

# Media Influences on Young People's Perceptions of Africa

Africa-UK Journalism Education Exchange Network

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## Abstract

Since 2004 the LUCAS has been running an outreach programme in Leeds schools to promote a greater understanding of Africa by recruiting, training and supporting African PG students, studying at Leeds University, to deliver activity days in primary schools. Research conducted by LUCAS alongside this outreach programme indicates that young people have a very stereotypical perception of Africa. The postcolonial paternalistic perspectives of Africa propagated by the media and charity campaigns were found to have the greatest influence on young people's perceptions.

Despite numerous educational initiatives, to promote equality and diversity and incorporate a global dimension to the curriculum, young people's perceptions of Africa have changed little over the past twenty years. Assessment of the impact of the African PG students indicates that they were able to challenge young people's stereotypical perceptions by providing them with an opportunity to engage directly with someone from the continent.

This workshop will discuss the research undertaken by LUCAS and raise questions about how the media can respond to its findings.

How can the media counter the negative stereotypes of Africa that pervade coverage of the continent?

How can the media facilitate direct engagement between its audience and Africans from across the continent?

## Background

Young people's perceptions of the world have been the focus of study for many academics over the past 25 years. Even though the area of the school curriculum devoted to the study of the 'developing world' has increased, and a Global Dimension has been incorporated to all subjects, young people's stereotypical perceptions of the Global South have changed little. Early researchers found that young people's perceptions of the world change as they grow older (Gambrill 1996) and that as they become older these perceptions become lodged into their emotional perceptions of themselves and the world around them (Marsden 1976, Milner 1983). Young people under the age of 12 years can accept adult attitudes towards distant localities as fact without question and criticism (Wiegand 1992) but these can be easily challenged (Friend 1995). These studies highlight the need for early intervention, in primary school, to ensure that young people form balanced perceptions of the world and do not propagate negative stereotypes.

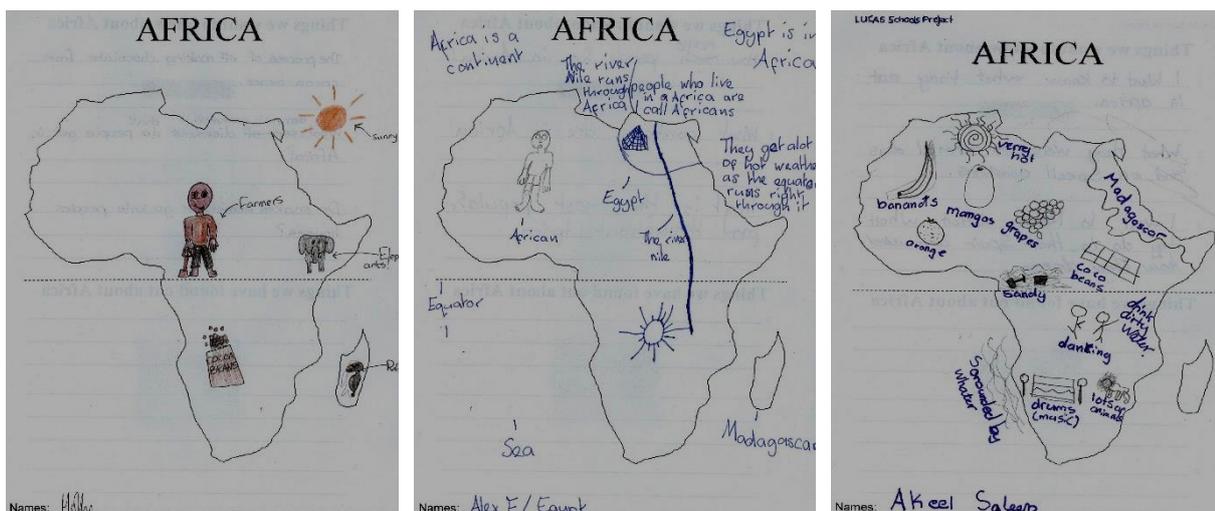
There have been initiatives that provide an indication of how to challenge negative stereotypes in schools. Global School Partnerships, for example, have allowed pupils to study a distant locality firsthand through direct contact with their partner school without having to rely on second hand materials that generally focus on poverty, debt and underdevelopment (Pickering, 2007). They have presented schools with an opportunity to develop activities that require pupils to engage in a

process of structured enquiry that relates to the experiences of real people (Disney, 2004). Also, the reciprocal visit experience has increased teacher knowledge and understanding of another culture and society and enabled them to teach about a distant locality more effectively and with more authority (Disney 2008). But these activities are not without their dangers. Teacher visits to the Global South require a 'decolonisation' of the participants' mind to ensure they don't place value judgments on the places they go to and the people they meet (Martin & Griffiths H 2011). Also, if global school partnerships are not embedded into a school's educational provision there is a danger that stereotypical perceptions of their partner locality can be reinforced (Pickering, 2007).

LUCAS has developed an alternative approach to facilitating direct engagement between pupils and people from Africa. The Centre's African Voices programme recruits and trains African PG students to deliver activity days in local primary schools. In 2009 research was undertaken to assess young people's perceptions of Africa and the impact of African Voices on those perceptions.

### Young People's Perceptions of Africa

To ascertain existing knowledge and awareness of African pupils were given blank maps of Africa and asked to write or draw anything they knew about the continent. Africa maps, like the ones below, provided an insight into how young people perceive the continent. Nearly all of the Africa maps analysed had a drawing of a sun or words indicating the pupils perceived Africa as being hot and dry. References to Madagascar were common because many pupils had seen the Disney film of the same name. There were images of animals, music, dancing and Egyptian pyramids which probably come from wildlife documentaries and travel programmes. The most disturbing drawings depicted Africans as poor, helpless farmers living in straw huts and lacking clean drinking water. These images are the ones young people see on news programmes or in charity fundraising campaigns. There was no recognition of the urban, industrial and technological aspects of the continent or the accomplishments of African people on any of the Africa maps.



To gather quantitative data, on knowledge and perceptions of Africa, pupils were asked to complete a short questionnaire. The questionnaire investigated linguistic and visual perceptions

by asking pupils to choose three words and three images, from a selection provided, that they thought best described Africa and best showed what Africa looked like. Knowledge of contemporary Africa was investigated through a series of statements to which pupils were asked to agree or disagree with. Support for development was investigated by asking pupils to indicate the importance they would place on a range of initiative to help people in Africa.

Over 63% of all pupils selected the word *Scorching* as one of their three words which related to the images of the sun drawn on many of the Africa Maps. Many of the pupils also selected the words *Arid* and *Thirsty* which confirmed their general perception of Africa as being hot and dry. Perceptions of Africa as a poor and underdeveloped continent were reflected by the selection of the words *Starving* and *Primitive*. All together these five words accounted for 68% of all pupil selections.

African poverty and underdevelopment were also prominent in the choices pupils made about what Africa looked like. Over 73% of all pupils selected a picture of hungry children holding out an empty plate as one of their three images and 53% of all pupils selected an image of straw huts in a rural setting. The influence of cultural and exotic television programmes was also apparent with 40% of all pupils selecting traditional Zulu dancers and 38% selecting elephants on the East African Savannah.

The pupil responses to the statements revealed how their limited knowledge of the continent distorted their perceptions of the Africa. Only 11% of pupils thought there was ample food in Africa; a testimony to the success of NGO disaster appeals. Only 15% of pupils thought that people in Africa used mobile phones and only 10% of thought there were skyscrapers in Africa; a reflection of a media that focus on the underdeveloped agrarian aspects of the continent.

Pupil support though for development initiatives to improve the lives of people in Africa was very strong. Nearly all pupils thought buying fairly traded goods from Africa and supporting charities that worked in Africa to be very important; an indication of the success of DfID's promotion of development awareness and NGO campaigns to engender compassion for those less fortunate.

Focus group discussions with pupils were conducted following their African Voices programmes. The information obtained from these discussions assisted in the interpretation of the data from the pupil questionnaire. They confirmed that the main influences on young people's perceptions of Africa were from news reports, TV programmes and charity appeals.

"When you see Red Nose Day you see loads of pictures of people starving."

"I thought all people were poor and they didn't have any technology."

"I thought it was like what you see on the news – straw huts and fighting."

"I used to think that Africa was primitive and deprived because the media focuses on the worst part."

Quotes from pupils (2009)

The overall results of the research data indicated that the information and images about Africa pupils obtain from the media are the main influence on their perceptions of the continent. Analysis of the results between schools across the city suggested that there was a correlation

between pupil perceptions of Africa and the level of social deprivation in the area around the school. In general, pupils from schools in more affluent areas of Leeds were more positive than pupils from schools in less affluent areas. This indicated that it is not only media coverage and charity campaigns that shape young people's perceptions but also the community in which they live.

## **Influence of the Media on Perceptions**

A review of research associated with the influence of the media on perceptions of Africa raised a question as to whether the media creates the problem or simply reflects views of the continent that are already prevalent amongst the UK public.

African countries are covered by the British press as much as other parts of the world but there are more 'soft' articles about the continent, covering events such as Western visits, and many of the reviews and features are published at the weekend (Scott 2009). If 'hard' news stories about African countries do not feature in the mainstream press they are unlikely to filter down to the news items prepared for a younger audience. To many young people the lack of accurate and up to date information about contemporary Africa gives them the impression that nothing is happening that would challenge their existing perceptions of the continent.

The images of Africa used by INGOs to encourage people to donate to appeals have a significant impact on young people's perceptions. The television adverts are timed to appeal to a family audience and many schools see their support for charities working in Africa as good global citizenship. Through appealing to a common humanity charities can attract substantial support but this comes at the cost of institutionalising the stereotype of all Africans as being agrarian 'Third World' farmers (Droga A. 2007). However, the use of more balanced images to depict people in Africa has little effect on public perceptions of continent (Richard R. 2004).

The first time images of starving babies in Africa appeared on British television screens was during the conflict in Biafra in the late 1960s. To many people in the UK these were the first pictures they saw of Africa post independence. Support for charities working in Africa to alleviate poverty grew and they became the moral and ethical representative of the UK public in the developing world. In 1985 Band Aid and Live Aid tapped into public concern for those suffering from the effects of drought in Ethiopia and championed the cause globally. However, 20 years later little had changed and campaigns suffered from 'donor fatigue'. There was a growing realisation that the problems of many Africa countries could not be solved just by giving more and more money and that changes were needed to the way the Global 'North' related politically and economically to the Global 'South'. In 2006 the Make Poverty History Campaign (MPH) and Live 8 concert tried to change public perceptions with its message of 'justice not charity'. Nevertheless, the majority of the UK public persisted in believing that MPH and Live8 were about raising money just like Live Aid (Darnton 2006).

It would appear that the lack of 'hard' news about Africa and the success of charity campaigns do not create the stereotypical perception people have of Africa. They are representations of the continent that merely reflect existing perceptions. To maintain their audience the media chooses their content according to what people will read, watch or listen to and NGO fundraising campaigns tap into an existing compassion for the poor and needy.

## Theoretical Explanations

Current education about development in the UK focuses on the Global North 'sorting out' the problems of the Global South using development aid to alleviate poverty through programmes such as the Millennium Development Goals. Whilst this reflects the values of good Global Citizenship it has been criticised for propagating patronising and paternalistic postcolonial perspectives towards the people of the Global South (Andreotti 2006). Teachers constrained by their own conditioning and the limits of the curriculum do not address issues of power, inequality and injustice and unwittingly recreate the colonial patterns of behaviour that reinforce the stereotypical attitudes they seek to change (Martin & Griffiths H 2011).

The media reflects this postcolonial perception of Africa through stories of 'lack' - wealth, education, sanitation etc. - and propagates solutions through stories of 'aid'. This simplification of the relationship between the UK and African countries means that people in the UK do not have to think about or do anything to address the underlying causes of global inequality. In addition, this postcolonial perspective maintains a sense of superiority amongst the UK public which, in times of economic stress, could lead to prejudice, discrimination and racism towards people from Africa.

An alternative explanation, which reflects the nature of people rather than the nurture of society, is a sociological concept known as *infracommunitarianism*. The concept is based on how people attribute a 'human essence' towards others. Research in adults has shown that people tend to attribute human emotions to others they considered to be part of their own 'ingroup' whilst they attribute animal emotions to others they consider to be in 'outgroups'. The media utilises these emotional associations to reinforce the esteem of 'ingroup' readers by subtly denigrating those in 'outgroups' (Leyens J. 2007). In this way the media reinforces existing perceptions to maintain their audience.

## Impact of African Voices

The result from questionnaires completed by pupils following their African Voices Days indicates that the African PG students can have a significant impact on pupil perceptions. The percentage of pupils that selected *Scorching* as one of their three words reduced from 63% to fewer than 45%. Also, the words *Starving*, *Thirsty* and *Primitive* were replaced by *Welcoming*, *Friendly* and *Lively* reflecting the personal bond the African PG students were able to establish with their pupils. The percentage of pupils that selected the image of hungry children reduced from 73% to below 28% and the image of rural housing was also replaced by a city landscape reflecting the urban perspective of the continent presented by the African PG students. The percentage of pupils that thought there was ample food in Africa increased from 11% to over than 50%, over 72% acknowledged that there were skyscrapers in Africa and over 90% realised that African people also use mobile phones. However, the importance pupils placed on supporting charities that work in Africa and buying fair trade goods from Africa decreased slightly indicating that they had begun to question their assumption that the solution to Africa's problems was aid.

The focus group discussions suggested several factors contributed to the observed perceptual changes. The presence of a highly educated, relatively wealthy and articulate African PG student in their classroom challenged pupil's stereotypical perceptions of what they thought of African

people. The pupils had time to establish a personal bond with their African PG student which added credibility to what they taught. Also, the activity based structure of the programme facilitated interaction between African PG student and pupils enabling them to present a balanced perspective of their home country and the continent of Africa.

“I didn’t know they had cars, I thought they had to walk.”

“I learnt that there are wealthy people in Africa as well.”

“I didn’t know that there was that much technology in Africa.”

“I thought all the buildings would be different but they were like what we’ve got.”

Quotes from pupils (2009)

The results show that direct contact with someone from Africa can dispel the stereotypical perceptions young people have about the continent. It was clear from my discussions with pupils that the new knowledge and information they gained from their interaction with their African PG student made them think more critically about their existing perceptions. In my own experience, as a writer of teaching resources about Africa and Development Education teacher trainer for the past 20 years, the African PG students present a more effective approach to changing perceptions of Africa than any teaching pack or Continuing Professional Development course.

The results also showed that all pupils had a more positive perception of Africa, following their African Voices Days, with the greatest impact being observed in pupils from schools in less affluent areas of Leeds. The African PG students presented a perspective of Africa that the young people in these localities had not previously been exposed to through the media and a perspective which they were prepared to acknowledge and incorporate into their perceptions of the continent. In addition, analysis of the results between schools indicated that, regardless of their starting point, the African PG students were successful in raising pupil awareness of Africa and African people to roughly the same level in all schools.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence from this research suggests that the mainstream media maintains and propagates distorted and stereotypical perspectives of Africa. News stories that focus on disasters, television programmes that feature African wildlife and exotic lifestyles and charity campaigns that appeal to public compassion all contribute to a perception of Africa as a poor, rural continent in need of Western help. In order to maintain readers, listeners and viewers the mainstream media in the UK reflect this perception by promoting the issue of ‘lack’ as the problem and the supply of ‘aid’ as the solution. By challenging this perception those who work in mainstream media risk losing their audience and are confined to preaching to the converted. Addressing the underlying problem of global and political inequality would mean implicating UK institutions and the UK public as being part of the problem rather than being part of the solution.

Postcolonial theory suggests that this distorted perception has been socially constructed to maintain a post-colonial dominance over independent Africa. Within UK society this postcolonial perspective propagates a paternalistic perception of superiority with, in communities under economic stress, could manifest as prejudice, discrimination and racism. Evidence from this

research suggests that this would be most likely in less affluent communities that rely on mainstream media for their information about the wider world. Overcoming postcolonial perceptions would require a 'decolonisation' of the mind to enable people in the UK to engage in equitable dialogue with people in Africa. However, infrahumanisation theory suggests that people attribute a 'human essence' to others they consider part of their 'ingroup'. The mainstream media utilise this characteristic of human behaviour to celebrate their 'ingroup' audience and reinforces their self-esteem by subtly denigrating 'outgroups'. To avoid infrahumanisation mainstream media would have to 'humanise' the others to avoid propagating divisions between global communities.

The African Voices Programme has shown that it is possible to address both postcolonialism and infrahumanisation amongst young people who have yet to form definite perceptions of Africa. Through the use of African PG students, to present an alternative and balanced perspective of Africa, young people have the opportunity to bypass mainstream media representations of the continent and find out what it is really like from someone who lives there. The challenge for those who work in the media is how to counter the current perspective propagated by the mainstream, to present a balanced perspective of the continent whilst maintaining their audience and to facilitate an equitable dialogue with people in Africa.