Independent and state school partnerships (ISSPs) in England: systemic tensions and contemporary policy resolutions

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ABSTRACT

English education has a long-standing parallel but unequal school system. State-maintained schools are free of charge for attendees; independent schools are free from state control and funded largely by fees. Most independent schools hold charitable status which benefits them in relation to taxation although they cater largely for socially advantaged students. Various governments have enacted different policies to try to rebalance some of these systemic educational tensions. This paper examines how the independent and state school partnerships (ISSP) policy seeks to rebalance, or provide some compensation for, independent schools’ charitable status through the requirement that they provide ‘public benefit’. In ISSPs, schools from the two sectors work together on dedicated activities, sharing resources and expertise. Drawing on data from three telling cases, we argue that ISSP policy may deliver some localised benefits to both types of schools but that these relationships are unlikely to produce any major structural changes.

Contextualising state and private schooling in England: a systemic tension

Peel (2015, 4) claims that ‘few institutions have polarised opinion to the same extent as Britain’s independent schools, extolled for their standards of excellence on one hand and reviled for their social exclusiveness on the other’. One reason for this tension is that independent schools confer many social advantages on their student intakes. While fee-paying, independent schools educate only 7% of all students in England, their alumni go on to occupy a significantly higher number of seats in government and other professional occupations (The Sutton Trust 2017). This outcome has led Wilde et al. (2016, 302) to claim that ‘private schools are a significant channel through which inequality is reproduced in the UK’. Over time, there has been some blurring between private and state schools’ relationships with the state (Boyask 2015). However, in this paper, while we recognise that diversity exists in the independent sector, a fundamental
point in our analysis is that independent or private schools charge fees for students to attend instead of being funded by the government. While recognising the social advantages that independent schools confer, some parents may well justify their selection of these schools for educationally-based reasons such as smaller classes and shortage subjects such as Latin or physics. In essence, it is the capacity to purchase social, cultural and economic advantages that is seen to be so deeply divisive. Most English independent schools are registered as charities (Peel 2015), and as such enjoy a range of financial benefits. These include relief from business rates; thus, charitable status subsidises those already financially advantaged.

In 2001, Tony Blair, then Labour Prime Minister, commissioned a review of charitable law which led to a policy shift that required independent schools to report annually on their wider educational contribution, known as their ‘public benefit contribution’, but stopped short of removing their charitable status (Dunn 2012). The Charities Act 2006 required charities, including independent schools, to evidence that they meet their public benefit obligations. Before the Act, there was a general presumption that they did so (Wilde et al. 2016). Ten years later, in its 2016 consultation paper, ‘Schools that work for everyone’ (DfE 2016), the Conservative government made it clear that if independent schools were to retain their charitable status, they must do more to benefit children from a wider range of backgrounds. This recommendation was not pursued when the Conservative government came to power in 2016. Thus, the ‘problem’ of the independent school sector ‘has been mainly addressed through calls to change its relationship with the state-maintained sector’ (Edwards and Power 2020, 137).

**Policy interventions: forging public benefit**

Since the Charities Act 2006, independent schools have been required to demonstrate their public benefit in order to access charitable status. According to the Independent Schools Council (ISC 2018), approximately nine out of ten private schools share their amenities and academic expertise with state schools. Others offer scholarships or bursaries. The amount and type of public benefit required to ensure charitable status is not prescribed or regulated but left to the schools to decide for themselves (Boyask 2015; Wilde et al. 2016). Over time, different policy interventions have been inserted by various governments in order to accommodate the principle of benefiting the public and contributing to the common good.

The newly elected Conservative government in 1980, for example, introduced the Assisted Places Scheme (APS) whereby the government funded ‘scholarships to independent schools for able pupils whose parents could not otherwise have afforded the fees’ (Aldrich 1996, 125). Power, Sims, and Whitty (2013, 5) reported that the Conservative Government intended ‘to provide a ‘ladder of opportunity’ for academically able students from poor homes’. Tapper (2003) found that even though scholarship recipients were means-tested, those who would have chosen private education anyway used APS awards to offset their costs, a finding supported by Edwards and Power (2020, 139). The APS was greeted with ‘vitriolic hostility’ by the Labour Party (Tapper 2003, 13) who scrapped it in 1997 when they came into government as its public benefits were considered negligible.

The abolition of the APS meant that independent schools had to fund places themselves if they wanted to continue offering scholarships (Peel 2015), and means-tested
bursaries became the norm. Following the Charities Act 2006, the Charity Commission guidelines of 2008 suggested that bursaries were one of the main ways for independent schools to meet their public benefit requirements (Wilde et al. 2016). The scale of these bursaries and scholarships, never matched the maximum of ‘8.5 per cent of places’ (Henseke et al. 2021, 3) allocated through the APS. Green et al. (2017) found that means-tested bursaries accounted for ‘just 4 percent of fees spread over 8 percent of private school pupils’ (36), but that only one per cent of pupils paid no fees (ISC 2020). Boyask (2015) argues that ‘public benefit’ is often reduced to simply refer to the payment of fees – something she regards as a restricted notion of the public good. Furthermore, she claims that, although the majority of schools that provide some bursaries and scholarships signal some alignment with a democratic ideal, they lack stated and actionable aims towards social justice.

Boyask (2015) argues that moving academically talented students from the state sector into independent schools not only benefits these institutions but also means that some high achieving young people are lost to their local schools thus exacerbating the academic gap between sectors. Kenway and Lazarus (2017, 273) have described these types of policies as ‘cherry picking talent from other education systems’. Underlying this policy approach was the unstated but evident belief that the independent system was better for the so-called ‘able’ child who was being saved from the less academic state school system. Fundamentally, however, these policies were aimed at very small numbers of individuals – more a form of tinkering at the edges than anything more radical.

Immediately after coming into office, New Labour published a White Paper, Excellence in Schools (DfEE 1997), that sought to formalise Independent-State School Partnerships (ISSPs). The Labour Government sought ‘a more positive contribution from independent schools to the government’s goal of raising educational standards for all children’ (Chitty 2002, 95). The government, elected on a landslide, did not use its mandate to remove either charitable status from these schools or to reduce this sector in any other way, but the notion of partnership introduced some potential to reset the relationship between these two systems. These partnerships were not entirely new ventures. As Tapper (2003, 22) pointed out, there had been ‘cooperation at the local level between state and private schools for a long period of time’. Many independent schools shared their facilities and had provided scholarships for some time. However, the New Labour policy directive seemed to imply that private schools were now going to be used to raise standards in the state system – a somewhat deﬁcit view of state schools and a different policy direction (Edwards and Power 2020).

Policies such as the APS, bursaries and scholarships provided by a wide number of independent schools mean that some ‘talented’ students move out of the state system without any change to the system of privilege and advantage. In this policy approach, independent schools are arguably caught up in a form of what Kenway and Fahey (2015) describe as a ‘gift economy’. Scholarships and bursaries are provided largely to those young people who will enhance the academic reputation of the independent school while enabling it to meet some of its public benefit requirements and allowing these schools to ‘downplay, even disavow, their well-documented role in reproducing privilege’ (Kenway and Fahey 2015, 112). In contrast, New Labour’s concept of partnerships between the sectors contained the possibility of a greater degree of sharing and reciprocity because the expectation was not simply of making spaces for talented but less
privileged students; the intention was to raise standards in both sectors through various partnership arrangements.

Partnership is a contested concept and in this paper, we take it to refer to normative inter-school collaborations between the state and independent sectors (Armstrong 2015). Briefly, partnerships involve participants agreeing to work together. However, there may be constraints involved such as differences about purpose; tensions and struggles over power and control matters as well as issues of equity that come into play (OECD 2007). The essential feature is that partnerships involve two-way processes of sharing and mutual benefits unlike scholarships and bursaries that were intended to support individuals to attend independent schools. In the New Labour approach, partnerships across the two sectors were initiated to promote ‘a framework within which teachers and pupils from the two sectors can work together to raise standards in education, and to make each partner school “better than it is”’ (Sharp et al. 2001, np).

Independent-state school partnerships

In January 1998, schools in England and Wales were invited to apply to be part of the formal ISSP pilot scheme, funded with £600,000 from the government including £250,000 from The Sutton Trust, a foundation established to improve social mobility (Sharp et al. 2001). It could be argued that using government funding to raise standards in independent schools contains within itself a number of questions. Is this good use of limited central funding? Should independent schools receive money in this way? Is this fair? Is this socially beneficial? However, the first round attracted over 290 applications with 47 projects being funded (Sharp et al. 2001). Funded projects included eighteen involving information and communications technology, ten focussing on literacy, and others ‘covering a wide range of curricular areas’ (Sharp et al. 2001, np). One project brought together sixth formers from state and independent schools, alongside undergraduates from a local university, to mentor state primary pupils.

Government funding for partnerships continued until 2011, with around £15 million invested over this period (ISC 2013). However, not all ISSPs received central funding. A number of independent schools established and fully funded local partnerships. In other cases, state-maintained and independent schools set up mutually funded ISSPs in which each school paid the same, relatively modest, annual fee to support their partnership working. By 2018, twenty years after ISSPs were formally introduced, the ISC reported that 1137 independent schools were involved in cross-sector activities. With additional funding rounds in 2014 and 2019, successive UK governments have continued to make a commitment to, and investment in, these partnerships. While some critics have accused independent schools of entering into partnerships with their state school colleagues for motives ‘which might be concerned less with equality than with preserving the tax breaks relating to charitable status’ (Benn 2012, 151), Nutt (2018, np) claims that:

a growing number of professionals are openly looking for mutual benefit that isn’t just a matter of posh kids mingling more, or poor kids learning about Oxbridge; the naive stereotypes ideologically possessed opponents of private schooling love to peddle.

Early evidence to support this claim came from Edkins and Seldon (2002, 8) who claimed, after the first rounds of ISSP funding, that the benefits of partnership
working ‘need not be one-sided’, going on to argue that these relationships ‘can provide challenge and enrichment for teachers’ from both sectors. However, given the longevity of ISSPs and the investment involved over time, it is surprising that so little has been published about this policy initiative.

In 2017, Lucas et al. were commissioned by Eton College, an elite English independent school, to review ISSP evidence and current practices. Their study surveyed practices in 132 independent schools. The authors acknowledged that their respondents were ‘almost certainly a skewed sample of early adopters’ (17). Furthermore, their report lacked input from partner state schools. Lucas et al. considered an ISSP to be ‘any deliberate collaboration or association of two or more schools, whether formal or informal, short or long-term, wide-ranging or focused’ (4). Some ISSPs were based on state school students experiencing features of independent schools, such as the use of facilities, a long-standing form of Kenway and Fahey’s (2015) ‘gift economy’ approach that had preceded formal partnerships. Others were more far-reaching and were based on mutual benefit. Nutt (2018, np) claims that ‘mutual benefit’ is the core characteristic of partnership and transcends the ‘doing good to those less advantaged’ approach characterised by scholarships and bursaries. Teachers from both sectors benefit from joint working and independent school students gain experiences that can take them out of what Wilde et al. (2016, 312) termed their ‘privileged bubble’. State school students get access to enriched resources and sometimes specialist teaching, commonly in Latin and STEM subjects. Partnership involves reciprocity; a recognition that all parties have something to give as well as something to gain.

**Methods**

In this paper we explore three cases that seek to rebalance, or at the very least, provide some compensation for independent schools’ charitable status through the requirement that they provide ‘public benefit’ through partnership working (see Table 1).

Thomas (2011, 513) argues that cases can be ‘persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems which are studied holistically by one or more methods’. Punch and Oancea (2014, 148) write that: ‘almost anything can serve as a case’. The cases in the research reported here, designated as telling cases, furnished the views, feelings, and perspectives of key actors in the partnerships. This was done through an investigation of school documents and website material, observations of partnership events and through a series of rich and detailed interviews. The participants, the

| Table 1. The three ISSPs. |
|---------------------------|
| **ISSP**                  | **Age and structure** |
| Leslie Independent-State School Partnership (LISSP) | Established over 15 years ago, this is what the DfE (2018) labels a ‘hub and spoke’ partnership, with secondary school ‘spokes’. Franklin School is the independent school at the hub |
| Maxwell Schools’ Association (MSA) | Another ‘hub and spoke’ partnership, but with primary school ‘spokes’. Lovelace College is the independent school at the hub. MSA has been active for more than six years |
| Napier Schools Together Group (NSTG) | Over twelve years old, this is what is described by the DfE (2018) as a ‘broad area partnership’ involving three independent and nine state schools all contributing equal annual subscriptions |
‘tellers’, included heads, teachers, coordinators and students who gave insightful and detailed accounts of their histories and positioning in the partnerships. Such an approach fits with Mitchell’s notion of the ‘telling case’ (1984, 238) as one in which ‘the events themselves may relate to any level of societal organisation’ (the individual partnership arrangements), and which is ‘located within some wider setting or context’ (241) (the national context of independent-state school partnership). The accounts deriving from the perspectives of insiders’ points of view created compelling ‘telling cases’ of the practices, processes and understandings of the three partnerships. Analysis of the combined data also generated insights into the partnership phenomenon that enabled the positing of theoretical positions about the cases ‘in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case served to make previously obscure theoretical relations suddenly apparent’ (Mitchell 1984, 239). Full ethical approval was sought and given for this research by the supporting university and all participants’ names and institutions have been anonymised.

Data was collected in two phases, findings from the first phase informing the second phase. In the first phase, documentary research was used to establish how partnerships and their activities are textually portrayed. While the analysis of documentation can gauge activity, it cannot explore the enactment of the collaboration and partnership itself. To investigate these matters, semi-structured interviews were conducted with headteachers, partnership coordinators and other key partnership policy actors. In the second phase of fieldwork, ISSP activities were observed across the partnerships. Focus groups of sixth form students were convened to explore their experiences and semi-structured interviews conducted with staff involved in the activities to probe further issues raised in the first phase.

A system of open-coding was used to chart the data based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis of generating initial codes, then searching for and reviewing emergent themes. All transcripts were coded to capture partnership experiences and perceptions of the ISSP. The researchers worked together to identify some thematic clusters that were repeated across the data as well as highlighting any discrepant or unexpected findings. In this short paper, we draw on a subset of interview data (see Table 2) and on some of the related materials and artefacts.

In what follows we consider three themes from our data set and while we discuss them here in isolation as a heuristic device, in reality they are interwoven and sometimes hard

| Participant | ISSP  | Role                                |
|-------------|------|-------------------------------------|
| Alan        | LISSP| State school headteacher            |
| Barry       | MSA  | Independent school teacher          |
| Ben         | NSTG | Independent school headteacher      |
| Carolyn     | MSA  | Independent school headteacher      |
| David       | LISSP| Independent school headteacher      |
| Denise      | NSTG | Partnership coordinator             |
| Lisa        | NSTG | State school coordinator and chair of OSG |
| Lucia       | LISSP| State school coordinator            |
| Mia         | LISSP| State school coordinator            |
| Nicola      | LISSP| State school headteacher            |
| Patrick     | NSTG | Founding state school headteacher   |
| Sharon      | LISSP| State school headteacher            |
to tease apart. First, we consider the purpose and mission of the three partnerships, looking at what they set out to achieve, and second, we examine how they are led and coordinated, how the policy is enacted in practice. We then reflect upon some financial elements in the three ISSPs. Our intention is to document and explore the impact of these partnerships as they are enacted on the ground in order to ask questions about the ISSP policy in terms of its reach and its outcomes in relation to any resolution of systemic tensions across and between the two sectors.

**Doing ISSP work: policy into practice**

**Purpose and mission**

In practice, much will depend on how each partnership sees its mission and its purpose and how far these extend beyond simply sharing resources as evidence of public benefit or some other form of the ‘gift economy’ model. Much will also depend on who (or which institution) influences the policy direction. In the newest of our partnerships, MSA, the independent school is very clear in its partnership goals to ‘inspire achievement, provide opportunities, community value’ (Lovelace College website). However, Lovelace College does not run activities for other schools just for altruistic reasons; headteacher Carolyn is aware of the marketing opportunities for her school being involved in ISSP policy work. For her, leading an ISSP is also ‘about raising the awareness of the school for lots of people who also could come and could pay’. She was motivated by pragmatic gains for both sides. The state schools had access to better facilities that in turn acted as an impulse to recruitment for her school. While there is a rhetorical commitment to ‘community’ from the independent school which is firmly in the ascendency in this ISSP, there is also a notion of each partner getting something tangible from the other, rather than a collaborative venture being undertaken. Here the independent school demonstrates ‘public benefit’ and looks to additional recruitment as a secondary form of financial advantage.

Reflecting on the importance of school mission statements, Gurley et al. (2014, 222) claim that without these, ‘educational professionals who work together closely on a daily basis may interpret their purpose very differently’. Even when purposes are well established, on the ground different policy actors may hold different perspectives. For example, David, the head of the LISSP independent school, privileges the gains for his students in terms of additional social learning, ‘I think the mental health advantages, the social advantages, the self-education advantages from being part of other people’s worlds … it’s really important’. As Hunter and Perkins (2014) found, partners bring their own ‘values, beliefs and behaviours’ (44) to these relationships, so it is not surprising that the other partnership heads see additional and alternative purposes for the LISSP. Nicola talks about the purpose being a contribution to ‘the common good … raising aspirations, raising achievement’. Mia views the main purpose of LISSP as being ‘to break down those barriers … to allow students from local community schools to have the opportunities that are available to students at independent schools’. She sees the purpose of the LISSP as a form of redistribution more than one of mutual benefit.

Of the three ISSPs, NSTG had the clearest and simplest purpose; ‘to stretch more able students’ (NSTG website) in all the partnership schools. Ben, a current NSTG
independent school headteacher attributes the partnership’s success to its ‘very clear raison d’être’. This partnership is based explicitly on the assumption that all parties have something to give as well as something to gain. Partnership working is evident at senior leader and coordinator levels, offering an extensive and collective programme for ‘able’ students across all partner schools. Founding head, Patrick, argued that this mission was not seen positively by all participants. While its purpose offers some mutual benefits to all partnership schools for ‘able’ students, it could be argued that this ISSP is premised on a somewhat exclusionary educational provision that echoes concerns about elitism and privilege. At the same time, the fact that the partnership is made up of three independent schools and eight state-maintained secondary schools means that there is a more reciprocal approach; there is not one independent school at the hub in this partnership and all the schools have chosen to stay working in partnership.

In exploring how the three ISSPs set out their mission and purpose, it is evident that different policy actors in different partnerships articulate a variety of reasons for their involvement. No one specifically mentioned the need to address public benefit although one partnership seemed more attuned to practical and economic benefits. Where the purpose was (in some senses) more linear and focused on stretching the ‘able’ students, reciprocity and mutual educational benefits were easy to demonstrate. In the third and very large ISSP, the Franklin independent school headteacher David, who was very much at the centre of the partnership foregrounded his intentions that could be seen as going some ways towards a more social and psychological rebalancing between the state and private sector. He said of his rebalancing vision, ‘all students gain in terms of social learning, ‘giving our children a human, pastoral education … it’s fundamental’.

Leadership and coordination: shared or centralised power

If ISSPs are supposed to provide a context in which teachers and students from the independent and state sector can work together to ‘raise standards’ and ‘make each partner school “better than it is”’ (Sharp et al. 2001, np), then issues of power and control need to be considered. As Armstrong (2015, 28) points out, ‘perceived power imbalances’ can be a barrier to mutual forms of collaboration. If ISSPs are intended to bridge some of the long-standing tensions and barriers between state-independent schools, then matters of power and control are significant concerns that need investigation. From the interview data, it was evident that the leadership structure in partnerships tended to the traditional school pattern, where headteachers hold ultimate authority (and responsibility) and the power to sanction the existence of the partnership as well as controlling the funding. However, the headteachers in this study, generally delegated aspects of their authority to school coordinators, the ‘local champions’ who were influential in ‘driving the policy agenda forward’ (Perkins et al. 2010, 106).

Leadership was enacted in different ways in terms of committee structures, responsibilities, power and time allocations. The norm in the partnerships was for a coordinating
group comprising representatives from the schools, to plan and organise activities, with a steer from the headteachers. Some coordinators had more influence than others and had more power to direct the partnership’s offer. The headteachers generally entrusted the day to day coordination, usually to another senior colleague. In this way, the heads kept a balance between ‘holding on and letting go’ (MacBeath 2005, 354). In MSA, the independent school’s coordinator organised all partnership events and the lead teacher, who was given one day per week for partnership working, led the majority of events so here the power was concentrated in the independent school. While LISSP was managed by an executive committee, with representatives from each of the partner schools, it was chaired by the coordinator from the independent founding school. Franklin School took the lead in the coordination of LISSP working, exerting a considerable amount of influence and control. This type of ‘direction and control’ can, according to Newman (2001, 110) lead to domination by some partners and the power to set the partnership agenda.

NSTG had a two-tier committee structure, with a Heads’ Strategy Group (HSG) and an Operational Steering Group (OSG), both supported by the Partnership Coordinator. Each group had a distinct role and set of responsibilities, identified by Hunter and Perkins (2014) as critical in successful partnerships. This layered and more democratic structure enabled heads to meet together to consider overall strategy for NSTG, to review events and be actively involved in evaluation, providing what independent school head Ben described as ‘a degree of quality assurance’. The OSG was chaired by the unfunded state school coordinator Lisa, who asserted that ‘We’re the ones who do all the groundwork, we’re the ones who run it all, we know what’s going on, we know what students are involved’. Uniquely in our ISSPs, the NSTG coordinator Denise, a former state school teacher, was not a member of any of the partner schools but was directly employed by the partnership. Denise was influential within the partnership, and exercised a degree of power which had, according to school coordinator Lisa, ‘been given and agreed collaboratively’, enabling more distributed leadership in this ISSP.

Each ISSP was supported by all secondary partnership headteachers who provided high visibility and interest in the work. NSTG heads saw it as part of their role to monitor the quality of the partnerships in attending events and checking the overall provision to ensure conformity to the partnership purpose and mission. Headteacher Carolyn helped set the MSA plan for the year to make sure ‘one we’re doing it for the right reasons but also it is ticking the box of what we’re going to be judged on [in school inspection] and having the evidence for that’, recognising the tension between enabling activities for the students and aware of the need to demonstrate accountability and to evidence public benefit.

In LISSP there was a pragmatic acceptance by many of the heads that Franklin was resource-richer and they were happy to capitalise on that, for the benefit of their students and teachers. While this could be regarded as ‘paternalistic patronage’ (Wilde et al. 2016, 315), the participant heads believed that they had influence over the activities on offer and so they were not simply ‘done unto’. By contrast, in NSTG we observed the greatest degree of the mutual benefit that Powell and Dowling (2006) described as a desirable outcome of partners using ‘their own resources jointly’ (309), heads working towards a common purpose, with students from all schools benefiting from the coordination of events.
Each ISSP had different agendas and contrasting purposes, from inclusion and ‘social learning’ (David) to support for ‘able’ students across the partnership schools. However, the power to steer direction was in the hands of the headteachers, even in those partnerships with persuasive coordinators, reflecting a traditional form of leadership. As Hatcher (2005, 256) argues, ‘leadership ‘from below’ can only be transferred from the sphere of ideas to that of action when it is sanctioned by the authority of the headteacher’.

The core question in each ISSP about leadership, control and power relates to whether one head (from the independent school) holds the reins (LISSP and MSA), or are all the heads equally empowered to steer the ISSP (as with NSTG)? The data show that ISSP members were aware of the ultimate power-holder in their partnerships, frequently linked to who held the resource and financial power. Across the three telling cases, there were moments where the headteachers asserted their authority to direct or drive policy outcomes. Where the independent heads were at the centre of the partnerships, they were in the driving seat, sometimes steering at a distance, but always with the reins in their hands if needed. In the NSTG, its purpose and mission mitigated against this hierarchical form of governance; working together in the partnerships brought into play new roles and relationships although ultimate responsibility was inevitably vested in the participant headteachers. In two of the three cases, the independent school heads were ultimately in financial and educational control. While in practice this might not have mattered as each partnership was built on different degrees of distributed power, as illustrated above, nevertheless, the power relations in two of the cases may buttress perceptions of independent schools being dominant. Overall, while all three partnerships endorsed a rhetoric of equality, it was evident that some key actors held more power than others and were thus more able to influence events and outcomes in practice.

**Finance matters in the partnerships**

In a 2002 paper about ISSPs, two headteachers Edkins (state) and Seldon (independent) wrote that ‘it is often … the independent school which is predominantly the giver, and the state school which is the predominantly receiver’ (Edkins and Seldon 2002, 12), suggesting they ‘have much more money; they have better resources … and more teachers available’. They conclude ‘It is hard … to avoid the impression that it is the case of the rich giving to the poor’ (12). Independent schools will generally be financially advantaged in comparison with their state-sector colleagues and state partners will benefit from accessing additional resources and support. The question thus arises; to what extent is this type of relationship a partnership that benefits both sectors? Does the capacity to demonstrate public benefit equalise relations across the public-private divide?

Lovelace College head Carolyn taught in state schools for many years and was acutely aware of resource inequalities between the sectors. She described Lovelace as existing in ‘a different world’, saying ‘we’ve still got more money than a state school has, and we can still do more luxurious things … A state school can’t do what we do’. While its Federation funds Lovelace’s MSA involvement, the school also contributes through access to its facilities and teaching staff, further evidencing that it is resource-richer than its partners.
In LISSP, Franklin School is the resource-rich independent school at the hub of the partnership, devoting considerable human and financial resources from its own budget. State school heads acknowledge Franklin’s generosity in taking over the funding of activities when the initial government grant had been spent. This was exemplified by Alan, who told us that ‘Franklin are always very generous in offering support’. Those interviewed did not seem to resent this; indeed some actively sought maximum benefit from the partnership, alert to opportunities that presented themselves and agile in accessing advantages for their schools’ students, such as Mia who always asked for any spare available places on activities.

Rummery (2006, 297) found that agencies with bigger budgets tended to ‘set the agenda and scope of reference for partnership projects’, something we found in LISSP. Franklin sets the agenda. It funds partnership activities, but LISSP state partners have to pay for staff cover and some transport, noticeably impacting their annual budgets. State school coordinator Lucia concedes that Franklin sets the agenda and holds the balance of power, but asserted that, ‘we are given a chance to speak and [say] what we want, so it’s not like we are told to do what they want to’. Headteacher Sharon was emphatic that despite their financial differences, LISSP ‘is a partnership and it’s a partnership of equals’, a view supported by Franklin head David who said ‘there’s that sense of reciprocity, that everyone’s on the same page … no school’s any better than the other’. Nicola was more sceptical about David’s claimed ‘reciprocity’; unsure what was in LISSP for Franklin: ‘I couldn’t say that that partnership works both ways, that’s not really explicit’.

Reciprocity was unequivocal in our third case. When government money ran out NSTG schools took over funding responsibilities through making equal annual contributions. In partnership terms, paying the same amount helps avoid any sense of ‘insider/outsider status’ (Hunter and Perkins 2014, 41) which may result in those contributing most having the greatest influence. Founding head, Patrick said parity between schools was important from the outset. NSTG ‘was going to be a shared partnership, it’s not the independents doing it for the state, it’s us doing it together’. While schools paying the same annual contribution reflects ‘equality’ to some extent, it is not necessarily equitable as the independent schools have the capacity to give more than many of the state partners. NSTG leaders from both sectors support this view, making further contributions either through some additional funding or hosting events and absorbing charges. Independent school head Ben thinks the state schools are content with this because ‘they’ve learnt to be comfortable with the idea that this is not a paternalistic situation’. In terms of financial matters, schools in our three telling cases were pragmatic about differences in assets and resources; the independent schools were typically better off than their state partners. This did not mean that they always dominated decision-making or direction. Particularly in NSTG, because of its clear and linear focus on one theme, public benefit gains were evident for the independent schools but so too was a robust attempt at democratic practices within the partnership underpinned by the fact that everyone made the same financial contribution. In this case, it seems that the partnership is more evenly balanced; there is no hub school, nor is there a tradition of a lead headteacher. While these contextual factors may provide a degree of evenness in this partnership that may be less evident in the other two ISSPs, there are still factors of cultural and material difference (e.g. in
intake and resources) which undermine any more robust claims to equality or social justice.

Towards a conclusion

In exploring the ways that three different ISSPs enact partnerships on the ground, the intention in this paper was to drill down into key questions about the public benefits to state schools from these inter-school collaborations as well as any mutual benefits that accrue. ISSPs were set up initially to share and spread the advantages enjoyed by private schools with their local state schools – a method of ensuring that independent schools could demonstrably claim to have earned their charitable status.

We have identified some benefits for the schools in these three ISSPs. MSA independent school headteacher Carolyn recognised the benefit to her school of the marketing opportunities presented by ISSP. One of her teachers, Barry, said that the school did cross-sector working ‘because it’s a good thing to do’, but he added that ‘there’s a marketing bonus’. In LISSP, independent school headteacher David highlighted more philosophical benefits for his pupils, with the ISSP offering enhanced social learning and reminding them of ‘their place in society’. State school heads acknowledged that ISSPs offered their pupils opportunities and experiences that they might not otherwise have. Teachers welcomed the chance to work in different environments and appreciated the professional development opportunities, as well as the cross-sector friendships and mutual respect that grew over time. Staff interviewed were generally adamant that ISSPs presented worthwhile opportunities and not obligations. However, in lifting the lid off and making the independent school culture accessible to state school teachers and students, inequalities in resources, for example, became highly visible and injected a dimension of social justice concerns into many teachers’ views from both sectors. Nonetheless, this study found state heads and teachers were keen to seize the opportunity presented by their local partnership, and to empower themselves through sharing leadership of the agenda and provision. Although we found that resource and financial inequalities between the sectors were not equalised through ISSP participation, in two ISSPs we found schools that had an equivalent voice in setting the partnership agenda and considered themselves to have equal status.

Whether overt or hidden, power ultimately lies with the dominant partners but it could be said that the teachers enacting ISSPs on the ground held day to day power when making things happen. None of the partnership activities could take place without a huge investment of time from coordinators and teachers. Although some tensions, political, ideological, practical were evident, often bubbling under the surface, the partnerships sometimes served to bring these matters into the open and provided a platform for transparent cross-sectoral debate around, if not a resolution of, tensions. Teachers were not afraid to comment on privilege and inequality. Nonetheless, the commitment to the ISSPs by both state and independent school teachers engendered fierce defensiveness from all parties, a key claim being that their partnerships were about making a difference for their students. This was expressed by NSTG head Patrick, who said ‘You’re interested in education and you wanna work together … it hasn’t become political, it’s become educational’.
Edwards and Power (2020, 146) argue that while governments have attempted to address the independent sector’s ‘cycle of advantage’, including ‘exhorting private schools to share their resources and expertise’, they ‘have failed to erode the exclusivity of the private sector to any significant degree’. To an extent, in the three ISSPs some long standing tensions or misunderstandings between the two sectors were reduced at least at local level although they are unlikely of themselves to produce any major policy shifts or structural changes. Teachers are practical and pragmatic and make the best of what they have at their disposal. ISSPS can deliver additional access to resources and provide a space in which diverse groups of young people and their teachers can work with differently privileged peers; but none of these activities and experiences, however worthwhile of themselves, offers any significant challenge to the dual system of state-funded and private schools of England. Indeed, any claims about equality in these settings may be seen as being potentially misleading and, even more strongly, may sometimes work to obscure the enormous discrepancies in resourcing that exists between the sectors. In 1891, William Jewett Tucker observed that society could make no greater mistake than asking charity to do the work of social justice. Perhaps this adage still applies to those inter-school partnerships in ISSPs.

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