

## Young People's Perceptions of Africa

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Teaching young people about other countries and cultures is an important aspect of challenging stereotypical perceptions that lead to expressions of racism. At the end of the Millennium Stephen Scoffham wrote in his article *Young Children's Perceptions of the World*:

“Without intervention infants are liable to accept uncritically the bias and discrimination they see around them. Stereotypes promoted in advertisements and stories of war, famine and disaster in the media further distort perceptions. At the same time, the influence of parents and peer group pressure may also serve to confirm negative views. From here racism and all its attendant evils are only a short step away.” (Scoffham, 1999, p134)

Since 1999 there have been several government initiatives to prepare young people for life in a globalised world. However there has been little study of the impact these educational developments have had on young people's perceptions of the wider world. This paper presents the results of research conducted by the Leeds University Centre for African Studies (LUCAS) to assess young people's perceptions of Africa and the impact of an educational initiative, African Voices, developed by the Centre.

### Background

In 2000 the Department for Education and Science (DfES) introduced a revised National Curriculum that provided schools with more opportunities to teach about international development issues. Five years later the Global Dimension became a non-statutory Cross-curriculum Dimension and schools were required to demonstrate how they incorporated it within their educational provision. To support their White Paper, *Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1997), the Department for International Development's (DfID) advocated that all schools should teach about international development issues and that they should establish a global school partnership. Following the Crick Report (1998) the DfES introduced a Citizenship Curriculum that presented schools with opportunities to explore citizenship issues on local, national and global levels. In addition, the Macpherson Inquiry (1999) required education authorities and schools to place greater emphasis on Race Equality and Community Cohesion.

As a statutory subject, Citizenship Education became the focus of attention of many issue-based educations, in particular Oxfam's *Education for Global Citizenship* (2002). However, Citizenship Education focused mainly on the nation state and its relationship with the wider world and not the global interconnectedness promoted by Oxfam (Davies, Evans & Reid, 2005). The Education and Inspections Act 2006 required schools to promote community cohesion and the Curriculum Review into Diversity and Citizenship led to the introduction of the Identity and Diversity strand of the Citizenship Curriculum. However, not all schools fully complied with these requirements and Citizenship Education continues to focus on promoting national identity rather than addressing issues of race and racism (Ostler, 2009).

One initiative though bypassed the various interest groups and worked directly with people living in the Global South. Global School Partnerships allow pupils to study a distant locality first hand 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 present 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, reciprocal visits increase teacher knowledge and understanding of another culture and society and enable them to teach about a distant locality more effectively and with more authority (Disney 2008). However, if 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).

At LUCAS we have developed an alternative approach to facilitating direct engagement between pupils and people from Africa. The LUCAS African Voices programme recruits and trains African post-graduate 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. The results of that research are contained in this paper.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Africa Maps**

To ascertain existing knowledge and awareness of the African pupils were provided with blank maps of Africa and asked to write or draw anything they knew about the continent.

### **Pupil Questionnaires**

To gather quantitative data, on knowledge and perceptions of Africa, pupils were asked to complete a short questionnaire prior to and following their African Voices programme. 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 showed what Africa looked like. Perceptions of African people were investigated by asking pupils to indicate what they thought African people were like by rating them according to certain characteristics. 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.

### **Focus Group Discussions**

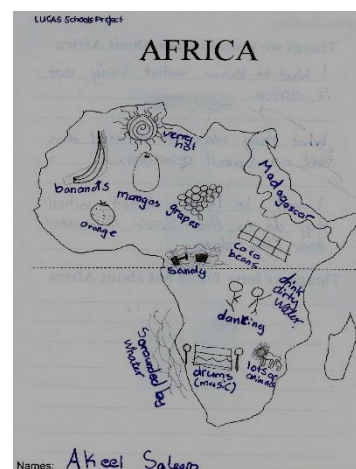
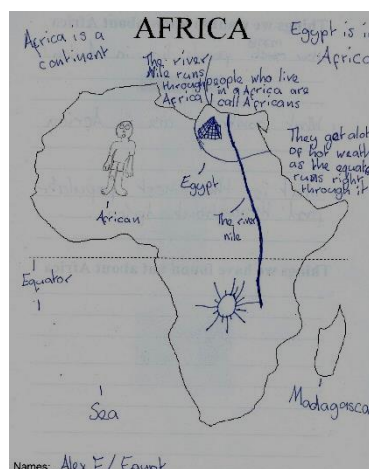
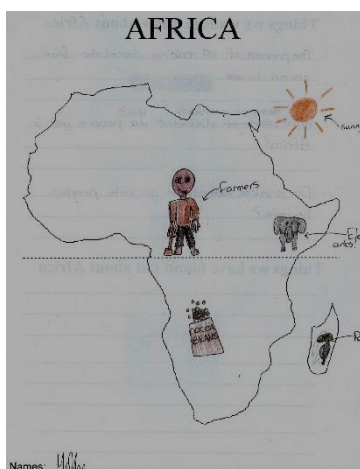
Focus group discussions with pupils were conducted following their African Voices programmes. The qualitative information obtained from these discussions assisted in the interpretation of the quantitative data from the pupil questionnaire.

## **Research Results**

The following data and information was gathered from 140 pupils in six Year 6 classes in four primary schools.

### **Africa Maps**

Africa maps, like the ones below, provided an insight into how young people perceive Africa. Nearly all of the Africa maps had a drawing of a sun or words to indicate the pupils perceived Africa as hot and dry. Many pupils placed Egypt and the River Nile on their maps because Ancient Egypt is a topic covered primary schools. References to Madagascar were also common because many pupils had seen the Disney film of the same name. There were images of animals, music and dancing which probably came from wildlife documentaries and travel programmes. References to exotic fruits and cash crops such as cocoa relate to greater awareness of fair trade. There were though other more disturbing drawings depicting Africans as poor, helpless farmers living in straw huts and lacking clean drinking water. These images are the ones pupils are most likely to see on news programmes or promoted by charity fundraising campaigns. On none of the Africa maps analysed was there any recognition of the urban, industrial and technological aspects of the continent or the accomplishments of African people.



## Pupil Questionnaires

Pupil perceptions of Africa were reflected in the words they selected from the list provided to describe what they thought Africa was like. Over 63% of all pupils selected *Scorching* as one of their three words which corresponds 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 impact of fair trade seems to have been reflected with 58% of all pupils selecting women picking tea and 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.

Perceptions of a poor Africa were reflected in how pupils rated African people. Their choices indicated that most of them thought Africans to be poor rather than wealthy and sick rather than healthy. But not all their ratings were negative. Most pupils thought that African people were neither sad nor happy and that they were hard working and not lazy.

The statements about Africa revealed how pupil perceptions of the continent influenced their responses. Over 75% of pupils thought there was little food in Africa; over 70% of pupils thought that people in Africa did not use mobile phones; and over 65% of pupils thought there were no skyscrapers in Africa.

Pupil support though, for development initiatives to improve the lives of people in Africa, was very strong reflecting the success of NGO campaigns. Nearly all pupils thought buying fairly traded goods from Africa and supporting charities that worked in Africa to be very important.

The results from the post-delivery questionnaire indicated that the African student-teachers had a significant impact on pupil perceptions. The percentage of pupils selecting *Scorching* as one of their three words was reduced from 63% to fewer than 45%. Also, the words *Starving*, *Thirsty* and *Primitive* were replaced by *Welcoming*, *Friendly* and *Lively*. The percentage of pupils selecting the image of hungry children reduced from 73% to below 28%. The image of rural housing was also replaced by a city landscape reflecting the urban perspective presented by the student-teachers. The pupils thought Africans to be richer, happier and healthier than they first thought. The percentage of pupils that thought there was little food in Africa reduced from 75% to fewer than 40%. Over 72% acknowledged that there were skyscrapers in Africa and over 90% realised that African people use mobile phones. However, the importance pupils placed on supporting charities that work in Africa and volunteering to help African people decreased slightly indicating that they had started to question their initial perceptions of the continent.

### **Focus Group Discussions**

The focus group discussions confirmed our interpretations of the Africa Maps and Pupil Questionnaires. 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 discussions suggested several factors contributed to the perceptual changes. The presence of a highly educated, relatively wealthy and articulate African student-teacher in the classroom challenged pupil's stereotypical perceptions of what they thought African people were like. The pupils had time to establish a personal bond with their African teacher which added credibility to what the student taught. The activity based structure of the programme facilitated interaction between student and pupil enabling them to present an alternative 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)

## **Analysis of Results**

The overall results of the research data indicate that pupil perceptions of Africa are mainly influenced by the information and images about Africa they are exposed to outside of school. All the evidence suggests that postcolonial paternalistic attitudes that pervade British society (Sharp 2008) are accepted unquestioningly by young people as fact (Wiegand, 1992). Given that these societal influences are important in shaping young people’s perceptions of Africa the results were further analysed to determine whether there were any differences between schools across the city. My analysis suggests that there is a correlation between pupil perceptions of Africa and the level of social deprivation in the area around the school. Pupils from schools in more affluent areas are more likely to be positive than pupils from schools in less affluent areas. It is not only media coverage and charity campaigns that shape young people’s perceptions but also the community in which they live. It would appear that negative and stereotypical views of Africa and African people are deeply rooted in our society. If not challenged these perceptions could manifest themselves as forms of racial prejudice and discrimination.

The results also demonstrate that the African Voices programmes can dispel the stereotypical perceptions young people have about Africa. The presence of the African student-teacher in the classroom provided pupils with an opportunity to engage directly with somebody from the African continent. It was clear from my discussions with pupils that the new knowledge and information they had gained from their interaction with the African student-teacher 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 post-graduates present a more effective approach to changing perceptions of Africa than any teaching pack or Continuing Professional Development course.

Analysis of the post intervention results indicates that all pupils had a more positive perception of Africa with the greatest impact being observed with the pupils from the schools in less affluent areas. It appears that the African student-teachers presented a perspective of Africa, one that they had not previously exposed to, which they were prepared to acknowledge and incorporate into their perception of the continent. In addition, analysis of the results between schools indicates that, regardless of their starting point, the African student-teachers 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 curriculum initiatives introduced by DfES over the past 10 years together with DfID’s agenda of poverty reduction and Development NGO marketing have contributed towards engendering a sense of compassion amongst primary pupils towards Africa and its peoples. However, this has been at the expense of propagating a distorted and stereotypical perception that nearly all Africans are poor, helpless and in need of Western charity. This is not the fault of schools and teachers, who have to work within the guidance provided and

resources available, but, arguably, relates to the various interest groups that seek to use education provision to achieve their own goals.

The research suggests that the postcolonial paternalistic messages that young people are exposed to outside school are more powerful than any attempts in schools to challenge stereotypes and promote equality and justice. Television programmes, news reports, films about Africa and Development NGO campaigns contribute to maintaining a stereotypical myth of Africa and its peoples. More often than not people unknowingly propagate the myth within their communities and young people grow up accepting this perspective as fact without question.

Compassion for those less fortunate is insufficient to prepare young people for life in a globalised world. However, providing young people with a more balanced perspective of the world would undermine overly negative postcolonial perspectives which underpin many British institutions.

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