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Countering stereotypes through global learning

Ruth outlines some practical ideas that can be used to challenge stereotypes when teaching about inequality and suggests resources to support them.

Accompanying online materials

The multiple perspectives explored by global learning reveal a more complete and complex picture of life in the world today. The ideas in this article aim to increase students' understanding of the dangers of misconceptions and stereotypes and develop ways to question them, enabling them to form a broader, more critical perspective on the world.

Through charity campaigns, holiday adverts, news and social media, school resources, etc. students are exposed to a vast range of images which shape their perceptions of the world beyond their immediate experience. Unless these perceptions are challenged, students may simply accept biased opinions: they need to develop the intellectual tools to critically assess them.

Stereotypes can make people suspicious of each other, avoiding contact and communication. 'Others' can be seen as less than equal, resulting in prejudice and discrimination: at an extreme level they can be dehumanised and subjected to injustice and violence. Misconceptions about poverty can actually increase it. A failure to understand the causes of poverty, both in the UK and internationally, can lead to a blame game – if people are poor it is their own fault. Consequently they are socially excluded: their voices are rarely heard and their achievements go unrecognised. It is particularly important when teaching about poverty to avoid engendering a feeling of superiority amongst students, but rather to see poverty as injustice, a result of human power relations rather than a social hierarchy.

Scoffham (1999), suggesting that perceptions of people and places are formed in early childhood, advocates global learning from an early age, as misconceptions become more difficult to 'unlearn' over time:

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… the influence of parents and peer group pressure may also serve to confirm negative views… racism and all its attendant evils are only a short step away. (Scoffham, 1999, p. 13)

How can we challenge stereotypes when teaching about poverty?

Reflect

We all view the world through our own 'cultural spectacles', tinted by our background, education, experience, beliefs and – possibly – privilege. True objectivity may not be achievable – we may not be able to view the world through others' spectacles – but we can be aware that our own world view is just one amongst many. This may enable us to avoid imposing our cultural biases on our students and to encourage them to be aware of their own. To what extent are we consistently questioning our own assumptions and world views when preparing and planning teaching and learning?

If we have visited another country our experience will have helped shape our perception of it, but we recognise that our experience of a specific time and place should not make up the whole, or our only, image of a place. Similarly, we shouldn't expect the people we meet to be representative of all the people in that place. It might be useful to look at the photographs we took during a visit – maybe ones we have used in lessons. What do they say about what we thought was important about the people and place we visited? Did we take photographs which are similar to ones that are commonly seen in the media? What photographs did we *not* take? (Figure 1)

The images one teacher brought back from her first visit to a partner school in Uganda showed only what the school didn't have: no chairs, no windows, and only limited toilet facilities. She also went to great lengths to find a 'mud hut' to add to her collection. These images of a country

Figure 1: These images were taken on a visit to Bangalore. Do they challenge stereotypes or do they confirm them? **Photos:** Ruth Totterdell.

in Africa were not new to her students. After reflection, on her second visit the teacher took photos of the airport she arrived at and the taxi she travelled to the city in. She filmed the journey through the city, the bank, the post office, the school allotment and the animals the students cared for. Images showing similarities with the students' lives may be less striking – even taken for granted – but these images provide essential context for an exploration of inequality and diversity within countries (Figure 2).

Some grown-ups think Africa is poor; they don't understand that there are poor parts and rich parts and some in between. Like most other places in the world! (Year 2 pupil at a GLP Expert Centre School.)

Find out what students already know or think

We've probably formed an impression of the type of perceptions or stereotypes of people and places students might have, but we won't really know until we ask them: this can often yield surprising results.

Devising activities to elicit this information need not be complex. Asking students to label a blank map of a country with what they might expect to see there, or respond to the question 'Why are people hungry?' will give us a framework for understanding where negative attitudes, misconceptions and misunderstanding exist and may also offer clues as to where students are getting their ideas from. All this can feed into planning and can be repeated to monitor progress.

Resources

An updated edition of the teacher's resource *How do we know it's working?* (RISC, 2015a), which includes activities for measuring attitudinal change, will be launched in the summer term 2015.

Ensure a balance of images and perspectives

Use images of 'the everyday' to help students recognise commonalities and links between their lives and those of others (Figure 3). This also helps students to recognise the diversity of rich and poor within, as well as between, countries, and that people all over the world care for their families, enjoy free time and have dreams for their future.

Figure 2: Uganda or UK? These images are from a photo resource comprising images of Uganda, accompanied by matching pairs of images of the UK, to provide a balanced view of a locality and challenging stereotypes of people and places. **Photos:** *risc.org.uk/education*

Resources

In *Perceptions of Africa* (Carpenter, 2012) Global Thinking has collated a range of good images. RISC (RISC, 2015b) have also built a collection of about 6000 teachers' images covering a number of countries. It's free to register and download images; please get in touch with RISC if you would like to contribute images of your own.

Discuss what a stereotype is, so that students can recognise one

Teachers at a primary school in Brighton, planning a term's work on India, were concerned that their pupils had a negative and stereotypical view of India and wanted to explore ways of challenging their negative perceptions. They introduced a wide range of images of the country, exploring city life and looking for commonalities; however, it was not until they had taught a lesson on understanding stereotype that pupils began to look critically at the images and information presented to them and recognise that no single image or description defines people, places and cultures, and that they are not static but continually changing.

We did some work on challenging misconceptions about countries, including Ethiopia, India, Syria and Vietnam. We learnt that nearly all our first thoughts about the countries were wrong! We know so much more about GDP and life expectancy in these countries now and we in the UK could learn from them! (Year 6 pupil at a GLP Expert Centre School).

Figure 3: Use images of 'the everyday' to help students recognise commonalities and links between their lives and those of others. These children are playing games on a beach near Beira in Mozambique. **Photos:** Rachel Finnigan.

While adults were quoted in 38% of stories about young people, a young person's quotation appeared in only 11% of the coverage.

Fewer than one in four stories about young people in the national media is positive.

Broadcast media is particularly negative, showing young people in an unfavourable light in 87% of coverage. 87.5% of broadcasting media clips are unfavourable towards young people.

Figure 4: Media coverage of young people. **Source:** TNS Media Intelligence Survey 2007, quoted at *www.communitycare. co.uk/2007/06/25/young-people-lose-out-in-media-coverage-survey-finds.*

Online resources
Go to *www.geography. org.uk/tg* and click Summer 2015 to download a list of global learning resources supplied by Ruth that can be used to counter stereotypes.

Find out more about how the Global Learning Programme (*www.glp-e. org.uk*) can help your school integrate real-world, global contexts into lessons to enthuse, inspire and engage students. Register your school today to get access to the free staff training, funding, guidance, resources and local network support. Global Learning Programme (GLP) Expert Centres are schools that have a passion and expertise in global learning and whole school development, together with a strong CPD capability.

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Another useful way of introducing students to the idea of stereotyping is to look at how young people themselves are portrayed in the media – this helps them better understand the term 'stereotype' and the damage stereotypes can do (Figure 4). An activity that can be done with students can be found in *Show racism the red card pack* (2008).

Critique resources

A wide range of organisations make global learning resources available to teachers: aid agencies, charities working locally or internationally, universities, museums, galleries, even the Ministry of Defence. But how do we know which are useful and which not? Do they offer a balanced approach? Do they challenge or reinforce misconceptions or stereotypes? Do they elicit positive responses or provoke pity and disempowerment?

A good Global Citizenship resource challenges stereotypes, focuses on what people have in common as well as celebrating diversity, and enhances critical thinking skills by requiring children and young people to think about the causes and consequences of injustice and inequalities (RISC, 2015c, p. 2).

Their 'Dos and Don'ts' list suggests ways of assessing the quality of global learning resources, including the advice to seek out resources which incorporate students' voices, which link actions to consequences and which genuinely reflect diversity.

Learn to unlearn

Challenging misconceptions which students may have acquired at a young age requires helping students to 'learn to unlearn'. It involves restructuring previously held perceptions, ideas, attitudes and even feelings. This might be possible with a single image, a surprising fact or being exposed to different perspectives. It can be uncomfortable, for young people and adults alike, and needs to be tackled sensitively, with

ground rules and open discussion. Be prepared and expect to be challenged as it can reduce student anxiety about negative presentations of people and places: it can also be mind-blowingly exhilarating!

Measure impact

Revisit the initial activities to measure the impact of the teaching and learning. Have the students' knowledge, attitudes and opinions changed? Are they questioning each other's assertions more critically? As well as asking students to question their understanding, ask yourself how your understanding has changed. Take time to reflect on your assumptions. Have you modified your ideas and interpretations of the world?

Enthused by a CPD global learning course, two secondary teachers returned to school and planned an off-timetable 'Global Week' for year 9, with a range of exciting global activities. At the start of the week they gauged students' perceptions of countries in Africa, Asia and South America. These showed students held very stereotypical and superficial views of people and places. The Global Week was thought to be a great success, with students fully engaged and motivated. At the end of the week the teachers checked the students' perceptions again – and they hadn't changed. If they hadn't gauged students' perceptions at the start and end of the Global week, the teachers might have assumed that the stereotypes had been successfully challenged. They also learnt that although one-off global learning events might be fun they don't necessarily bring about deep learning or long-term change: global learning needs to be embedded in the curriculum and ethos of the school.

Conclusion

In a complex, ever-changing world global learning approaches can help you open up new perspectives and insights to your students, encouraging open dialogue, enquiry and critical thinking. Global learning can help students make sense of the world and their role in it and engage them actively with their local and global communities. Challenging stereotypes and encouraging reflection and self-questioning will help them develop empathy for people they know, as well as anonymous strangers, ensuring that they regard all people as of equal value. | **TG**

References

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