Young People's Perceptions of Africa

'The reasons for teaching children about distant places and cultures from an early age appear compelling. 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.'

Dr Stephen Scoffham
'Young Children's Perceptions of the World', Teaching Young Children, 1999

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum, in 1991, all schools have been required to teach about the developing world. There have been, over the past twenty years, many opportunities for schools to incorporate the study of localities in developing countries and development issues into their programmes of study. However, what impact have these curriculum developments 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 developed by the Centre, African Voices, on those perceptions.

2. World Studies to Global Partnerships

The study of the wider world and development issues took nearly twenty years, prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum, to become an integral part of the school curriculum. In the 1970s, a loose network of educators began to promote world studies in schools and the publication *Learning for Change in World Society* (Richardson, 1976) became a benchmark for a global dimension in the curriculum. At the same time, NGOs such as Oxfam and Christian Aid were seeking ways of disseminating information about their work in developing countries to the British public. Their source material and the methodological approach of World Studies combined in the Development Education movement and a network of Development Education Centres (DECs) established to support schools and teachers.

Throughout the 1980s, World Studies and Development Education was a 'grass roots' movement that gained considerable support from some schools and teachers but struggled to make impact on national educational provision. With no financial support from the government, those working in the field were dependent upon grants from development NGOs and the European Commission. Even though high quality teaching and training resources were developed, such as *World Studies 8–13: A Teacher's Handbook* (Fisher & Hicks, 1985) and *Global Teacher, Global Learner (*Pike and Selby, 1988), there was opposition to their use in schools. Scruton, R (1985) argued that World Studies and Development Education were being used for 'political' ends and that world studies was

guilty of indoctrination of pupils, politicisation of the classroom, the use improper teaching methods and of lowering educational standards.

The television coverage of the famine in Sudan and Ethiopia in 1984/85 and the fundraising activities of Band Aid and Live Aid brought images of drought, starvation and death into people's living rooms in Britain. Besides raising greater awareness of the plight of thousands of people in the Sahel region of East Africa the images reinforced existing perception that nearly all Africans are poor, helpless and in need of Western charity.

Whilst the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1991 restricted the opportunities for more radical teachers to incorporate a more questioning global perspective, the guidance for Geography did require all schools to teach about an 'economically developing country'. This created a need for training and resources amongst non geography specialists in primary schools to which many Development NGOs, DECs and the Geographical Association responded by publishing photo activity packs to support the study of localities in developing countries. The guidance for Geography specified the countries that teachers could choose to study - a list of mainly former British colonies of which only five were from the African continent. This resulted in the resource publishers focusing their attention on only a few of these countries further limiting teacher choice and, in the case of Africa, directing them towards the study of Egypt or Kenya.

In 1997, there was a change in government and a change in emphasis on what schools taught about the developing world. The Department for International Development (DfID) was committed to increasing the level of development assistance. In their White Paper 'Eliminating World Poverty' DfID included proposals to promote greater development awareness amongst the British public to ensure there was support for the increases in development assistance. DfID advocated that all schools should teach about international development issues and that all schools should establish a North / South school partnership. To support these initiatives DfID provided financial support through the Development Awareness Fund, Global School Partnerships and Enabling Effective Support. At the same time, the Department for Education and Science (DfES) undertook a review of the curriculum that led to the introduction of a revised National Curriculum in 2000. This revision supported the DfID initiatives by providing schools with more opportunities to teach about international development issues. Following the Crick Report the DfES introduced a Citizenship Curriculum that presented further opportunities to explore citizenship on local, national and global levels. In addition, the Macpherson Inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, required education authorities and schools to place greater emphasis on Race Equality and Community Cohesion.

As we entered the new millennium, the framework and support for teaching young people about the wider world, in a way that would challenge their stereotypes and misconceptions, were in place. Existing research, into young people's knowledge and understanding of the wider world, was reviewed by Stephen Scoffham in 1999 in his article '*Young Children's Perceptions of the World'* (Scoffham, 1999). The key learning points from this article were:

- Young people accept attitudes as they would accept facts without question or criticism (Wiegand, 1992)

- Young people's perceptions of the wider world change as they grow older (Gambill, 1996) and that it is easier to challenge negative perceptions in younger children (Friend, 1995)

- Stereotypes become lodged into young people's emotional life and this 'attitudinal rigidity' is more difficult to break down beyond the age of 12 years (Marsden, 1976 and Milner, 1983)

- Contact with people from other countries through travel (Wiegand, 1991), school visits by people from other countries (Stratta, 1989) or a sustained study of a distant locality (Harrington, 1995) can change the way young people perceive the wider world

Besides the inclusion of development issues in the guidance for Geography, the Global Dimension became a non-statutory Cross-curriculum Dimension along with Identity and Cultural Diversity. Whilst the Global Dimension was not a 'subject' in the curriculum, schools were required to demonstrate how they covered global issues within their educational provision. However, the Global Dimension was only one of a number of educational initiatives introduced to improve standards and prepare young people for life in an increasing globalised world. What schools actually delivered was also influenced by the financial incentives provided by DfID to promote its policy for alleviating absolute poverty and by the educational resources provided by NGOs to support their campaigns for social justice (Hicks, 2008).

Within the guidance provided for Citizenship Education, there were opportunities to incorporate a global perspective within the 'development of good relationships' and 'respecting the differences between people'. As a statutory subject, Citizenship Education has been the focus of attention of many issue-based educations, in particular Oxfam's Education for Global Citizenship. However, Citizenship Education had a focus on the nation state and its relationship with the wider world and not the global interconnectedness as promoted by Education for Global Citizenship (Davies, Evans & Reid, 2005).

In response to greater racial tension within Britain, the government identified schools as the place to address issues of community cohesion. The murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent Macpherson Enquiry resulted in the Race Relations [Amendment] Act 2000 (RRAA) which required schools not only to address discrimination but also to promote race equality. The destruction of the Twin Towers, the London bombings conducted by 'home grown' extremists and the influx of refugees and asylum seekers from the conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan all contributed to a greater focus on Citizenship Education. 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 that addressing issues of race and racism (Ostler, 2009).

Whilst changes to the curriculum and legal requirements have presented more opportunities to incorporate global issues into educational provision; schools and teachers still had to decide how to deliver them in the classroom. In this respect, there has been competition for their attention from government and NGOs promoting their own spin on the limited time available to engage young people in their study of the wider world. Each of these bodies had their own agenda; DfID's development awareness and alleviation of absolute poverty; NGO campaigns for social justice and global interconnectedness; DfES's citizenship based on national identity and international relations.

There has been one initiative though that has bypassed the intervention of specific interest groups and worked directly with people living in the Global South. The funding provided by DfID to promote and establish Global School Partnerships has facilitated schools, teachers and pupils to engage with their contemporaries in another part of the world. Grants from DfID, through the British Council, have enabled reciprocal teacher visits to establish the school partnership, increase their knowledge of the partner community and agree shared curriculum initiatives. Some partnerships also result in exchange visits that facilitate direct contact with people from a different geographical and cultural background.

Global School Partnerships have allowed 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 the problems (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). 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).

Within this environment of opportunity to engage young people with the wider world LUCAS conceived a project that challenged stereotypical perceptions of Africa and enabled pupils to have direct contact with a person from Africa. In 2004, LUCAS initiated a pilot project to explore whether African post-graduate students, studying at Leeds University, could be used as a resource to present a more balanced perspective of Africa and raise greater awareness of contemporary African issues. The pilot demonstrated that with appropriate training and support African students could be a very effective in promoting greater awareness of Africa and its peoples.

Since 2007, LUCAS 'African Voices' project has recruited and trained 66 African post-graduate students from 16 different countries and delivered activity days and sessions to over 5,000 pupils in nine secondary and forty six primary schools in Leeds. In 2009 research was undertaken to assess young people's perceptions of Africa and the impact of LUCAS's African Voices on those perceptions. The results of that research are contained in this paper.

3. Research Methodology

The research utilised a range of methods to obtain both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

African Maps

Pupils were provided with blank maps of Africa and asked to write or draw anything they knew about Africa. These maps were used to ascertain their existing knowledge and awareness of the continent.

Pupil Questionnaires

Pupils were provided with a short questionnaire determine their linguistic and visual perceptions of Africa, what they thought of African people, their knowledge of contemporary Africa and their support for development initiatives. The questionnaire provided quantitative data about pupil perceptions and was repeated after the delivery of their African Voices programme.

Focus Group Discussions

Pupils were invited to participate in focus group discussions following their African Voices programme. The qualitative information obtained from these discussions assisted in the interpretation of the pupil questionnaire's quantitative data.

The questionnaire data and focus group discussion information was gathered from 140 Year 6 pupils in six Year 6 classes in four Leeds primary schools.

4. Baseline Research

4.1. Africa Maps

Africa maps, like the ones below, provided an insight into how young people perceive Africa. Many pupils placed Egypt on their maps because Egypt is a topic covered in the primary curriculum. Madagascar was also common because it is the location of the Disney film of the same name. The images of animals, music and dancing probably come from wildlife documentaries and travel programmes. References to exotic fruits and cash crops such as cocoa are a result of greater awareness of fair trade. It was, though, the perception of African people as poor, helpless farmers living in straw huts and lacking clean drinking water that was the most disturbing as this is the image most commonly propagated by the media and fundraising campaigns. In addition, there was

no recognition of the urban, industrial and technological aspects of the continent or the accomplishments of African people.

One Year 6 pupil decided to write about Africa within the outline shape of the continent. His words, reproduced below for clarity, are representative of the stereotypical perspectives many young people have about Africa. The influences of school, media and NGOs can be clearly discerned.

> *Africa*
> *is a continent.   It is on the*
> *equator which means it is hot short of water*
> *and food. Many people are poor. People are homeless.*
> *and have straw roofs Lots of lions, zebras, giraffes, tigers,*
> *cheetahs, pumas, jaguars, lizard, crocodiles and elephants.*
> *Religion is Vudu. Famous food is pineapple, passion fruit, mango,*
> *grapefruit, and bananas. Rive Nile and pyramids. Lots*
> *of diseases and people die. A baby dies*
> *every two seconds. There is lots of*
> *poverty. People carry water on*
> *their head. Walk a long way to*
> *get some water. There is a fire*
> *every day. Mostly black*
> *people but there are*
> *white people. People*
> *wear loose cloths*
> *for clothes. They*
> *play football in*
> *sandals.*

4.2. Pupil Questionnaire

Linguistic Perceptions of Africa

From a selection of adjectives to describe what they thought about Africa (Appendix I) over 63% of all pupils selected 'Scorching' as one of their three words. Together with 'Arid', 'Thirsty', 'Starving' and 'Primitive' these five words accounted for 68% of all pupil choices.

Visual Perceptions of Africa

From a selection of images to show what they thought Africa was like (Appendix II) over 73% of all pupils chose a picture of hungry children holding out an empty plate as one of their three images. The top five images also included ones of women picking tea, straw huts in a rural setting, traditional Zulu dancers and elephants on the East African Savannah.

Perceptions of African People

On a scale of 1 to 5, pupils rated various characteristics of African people (Appendix III). They indicated that they perceived them to be more poor than wealthy and more sick than healthy, neither sad nor happy, but very hard working and not lazy.

Perceptions of African Place

Given a series of statements about Africa pupils indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with them (Appendix IV). 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 50% of pupils thought there were no skyscrapers in Africa.

Support for Development Initiatives

When asked about their level of support for Africa and African people (Appendix V) pupils thought buying fairly traded goods and supporting charities to be very important but placed less importance on volunteering and going on holiday to Africa.

4.3. Focus Group Discussions

The focus group discussions with pupils confirmed earlier observations that the main external influences on young people's perceptions were TV programmes and charity appeals and the main school influences were the inclusion of fair trade issues in the curriculum and multi-cultural activities such as Zulu dancers.

Quotes from Year 5 and 6 pupils

> *'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.'*
>
> *'Everybody focuses on the poor parts of Africa – anybody who had not been there thinks it's quite poor.'*
>
> *'The Zulu dancers came to our school last year.'*
>
> *'All the TV shows are the bad things about Africa.'*
>
> *'We did tea picking in school.'*

4.4. Analysis

The questionnaire results were analysed to see if there were any suggestions of differences in young people's perceptions of Africa across the city. This preliminary analysis suggests that there could be an association between social deprivation in the area around the school and pupil perceptions of Africa. The results indicate that pupils from the schools in more affluent areas were more likely to be positive, about Africa and African peoples, than pupils from schools in less affluent areas. Other factors such as the presence of BME pupils in the class and curriculum initiatives to promote community cohesion had a minor influence on pupil perceptions but seemed less significant than the level of social deprivation.

These preliminary findings suggest that sources of information about Africa and African peoples young people are exposed to outside of school have a greater influence on their perceptions than the educational opportunities provided within school. Moreover, 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 racial prejudice and discrimination.

5. African Voices

The aim of the African Voices programmes was to challenge stereotypical perceptions young people have about Africa, present a more balanced perspective of the diverse continent and explore contemporary African issues. The composition of the programmes reflected some of the good practice identified by other researchers. To have the greatest impact the African Voices programmes focused on primary school, they provided pupils with the opportunity to learn about Africa through direct contact with the African post-graduate students and utilised active learning approaches to encourage critical analysis and peer group interaction.

A typical African Voices programme was composed of several elements:

- Introductory activities to enable the pupils to get to know the student

- Generic activities about Africa to challenge misconceptions and explore the diversity of the continent

- Country profiles developed by the students to reflect their perspective of their own region of Africa

- Theme based activities that explored issues such as international trade, rural development and the scramble for Africa

- Cultural activities such as stories, songs, music and dance from the student's own region of Africa

- Plenary activities that provided pupils with an opportunity to reflect on their learning and acknowledges changes in their perceptions

6. Impact Research

Following the delivery of the African Voices programmes by the African post-graduates the pupil questionnaires were repeated and followed up by focus group discussions with pupils.

6.1. Pupil Questionnaire

Linguistic Perceptions of Africa

Whilst Scorching and Arid were still popular words to describe Africa, Starving, Thirsty and Primitive were replaced by Welcoming, Friendly and Lively.

Visual Perceptions of Africa

The images tea pickers and cultural dancers were still popular amongst pupil, but the images of hungry children and rural housing were replaced by wildlife and city landscape.

Perceptions of African People

Pupil perceptions of African people also changed, they thought them to be richer, happier and healthier than they first thought whilst their perception of Africans as being hard working was maintained.

Perceptions of African Place

Pupils realised that Africa was not as food deprived, as rural, as dangerous or as technologically deficient as they first thought.

Support for Development Initiatives

The importance pupils placed on supporting charities that work in Africa and volunteering to help African people decreased slightly whilst buying fairly traded goods and going on holiday to Africa maintained their same levels of importance.

6.2. Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions with pupils indicated that several factors contributed to the change in perception indicated by the results of the pupil questionnaire.

1. Firstly, the presence of the African post-graduate students in the classroom presented a different perspective of Africa – highly educated, relatively wealthy and articulate.

2. Secondly, they established a personal bond with the pupils that added credibility to what they taught.

3. Thirdly, by structuring their lessons around activities, to engage the pupils in discussion, the students were able to present an alternative perspective to their home country and the continent of Africa.

Quotes from Year 5 and 6 pupils:

'I thought there would be no rich people there but they have diamond mines and big houses.'

'I didn't know they had cars, I thought they had to walk.'

'I learnt that there are wealthy people in Africa as well'

'Most people use mobile phones'

'That there are over 1000 languages in Africa'

'I was surprised to find out there are 53 independent countries'

'I didn't know that there are lots of really tall skyscrapers'

'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.'

6.3. Analysis

The results from this questionnaire were analysed to consider whether the impact of the African students on the pupils varied across the city. They indicated that all pupils had a more positive perception of Africa after their interaction with the African students but the greatest impact observed was on the young people that were initially the most negative – the pupils from the schools in less affluent areas. It appears that the African students presented a perspective of Africa that these pupils were not familiar with but one which they were prepared to acknowledge and incorporate into their perception of Africa. In addition, analysis of the results between schools indicated that, regardless of their starting point, the African post-graduate students were successful in raising pupil awareness of Africa and African people to roughly the same level.

7. Conclusion

The evidence from this research suggests that the introduction of the Global Dimension to the National Curriculum, a Citizenship Education that focuses on national identity, DfID initiatives to promote development awareness 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 of the various interest groups that seek to use education provision to achieve their own goals.

Schools are often perceived as the panacea for all the ills of society but, in this case, they are fighting a loosing battle. The research suggests that the messages that young people are exposed to outside school are more powerful than the messages delivered by the educational provision they receive in school. Television programmes, news reports, films about Africa and Development NGO campaigns all contribute to a societal perception of Africa and its peoples. More often than not people unknowingly propagate the myth within their communities without question and young people grow up accepting this perspective as fact.

On a more positive note, the LUCAS African Voices project has demonstrated that it is possible to burst this myth by providing young people the opportunity to challenge their own perceptions through direct contact with someone from a different continent, culture and social background. This personal interaction with African post-graduate students circumvents the attempts of the various interest groups to influence the views of young people and allows them to find out for themselves. The knowledge gained from this external intervention, and the perceptions young people form as a result, appear to have a greater impact than similar internal interventions.

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 Development NGO marketing campaigns; challenge the concept of national citizenship; and question the UK's economic and political relationship with the Global South.

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Appendix I

Which THREE words do you think best describe Africa? (Write down the words)

Wealthy	Bright	Scorching	Dangerous
Advanced	Cool	Staving	Dark
Welcoming	Rainy	Thirsty	Deprived
Friendly	Boring	Arid	Primitive
Lively	Freezing	Aggressive	
Harmless	Dull	Unpleasant	

Appendix II

Which THREE images best show what you think Africa looks like? (Write the numbers)
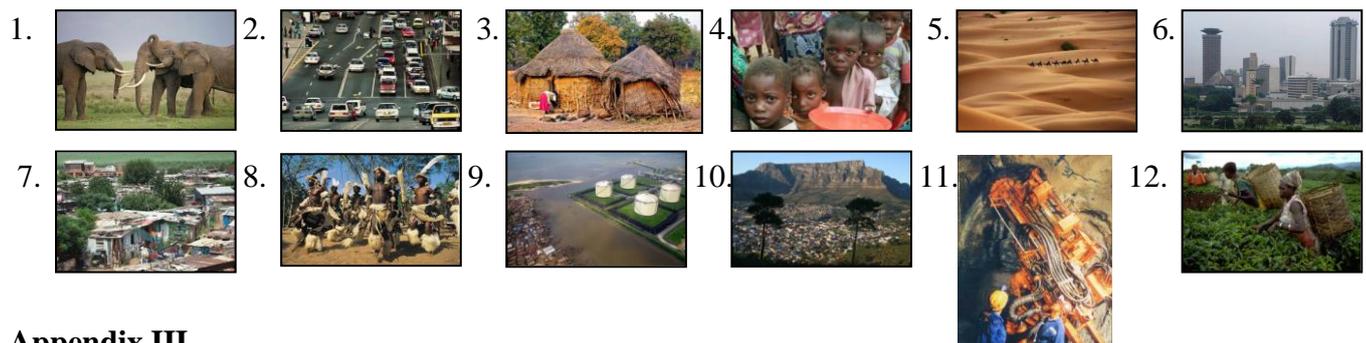
Appendix III

What do you think African people are like? (Tick ONE box for each)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Poor	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Rich
Lazy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Hard Working
Sad	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Happy
Sick	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Healthy

Appendix IV

Which of the following do you agree / disagree with? (Tick ONE box for each)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
There is little food in Africa	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
There are no TVs in Africa	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Africa is a dangerous place to live	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
There are many skyscrapers in Africa	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
People in Africa use mobile phones	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix V

How important do you think the following are? (Tick ONE box for each)

	Very	Fairly	Little	Maybe	Not at All
Buying fairly traded products from Africa	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Supporting charities that work in Africa	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Going on holiday to Africa countries	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Volunteering to help African people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐