THE HIDDEN COST OF A RED NOSE

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For the past three years Richard has been employed by the Leeds University Centre for African Studies (LUCAS) on a schools project aimed at challenging negative stereotypes by providing young people with a more balanced understanding of contemporary Africa. This article discusses how some media messages perpetuate negative thinking and also shows how graphicacy was used as part of the project to reveal children's changing views of this diverse continent.

Charities, fundraising and primary schools

Every two years the British nation puts its reserve to one side for a day and engages in activities that one would normally see performed by entertainers at a children's birthday party. In aid of good causes people dress up like street performers, willingly get involved in bizarre sponsorship activities and wear red noses to raise money for those less fortunate than themselves.

People in British society buy into these fundraising events for a variety of reasons. Faith groups believe that they have a moral responsibility; corporate business believe it enhances their public image; and schools believe it contributes to the promotion of good citizenship. Millions of pounds are raised to relieve suffering and protect the most vulnerable, but this is peanuts compared to the billions spent on propping up a creaking global financial system. I remember the first time the British public was engaged in an international fundraising campaign around a specific event – Live Aid 1985. I was watching the live transmission as the amount raised crept towards one million pounds and Bob Geldof was pleading with viewers to give more money. The interview was interrupted by a telephone call from an anonymous donor from the Middle East who pledged one million pounds from their personal fortune.

So, if the amount of money raised only represents a sticking plaster for the problems then what drives these events and why do they have such a high profile? Engaging millions of people in acts of collective financial support also raises greater public awareness of global inequalities and places poverty on the global political agenda. However, the way these events generate support also has a hidden cost on how we perceive people in distant countries. The British public are motivated to respond to the need for help through a sense of compassion for those less fortunate. The event organisers are aware of this and so they make sure there are images of suffering included in their broadcasts. Stories that focus on hunger or orphaned children as a result of conflict or HIV are common. The settings are usually rural, depicting traditional 'straw huts' and women carrying water on their heads. These images have a significant influence on our perceptions. To anyone who has not visited these distant places, or has not critically analysed the broadcast, they contribute to a distorted and negative stereotype.

As teachers we need to be aware of the hidden costs of a red nose. Engaging young people in fundraising activities around national events may engender good moral values but what effects do the images and messages used by these events have on their perceptions of people in distant places? As the pace of globalisation increases, the movement of people and information around the world presents young people with new challenges. How they relate to people from different cultures, interpret images and messages and challenge inequalities depends upon how they perceive the wider world. To promote community cohesion, and avoid racial prejudice and discrimination in the future, young people need a more balanced and objective perspective.

Young people's perceptions of Africa and African people

The LUCAS project seeks to help young people in Leeds schools understand that they are part of a global community, that African societies have many interests similar to their own and that they do not see Africa as an exotic 'other' but as a functioning continent with historical, cultural and economic links to their own lives.

Our approach utilises a resource on our own doorstep – post-graduate students from Africa studying at Leeds University. We recruit African students
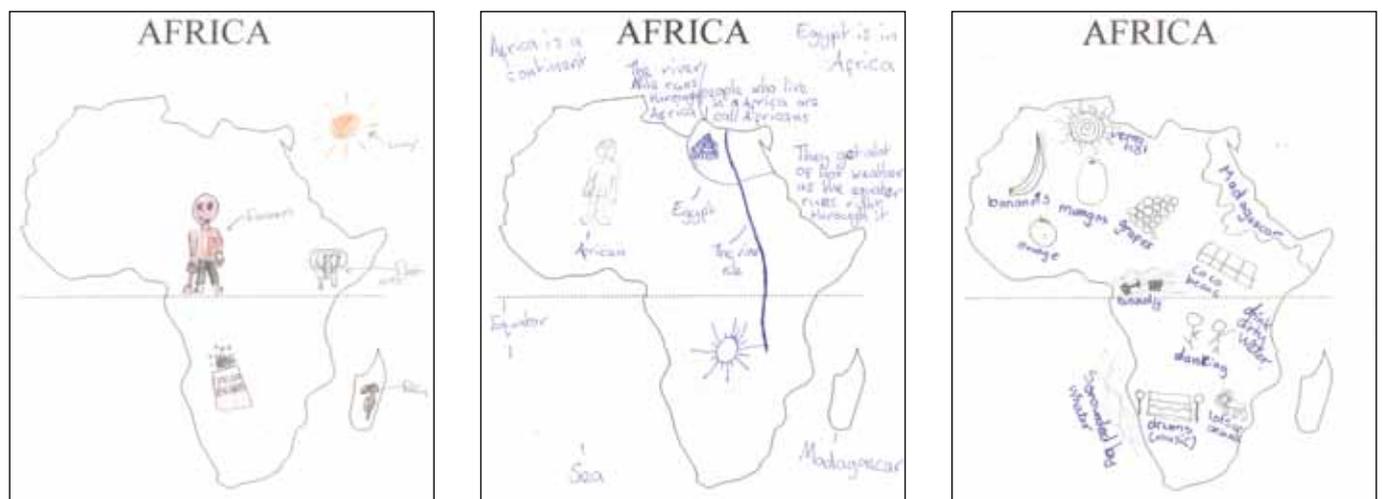

Figure 1: Year 5 pupils' initial impressions of Africa.

from a wide range of courses and provide them with a course of training to deliver activity days in primary schools. Over the past three years the project has recruited and trained 45 African post-graduate students from 14 different countries and delivered African Voices Days to over 2600 year 5 and 6 pupils in 49 primary schools around Leeds.

At the start of the project we wanted to assess young people's perceptions of Africa so we provided year 5 pupils with blank maps of the continent and asked them to draw or write anything they knew about Africa (Figure 1).

Africa maps, like the ones above, provided us with a way of looking at Africa through the eyes of young people in Leeds. For example, many pupils placed Egypt and Madagascar on the map because Egypt is a topic covered in the primary curriculum and Madagascar is the location of the Disney film of the same name. Images of animals, music and dancing probably come from wildlife documentaries and travel programmes and references to exotic fruits and cash crops such as cocoa are a result of greater awareness of fair trade. It was 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. The coverage of the World Cup from South Africa may have gone some way to challenge this perception but in all of the Africa maps we

Over 75% of pupils thought there was little food in Africa:

'When you see Red Nose Day you see loads of pictures of people starving.' (year 6 pupil)

Over 70% of pupils thought that people in Africa did not use mobile phones:

'I thought all people were poor and they didn't have any technology.' (year 5 pupil)

Over 50% of pupils thought there were no skyscrapers in Africa:

'I thought it was like what you see on the news – straw huts and fighting.' (year 6 pupil)

Figure 2: Initial misconceptions about Africa.

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

To explore these perceptions further we asked year 6 pupils to complete a questionnaire. Provided with a selection of adjectives to describe what they thought about Africa, the words scorching, arid, thirsty, starving, deprived and primitive accounted for 76% of all pupil choices.

From a selection of images to show what they thought Africa was like, 75% of pupils chose pictures of hungry children, tea pickers, rural housing and traditional dancers.

When pupils were asked to rate various characteristics of African people they indicated that they perceived them to be poor and sick, neither sad nor happy, but harder working, interesting. From a range of agree/disagree statements about Africa, pupils generally thought of Africa as a place with little food, having no TVs, being a dangerous place to live, having no tall buildings and being a place where people do not use mobile phones (Figure 2). When asked about their level of support for Africa and African people, pupils thought buying fairly traded goods and supporting charities to be very important but placed less importance on volunteering, going on holiday to Africa and finding out more about Africa.

We followed up the year 6 questionnaires with a focus group discussion. The pupil responses confirmed our earlier observations that the main external influences on young people's perceptions were television 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 the Zulu dancers (Figure 3).

Analysis of the results between schools indicated that pupil perceptions of Africa varied across the city. The most significant

'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.'

Figure 3: Quotes from year 6 pupils.

factor influencing pupil perceptions was the level of social deprivation in the area around the school. We found that pupils from more affluent backgrounds were more likely to be positive about Africa and African peoples than pupils from less affluent backgrounds.

We concluded, therefore, that young people are more influenced by the sources of information about Africa and African peoples that they obtain from outside school than from 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. 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.

Challenging negative perceptions

Young people's perceptions of Africa can change. Following the delivery of the African Voices Days by African post-graduate students, the year 6

'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 thought all the buildings would be different but they were like what we've got.'

'I thought everyone was black.'

Figure 4: Quotes from year 5 pupils.

questionnaire was repeated. While 'scorching' and 'arid' were still popular words to describe Africa, 'deprived' and 'primitive' were replaced by 'welcoming', 'friendly' and 'lively'. The images of tea pickers and cultural dancers were still popular among pupils, but the images of hungry children and rural housing were replaced by wildlife and city landscapes.

Pupil perceptions of African people had also changed; they thought them to be richer, happier and healthier than they had at first thought, while their perceptions of Africans as being hard working and interesting were maintained. Pupils realised that Africa was not as food-deprived, as rural, as dangerous or as technologically deficient as they first thought (Figure 4). Buying fairly traded goods and going on holiday to Africa maintained their importance but the importance placed on supporting charities that work in Africa and volunteering to help African people decreased slightly.

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. Focus group discussions with pupils and teacher questionnaires indicated that several factors contributed to this change in perception.

Firstly, the presence of the African post-graduate students in the classroom presented a different perspective of Africa – highly educated, relatively wealthy and articulate. Secondly, they established a personal bond with the pupils which added credibility to what they taught. And 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 (Figure 5).

Who 'nose' best?

My intention in writing this article is not to discredit charities that seek funding through high-profile media events. The work that these charities undertake in Africa makes a significant difference to the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable across the continent. But their influence on how we perceive Africa is disproportionate as they focus on a small percentage of the population that is in greatest need of support. As economically active adults we can make 'informed' decisions about whether to respond to media appeals for donations made by charities. As teachers we have a responsibility to ensure that the

'We saw pictures of cities and mining in Africa.'

'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.'

Figure 5: Quotes from year 6 pupils.

pupils in our care are not misguided by these high-profile events. Young people need a more balanced perspective of Africa so that they can put what they see and hear into an informed context.

The African post-graduate students recruited by the LUCAS Schools Project are immensely proud of where they come from and of their cultural heritage. They were dismayed by the lack of knowledge and understanding young people in the UK had about the African continent. Through African Voices they had an opportunity to influence how the young people in Leeds perceive Africa. They were able to share with them some of the richness and diversity of a vibrant continent from an African perspective.

The Schools Africa Project raises awareness of Africa amongst children and young people in Leeds. The project recruits and trains postgraduate African students that study at the University of Leeds to go into local schools and deliver lessons about Africa to pupils. LUCAS monitors the impact of the African postgraduate students on pupils and teachers in Leeds, and uses the evidence to research young people's perceptions of Africa and its peoples.

Find out more *http://www.polis. leeds.ac.uk/lucas/schools-africa-project/*

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