Best practice in International Service Learning (ISL): Aspects of risk and impact

TEACH[R]

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Introduction

Provision of cross-cultural, service learning opportunities has become a distinctive feature of Christian, and more specifically, Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) secondary schooling in Australia. At time of writing 95% (21/22) of SDA senior secondary high schools offer students participation in international travel with a service emphasis, typically over a period ten to twenty-one days. Such trips are usually referred to as mission trips. By way of comparison, 73% (19/26) of independent Christian senior secondary schools in New South Wales provide similar international service learning activities for their students. For teachers facilitating these trips, international service learning is a valuable learning experience and for many principals it is a unique marketing feature characterised by significant benefits to individual participants, teachers and beneficiary communities. However, there are also unique challenges, risks and stressors associated with international travel in a service learning context.

The following article outlines the difference between international service learning and short term mission trips. It then proposes six features of effective international service learning that are likely to minimise risk while resulting in demonstrable impact.

What is the difference between international service learning and short term mission?

SDA schools are more likely to refer to international service experiences as 'mission trips' or 'short-term mission trips' (STM) which, although varying in nature, commonly include "evangelism, service provision, cultural immersion, education, or social justice advocacy" (LiErin, 2013, p. 204). At time of writing, four schools ran international service learning under the banner of STORM Co, an adventure-based, short-term mission program. As an acronym for 'Service To Others Really Matters', STORMCo emphasizes "… friendship evangelism and community service, seeking to bring the message of Christianity directly to an entire community …" (NNSW Youth, 2016). Whether badged as STORMCo or more broadly as mission trips and service trips, SDA schools that engage students in cross-cultural experiences with a service dimension tend to emphasise meeting a community need in practical ways. In some contexts this may involve students in building, painting, maintenance, clowning, play, teaching, worship and other services.

Concurrently used in broader education sector terminology, is the term International Service Learning (ISL). ISL implies a stronger level of structured learning and may or may not have a spiritual dimension. Crabtree (2008, p. 18) notes simply that ISL "combine[s] academic instruction and community service in an international context." It is noteworthy that service learning has been a feature of the USA education landscape since the 1980s however service learning programs were found in less than 30% of USA K-12 schools and scepticism over its educational merit continues. This is despite more than 70 studies that have found "… positive impacts on participating students' academic, civic, personal, social, ethical, and vocational development" (Furco & Root, 2012, p. 1).

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absent in Australian SDA secondary schools where service is either a highly valued or essential component of Christian education. Referring specifically to ISL, Adventist Schools Australia Director, Dr Daryl Murdoch (personal communication, February 6, 2017) states "Becoming a servant with an attitude of service and a strong sense of social justice is a primary goal of our education system." Although a service ethic can be nurtured domestically, SDA schools see particular value where service intersects with international mission and cross-cultural experience.

Although used interchangeably by some schools, mission trip, STM and ISL may differ in regards to focus. It is argued here that STM tends to emphasise spiritual aspects of service and personal development, often as the primary goal. ISL may emphasise, in a more rigorous way, value on the "learning aspect" of trips. In either case, for many educators these experiences provide an opportunity where students can grow both inter- and intra-personally through experience of altruistic activities and contact with a different culture. In a world where international mobility and integration are increasingly valued and expected, service oriented international travel offers a unique opportunity for students to develop and nurture a cross-cultural appreciation with a sense of global citizenship and responsibility (Barr et al., 2008).

Measuring the long-term impact of STM and ISL is notoriously difficult. However, according to Chang, Chen, Huang and Yuan (2012, p. 230) empirical studies show that participation in ISL "increases learners' intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of cultural differences, and tolerance for ambiguity." As additionally evident in Figure 1, developed by the Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training, there are numerous benefits associated with overseas learning experiences.

Despite some enduring scepticism about the impact of ISL, teachers who lead students in STM and ISL frequently describe the experiences as transformational for participants. In a rare longitudinal study of 22 college students who participated in an ISL trip to Nicaragua with a strong social justice component, Kiely (2004, p. 1) identified transformational change in at least one of the following six dimensions—political, moral, intellectual, personal, spiritual, and cultural. Importantly, Kiely observed the "… ongoing conflict and struggle …" as students attempted to mobilise a newfound critical awareness and sense of compassion into meaningful action.

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Figure 1: Benefits of Student Participation in ISL

Personal and social confidence	Intercultural understanding
• Enhanced sense of self and personal identity Increased independence, maturity, confidence and self-awareness • Enhanced social competence, through confronting challenges beyond their familiar environment and comfort zone • Opportunities to be ambassadors for the school • Increased awareness of future study and career opportunities and broader community participation	• Move beyond stereotypical views and attitudes • Greater interest in global and international issues • Increased proficiency in the use of another language • Motivation to further engage with other cultures through future travel and consideration of employment opportunities overseas • A more global outlook on life, and a heightened sense of engagement with, and increased awareness and appreciation of different cultures • A deeper understanding of their own culture as distinct from others

Source: State of Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2015, p. 6

Figure 2: Australian SDA Senior Secondary School Destinations for 2016 or the year when last offered

Cambodia 5
Nepal 2
Solomons 3
Mauritius 1
Fiji 1
Vanuatu 7
Tahiti 1
Myanmar 1
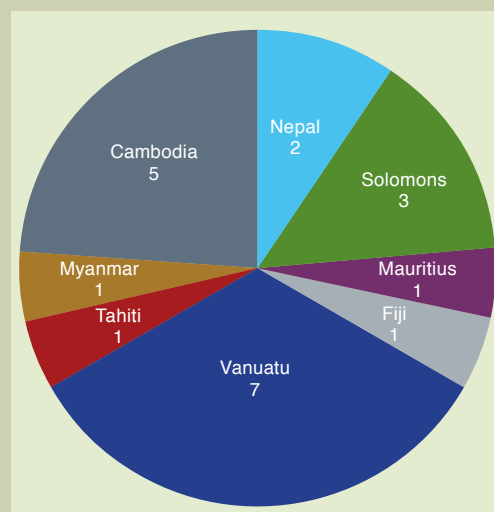
Where do Students in Australian SDA secondary schools travel?

SDA schools in Australia are far more likely to send students to Pacific destinations than independent Christian Schools in New South Wales. As can be seen below in Figure 2, more than half of most recent international trips were to Vanuatu (7/21), Solomon Islands (3/21) and Fiji (1/21).

The predominance of SDA trips to Pacific countries is largely explained by strong links between the SDA church in Australia and schools in the Pacific region, low travel costs and the perception that Vanuatu in particular is a safe destination. In some cases principals and teachers in Australian schools have worked in schools in Melanesia and Polynesia. In comparison, independent Christian schools in NSW (see Figure 3) are more likely to visit diverse destinations throughout Asia.

## Six key features of effective and safe ISL and STM

1. Maximisation of student learning by reflection
   Chinnappan (2013) argues that a limited immersion in a cross-cultural setting may prove inadequate in terms of providing enough stimulus for desired levels of learning to occur within participating students. Whether badged as STM or ISL, a common goal for educators should be to provide an effective framework for global citizenship learning. In brief, this involves promoting reflection on tasks and activities that lead to "a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, globally and locally" (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones, 2011, p.19). For such

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Figure 3: NSW Independent Secondary School Destinations for 2016 or the year when last offered
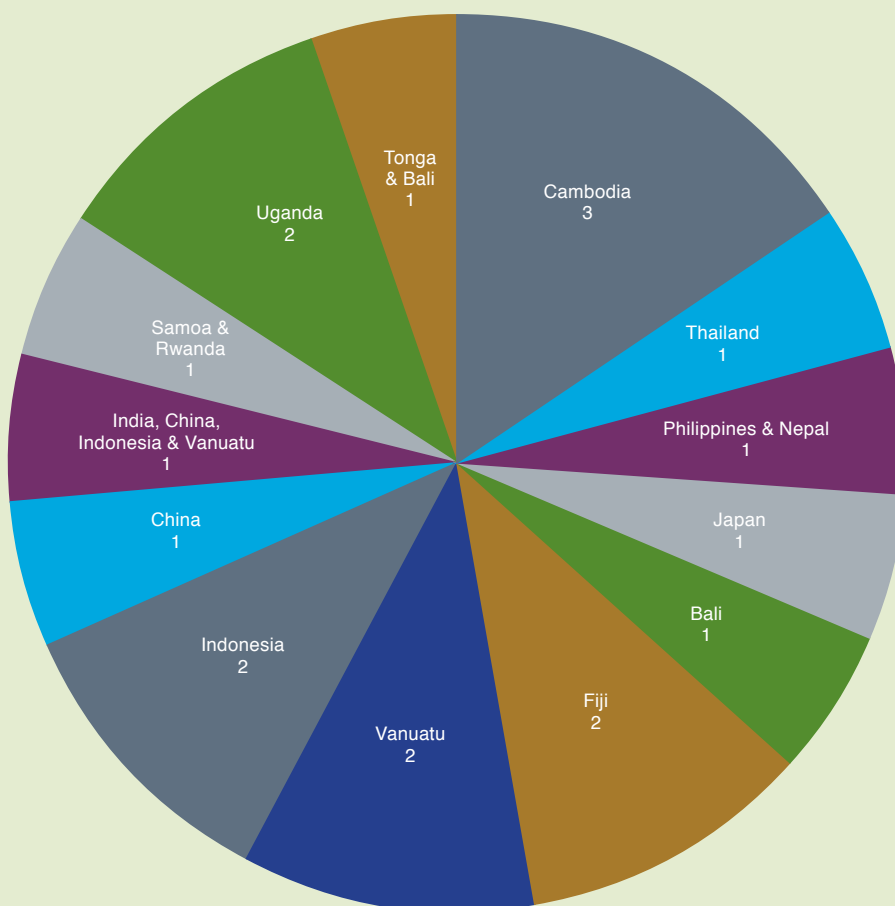
commentators the task of reflection and debrief is as critical as the quality of activity.

According to Molee, Henry, Sessa, and McKinney-Prupis (2010) reflection is an integral part of the ISL experience, addressing the learning element of the trip. Numerous studies emphasise the importance of reflection in such a context. Findings by Yang, Luk, Webster, Chau and Ma (2016) highlight the need for the intentional guidance of students to facilitate critical reflection on personal values and the consequences of actions while forming reciprocal relationships during their international service learning experience. Supporting this idea, Pagano and Roselle (2009) point out that learning occurs as students participate in projects through association with community members and, perhaps most significantly, reflect upon such interactions. Moreover, research conducted by Urraca, Ledoux and Harris (2010) concludes that preparation for ISL is most effective when emphasising intercultural training and completion of exercises involving deep reflection.

Because of hectic travel schedules, time limitations and lack of planning, it is easy for group leaders to neglect deep reflection, adequate immersion within the culture and cultivation of cross-cultural relationships. Like a stone skipping across the surface of a pond, groups of students may skip across the surface of the social groups and cultures they visit, especially when isolated in hotels and engaged in practical tasks without adequate interaction with people. Critical, reflective thinking based on real engagement with social problems adds new value to service experiences, enriches the learning which takes place and potentially develops students' ability to act responsibly in the future (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones, 2011).

Bringle, Hatcher and Jones (2011) suggest a number of elements to consider for well-designed reflection activities. According to their research, reflection activities should intentionally link the service experience to course-based learning objectives, be structured and occur on a regular basis. Moreover, the activities should allow for feedback and assessment as well as include clarification of values. Consequently, reflection will represent an articulation of each student's journey towards intercultural competence (Williams, 2009). Students should be strongly encouraged to journal,

> *culture shock and its associated measures of dis-equilibrium and dissonance may provide … for greater self-awareness and personal development*

blog or document their learnings, feelings, questions and to share these with peers and trip leaders throughout a trip. An obvious challenge is to facilitate this without students and teachers feeling like they are in class!

2. Management of culture shock

The term "culture shock" refers to "a state of bewilderment and distress experienced by an individual who is suddenly exposed to a new, strange, or foreign social and cultural environment" (Random House Inc., 2017, para. 1). Upon encountering an alien environment through ISL or STM, students are challenged to process the information around them and adjust accordingly. However, due to varied cognitive frameworks and predispositions, or prior international and cross-cultural experience, some students may thrive in a foreign setting while others cope poorly. Culture shock can cause stress and anxiety to such a degree that, rather than serving as both initiator and motivator of learning, the event may lead to an individual distancing or isolating themselves from the newly encountered culture. Often associated with feelings of frustration, alienation and helplessness, culture shock may also be seen as a state of 'disequilibrium' or 'dissonance' (Che, Spearman, & Manizade, 2009).

Culture shock is viewed by most trip leaders (especially high school teachers) as a risk that must be minimised or eliminated for the good of participants. However, culture shock and its associated measures of disequilibrium and dissonance may provide opportunity for greater self-awareness and personal development. According to Chang et al. (2012, p. 233), "environment-person interaction theory provides a foundation for transformative learning, in which the disequilibrium or disorienting dilemmas … serve as an important trigger for significant growth." Discomfort and disorientation may therefore be required if transformational learning is to occur.

Trip leaders must promote a balance, aiming to avoid serious trauma, yet ensuring a certain degree of challenge and disequilibrium regarding students' preconceived ideas and perspectives. A degree of well-managed culture shock or disequilibrium in a supportive environment may be preferable to students travelling in a protective 'bubble' of friends and teachers.

Usually, moving from one destination to another over several days is unlikely to trigger enough 'discomfort' and 'questioning' for deep reflection. Very short international trips (less than 10 days), especially with multiple destinations, may not provide enough disequilibrium to truly challenge student's perceptions of themselves and others, or allow for any real analysis of social problems and ethical solutions.

3. Minimisation of risks

In a broader context, "risk management" relates to a continuous process of identifying, analysing, monitoring, responding to, mitigating and assessing risks. Teachers in particular are often well aware of the need to manage risk and ensure that "risk strategies and processes are in place" (State of Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2014, para. 2). Because each destination carries its own unique set of risks, trips are generally safest when there is an effective relationship with a host community or organisation, when trip leaders return to the same destination for several years and when groups are assisted by 'experts' in the local culture. Partnering with a local organisation with high capacity to anticipate, manage risks and provide effective support for adverse events is crucial for the safety of students and staff. Additionally, by returning to the same destination repeatedly, coordinators become increasingly familiar with actual risks and concerns in the particular area, and as a result more capable and equipped to handle adverse events when they occur. Of particular concern are SL or STM trips where partnership organisations have limited capacity to support visiting groups through critical incidents.

A feature of risk management that is often neglected by trip leaders is the reality that ill-planned and ineffective service activities may cause harm to the host community. The following principle is central, "[d]o not do things for people that they can do for themselves" (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009, p. 115). As Ellen G. White (1909, p. 195) points out in *The Ministry of Healing* "[w]e may give to the poor, and harm them, by teaching them to be dependent." Watson (2014, p. 145) adds, "[w]ell-intentioned giving can strangle local initiative, corrupt local churches and make people dependent on foreign support." ISL and STM leaders must therefore ensure that any projects which they engage in, are giving the community a "hand up" rather than a "hand out." Repetitive acts of charitable giving may feel good, and may satiate the need of students to feel they are making a difference, but it may disempower local people and stifle initiative.

4. Promotion of cultural sensitivity

In speaking of ISL, Crabtree (2008, p. 18) claims that the "[o]bjectives of linking international travel, education, and community service include increasing participants' global awareness, building intercultural understanding, and enhancing civic mindedness and skills." The term 'cultural sensitivity' encompasses the traits mentioned above. However, more specifically, in accordance with the findings of Foronda (2008), the following four attributes emerge from the idea of cultural sensitivity: knowledge, consideration, respect and understanding.

Unfortunately, teaching these attributes is a complex task, with a number of pitfalls. Segregation (e.g. students live comfortably in hotels while the beneficiaries live in shacks), lack of cultural preparation (e.g. teachers fail to give students a broad understanding of the host culture prior to trip commencement and ignore local language), and having a partner organisation with negative power dynamics (e.g. the staff feel superior to the villagers) are specific examples of this. Particularly in a globalised and highly interconnected world, promotion of cross-cultural awareness and respect is increasingly relevant and necessary. The aim is that every individual acknowledges the similarities and differences between ethnic groups, without assigning them any particular value like "negative" or "positive" and "better" or "worse" (Dabbah, n.d.), but understands how they impact relationships and processes. This may be difficult to achieve when destinations change frequently and teachers change annually.

ISL and STM facilitators are responsible for ensuring that, instead of amplifying power differentials and prejudicial views, interaction with the host community fosters respect and, ideally, understanding of the 'other.' A critical analysis conducted by Arends "reveals that international service learning interactions occur at a complex nexus of expectations regarding race, gender and privilege, leading to feelings of exploitation, entitlement and stereotyping" (cited in Larsen,

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2016, p. 109-110). For instance, common negative generalisations include "Africans are primitive", "Muslims are violent" (Paul & Becker, 2015, para. 1), and "Latinos are uneducated" (Ghavami & Peplau, 2012, fig. 3). To this we might add "Pacific Islanders are all happy" and "They're poor—they've got nothing." To avoid reinforcing stereotypes, preparation exercises, in-country activities and opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, must be designed in such a manner as to promote cultural respect, sensitivity and recognition of the agency of apparent 'beneficiaries.' The degree to which a student practices intercultural sensitivity is evident through the effectiveness of their involvement in a foreign culture, by "showing interest, observing cultural differences and displaying the capacity to accommodate this difference through modification of behaviour" (Campbell & Walta, 2015, p. 3).

5. **Commitment to impact evaluation**
    In considering whether compassion is enough, Occhipinti (2014, p. 81) argues that "Serving others is fulfilling for volunteers, but the main goal of service is helping others, not experiencing personal satisfaction." In order to improve practice in ISL and STM, evaluation and assessment is therefore essential. A review of impact on students, staff and beneficiaries is ideal to avoid situations where "It's hard … to go and not do something and so lots of times we go, and we do something bad, something that ends up being negative" (Weichman cited in Occhipinti, 2014, p. 81).

    Unfortunately however, impact evaluation and trip assessment is often limited to a short debrief with students and staff at the end of a trip. Murdoch, Director of Adventist Schools Australia (personal communication, February 6, 2017), notes that impact evaluation is a major area where more focus should be given, however also points out that "Staff are time poor and service projects are often run over non-term time or at the end of the school year … ." The reality is that for many teachers and principals, impact evaluation runs the risk of being seen as an unnecessary layer of extra administrative responsibility or another form to fill out in an already laborious process.

    Despite the reservations of time-poor trip leaders, qualitative assessment is integral to gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of a trip's actual impact on students. Molee et al. (2010, p. 204) points

out, "Despite its centrality, [this] is perhaps the most challenging aspect of service-learning to assess … evaluate and deepen learning outcomes." Qualitative approaches possess a variety of benefits in terms of evaluating individuals' subjective experiences, ideas, and feelings, and determining specific areas with room for improvement. This does not necessarily have to be a burden. Teachers, as first steps, are advised to review student journals or interview students in order to gauge whether the trip has been transformational. The power differential between staff and students may inhibit effective feedback, necessitating the use of a neutral, third party. Further, partnering with higher education providers to assess impact is likely to reduce stress for already overcommitted teachers.

A number of quantitative and qualitative tools for the measurement of the impact of ISL on student learning exist. Quantitative tools include the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) (Merrill, Braskamp, & Braskamp, 2012), the International Volunteer Impacts Survey (IVIS) (Lough, McBride & Sherraden, 2012), the Global Awareness Profile (GAP) (Corbitt, 1998, as cited in Stemler Imada, & Sorkin, 2014), the Attitudinal and Behavioural Openness Scale (ABOS) (Caligiuri, 2000, as cited in Stemler et al., 2014), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, 1998, as cited in Stemler et al., 2014) and the WICS (Stemler et al., 2014). All of the above tests are delivered in a survey format and are primarily designed to measure intercultural competence based on how students score in a number of areas for example: their international contacts, civic activism, open-mindedness, global understanding, media attentiveness, intercultural relations, life plans, financial contributions, and community engagement (Lough et al., 2012). However, for school systems there is merit in developing an evaluation tool that specifically deals with safety, quality of the learning experience and impact.

As part of the evaluation process, the staff should self-reflect, and critically analyse their own behaviour and procedures, and adapt practice as appropriate. According to Murphy (2011, p. 2), "Faculty self-reflection has the potential to improve teaching effectiveness as it supports the development of their pedagogical repertoire." Staff self-reflection can take place informally, as part of post-trip wrap-up processes and use simple tools

> " *It's hard ... to go and not do something and so lots of times we go, and we do something bad* "

such as SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities) analysis to capture a single page of collaborative feedback that does not identify individuals.

Unfortunately, STM and ISL leaders rarely seek to understand their impact on beneficiaries, presuming that because services were delivered outcomes will be positive. A more challenging discussion is whether project activities actually work in achieving larger goals (Occhipinti, 2014, p. 103). For instance, rather than ask simply if the school playground they built was completed, trip leaders may ask how and what impact it has had on children or the school. Rather than presume that painting a classroom is beneficial, trip leaders might ask what new learning local children gained when foreigners from Australia came to paint their classrooms or whether this was a priority that led to improved learning? Rather than focus on completion of a project, teachers might ask what quality of relationships were formed? Obviously, assessment should not merely cover students and staff, but rather include broader evaluation of the impact on beneficiaries.

6. Promotion of reciprocity and partnership

Although one of the primary aims of ISL is to build cross-cultural relationships, the experience can, at times, reinforce existing preconceptions (Crabtree, 2008). Unless ISL and STM coordinators stay critical and alert, power asymmetries may widen, as participants increasingly view themselves as superior to the "needy" community to which they lend a helping hand (Sharpe & Dear, 2013). Problematically, charitable acts may perpetuate one-way relationships and exchanges between generous donors and grateful recipients (Occhipinti, 2014, p. 82). Further, it may actively create dependency on foreign donors.

Particularly in regards to counteracting a sense of "provider" v. "recipient", schools involved in ISL and STM should find an organisation which emphasises the fact that both parties are beneficiaries of the experience. Mutual respect between the two is essential in effective ISL practice and in promoting intercultural understanding. Programs should, therefore, be equally concerned with the learning and growth occurring in the host community as in the visiting group. Adding to this notion, Jacoby (1996, as cited in Sharpe & Dear, 2013, p.

49) suggests that "an ISL program based on reciprocity should aim to create a learning environment in which those serving and those being served become indistinguishable in principle, if not in practice." Moreover, according to Holland (2002, as cited in Keith, 2005, p. 14), reciprocity involves "respect for different sources of knowledge, different contributions of each participant, a fair exchange of value, and the assurance of benefits to all." ISL and STM leaders who return to the same destination over long periods of time are more likely to develop reciprocity and partnership than those who frequently change destinations. This is also the case for trip leaders who actively use the 'poor' to teach the 'rich.'

Conclusion

ISL and STM have potential to increase "intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of cultural differences, and tolerance for ambiguity" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 230). Further, through carefully managed culture shock, effective evaluation and a commitment to partnership, such experiences can contribute to the development of global citizenship, including an ethos of compassion and social justice. In a Christian school setting, effective STM and ISL can and does impact student's spiritual and ethical growth.

Reflecting on the prevalence of SDA school engagement with ISL and international STM, Murdoch (personal communication, February 6, 2017) states "We still have much to learn in relation to ISL. Being committed to the needs of others and having the best intentions is a valuable baseline from which to operate; however, there is certainly scope for a much more coordinated approach systemically to addressing the six key factors that enhance effective ISL projects." This includes a more coordinated approach in relation to the preparation of staff and students prior to engagement in ISL projects. Additionally, consideration should be made for construction of a platform where schools can share and access advice and lessons learned including on formation of partnerships to measure impact on students, staff and beneficiaries. Finally, given the lack of research on the impact of ISL conducted by SDA schools, considerable scope exists for exploration of what is widely considered to be an integral part of SDA education in Australia.

" aim to create a learning environment in which those serving and those being served become indistinguish- able in principle "

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> *consideration should be made for construction of a platform where schools can share and access advice and lessons learned including on formation of partnerships to measure impact*

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