

Beyond Leadership: The Why, What, Who and How of Education Diplomacy

Christine Chen

Cheong Su Fen

Ding Zhen Xin

Therese Tan

Charmaine Teo

Introduction

This article is a summary of the authors' reflections on the Education Diplomacy Course offered by the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI). The authors embarked on a journey of discovery through learning in a community and reflecting on each other's personal takeaways.

When we first started, we had a confused and vague idea of education diplomacy. But all of us dived into this new learning opportunity. We were aware that diplomacy has traditionally been seen to be "... the conduct of relations between sovereign states through the medium of officials based at home or abroad" (Berridge and James, 2003, p. 69). As such, in the traditional sense, a diplomat is one appointed by the government to conduct official negotiations and maintain political, economic and social relations with another country.

During the course, however, we discovered the "new diplomacy" in which each one of us can play a leadership role as education diplomats who take on the responsibility of identifying an education issue, initiating an idea, advocating and negotiating a sustainable plan that would

improve the lives of children and their families. We also found answers to the questions: Why is education diplomacy important? What exactly is education diplomacy? Who is the education diplomat? What does it require of us? And, how do we carry out our role as an education diplomat? This article will address these questions each in turn.

Why We Need Education Diplomacy

Education diplomacy has to do with the advancement of the education field at local, national and international levels. In Singapore, even though we have a high enrolment rate in preschools, the government has had to address the issue of high absenteeism among 5-to-6-year-olds (Ng, 2015). The Early Childhood Education Agency (ECDA), in working with community partners and preschools, has been involved in addressing this issue with various initiatives that include garnering the assistance of neighbours within vulnerable community groups, to take children to school each day. Such initiatives reflect the commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in making education available and accessible to all children including

taking measures to encourage school attendance and reduce drop-out rates (UNHR, 1989).

Around the region in South East Asia, the education landscape is quite different. For example, in Laos only 15% of children ages 3 to 5 years are participating in early childhood care and education (UNICEF, 2012). In Myanmar, although enrolment rate is 84% in primary education, the drop-out rate of children who do not complete primary level is 46% (UNICEF, 2012). The recent news of the dire circumstances of refugees has prompted UNHCR and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) to highlight the dismal fact that globally, only one in two refugee children go to primary school and one in four to secondary (Global Partnership for Education, 2016). Furthermore, more than half of the world's out-of-school children live in countries facing strife and violence and are deprived of their right to education (Global Partnership for Education, 2016). The different education scenarios so far highlighted and the many more that are evidenced in the diverse communities around the world compose the purpose and scope for education diplomacy.

Also, UNESCO has been tasked with the mandate to cover all aspects of education including formal and non-formal education (UNESCO, 2016). This responsibility is tied closely to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, to SDG4 – “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” The interconnectedness of the SDGs requires

both partnerships and networks at all levels to undertake such transformational change. Thus, education diplomacy requires a commitment to using negotiation and diplomacy in understanding the cultural context when setting educational goals. Considerations such as successful implementation, follow-up and the review process can only be effective if supported by effective multi-stakeholder partnerships and financing (UNESCO, 2016). Therein lies another angle to the purpose of the human connection. Through such interactions that cultivate trust among state and non-state players, it provides the roots for education diplomacy to advance education goals that mutually benefit the learner, his family, his neighborhood and the community at large.

While children and young people are shaped by the world, they too have the ability to influence the world around them (UNICEF, 2013). The era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) saw progress made in the reduction of household poverty, an increase in school attendance, a decrease in child death rates, and increased access to clean drinking water (UNICEF, 2013). The entry of the SDGs into a world of economic uncertainty, war and violence has made it ever more clear that if these goals are to be met, then ‘holding hands to work together’ has to be our mantra. As of 2015, the SDGs are spearheading efforts in the areas of health and education among others, so as to ensure investment in the future of *Every Person*. Sustainable development must

balance the scales of equity across all spectrums in order to break cycles of poverty and ensure that children and families of today and tomorrow are able to inherit and thrive in a liveable, safe and peaceful world (UNICEF, 2013). Education diplomacy thus has to take a serious look at its role in being a channel of peace.

All these reasons have given us the scope, impetus and direction for education diplomacy.

What Education Diplomacy Achieves

Educational diplomacy has been envisaged to exceed the normal traditional understanding of diplomacy between diplomats at the governmental level. "Education diplomacy cultivates trust to achieve benefits in the pursuit of context-specific education goals using negotiation and other diplomatic skills to communicate across regional or national boundaries or with local communities responsible for education delivery" (Hone & Murphy, 2016). It now includes new actors across other structures. As shown in Fig 1, these actors may constitute non-governmental organisations, high profile personalities, private sector, funding or philanthropy organisations, religious organisations and academics. Simply put, any one person or organisation can be argued to be an education diplomat provided the agenda is related to that of education.

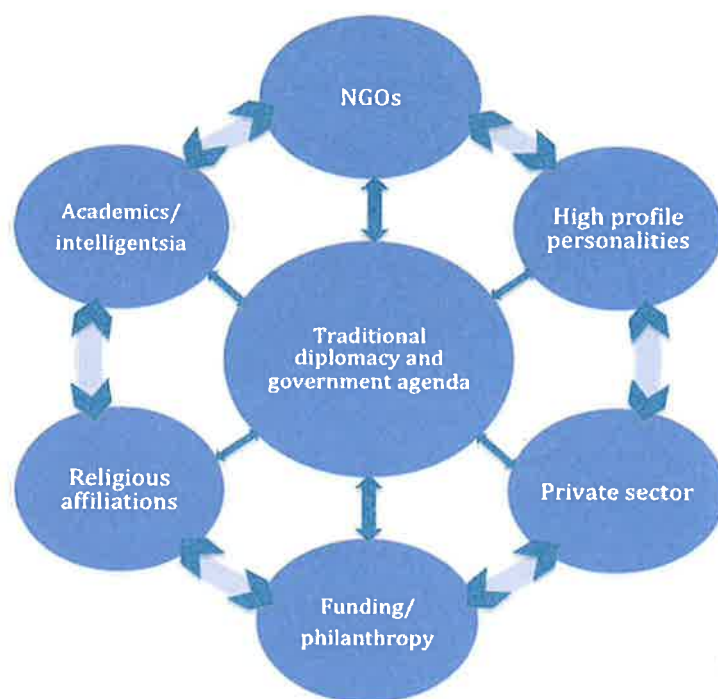


Fig 1: Actors in New Diplomacy (*adapted from Kelley, 2010, p. 296*)

How did this come to be so? What brought about the change from traditional ideas of diplomacy to this "new diplomacy"? Two separate arguments are pertinent here – that the emergence of new topics have caused this change, and this builds on an earlier argument that "organised crime, international terrorism, the environment, human rights, finance, trade, health, migration and new technology have changed the face of the international agenda quite profoundly (Riordan, 2003)". As these new or changed topics have altered the international agenda, new actors have become the subject of the shift between traditional diplomacy to the new version. All of us can become new actors in this new era of education diplomacy.

Who Should Engage in Education Diplomacy

Education diplomats may be artistes, celebrities, politicians, philanthropists, tycoons and other people of renown who are able to publicise and push agendas as education diplomats. Individuals who are well-known public figures may easily become education diplomats because of their reputation. Examples of such diplomats are: Andre Agassi, the sports personality, created a fund to open 23 charter schools; Angelina Jolie, the actress, opened a girls' school in Afghanistan and Oprah Winfrey, media owner and host, started an academy for girls in South Africa and donates generously to American charter schools.

However, education diplomats may also be people like you and us who are deeply passionate about an education issue that has yet been addressed. In the following paragraphs we provide examples of how we have acted as education diplomats in the Singapore context, through two community-based projects.

How to Enact Education Diplomacy

To carry out our roles effectively, we needed to have the basic knowledge of the community that we were working in and the practices of the individuals in that community. Having the knowledge was not enough; we needed to respect their perspectives, be able to put ourselves in their shoes, and be willing to learn from them. Only then could we create a win-win situation in which all parties collaborated

towards an agreed upon goal or vision for change. As such, as an education diplomat, the following skills and abilities were necessary:

1. Be able to respect the different beliefs and putting oneself in another's shoes so as to develop a common language in goal setting.
2. Have the ability to understand the goals of all parties involved and make sense of it once the goals have been reached.
3. Embrace the system thinking skills because education does not exist in solace. There are many factors affecting this system, in the micro, meso and macro levels. It is important to identify crucial leverage points to effect change.
4. Possess good communication skills; be open, listen, show empathy towards the views of others because in today's "new diplomacy", we need to weigh the differing priorities and decide if it is worthwhile to sacrifice the issue at hand for other business opportunities.
5. Build trusting relationships by exhibiting integrity and sincerity because education diplomacy* is not about short term gains but the collaborative effort of stakeholders coming together to achieve the SDGs.

Putting the above abilities and skills into action, the Project Hand in Hand and Project Tinker Kit were initiated.

Project Hand in Hand. Singapore certainly believes that education is critical in lifting people out of poverty; research has also

shown that high absenteeism rate at preschool predicts a worsening trend that will eventually result in children dropping out of school. As high absenteeism at preschool has unfavourable impact on children's continued education in schools, the Association for Early Childhood Educators, Singapore (AECES) introduced an early intervention programme, the Project Hand in Hand with the support of a funding partner. This Project aimed to get preschool children who were frequently absent to attend school regularly and the actors acted as education diplomats. This project started off with several rounds of pre-negotiations with the relevant partners before proper agenda set in for project implementation (see Fig 2).



Some preliminary ideas that were discussed at the pre-negotiations were:

1. Are the relevant partners contacted and included for the subsequent meetings?
2. What are the challenges / problems on the ground that we are trying to resolve?
3. Are there any other alternatives to help these children? Or can technology help?
4. Who will be the right agency to implement the project?
5. When will be a good period to implement the project?

Fig 2: Illustration of the Project's Process

Working with several partners required a higher level of negotiation, it was important that the formula or outcome was agreeable to all parties and every party felt that their interests were reflected in the formula or outcome. The agenda was then decided by the key actors for the concerned-agenda which was to increase preschool attendance (see Fig 3). Each had a role to play.

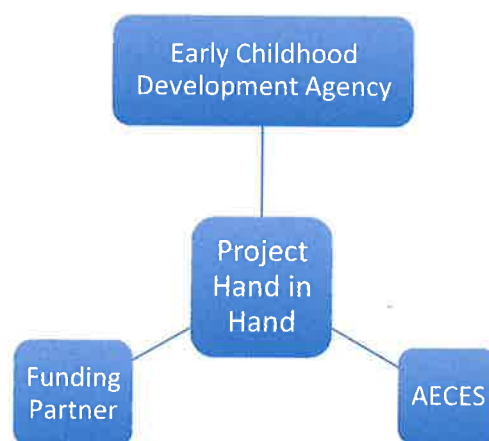


Fig 3: Key actors

All the actors were acting as education diplomats and through negotiations, each party agreed on the agenda and the scope before proceeding with the implementation. The Association proceeded with the project after the funding partner cleared the project with management. Its role was to find adults (volunteers) who were willing to take children to school and back. So far, AECES had matched about 20 children to the volunteers and the number is growing.

Project Tinker Kit. This was another project started by a social enterprise, Preschool Market. The founders of this social enterprise, acted as education

diplomats. Their aim was to give a tinker kit to each identified child of age 4-6 from less-privileged backgrounds, in particular those living in one- or two-room public housing. They were driven by their passion of giving every child the opportunity to learn and create. As such, they created a tinker kit for each child to give children and their families a means to express themselves through art and craft with the basic tools and guidance in the tinker kit. Project Tinker Kit also hoped to initiate family bonding between parents and children through the activities in the kit.

In order to get it going, the founders needed to source for funding and also make connections with children of the target group. For funding, much support was garnered through sponsorships and crowdfunding. Effort was put into communicating the objective of the project to the sponsors and what they can stand to gain through the sponsorship; creating a win-win situation. Also, engaging the families, volunteers and social services groups were its main thrust and tinker kits were brought into the

homes of the families. Included in this project were government agencies like the ECDA and IDA. They were interested in this project as it was a bottom-up initiative and had a social mission. Besides the government agencies, this project also involved other partners (Fig 4).

In 2015, about 100 children had benefitted from the Project Tinker Kit and there would be another 150 beneficiaries in 2016. The two projects, Hand in Hand and Tinker Kit, demonstrated the role that education diplomats could play in convincing others of their cause and achieve buy-in as we reminded ourselves that Every Child Matters.

Conclusion

The purpose of education diplomacy was to take the leadership in identifying, initiating, advocating, negotiating a sustainable plan on an education issue that would improve the lives of children and their families. It appeared a daunting task but working in a trusting and collaborative manner, taking baby steps and celebrating little victories along the way, made the whole process most fulfilling.

Government Agencies	Families	Family and Social Services Groups	Sponsors and Contributors	Polytechnics and students
Intervention for the children of 4-6 years old from the lower income families to lessen the income gap	Opportunities for family bonding and engaging in meaningful play	Intervention for the families and to encourage more engagement.	To provide learning opportunities for the children To engage in corporate social responsibility events	Opportunities for the younger generation to reach out to the community in supporting families, planning and executing the project

Fig 4

Children represent close to one-third of the world's population and this means that they rely on the other two-thirds to help them create a better tomorrow. The paths we take as education diplomats is wrought with challenges but it is our belief in the human spirit that keeps our purpose grounded and our efforts steadfast as education diplomats.

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