Intercultural Understanding or Neo-Colonialism? A Critique of Global Educational Partnerships
Dr. Fran Martin and Dr. Helen Griffiths, University of Exeter, Graduate School of Education

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Warwick, 1-4 September 2010

Introduction
This paper presents the early stages of a three-year ESRC funded project into, “Global Partnerships as Sites for Mutual Learning: teachers’ professional development through study visits”. It focuses on issues of power and representation in North-South intercultural experiences, and shows how these issues have informed the methodology and research design. Postcolonial theory provides the key theoretical framing for the study.

Postcolonial Theory
Post-colonial, literally the period following independence from colonial rule, needs to be distinguished from postcolonial (without the hyphen) which is ‘a critical approach to analysing colonialism and one that seeks to offer alternative accounts of the world’ (Sharp, 2009:4). Postcolonial theory was first developed by Edward Said in his seminal work ‘Orientalism’, where he demonstrated how, during colonial times, the western binary way of thinking (like-unlike, them-us, rich-poor) was the basis for how colonisers made sense of what they encountered. Said (1985), showed how categorisations were not only binary and oppositional, but also hierarchical, with one term being privileged over the other:

On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things. (1985:49)

Categories divided the world into the ‘West and the Rest’ with the rest epitomising everything that the West found uncomfortable or unsettling to its superior image. The use of postcolonial theory continues to hold relevance today because as Sharp observes, ‘while political, and to a less extent economic, decolonisation might have occurred with independence, cultural decolonisation – what some call decolonisation of the mind – has been a much more difficult process’ (2009:5).

Contexts for Global Education Policy
Believe it or not, there are millions of children across Africa who’d love nothing more than to be given a ton of homework to do. That’s because getting homework would mean they’d be getting an education and that’s their best chance of escaping the grinding poverty they face. (source: comic relief website)

Education policy is not developed in a vacuum and a range of contexts have a bearing on North-South educational partnerships and intercultural learning. It is our contention that the UK’s economic neo-liberal goal of maintaining a superior position within the global economy is hidden under the rhetoric of political neoliberal goals of social justice, the latter of which are perhaps most powerfully expressed through the eight Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000). A critical analysis of the MDGs are particularly significant to education because they are embedded into the work of NGOs many of which have a big impact on how the global dimension is interpreted in schools.

From a postcolonial perspective, the MDGs are an example of a binary approach to making sense of the world that immediately divides the world into those that have, and those that have not. For example, in MDG1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, poverty and hunger are assigned to the South while the West is represented as the advanced society with the power to ‘help’ in a paternalistic way. In another example, MDG2: Achieve universal primary education, represents universalist views of what primary education looks like
based on Western conceptions of education taking place in formal school systems. Those in the South are rarely shown in active roles in the achievement of the MDGs, and where a sense of agency is suggested, it is often portrayed as being in the gift of the West through the financial support of, for example, UKAid. In all of this, the historical, colonial relationship between the UK and the South, and thus UK’s implication in global economic disparities, remains invisible.

At a broader, societal level, a neoliberal discourse is evident in media representations of the South and the unquestioning assumption that the problem can only be fixed through aid and the work of NGOs such as Oxfam, UNICEF, and CAFOD, and charitable organisations such as Comic Relief and Sport Relief – all of which, through their educational wings, aim to influence pupils’ learning. Again, the causes of inequality are hidden under the ideal of the concept of care which, liberals would argue, represents a universal morality (Johnson 2004).

On the one hand educational policy states the liberal aims of ‘challenging negative and simplistic stereotypes and images … ensuring equality, mutual respect and the promotion of learning’ (DfES/DfID 2005: 4). On the other hand, however, there is a need to equip ‘our children, young people and adults for life in a global society and work in a global economy’ (ibid. 2-3). In a context of increasing numbers of international students in FE and HE, the aim is ‘enculturation’ into Western discourses in order to ‘maximise[e] the contribution of our education and training sector and university research to overseas trade and inward investment’ (DfES, 2004: 13). The conflation of economic goals with the aims of developing ‘good’ citizens is a prime example of the paradoxical nature of government policy that schools have to negotiate.

This is the context within which educational policy has been developed which has, in turn, provided the context for policy on North-South school partnerships (figure 1).

Figure 1: Contexts for North-South school partnerships

**Gap in Research**

Global education has been high on the government agenda for the last decade. In 2000, the DfEE produced guidance for schools on including a global dimension across the curriculum (DfEE/DfID). Subsequently the DFES (2004) set a target for all schools to establish a link with a school overseas by the year 2010. A key part of this strategy is encouraging links with schools in the global south, often linked to DFID’s Global School Partnership (GSP) programme. However there is growing evidence that schools are ill equipped to respond to the differences that are inevitably encountered (Disney, 2004; Wood, 2006). Issues of power and the effects of colonialism are central to how such partnerships develop and the learning that takes place within them; lack of understanding of these issues is leading to practices within some partnerships that undermine their educational goals, for example fundraising activities that reinforce imbalances of power (DFID, 2007; Leonard,
2008). A key factor in this has been identified as lack of teacher understanding of development and global issues (Hutchings & Smart, 2007; Martin, 2007; Oxfam, 2007; DEA, 2009).

Analyses of policy documents that promote intercultural learning and global citizenship have revealed an over-riding colonial discourse, which is common to Canada, the USA and the UK (Graves, 2002; Zemach-Bersin, 2007; Andreotti, 2008). However, this discourse is hidden under a rhetoric that focuses on common humanity and celebration of diversity and as such is hard for teachers to identify – particularly since the rhetoric might be consistent with their own beliefs about the aims of global citizenship.

**Our Project**

One of the strategies for developing teachers’ knowledge is North-South study visits, however no systematic research has been conducted into the impact of these on teachers’ knowledge and understanding. The ‘Global Partnerships’ project is therefore investigating what teachers learn from study visits, and how they make use of what has been learnt back in their own educational settings, giving equal weight to the learning of both northern and southern partners. The key research question is:

> What impact do two North-South study visits have on teachers’ understanding of development issues and how does this inform their understanding of, and practice in, global partnerships?

The focus of the investigation is on two long established global educational partnerships (between the UK – Gambia and UK – India) and the study visit courses that are run within these. The research is taking place at two levels. Firstly, at the more strategic level we are examining how the two North-South partnerships have developed and the context they provide for educational study visit courses. A participatory approach (Bennett & Roberts, 2004) is being taken to research with methods including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and the use of research diaries. Secondly at the pedagogic level we are exploring what and how teachers from both the North and the South learn about development and global issues from their involvement in study visits. One of the study visits is aimed at student teachers with the other involving experienced teachers and other educators. A multi-sited ethnographic approach is being taken to gather data at this level, with the focus on participant observation supplemented by semi-structured interviews/research conversations and learning journals.

**Research Model**

Study visit courses that enable teachers to deconstruct how North-South relationships are conceptualised at both societal and personal levels are faced with a major challenge, and very little is known about what processes might enable this to happen. The courses that are to be investigated in this study address an epistemological concern about how knowledge of ‘the Other’ is constructed within the context of North-South study visits. However, previous studies have shown that intercultural experiences often do not have the desired effect regarding deconstructing teachers’ knowledge and beliefs (Finney & Orr, 1995; Hutchings & Smart, 2007). For example, in a study on intercultural field experiences for undergraduate students, Finney and Orr (1995) noted a disappointing lack of change in attitudes and suggested that this was due to students’ individualist notions of identity, in which they ignored the socio-historic structures underpinning wider society.

In the context of Global Citizenship Education, Andreotti (2007) discusses the need to develop ‘an ethical engagement with the Other’ and to this end, the study takes an intercultural learning approach to the research design. This is achieved by employing Gambian and Southern Indian researchers. Intercultural, mutual learning will take place between Northern and Southern researchers in the same way as takes place between northern and southern teachers involved in the study visits (figure 2). In this respect, a participatory approach is being taken to the research with the aim of ensuring a voice for all actors in the research, and embodying the principle of the right of people being researched to influence how the research findings are portrayed and the public debate that ensues.
Initial Findings

This paper finishes by providing a brief example from the first year of the research. In July the study visit to Southern India took place for student teacher from Canterbury Christ Church University. Whilst we have yet to analyse any of our findings, issues of representation became evident during the visit. Near the end of the visit some students co-led a reflective session. We discussed examples of an image we’d held of India before coming on the study visit that had been dispelled. The following extract from Fran’s research diary reveals that some students had begun to develop more complex ideas about the representation of ‘India’:

Sarah spoke of being aware that one stereotype (of India) might be being replaced by another – i.e. we were only experiencing Tamil Nadu and other states might be very different. Becky replied saying that therefore as teachers we will need to be more critical when teaching about, for example India – and develop pupils’ critical / analytical skills as well as creative ones. Anna said we would need to do some sort of elicitation with pupils before teaching the unit. And Robert suggested that it’s not so much replacing one image with another as layering and thus images becoming more complex.

These insights were brought out during supported reflection and had not arisen prior to this. This supports our contention that study visits have the potential to be more effective if they are framed within a formal course in which learning is facilitated by knowledgeable others.

Both Fiedler (2007) and Brock et al. (2006) point out the need for facilitation or supervision during intercultural experiences. We wish to argue that without such facilitation, or mentoring, it is difficult for participants to critically engage in meta-reflection that will enable them to examine (and readjust) their beliefs, attitudes and dispositions (McAllister, et al., 2006). Indeed, Merryfield (2000) concluded that crucial to a ‘decolonisation of the mind’ (p.439) was time to reflect and support to deconstruct previously held assumptions about the world.

Emerging Research Issues

As we near the end of Year 1 of the project we are mindful that issues of power and representation between Northern and Southern researchers and between researchers and participants/organisations are becoming central to the research. For example, during research conversations there is a tendency to want to find points of contact and to feel connected to those one is working with by focusing on similarities and seeking consensus. However, drawing on the work of Burbules (1997) and Souza (2008), we are becoming increasingly

1 All names are pseudonyms
aware that it is possible to feel connected through difference when one aims not to resolve those differences, but to understand them. The focus for year two moves onto investigate ways in which the study visit course inform the development of teachers’ practice over time and providing Southern perspectives on learning from study visits.

The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council First Grants Scheme for a three-year period October 2009 – September 2012 (ESRC Grant Reference: RES-061-25-0402).

References


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 8 March 2011