocal visits, it has been difficult to establish partnerships and build relationships with teachers in other schools. When meeting through video chats, we have begun to get to know each other more... I feel the school has had less opportunity to celebrate the project, as whole-school assemblies etc. are not happening in the same way. Children don't see displays in the halls/ share across year groups, which makes collaborative activities harder to plan and we are in danger of the project being 'forgotten' by some, as they feel disconnected. We are adapting to overcome these issues, which is challenging given the other Covid-19 related logistics we are faced with.

I will now explore some of these factors in more detail.

Priority for UK and overseas Partner Schools

Figure 10 highlights how priorities changed during the Covid19 pandemic and due to these unprecedented circumstances, the partnership became less of a priority for UK and overseas schools. Respondents stated:

It is a very low priority given how busy schools are.

The priorities for effective blended learning have affected our project as schools are focusing on ensuring there are effective online platforms and high-quality blended learning for all learners.

For many schools, demands on teachers' time changed and the need to spend time on other (more pressing) issues increased (see 'Curriculum focus' below). The pressure on time and change in priorities might mean less focus on overseas partnerships during the pandemic (Figure 10).

A Cluster Lead respondent said that their concern was that, as a result of the pandemic it will be difficult to re-establish the partnerships in other schools that do not see the link as a priority.

Curriculum focus

According to Figure 10, 25% of respondents stated that a change in curriculum focus since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic had been a challenge to their overseas school partnerships.

As discussed on Page 25 ('Implications of Covid-19 and school closures on school partnerships'), many primary schools in the UK pared back their curriculum during school closures to focus on English and Mathematics, with fewer whole school or non-core related activities. Similarly, as students in the UK went back to schools in the autumn of 2020, respondents described a 'recovery curriculum', enabling students to settle back into positive learning habits, rebuild transferable skills and catch up on missed learning in core subjects. This potentially would mean less focus on non-core partnership related activities. Indeed, where CCGL collaborative projects did not form part of the curriculum subjects being covered (core curriculum), it would be unlikely to have been completed.

It is important to note that the change in curriculum focus did not impact all schools and as shown in the case study one, some schools adapted to develop new opportunities with their overseas partner schools.

Communications

Good communication is obviously key to overseas school partnerships. It is only through communication with teachers that relationships can be developed, and collaborative teaching and learning can take place.

Almost a half of questionnaire respondents in Figure 10 note that communications were a challenge before the pandemic and a similar number during the pandemic (34% of respondents answered to this both before and after). I also described on Page 25 how communications between partners had changed over the period.

What became evident from the qualitative responses was that the main communication issue is linked to access to the internet, equipment, and the strength of local networks in overseas partnership countries. Respondents stated:

Unsure how the partnership can be developed in terms of alternative means of communication, due to the lack of electricity in the village where our Partner School is located. It's a poor, rural area. Actual visits have so much impact.

Our Partner School does not have the IT infrastructure to support more online communication.

Another school explained that communication with rural Uganda is always an issue for them but that despite this they intend to keep working together. The majority of issues with communication were linked to overseas Partner Schools in Africa. Around a third of UK respondents with links to schools in (mainly rural / semi-rural) Africa noted that internet access and or cost was a big challenge for their project. One describes the issues and the further impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:

As our Partner Schools are all / mostly rural schools, they tend not to have mains electricity supplies. There are few computers, and most email communications happen via teacher mobile phones or involved teachers visiting internet cafes. We have tried to organise video calls with our Kenyan partners, using computer facilities at a nearby hotel. However, time differences meant that these needed to happen in the evening in Kenya. Evening curfews and other Covid-related travel restrictions made this difficult / impossible for Kenyan teachers.

It seems apparent that in these circumstances teachers are often likely to have a personal mobile device, but this does not translate to the school:

It is not uncommon for teachers to have access to their own mobile phone, however, there is little access to reliable and affordable Internet access.

The pandemic possibly meant an exploration of different forms of communication as evidenced on Page 25 ('Type of partnership activity during the Covid-19 pandemic'), with the increase in the use of platforms such as Zoom. Teachers I have been working with have become much more confident in trying new technologies and have looked for things that work for their partner country. Recently the use of Padlet has been successful in the sharing of projects amongst schools in the UK and overseas I have supported in my role as Local Advisor.

Length of partnership and importance of relationships

In this section I will consider whether the length of overseas school partnerships impacted how partnerships during the pandemic.

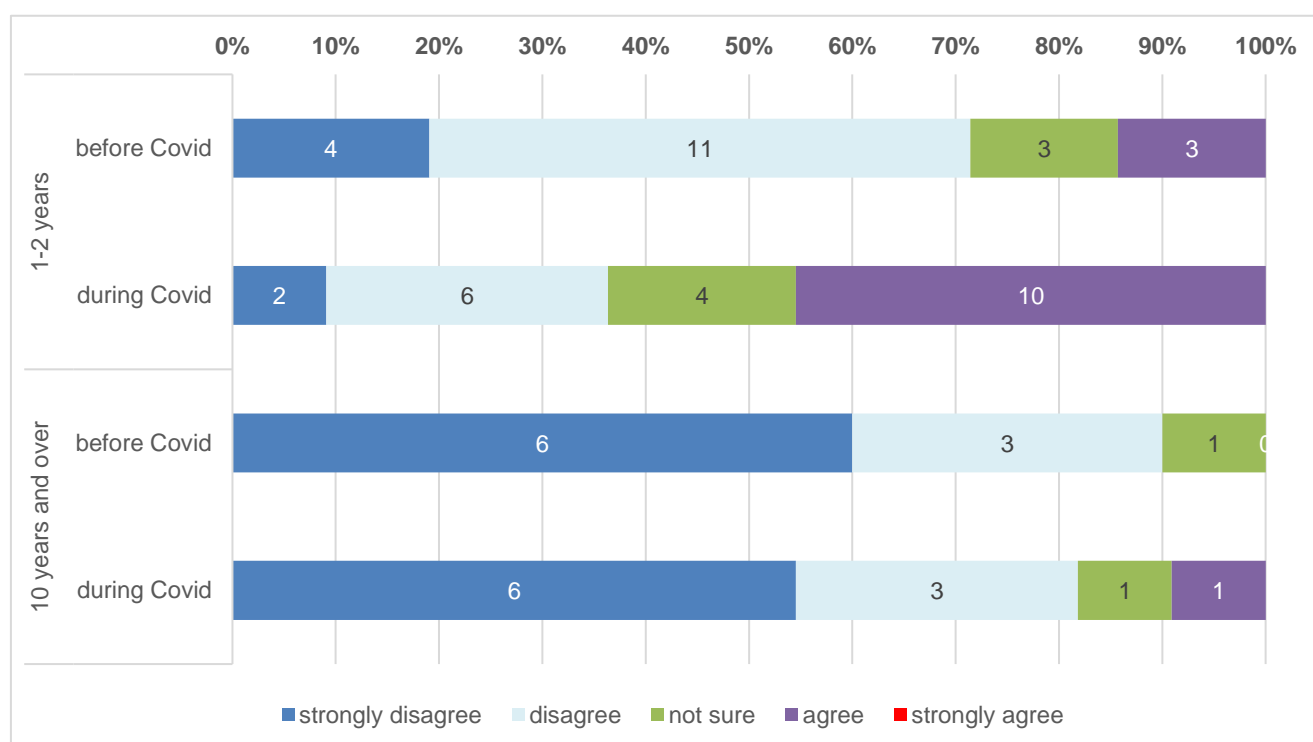
Tables 5-6 shows questionnaire responses to vulnerability and difficulty maintaining overseas school partnerships after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 5 respondents were asked if they thought their partnership was vulnerable, with respondents from schools with partnerships of 1-2 years feeling more vulnerable than those with more time working together.

Table 5: Vulnerability of partnership vs. duration of partnership

Duration of existing CCGL overseas partnership	strongly disagree	disagree	not sure	agree	strongly agree
under one year	2	4	0	2	0
1-2 years	2	6	4	10	0
3-4 years	1	0	0	1	0
5-9 years	1	2	1	1	0
10 years and over	6	3	1	1	0

Figure 11 compares responses from schools involved in partnerships before and during Covid and how vulnerable they think the partnership is. I provide a comparison between schools with partnerships of 1-2 years, vs. those of 10 years and over (as they had more responses). Figure 11 suggests the greatest change in vulnerability of overseas school partnerships has been for those schools with partnerships between 1-2 years, with a number of schools responding that they think their overseas school partnership is more vulnerable.

Figure 11: Perception of vulnerability of partnership before and during Covid pandemic vs. length of partnership



Questionnaire respondents were asked if they thought their overseas school partnership was difficult to maintain after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 6 shows similar results to those looking at

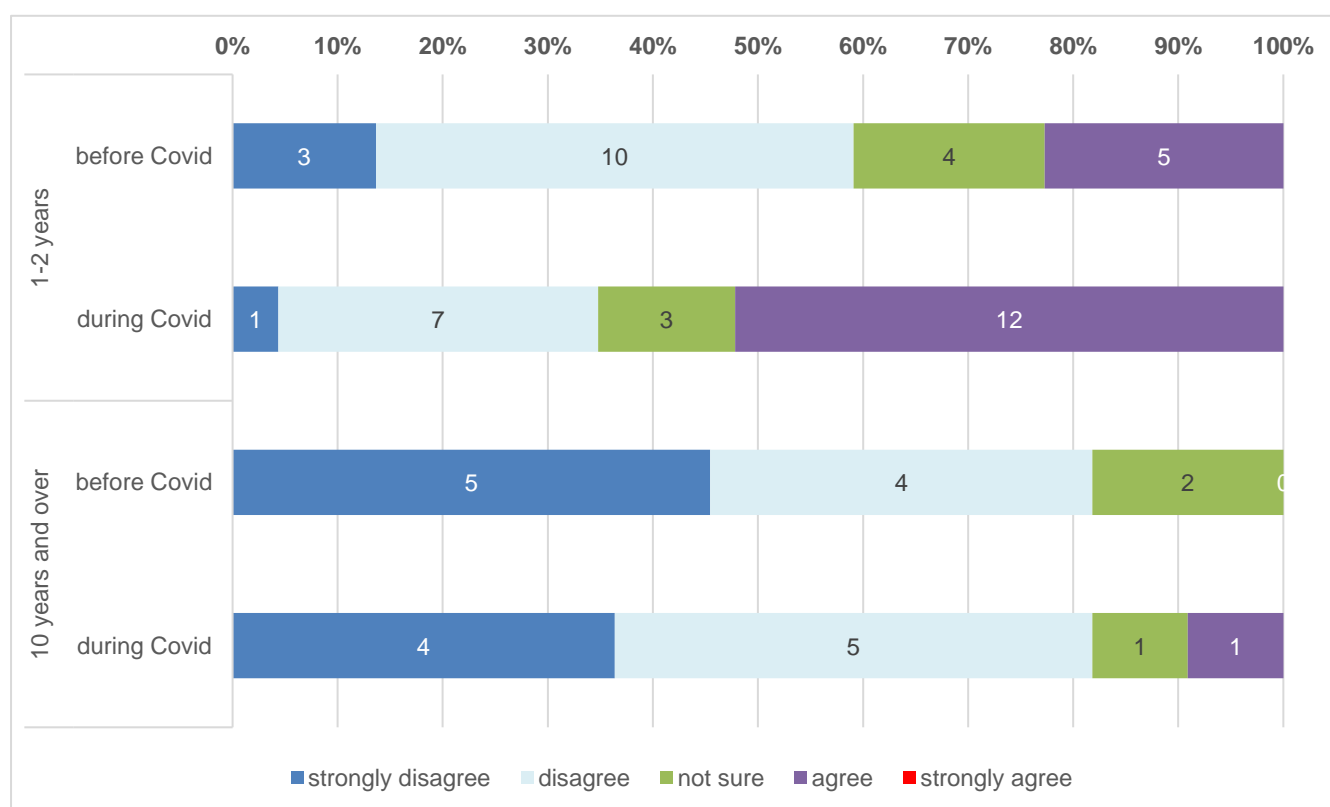
vulnerability, where respondents from newer overseas school partnerships are finding maintaining partnerships difficult, but some struggled even with more experience.

Table 6: Difficulty maintaining partnership vs. duration of partnership

Duration of existing CCGL overseas partnership	strongly disagree	disagree	not sure	agree	strongly agree
under one year	1	1	3	3	0
1-2 years	1	7	3	12	0
3-4 years	0	1	0	2	0
5-9 years	2	0	1	1	1
10 years and over	4	5	1	1	0

Figure 12 compares responses from schools involved in partnerships before and during Covid, and how difficult they think the partnership is to maintain. I provide a comparison between schools with partnerships of 1-2 years, vs. those of 10 years and over. It suggests there has been little change for those with overseas school partnerships of over 10 years, but those with 1-2 years there was a shift, with more schools responding that their partnership was difficult to maintain.

Figure 12: Perception of difficulty to maintain partnership before and during Covid pandemic vs. length of partnership



Uncertainty of reciprocal visits

For many respondents, the uncertainty that still remains around travel is a challenge. This seems particularly the case for schools who had to postpone visits. Respondents stated:

It does feel like the pandemic has taken the momentum out of the partnership. Pre-covid we had the visit from Partner Schools in Nepal and a celebration event. Now the return visits have had to be cancelled and the project has taken a back seat in school.

I feel that if we cannot complete the visit, it could have a long-term detrimental impact on our continued partnership. While linked work is important nothing can enhance the partnership as effectively as welcoming the teachers to our schools in the UK.

The concern of restrictions to travel is echoed by a number of respondents. The quote below particularly highlights the perceived importance of face-to-face visits for building relationships and the sustainability of the partnership. This respondent is concerned the partnership is under threat:

My biggest concern is the stagnation of international travel. While I hope that the planned reciprocal visit will be able to take place, I am concerned that the teachers commenced planning in order to complete the visit and if it doesn't happen it could negatively affect the strength of the links; our planned reciprocal visit could not take place last February and still cannot take place this year. This has been difficult for our partnership; If we can't visit as planned or them visit us it is hard to see how this partnership will be sustainable and how we can develop a true friendship with them. I feel very sad about this as we had flights and accommodation booked as lock down started.

For several schools there is also added pressure of not knowing if reciprocal visits can take place before the end of the CCGL programme in December 2021.

That said, this is not the case for all schools, and it is encouraging that some schools are able to consider a move to a virtual partnership when travel is not an option and technology is less problematic. Respondents acknowledge both the opportunities and challenges to moving on-line:

The move to on-line learning creates opportunities but also challenges for our collaborative projects. Not having the face-to-face visits has forced us to adapt and re-think how we can achieve our goals.

Schools are finding new online ways of communicating within their clusters and with their partners. The online collaboration between schools is becoming more developed.

Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted people globally and affected children's education in most countries. The evidence suggests that it is not one single factor that has impacted overseas school partnerships as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but that a number of interrelated barriers and enablers have played their part. These barriers and enablers are evident through a number of key themes which will be discussed here.

Bourn (2014) suggests that the impact of overseas school partnerships can be difficult to ascertain, with studies often emphasising the positive contributions of the partnerships, rather than opening up the dilemmas and challenges they may have faced. Whilst this may be the case, this small-scale study provides an opportunity to look at the challenges faced by schools both before and after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

For some respondents, the impact of the pandemic on their overseas school partnership is frustrating, but does not seem to be detrimental and is not likely to impact the longevity of the partnership. This is often the case for partnerships that are already established. It ties in with the academic literature which focused on the importance of relationships in partnerships (Leonard, 2012; Sizmur et al, 2011). Indeed:

Whilst the culture of the Partner School obviously had a significant effect, perhaps an even greater factor affecting the success was the relationship that the UK teachers have with individual teachers at the Partner School (Sizmur et al, 2011).

Another key theme that has emerged is the prioritisation within schools of their overseas school partnerships. The pandemic has impacted schools across the world, with many having to adapt to address immediate concerns within the school and local community. As I have discussed, for some teachers there has been less prioritisation of the school partnership during the pandemic. Martin (2005) talks about teachers needing to feel motivated on a personal level to take part in a school link. The Covid-19 pandemic, with its increased pressures on teachers, has changed many teachers' immediate priorities and motivations.

Within partnerships, the priority for many during the pandemic has changed to focus more on the wellbeing of teachers and students within the partnerships rather than focusing on collaborative projects. Two respondents spoke of taking part in fundraising to help their overseas Partner School with Covid-19 related needs. I know other schools personally that have chosen to do this. Whilst this can be considered as a short-term imperative, in the future it may be seen as problematic. As Bourn (2014) suggests:

Linking experiences can reinforce notions of dependency and paternalism, increasing support for more charitable based approaches such as raising money for infrastructure development and resources (Bourn, 2014).

What is undeniable from this study is the disparity between material differences and hence inequalities and injustices (suggested by Leonard, 2012) within certain overseas partnerships. This being an issue for many both before and after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic but exacerbated by the pandemic.

The importance of reciprocal visits is something that has clearly been shown within this study. Hirst (2013) explains that for staff, having some form of overseas exchange experience had a deep impact

and was 'life changing'. The uncertainty of reciprocal visits has been difficult for many schools and for some has even put the sustainability of the partnership into question.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find the answers to the focus question:

'How have overseas schools' partnerships been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic?'

The study looked at the various challenges faced by schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as case studies of how schools have been able to overcome some of these challenges. In order to successfully answer the aim, the study was divided into 4 research questions, each of which will be responded to in this conclusion.

Responding to the research questions

- **How have overseas school partnerships been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic?**

It is clear from international data that children's education has been impacted due to school closures, and how education will change and develop after the Covid-19 pandemic is still unclear. What is clear is that when students have been unable to access schooling, the likelihood of successful collaboration between schools in the UK and overseas partner schools will have been reduced.

As described, the pandemic has resulted in some of these key aspects of overseas school partnerships being put on hold, and some of the potential learning lost. Like the school curriculum, many partnerships have adapted, and some might need a recovery plan.

Responses highlight the importance of the reciprocal visits, and the impact of uncertainty might have on partnerships. This is a key concern for a number of schools, and it could be the case that the lack of visits will have a long-term impact on school overseas partnerships.

- **What have been the barriers in working together in the Covid-19 pandemic?**

The research highlights several barriers that respondents faced with regard to overseas school partnerships during the pandemic. A major barrier was school closures, and the difficulties of working on collaborative projects when not all students can access school.

Linked to this, emergency / recovery curricula have limited the extent to which partnerships can appear within the core teaching and learning of the school. Other barriers explored include shifts in priorities and pressures on time which might limit the time available for partnerships.

Communication and access to relevant technology has also been problematic for some partnerships. This seems to be more of an issue in countries where reduced internet access and higher costs have had a major impact.

- **What factors have enabled overseas partnerships to continue?**

During the pandemic, some of the activities shifted, particular in relation to pupil collaborative projects and the cancellation of reciprocal visits. The focus of many partnerships seemed to become more

personal and linked to checking the welfare of teachers and students. It is possibly that the pandemic might have brought some partnerships closer together.

That said, evidence shows that length of time the partnership has been in existence has impacted how vulnerable the relationship feels. Those with longer relationships overall feel their partnership is less vulnerable and more sustainable. Those who started partnerships over the past two years appear more vulnerable.

Whilst for some respondents communication, and a shift to virtual partnerships have been a struggle, for others, a move to a virtual partnership has enabled their overseas partnership to continue in new ways. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the British Council developed a number of resources to help schools work virtually (British Council, 2020), which, for partnerships such as my own, have proved valuable.

What comes through from the respondents is the determination, effort and time given by teachers working with overseas Partner Schools. It is hoped that while the pandemic has put a halt to some activities, there is a desire to get them up and running again as soon as possible.

- **In what ways have schools been able to continue pupil collaboration projects? Have these projects changed the SDG focus?**

Teachers are by nature adaptable and creative; this is seen when looking at how some schools have been able to continue to work on their collaborative projects.

Many schools have adapted the collaborative projects they had originally planned. For some the SDG focus has remained the same, but for others it has needed to change. The broad spectrum of SDGs has meant that schools tap into what works for their school even when there has been a change of curriculum focus.

Final reflections

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on many overseas school partnerships. The reasons for this are varied and not one school has experienced exactly the same challenges as another school. It is encouraging that the long-term sustainability of overseas school partnerships for most are not in question, with a number of schools hoping that once the immediate crisis is over, schools will return to a stronger partnership focus.

It seems that the pandemic, although having a detrimental effect for many in the short term, does not need to have a lasting impact. Many of the challenges faced by teachers in maintaining their partnerships are not likely to go away - they existed before the pandemic and will last beyond it. But the desire and motivation to make overseas schools partnerships work is there, and the importance of them understood. The pandemic has highlighted how we are all interconnected, something that we can continue to learn from for years to come.

With the CCGL programme coming to an end in December 2021, it is important to consider both the positives and negatives of the programme and ultimately how schools can be encouraged and supported to develop overseas school partnerships within their own schooling contexts. Bourn (2014) suggests that, due to pressure on funders and the need to demonstrate impact, the dilemmas and challenges are

not always considered. Within this small-scale study, these challenges are looked at. The pandemic has arguably brought out some of the difficulties faced by schools, whether it is a time of a global crisis or not. In the short-term, additional support to those more recent partnerships might be helpful. In the longer term, further research into how to overcome the challenges faced would be beneficial.

For me personally, this research has reiterated the importance of overseas school partnerships and the benefit they bring to both staff and students. It has highlighted some of the barriers faced by teachers and reinforced my belief that successful overseas partnerships need to be embraced not simply by a single teacher at a school, but also by the senior leadership team. It has also reminded me that key to a successful overseas partnership are relationships, and that the aim of partnerships should not simply be for the duration of any funded project, but for the long term.

Through the study, I have been struck by the disparity of resources and resulting difficulties for schools in certain countries in attempting a move to online collaboration. Whilst I do not disagree with academic researchers (Bourn, 2014; Leonard, 2012) who are concerned about dependency, I do think that this needs to be considered if there is an expectancy to move more to online collaboration.

I am reminded of the creativity and adaptability of teachers to make a thing work even in the most difficult of situations, and have been encouraged that, despite the pandemic, we see the bigger picture. The hope is that for most respondents involved in this study, the pandemic will not have a longer-term detrimental impact on their overseas school partnerships, but some remediation activities might prove beneficial for some.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire sent to schools

Questionnaires were sent to schools via Microsoft forms, below is a word version of the questionnaire used:

How have CCGL overseas partnerships been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research.

I am a teacher in Gloucestershire and run a cluster of schools partnered with Nepal. The results from this questionnaire will be used as part of a research paper, for the CCGL Practitioner Research Fund.

The aim of this questionnaire is to try and find out how CCGL overseas partnerships have been affected as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of us will have been affected in a different way and I think it is important and beneficial to develop a picture of the factors that have impacted our CCGL overseas partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic.

If you have any questions before completing the form contact Alyson Meredith (alymconsultants@gmail.com). To confirm all responses will be confidential and anonymised; no-one apart from me will see the individual data responses and it will be stored securely. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw. It should take around 10 minutes to complete. Thank you.

About your school

1. Do you work in a:
 - a. CCGL Cluster Lead School
 - b. CCGL Partner School
 - c. Other

2. Do you work in a:
 - a. Primary School
 - b. Secondary School
 - c. SEN School
 - d. Other

3. Please provide your school name (optional) and Local Authority area:

4. How long was your school closed to the majority of students as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?
 - a. More than six months
 - b. Between three and six months

- c. Between one and three months
 - d. Less than one month
 - e. It never closed
 - f. Other
5. During any closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic please indicate which response most applies to your school:
- a. All pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - b. Most pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - c. Some pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - d. Few pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - e. No pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - f. Not Sure
 - g. Other

About you CCGL overseas Partner School

6. In which country is your CCGL overseas Partner School?
7. Is your overseas Partner School a:
- a. Primary School
 - b. Secondary School
 - c. SEN School
 - d. State-Funded School
 - e. Private School
8. What is the location of your CCGL overseas Partner School?
- a. City
 - b. Suburban
 - c. Semi-Rural
 - d. Don't know
 - e. Other
9. Approximately how long was your school closed to the majority of students as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- a. More than six months
 - b. Between three and six months
 - c. Between one and three months
 - d. Less than one month
 - e. It never closed
 - f. Not sure
 - g. Other

10. During any closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic please indicate which response most applies to your CCGL overseas Partner School:
- All pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - Most pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - Some pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - Few pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - No pupils were able to take part in teaching and learning during school closure (either online or other)
 - Not Sure
 - Other

About your partnership

11. How long have you had your existing CCGL overseas partnership?
- Under 1 year
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-4 years
 - 5-9 years
 - Over 10 years
12. How many in person visits have taken place during the partnership?
- Visits from your School staff (or Cluster) to the Partner School
 - Visits from Partner School staff to your school (or Cluster)
 - Visits you have taken (personally) to the Partner School
13. Please complete the table below in relation to communication with your CCGL overseas Partner School in the SIX MONTHS BEFORE THE START of the Covid-19 pandemic. Please indicate approximately how you communicated and how often:

	Not at all	1-2 times	3-5 times	Over 5 times	NA
Email Exchange					
WhatsApp communication					
Facebook communication					
Zoom (or similar)					

Video calls between students					
Postal service					
Other					

14. What were the main challenges affecting your CCGL overseas partnership BEFORE the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Communication
 - Not enough time
 - Not seen as a priority by your school
 - Not seen as a priority by your overseas Partner School
 - Not enough support
 - We did not really face any challenges
 - Other

15. Please indicate how you regarded your CCGL overseas partnership BEFORE the Covid-19 pandemic:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	N/A
Strong and established partnership						
Strong new partnership						
Our partnership is vulnerable						
Our partnership is planned to continue long term						
Our partnership is difficult to maintain						
Our partnership is not sustainable						

You overseas CCGL school partnership since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e., March 2020)

16. Please complete the table below in relation to communication with your CCGL overseas Partner School since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e., March 2020). Please indicate approximately how you have communicated and how often:

	Not at all	1-2 times	3-5 times	Over 5 times	NA
Email Exchange					
WhatsApp communication					
Facebook communication					
Zoom (or similar)					
Video calls between students					
Postal service					
Other					

17. Have you used any new forms of communication with your CCGL Partner School since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and have they worked well?

18. What have been the main challenges affecting your overseas CCGL partnership since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic?

- a. Communication
- b. Not enough time
- c. Not seen as a priority by your school
- d. Not seen as a priority by your overseas Partner School
- e. Not enough support
- f. School closures
- g. Change of curriculum focus
- h. We did not really face any challenges
- i. Other

19. Have you managed to work on your pupil collaborative projects during the Covid-19 pandemic?

- a. Not at all
- b. To a lesser extent than planned
- c. Continued
- d. Successfully completed
- e. N/A
- f. Other

20. Has the focus of your project changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., change of SDG focus)? If yes, please explain.

21. Please indicate how you currently regard your CCGL overseas partnership:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	N/A
Strong and established partnership						
Strong new partnership						
Our partnership is vulnerable						
Our partnership is planned to continue long term						
Our partnership is difficult to maintain						
Our partnership is not sustainable						

22. Can you give any further information on how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected your school or your CCGL overseas Partner School that might be useful for this study?

Final thoughts

23. Is there anything that British Council or others can do to further support your CCGL overseas Partnership?

24. Do you have any thoughts on how you might adapt your CCGL overseas partnership in the future?

Survey completed

Thank you once again for taking part in this survey. If you would like any further information about the research, please do get in touch (alymconsultants@gmail.com)



About the Author

Alyson Meredith has been involved in education for over 20 years and for the past 3 years has been involved in the CCGL programme through the British Council. She has supported schools in their global learning journey and helped them establish partnerships and develop collaborative projects. In her own school, Alyson has taken on the role of global learning lead, integrating this into the curriculum as well as maintaining and establishing overseas school partnerships. For her, educating students about the wider world is of vital importance and global learning can be integrated into so much of what is taught on a daily basis. Alyson thinks we need to enable students to think critically and take action.

About Connecting Classrooms for Global Learning

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The CCGL Practitioner Research Fund

The CCGL Practitioner Research Fund runs from 2019-2022 with the aim to support educators to conduct research related to global learning and overseas school partnerships within schools. DERC was contracted by British Council to support educators in the research and writing process.

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