

Not all that comes out of Africa is 'bad'

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This article was published in The Weekly Observer in Uganda.

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LEEDS, UK: When I enrolled for a Post-Graduate degree course in Development Studies at the University of Leeds a year ago, the least I expected was to become an 'Ambassador for Africa.' Never did I, at any one time think I would be standing in front of a primary school classroom in the UK teaching up to a hundred children about Africa. Being an Ambassador meant I had to 'sell' my continent to this young generation regardless of the impressions they already had of it. Personally, I have always had my own perceptions about Africa. Honestly to an extent, I was convinced that there was nothing 'good' to tell about my homeland. But the more time I spent telling the attentive children what I knew about the continent, the more I realised that there was more to Africa than just 'bad news.'

Africa? Where is Africa?

By the time I was ten years, I knew a lot about Britain because I learnt about a boy called 'Robert of Britain' in primary three. I therefore knew that the United Kingdom was composed of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, governed by a Prime Minister and headed by a Queen. I also knew that London was the Capital of England and that that the native language was English. I even read the children's story books like Janet and John and Peter and Jane and their dogs Scott and Jack. I even knew something about English breakfast and the Union Jack! Great Britain was in the Ugandan primary school syllabus and you had to know about the UK in order to pass your geography exams. But it is different over here. Africa is less known in the UK and African studies are not on the British primary school syllabus. It was therefore little wonder that some of my pupils thought Africa was a country, headed by a Prime Minister and had one currency. They also thought that 'all Africans live in straw huts and trees with no water and food.' However, as I stood in front of the classroom, it was visibly clear that they were eager to learn about the continent they hardly knew about. It was also amazing how many questions these children had about Africa. They just did not know where to find the answers. The little they knew about Africa is what they saw on TV!

Western perceptions

There has always been controversy about the western media's portrayal of Africa, whether as news stories or fundraising campaigns. While some argue these are often sided to the negative, others argue that the western media actually mirrors Africa as it is. Inasmuch as aid organisations should be supported for all the work they do in their poverty eradication fundraising drives, they also, through their 'donation adverts' play a big role in propagating the negative image that young

people in the UK have about the continent. Therefore, from 'Live 8 concerts' to other events requesting for aid for Africa, the media has continued to present Africa as a 'continent of chronic problems' in need of aid. This portrayal has negatively impacted on those who have relied on it to know about the continent, especially the younger generation. What they know about Africa therefore is poverty, disease, hunger, war, death and dictatorships. Their conscious has also made them know that they are obliged to 'donate £2 a month to help save a child from dying of hunger' or 'a pound a month to buy a mosquito net to save a child in Africa from malaria' regardless of the fact that not everybody in Africa is that needy. The magnitude of the impact of this one-sided coverage of Africa on the young generation here was revealed in the questions they ask about the continent during the days I was 'Ambassador'.

The African Voices Project

"The young people in Leeds or anywhere else in Britain have a very unbalanced perspective of Africa. Their views come from development agency adverts and news reports and it's also a view that is propagated by teachers because they feel that it's good for young people to have empathy for the poor", says Richard Borowski, Project coordinator for The Leeds University Centre for African Studies (LUCAS) African Voices Project that attempts to address such subjects of concern mentioned above. He argues that while these campaigns are all well intentioned, it does propagate a negative view of Africa in the minds of young people.

Now in its second year, the Africa Days project is funded by the Department of International Development (DFID), Education Leeds and the University of Leeds, and this year, it saw 14 Post Graduate students from eight different African countries to deliver lessons and workshops in 28 primary schools in Leeds. The project is based on the fact that African students are actually a valuable resource in regard to knowledge about Africa. As 'Ambassadors' in 27 'Africa Days' the students shared experiences with Year five and Year six pupils and enlightened them about the 'other side of Africa' that they never see on TV! The Africa Days attempted to let these children know that there is more to Africa than death, hunger, poverty and disease.

In the UK, there have been lots of attempts to encourage overseas students to go into schools and teach local children about their backgrounds. However, the majority of these international students do not have a teaching background, or the skills. For the LUCAS project, therefore, PG students have to go through sessions of weekend trainings and preparation programmes and frameworks to gain basic activity-based teaching skills. The project thus entails a combination of personal experiences from Africa, ranging from generic and cultural activities in form of games, songs, folktales and dances, as well as theme-based workshops.

Questions, questions, questions

The participatory activity-based and themed workshops generated a lot of questions. For instance, the children wanted to know why Africa was poorer than Europe when the former produced seventy-five per cent of the world's diamonds. They wanted to know why children there could not afford chocolates and ice-creams yet seventy per cent of the world's cocoa comes from West Africa. They also wanted to know why African children had no clothes to wear yet lots of cotton was grown on African soil and why the cotton grower earns £0.50 for the cost of a £ 25 pair of

jeans sold in the UK while the retailer gets £ 12.50. They wanted to know why Africa was regularly at war yet it did not manufacture those deadly weapons? Why did so many children have to die of malaria and other preventable diseases yet a mosquito net cost only £3? Why were there no schools, hospitals and medicine? Why there was hunger and famine yet the continent had the best climates and soils? Some of these questions could best be answered through generic activities and theme-based workshops that illustrated the critical analysis of Africa's development. Issues like the impact of globalisation, neo-liberalism and world trade policies that put Africa in a disadvantaged position had to be explained in the easiest of ways through games, quizzes and riddles. It was clear that gradually, these young people will actually begin to challenge institutions and global policies before absorbing media stories and development agency adverts.

There was progress

By the end of the project, there was a clear difference in knowledge between the pre-evaluation and re-evaluation forms. The children understood that Africa was a continent and that the teaching student was from one country in that continent. They also gained understanding that countries in Africa can be extremely different in terms of climate, types of people, religion, culture and economies. They also became more positive about Africa and had begun to question global inequalities. In the Projects Interim report by an external evaluator, one teacher reported that "this was one of the best aspects" of the sessions. She felt the existence of an African person teaching her class created "a whole different atmosphere, an aura ... which changed preconceived ideas and enabled pupils to see things from a different perspective".

Another teacher referred to a primary education objective – (the sessions) caused "awe and wonder" and "the pupils were engrossed in all activities – they didn't want to go out to play!"

"Certainly, the pupils came away with a more positive image of Africa, most previously believed it to be backward and underdeveloped", another teacher stated.

The pupils also gained some understanding about the kind of global issues that affect the students' countries and that affect the UK, like the global trade policies and impact of colonialism on Africa. They were able to relate colonialism to their understanding of slavery, its abolition and human rights. According to the interim report, "the pupils were left with a feeling of injustice...and saw how colonialism and trade favoured the West". They also wanted African farmers to earn more, "I now know how Africa got so poor", one pupil said.

It was therefore essential that pupils knew about the historical impact of Europe on Africa to understand contemporary issues.

"To their pupils therefore, the colonialism workshop was the 'missing piece of the jigsaw' that linked many other strands of their knowledge and understanding", Borowski says. In future therefore, the 'Scramble for Africa' activity will be a core element of Africa Days and programmes.

Some of the children promised to visit Africa in future and even get involved in volunteering. It made them realise that Africa as a continent was full of potential and all it needed was an opportunity to make the best out of itself. The schools have been responsive, and so have the teachers who were enthusiastic and eager to learn about Africa as much as their pupils were. One teacher said, "I felt educated – I was cheated in my own education".

At the end of the project, over 1,300 young students in Leeds had an opportunity to interact with PG African students and changing their ideas and perceptions about Africa. It also promoted racial awareness within these schools by providing positive role models (the PG students) and breaking down stereotypes and bringing a global dimension in the UK education system.

Some pupils even emotionally bonded with the students and there was close rapport created between them.

“Some of the children wanted us to come back; they called after us as we left”, one of my colleagues said.

Next year, Borowski says, the project will build upon the successes of the first year. Alongside the Year 5 Africa Days and Year 6 Programmes the project will work with 8 Secondary schools during the spring term of 2009 and organise a Sixth Form Conference on contemporary African issues at the University during the summer term of 2009.

Why target children?

Younger children are more outwardly interested than self-interested and some things that happen to young people in schools will stay in them longer than when they age, psychologists say.

According to Borowski, it's thus important to change the perceptions of children at an early age. He argues that at that particular age, they (children) are more open-minded and balanced to think about things.

“If you don't, then you are at the risk of reinforcing images and stereotypes which will stay with them until they are adults”, Borowski says.

“It is also a good age at which you can present something to a child and they won't readily accept or deny it. But they will think about it and try to fit it in to their framework of thinking. If you get it in early, then it will stay in them”, he says.

The project is also trying to influence the school teachers so that they can continue with the project even after the PG students leave. It is also hoped that this model developed in Leeds can be replicated elsewhere in the UK.

I gained too

Teaching children in the UK about Africa and being able to combat the stereotypes they had about the continent was an enjoyable experience; an experience that instilled in me communication, presentation and teaching skills within a multicultural setting. I also gained skills and ability to develop interactive learning materials for young people to address complex issues in simple ways. Every day that I spent with 30 different young kids had an impression on them. What will happen if 100 other African students did the same?