Identical, Fraternal, or Separated at Birth: A Case Study of Educator Teams Within American-Israeli School Twinning

FERN CHERTOK, DAVID MITTELBERG, DINAH LARON, AND ANNETTE KOREN

School-to-school collaboration has emerged as a key paradigm for fostering personal and institutional connections between Israeli and Diaspora youth, educators, and schools. Using the findings of a multi-year case study of a high school level twinning initiative, this article describes the challenges to this form of transnational collaboration and takes the first steps to articulating a theory of intervention of Israeli-Diaspora school twinning at the organizational level. The article suggests two processes, collaborative capacity and cultural competence, critical to development of positive and productive relationships in school partnerships. Institutional twinning is suggested as the goal of these interventions at the organizational level.

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed an evolution in educational efforts to foster connections between American Jewish youth and their...
Israeli counterparts. The traditional communal paradigm reflected a homeland-centric approach and emphasized Israel education in Diaspora day and supplementary schools culminating in heritage tourism to Israel (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008; Powers, 2011). A new paradigm is emerging which focuses on developing mutual understanding and appreciation of the unique contours of Jewish identity and life in both Israel and the Diaspora and a sense of transnational Jewish peoplehood (Ehrenkrantz, 2008; Mittelberg, 2011). Introduced by Mordechai Kaplan (1948), the term “Jewish peoplehood” describes a sense of belonging and connection among Jews that transcends national, political, or religious belief differences.

Since the turn of the millennium, school-to-school collaboration has emerged as a key paradigm for fostering a bi-directional sense of peoplehood between Israeli and Diaspora youth, educators, and schools. These school “twinning” initiatives bring together educational institutions often from sister cities and typically include supplementary and day schools in the United States and public and private secular schools in Israel. The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI, 2012) currently lists over 200 such partnerships as part of its International School Twinning Network, the vast majority of which include a North American school. The activities subsumed under the rubric of school twinning vary widely, but typically include reciprocal visits, coordinated curriculum, and online exchanges.

Cross-national educator teams are integral to school twinning initiatives as both the agents and targets of change. One of the explicit goals of Israeli-American school twinning is to build positive and productive relationships between educators at paired schools characterized by reciprocity, mutuality, and acceptance of the unique identity of their respective institutions (Mittelberg, 2011). In many ways the exchange and collaboration at the heart of school twinning begins with cross-national teams of educators. In other words, the “theory of change” (Lipsey & Cordray, 2000) of American-Israeli school twinning includes the establishment of cooperative and effective cross-national teams of educators as a causal mechanism critical to the overall success of these initiatives. The existing literature on school twinning suggests that educators build connections to individual colleagues and perceive impact on their personal educational vision and practice (Pomson & Grant, 2004); however, this research does not answer important questions about characteristics, strategies, and experiences that influence, amplify, or temper the successful working of cross-national educator teams. The title for this article, “Identical, Fraternal, or Separated at Birth?” is partly tongue in cheek, but it also reflects the goal of employing the case study presented to expand our understanding of the workings, development, and tenor of the cross-national educator teams charged with designing and implementing school twinning initiatives.

The findings presented are based on a 3-year case study of a high school level school twinning initiative developed by the Boston-Haifa Connection,
a nearly two-decades-old partnership between the Boston Jewish community and the City of Haifa. The two pairs of twinned schools comprising this pilot were included in the research; an American supplementary school and an Israeli private school in one pair and a day school and an Israeli public school in the other pair. Both partnerships employed the same basic strategies of student encounter—short trips to each other’s schools by relatively small groups of students and virtual exchanges through video conferencing and Skype. Although the Boston-Haifa Connection has a long history of sponsoring school twinning, the goals of this pilot program were broader and more ambitious, aimed at engendering change at multiple levels including students, educators, and school communities. Most germane to this article was the explicit goal of developing replicable models of successful cross-national educator collaboration. In other words, the theory of change of this pilot program acknowledged the pivotal role of effective Israeli-American educator teams.

The research employed a multi-method qualitative strategy (Denzin, 1970) to develop a nuanced understanding of the evolution of the two cross-national educator teams. Data sources included key informant interviews, ethnographic observation, and documentary review. Each of these forms of qualitative data was analyzed through the grounded theory model which consists of an iterative process of content analysis resulting in identification of main themes and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Semi-structured interviews were conducted at several points in time during each of the 3 years of the pilot with dozens of key informants including school administrators, lay leaders, and educators from the four involved schools. Interview protocols focused on the development of the educator teams, the challenges of joint planning and implementation, the most effective strategies for developing good working relationships, and how the school twinning initiative intersected with the goals of each school. Ethnographic observations were conducted on a variety of educator team interactions for each school pair including three cross-national team planning weeks, as well as separate meetings of Israeli and American team members. Observations focused on the scope and tenor of the collaborative process, challenges faced in joint planning, and effective approaches for cooperative work. Team members were informed of the presence of observers and only public behavior was noted. Curricular materials including educational goals and lesson plans were also reviewed for each school pair.

The following discussion presents and elaborates on a model of the development of Israeli-American educator teams. We propose three elements key to positive and productive working relationships within these teams and ultimately to the success of the school twinning agenda: mission-centered goals, collaborative capacity, and cultural competence. Potential strategies for promoting the effectiveness of each of these aspects of cross-national collaboration are also highlighted.
OVERVIEW OF A THEORY OF CROSS-NATIONAL EDUCATOR TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Positing a theory of the development of cross-national educator teams such as the ones observed in this research includes articulation of the critical inputs to the process, desired outputs, and discussion of the transformative processes that lead from input to output. Figure 1 graphically represents a proposed theory of the development of American-Israeli educator teams highlighting the elements that are the focus of this discussion.

There are many inputs influencing the success of cross-national educator teams including the skills, experience, and motivations of individual educators, as well as the school’s resources and history of twinning. In this discussion we focus on mission-centered goals as a foundational input and necessary motivating force for the work of educator teams. Mission-centered goals are outcomes that align with the overarching purpose of the school and address or resolve barriers to achieving that mission (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). The proposed model also focuses on two transformative processes within successful cross-national teams: development of collaborative capacity and cultural competence. Collaborative capacity refers to the ability to foster a positive and trusting working climate, articulate mechanisms for shared power and decision making, engage in honest exploration and communication of differences, resolve conflicts and misunderstandings, and build an effective infrastructure for communication across organizational boundaries. Cultural competence describes skills needed to bridge inevitable cultural differences and to overcome the bias toward ethnocentrism (Triandis, 2006). The following discussion expands on each of these elements of the proposed model and employs observations from the case study of American-Israeli educator teams to highlight potential challenges.

**FIGURE 1.** Development of cross-national educator teams.
INPUT: MISSION-CENTERED GOALS

Through 3 years of research we repeatedly observed that when the development of cross-national educator teams is seen as important to achieving the core goals of the school, the project will be prioritized in terms of resources, staffing, and organizational attention. For example, as the 2nd year of the initiative started, one of the partnerships experienced dramatic growth in their collaborative process. The centerpiece of this change was the development of a shared curriculum that both schools viewed as important, exciting, and groundbreaking. This curriculum was intended to address a mission-centered goal for both schools; providing students with a language and framework for seeing themselves and their Jewish identity within the sociocultural history of Israel and the American Jewish community. For the Israeli school this curriculum was also seen as a means to another high priority goal, addressing perceived gaps in the Israeli Ministry of Education curriculum for teaching the history of the state of Israel. The advent of this shared mission-centered goal resulted in the project receiving attention, resources in terms of educator and staff time, and prioritization from the administrations of both schools.

It is important to note that mission-centered goals do not have to be identical between partnered schools for them to animate the work of cross-national educator teams. For example, we observed subtle but fundamental differences in the way that the American and Israeli schools framed the goals of the school twinning initiative. For the two Israeli schools, the goal was to utilize the discussion of Jewish peoplehood and Israeli-Diaspora relations to enhance the sense of Jewish identity amongst their pupils. This focus is driven by the perception that Israeli students are lacking in a personal Jewish identity (Shenhar Commission, 1994; Corb, Pascal, Rosenberg, & Silver, 2011). In other words, the goal in Israel is to translate a sense of national identity to a personal sense of Jewish identity by means of transnational belonging. For the Israeli schools one of the successes of their partnerships is that discourse on Jewish identity and culture is visible and palpable within the public domain of their schools alongside the prevailing language and ethos of nationalism and Israeli Zionism. In contrast, for the American schools, the goal is to translate the personal sense of Jewish identity that many students already have into a more global sense of Jewish connection and responsibility. Success for them is not primarily about expanding the exploration of Jewish identity but rather about enhancing students’ sense of responsibility for the worldwide Jewish community. Our observations indicate that these differences in goals are not in themselves a threat to the development of American-Israeli educator teams. What is critical is that these differences are explicitly acknowledged and become part of the educator team discourse. For example, one of the American schools wanted to focus a new 11th-grade curriculum on Jewish responsibility for repairing
the world. Their Israeli partner school wanted to build an online platform for student exploration of identity and connection to American peers. The cross-national team for this partnership talked explicitly about the different needs they sought to meet with their new 11th-grade programming and worked out ways to synergistically meet both sets of goals.

Our research also suggests that the failure to identify mission-centered goals can derail the ability of cross-national teams to work productively. For example, one of the American schools already perceived itself as having well-developed approaches to Israel education and Jewish identity development and did not find these goals of the twinning pilot to be particularly salient. In the first two years of the initiative the program-related goals for this school remained vague and unclear and this lack of mission-centered goals hindered the development of the educator team in several ways. For example, the American team members were never sure how much time and energy they should be devoting to this project in relation to other more mission-centered activities in which they were engaged. The Israeli members of this team felt that their American partners’ commitment to the endeavor was lackluster and did not meet their own level of investment leading them to question the value and longevity of the collaboration. In the 3rd year of the project the American school came to a new understanding of the potential of this initiative to meet one of their core goals, to foster Hebrew language proficiency within the context of learning about contemporary Israeli society. The resulting change in the American school’s motivation and investment was palpable and expanded educator resources were devoted to developing a program that would meet this new mission-centered goal.

Mission-centered goals set the stage for the work of Israeli-American educator teams and animate subsequent elements of the process. Although they do not need to completely align, explicit articulation of goals and open communication about differences in the priority of goals between partnership schools is critical to the development of an effective cross-national team.

TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS #1: BUILDING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

Twinned schools represent a unique instance of organization-to-organization cooperation, a topic that has received extensive attention in the social science literature. Studies of inter-organizational collaboration make clear that to be successful, cross-organizational teams need to develop their collaborative capacity comprised of the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to work in a collaborative manner (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001). Both progress and challenges to building collaborative capacity within both Israeli-American educator teams were observed in our research.
Although both teams aspired to collaboratively develop curriculum and programming, in the 1st year of the initiative they quickly fell into patterns of working in parallel. Teams did not have timelines or schedules for working together. Also missing were tools and online resources for sharing work in progress. In fact, during the inaugural year of the project these were cross-national teams in name only; interactions were not among the full group, but instead were limited to select pairs of teachers or sporadic communications. This autonomy in planning and implementation limited opportunities for teams to get to know and work together and resulted in potentially avoidable problems. For example, during the first year's program in the United States, the American teachers noted with dismay that Israeli students did not have adequate English skills to completely follow group discussions or fully understand verbally delivered instructions. Including an advance review of activities with the Israeli educators on the team might have surfaced this issue and allowed for development of solutions but this did not happen.

One of the hallmarks of a successful collaboration is the explicit definition of how decisions will be made and how differences will be resolved. One of the Israeli-American teams provided a cautionary example of the negative outcomes of failing to conduct explicit discussion and reach agreement on how decision making will be handled. The first student travel program within this partnership involved Israeli students visiting Boston. The American team designed all aspects of the experience with little input from their Israeli peers. Based on this experience the Israeli planning team assumed that each school would be fully responsible for orchestrating both the student and teacher sessions that they hosted. When the American school placed stipulations on the nature and location of programming for their students in Israel, the Israeli team interpreted it as a violation of the “rules of the game.” Tensions over this assumption of symmetry in decision making also emerged during preparations for the educator planning retreat held in Haifa. Based on their experience of the previous team meeting which the American educators were solely responsible for planning, the Israeli team members assumed that it was their turn to take ownership of the session being held in their city. When the American educators requested involvement in decision making, it was interpreted by the Israelis as vote of no-confidence in their professional qualifications and their ability to plan a high quality program. The resulting tension and feelings of insult nearly derailed the team planning session.

Each of the cross-national educator teams also faced important organizational asymmetries in the structure, constituencies, size, and staffing of their respective schools. For example, in one pair, the American school was a Jewish day school with a very homogeneous population of Jewish students. By contrast, their Israeli partner was a large public high school with a diverse population that included a small minority of Druze and Arab students as well as Ethiopian Jews and new Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union.
At the start of the second year we observed an important exchange between educators on this team that highlighted the importance of exploration and acceptance of organizational differences as part of building collaborative capacity. As part of a week of face-to-face planning sessions, these teachers were asked to describe the characteristics of their respective school buildings, students, and organizations. It was clear from their reactions that until that moment, team members on both sides had not fully realized some of the important ways in which their schools differed. For example, the Israeli teachers were shocked to find out that class size in the American day school was almost half the size of their own classes and American teachers were struck by the absence of parent involvement in the ongoing life of the school, a situation far different from their own. An Israeli educator stated, “There are big differences between the schools. The nature of the lesson structure, teacher student relations, etc., are all different. We hadn’t prepared ourselves for the extent of the differences.”

The collaborative capacity of each cross-national educator team was also dependent on their appreciation of differences in the organizational culture of their respective schools. For example, American and Israeli schools differed significantly in the centrality of Jewish identity development. Both of the American schools, a day school and a supplementary school, had an explicit focus on Jewish education and identity development; it was their reason for being. By contrast both of the Israeli schools belong to the secular sector of the Israeli education system and engage “Jewishness” primarily from the cultural and national perspective, rather than from a religious or personal identity perspective. Especially early in the initiative, this fundamental difference in the salience of Jewish education and observance in school culture led to miscommunications and erosion of collaborative capacity. For example, American team members in one school pair were concerned that their Israeli teammates did not fully understand or appreciate their insistence on kosher food and Shabbat observance during in-person student visits in Israel. This tension within the educator team came to a head over planning related to how students would be celebrating the secular New Year as part of their experience in Haifa, a situation made more difficult by the fact that this holiday coincided with Shabbat. The American members of the planning team were very concerned that their students’ observance of Shabbat not be compromised by travel on public transportation with their Israeli peers to participate in local celebrations. Although the Israeli educators agreed to have students from both schools spend the night at a hotel, they did not really understand this need for a level of Shabbat observance that was alien to almost all of their student body. During the subsequent years of the initiative this team continued to engage in dialogue about this issue and the Israeli educators came to understand that certain elements of religious observance were central to the American school’s identity and culture.
One of the goals for Israeli-American educator teams is to form a shared "community of practice" (Wenger, 1999) with common language and pedagogical perspectives. Although all of the participants in these cross-national teams were educators, in actuality the American and Israeli team members had limited professional common ground at the start of the project. Most of the American teachers were Jewish educators often with a background and focus on experiential approaches, while their Israeli counterparts were predominantly classroom teachers of secular subjects, such as science, history, or civics, with a more formal pedagogical perspective. In other words, the American and Israeli participants on these cross-national teams shared little in terms of professional background and language. In the first 2 years of the partnerships these differences remained unacknowledged and often resulted in collaboration challenges. For example, the face-to-face student encounter hosted by one of the American schools included a number of activities that involved personal sharing, reflection, and discussion. The American team had not previewed this activity with their Israeli peers and noted afterwards that the Israeli teachers did not seem as skilled or comfortable with facilitating experiential educational strategies. One of the takeaways of this research is the importance of including at least some team members that share a common pedagogical language as a foundation for collaborative work.

The pairing of Israeli and American schools presents a tremendous opportunity for positive and productive encounter between educators from different parts of the world. However, to fully realize this potential, cross-national teams must navigate multiple barriers to build a successful collaborative process. Some of the challenges to collaboration encountered by the two cross-national educator teams studied in this research related to overcoming the logistical difficulties inherent in partnering with colleagues several time zones distant. However, the fundamental challenges to the development of collaborative capacity lay in the teams' initial inability to explicitly discuss how they would work together, make decisions, and handle disagreements. Especially in the first year of the initiative the educator teams struggled to model the sense of camaraderie and communications they were trying to achieve for their students. As one teacher summed it up, the partnerships faced "the challenge of time, space, culture, and language." In a similar vein, differences in organizational structure and culture or in pedagogical perspective did not by themselves impede collaboration. Instead, the difficulty lay in the fact that these cross-national teams did not take the time to explore their implications for development and implementation of the project.

Initial difficulties in developing collaborative capacity are not totally unexpected. Research indicates that among the initial tasks to be accomplished by interorganizational coalitions are the development of a positive and trusting working climate, articulation of a shared vision, and agreement on mechanisms for shared power and decision making.
A Case Study of American-Israeli School Twinning

(Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). The literature also indicates that interorganizational partnerships follow a developmental course in establishing theses aspects of collaborative capacity, maturing in their commitment and ability to overcome barriers of communication, resource disparity, and organizational culture (Chinman, Anderson, Imm, Wandersman, & Goodman, 1996; Florin, Mitchell, & Stevenson, 1993; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). In the second and third year of the project we observed significant strides in collaborative capacity, especially in one of the cross-national teams. This team’s cocreation of a curriculum served to build professional communication, trust, and cooperation between educators from the two schools and motivated them to surface and resolve conceptual and logistical differences. Research on intergroup relationships indicates that working closely together, as equal peers, and in the service of shared superordinate goals are the exact conditions most conducive to reducing intergroup tensions and stereotypes (Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990).

TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS #2: DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Israeli-American twinning initiatives bring together teams of educators that on one hand see themselves as belonging to the same Jewish people, but at the same time face inherent, but not always obvious cultural differences. Participation in an American-Israeli educator team in particular confronts participants with the juxtaposition between their common history and heritage and the differences between the groups in terms of culture, understandings, and forms of Jewish identity. The success of cross-national educator teams requires the development of cultural competence or the ability to grant legitimacy to differences, display mutual respect and openness, and raise self awareness of assumptions and beliefs (Banks & McGee Banks, 2001).

Cultural groups differ along multiple dimensions including language, worldview, values, normative patterns of relationship, and in the ways that they perceive and weight information (Triandis, 2006). Research on multinational companies suggests that the values and norms of organizational life vary by country and that these cross-cultural differences can lead to difficulties in orchestrating the work of divisions in different parts of the world. For example, relevant to the current study is research demonstrating that Israeli organizations are characterized by much lower “power distance” than American organizations, indicating less reliance on superiors or vertical sources of information in decision making (Hofstede, 1983; Smith, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2002). At the same time American organizations score much higher than do Israeli counterparts on confidence in individual, as opposed to group, decision making (Hofstede, 1983).
Both of the cross-national teams observed in this study attributed some of the difficulties they encountered even into the second and third years of the project to not knowing how to work effectively across cultural differences. Some of these challenges can be thought of as translation errors in understanding both the surface and more nuanced underlying meaning of communications. For example, especially in the first year, we observed numerous instances of teams misinterpreting each others’ intentions, particularly in response to suggested ideas. American team members often used the phrase “that’s interesting” when they wished to communicate that they were not on-board with an idea suggested by their Israeli partners. In the New England context this is a culturally appropriate linguistic means to disagree while allowing the other party to save face. It may also be a way to indicate that the listener cannot make the decision by themselves and needs to refer it to a higher authority within the school. In sharp contrast, the Israeli team members took this response to indicate not only interest but consent to move ahead with implementation. On several occasions this linguistic misunderstanding resulted in Israeli team members assuming they had the endorsement of their American partners and proceeding to take initial steps to actualize a suggestion. For example, the Israeli members of one educator team came to a planning session fully expecting to develop a joint science program with their American partners. The Israeli science teacher had come prepared with project ideas and the expectation that the project would be moving forward. She recalled that this idea had been described as “interesting” by the American team coordinator. Although an American science teacher was in attendance for part of the meeting it became apparent that neither she nor the other American team members shared this expectation. The Israeli educators felt that they had been misled and the American teachers were confused by how their intentions could have been so completely misunderstood.

As the second year of the project started we observed progress toward bridging differences in language. For example, between the first and second year of the project one of the partnerships experienced a successful week of teacher planning facilitated by Facing History, an organization known for its focus on fostering intergroup and intercultural understanding. Immediately prior to this planning session the Israeli team members participated in a seminar where they were exposed to approaches to exploring identity and reflective practice in the classroom. Many of the American teachers on this team had previous experience with the same seminar. As a result, team members from both schools entered the planning process with a common framework and language for explicitly exploring cultural differences. The team quickly realized that although they all used the term “peoplehood,” it did not express the same idea for Israeli and American educators. One of the hallmarks of this planning meeting was the team’s productive grappling with developing a common understanding of the concept of peoplehood.
Israeli and American team members also experienced cultural differences in working together that reflected deeper disparities in worldview. Temporal orientations differ significantly across cultures (Triandis, 1982/1983) and one of the areas of tension that arose in both cross-national educator teams related to differences between Americans’ and Israelis’ sense of the appropriate pace and tempo of planning. For example, just weeks prior to their first student trip to Israel, the American educators in one team were distressed when they received an incomplete itinerary from their Israeli partners. The Americans interpreted this as a crisis in planning and quickly enlisted the funder and an external educational consultant to assist with the completion of plans. The Israeli team members assumed that any details that were not completed in advance would be worked out when the American group arrived. Although this approach of finalizing details on the ground and “just in time” planning was familiar to the Israeli educators on the team, their American counterparts characterized it as “last minute” and found it stressful. During the second year of the initiative, both of the teams came to understand the deeper cultural roots of this difference in thinking about time. In particular, American educators accepted that the “horizon” for logistical planning in Israeli society is typically shorter than in the United States. More importantly the American educators came to understand that this pattern may be a manifestation of a deeper normative avoidance of making long-range plans and may be one element of a culturally entrenched response to coping with Israel’s long-standing conflict with its neighbors (Bar-Tal, 2007).

Perhaps the most surprising cultural divide between American and Israeli team members was the different meaning that Jerusalem held for them. During preparations for teacher planning meetings to be held in Haifa, the American members of one team insisted that Shabbat activities be conducted in Jerusalem. The Israeli teachers demanded the meeting take place in a kibbutz in the north of Israel that was also used for student retreats in their partnership. The Israelis framed the disagreement in terms of cultural geography pointing out that although Jerusalem is the capital of the state of Israel it does not represent all of Israel. They wanted to introduce their American colleagues to Israel’s multicultural Galilean periphery comprised of Arabs, Druze, and Jews, rather than focusing on Israel’s political metropolis. In addition, they chose a location that was invested with an ideology of pluralistic Judaism. By contrast, the American educators claimed that Jerusalem was the capital of the Jewish people and felt it was inconceivable to visit the homeland without “pilgrimage” to that symbolic center. The Americans felt that being asked to forgo time in Jerusalem was a violation of the foundation of their relationship with Israel. The ideological chasm between the American and Israeli team members was most poignantly revealed when the two groups were asked to choose a cultural product that would be symbolic of “their” Jerusalem. The Americans chose “Jerusalem of Gold” by Naomi Shemer, a song that presents a symbolic, eternal, and idealized view
of the city. The Israelis chose “Jerusalem of Iron” by Meir Ariel, a more cynical reflection on the nationalism and combat of the Six Day War. Through this enlightening exercise both Israeli and American team members gained awareness of differences in how they conceptualized and experienced Israel and Jerusalem.

Cochran-Smith (1995) uses the term “discourse of differences” to describe the process of developing awareness and comfort with differences in language, culture, and worldview. As was the case with collaborative capacity, cultural competence was not quickly attained by the educators observed in this study, nor was it an inevitable outgrowth of working in a cross-national setting. The ability to bridge inevitable cultural differences, such as those encountered by these educator teams, requires explicit and concentrated focus in order to overcome the bias toward ethnocentrism (Triandis, 2006).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The effectiveness of cross-national educator teams is critical to the success of school twinning initiatives not only because they are charged with the important tasks of designing and implementing programming, but because they have the potential to form bridges of collaboration between entire school organizations. At the same time, our observations suggest that these teams do not typically experience a smooth course of development and that they face predictable, although not insurmountable, challenges to their success. This case study also suggests several avenues of intervention to support the development of the elements proposed as critical to the development of cross-national educator teams; establishing an extended prologue period, institutionalizing the role of external cultural translators, and developing online tools to support collaboration.

**Establish an Extended Prologue**

Effective collaboration within cross-national teams does not happen quickly and asking these groups of educators to cocreate programming at the same time as they are taking the first steps toward developing collaborative capacity and cultural competence may be a recipe for disappointment. We suggest the implementation of an extended “prologue” period in the process of school twinning. This preliminary stage would precede specific program planning and might include facilitated and/or structured activities to help American and Israeli team members get to know each other; explore similarities and differences in their school organizations; develop shared concepts, frameworks, and values; and establish expectations and strategies for working in a collaborative manner. Multiple cross-national educator teams
might be brought together for a series of workshops or training to jumpstart or facilitate the process. During this preliminary work, teams might also be asked to work together on smaller projects as a means to work out impediments to collaboration before they address the core tasks of the twinning initiative.

This prologue might accomplish several important goals. It would set the context for ongoing explicit examination of differences, establishing this as a norm for future work. Investment in a 6-month to 1-year prologue period would also set a higher threshold for school participation and might dissuade those for whom the project does not align with mission-centered goals. This prologue stage might culminate in the development of explicit and shared notions of decision making, timelines for working together, strategies for regularly checking in on the status of the partnership, and for sharing work in progress.

Institutionalize Involvement of Cultural Translators

The current study suggests that cross-national educator teams may benefit from the participation of “cultural translators.” These external consultants can assist teams to become more aware of cultural gaps and foster the development of mutual confidence, trust, and bridging strategies. Ideally the individual selected to play this role would have cultural understanding of both the American and Israeli context and be able to proactively help teams to understand these differences when they first arise and before they have developed into problems.

During the first year of this case study facilitation services were primarily employed to address entrenched tensions or crisis situations. During the second and third years of the project there has been growing acceptance and proactive use of cultural translators to develop productive professional and cultural discourse between schools. For example, we observed the very successful use of facilitators taking the role of cultural translator during week-long team planning sessions. When team members found themselves at odds, these external facilitators were instrumental in getting both Israeli and American team members to directly confront the tension, examine their underlying assumptions, and re-establish respectful and transparent communication. Our suggestion is that cultural facilitation services be institutionalized as an integral resource to cross-national teams.

Develop Online Tools for Collaboration

Working with physically distant partners presents unique challenges to cross-national teams. Faced with tasks related to school twinning as well as their ongoing teaching and administration responsibilities, cross-national team members have little time to develop the structures and tools to support
their work. We suggest that funders of Israeli-American school twinning devote resources to building an online site and associated tools for enhancing the work of multiple teams. These online settings might provide work “spaces” and files for each individual team, but might also allow teams to share their best practices and solicit support and suggestions from other teams.

CONCLUSIONS

In the arena of international secular education, school twinning has been shown to be a successful strategy for developing collective or regional identity (Uzunboylu, 2006; European Commission, 2004), for fostering international and intercultural understanding (Rose, 1989; Romero, 2005), and for resource sharing (Saunders & Hamilton, 1999). Israeli-American school-to-school collaboration also has great potential for fostering community-to-community relationships that transcend national borders. Our research suggests that mission-centered goals, collaborative capacity, and cultural competence are essential elements for achieving an effective and meaningful partnership process between Israeli and American educators.

Returning to the title for this article, the question is whether the cross-national educator teams studied acted like identical, fraternal, or separated at birth twins. The teams we studied faced inherent differences in organizational context, structure, and focus. There are significant differences between secular schools in a sovereign Jewish state and Jewish communal schools within a society where Jews comprise a very small minority. From our preceding discussion, it is clear that although the American and Israeli members of these teams share the “DNA” of common Jewish heritage, they are not identical “twins.” In fact, at the outset this shared heritage often (albeit counterintuitively) made it difficult to discern the cultural gaps that existed and resulted in teams operating in isolation from each other, as if they were “separated at birth” and thus missing the goal and value of twinning. Based on the findings of this case study we would suggest the metaphor of fraternal twins as the best descriptor of effective cross-national teams. These teams enter the relationship with both a strong sense of connection as well as explicit acceptance of the aspects of their organizational goals and cultural context that are quite different. The emerging relationship is grounded in an intentional dialogic re-learning of each other’s everyday life as Jews and the mundane and often taken for granted aspects of Jewish living in each community become inspiration for both American and Israeli team members to reexamine their own choices and expectations. Within this framework, teams can acknowledge the ways in which they differ, building bridges across their organizational and cultural divides, and where possible, leveraging these differences as strengths. The primary goal of the collaboration becomes
how to develop pedagogic and organizational strategies that can bridge the asymmetries.

The research described in this article begins but does not complete the process of articulating a theory of development for cross-national educator teams. Case studies, such as this one, have both benefits and limitations that should be kept in mind in evaluating their utility. Case study methodology suffers from several threats to internal and external validity including the representativeness of the cases, the ability to draw causal inferences, and the generalizability of results to the broader population, in this case to other educator teams (Cook & Campbell, 1979). However, the case method strategy is also particularly valuable in the exploratory stages of research into a topic and is well-suited to capturing the nuance and natural flow of a phenomenon. Case studies also allow for the emergence of new ideas and understandings. It is in its contribution to conceptualizing and developing hypotheses about the development and workings of cross-national teams that we feel this study has its greatest value. Clearly, each of the contentions presented will need to be further explored using other research strategies.

REFERENCES


