

Focus

THE IMPRESSIONS LEFT BEHIND BY NGO MESSAGES CONCERNING THE DEVELOPING WORLD

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Introduction

This article seeks to add to the discussion around understanding how young people interpret non-governmental organisations' (NGO) messages about the developing world by providing empirical evidence of the complexities of this interpretation. NGO material about the developing world has been the subject of debate for some time and there have been concerns around issues such as stereotyping, the predominance of a charity framework and misrepresentation (Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004). A significant source of information for young people in the developed world is within the broad umbrella of development education in schools, particularly material supplied by NGOs. Whether through campaigns, events or education material presented in class as supplementary to the formal curriculum, NGO representations of the developing world are prominent in many schools in the developed world. Evidence of how some young people are receiving and negotiating various messages will be presented from research carried out in the New Zealand context. From this, I conclude that both educators and NGOs need to seriously consider the educational impact of all aspects of NGO outreach. Good development education practice may be undermined by other NGO activities and a holistic view of how young people form impressions of the developing world is needed. It is not enough to 'raise awareness'; the evaluation of exactly what sort of 'awareness' has been raised is critical.

This article is based in the New Zealand context and draws upon findings carried out through empirical research as part of a doctorate in development studies. Certain problematic aspects of representation in development education became apparent in the course of fieldwork data collection. This paper highlights issues concerning what is taught and learnt about the developing world in the New Zealand classroom but the examples

given are not representative of all aspects of how development education is delivered in New Zealand.

The context of the formal schooling environment and the role of NGO material

Messages about geographically distant places and people are picked up continuously through general media, formal and informal literature and attitudes and knowledge from family, friends and life experience. Learning about the world in the formal environment of the classroom is just one avenue, although arguably a significant one as Bryan and Bracken demonstrate with their study in the Irish context (Bryan and Bracken, 2011). How the world is mapped and conceived of, and presented in the classroom, comes with the authority of the teaching environment. Teachers may teach about the complex and historical reasons for global inequalities, but the messages from other sources, such as films, advertising, tourism promotion and NGO campaigns can influence the learning about other regions, especially in the developing world.

The ‘charity lens’ of benevolence towards the Other, as part of NGO messaging has been under considerable challenge for some time (Andreotti 2006; Young 2010). Commentators in the development education sector recognise that teaching a ‘charity’ model of development, implying that the ‘West knows best’, is to deny other forms of thinking about development and to risk creating attitudes of superiority amongst students in the developed world (Smith and Donnelly, 2004; Zemach-Bersin, 2007; Jefferess, 2008). This framework is not unique to the formal education sector nor to non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) that provide information to the public. There has been criticism in the past of how the general media often highlights the negative, the exotic and the bizarre in the developing world with a focus on providing easy or palatable sound bites for Western consumption (Chouliaraki, 2006; Davis, 2007; Barnes, 2008; Scott, 2009; Versi, 2009; MacDonald et al., 2010).

Alarm bells have been sounded by many educators that young people may be locked into ‘ways of seeing’ that are influenced by several factors including their lack of exposure to media generated outside of the developed world (Philo, 2002; Miller, 2008; Campbell and Power, 2010) and by the

emphasis on the drive to ‘make a difference’ through charity (Andreotti, 2008; Jefferess, 2008; Bryan and Bracken, 2011). Within the New Zealand context, a study of print media determined a bias that supports these critiques concerning general media’s portrayal of the developing world (Matheson, 2011). A comment illustrates this concern from another perspective. New Zealand billionaire businessman, Stephen Jennings spoke to a New Zealand audience of business people in 2009, and his message was:

“We assume not only that these countries are helpless and clueless, but they want what we have, the way we have it, and that we, benevolently, need to show them the way or they’ll never manage. And we’re simply wrong” (quoted in Clifton, 2009: 20).

In an earlier part of her interview with Jennings, New Zealand journalist Clifton writes about sub-Saharan Africa as ‘those places we’re accustomed to thinking of only in terms of TV aid appeals’. The key word in this statement is ‘accustomed’ which refers to audiences understanding messages within their own historical and contextual backgrounds, so that they start to ‘see’ the developing world in certain ways, to become ‘charity literate’ concerning NGO messaging (Dogra, 2012). From many angles, commentators are arguing that we need to question how the developing world (if there is such a region) is viewed, particularly Africa (Bula, 2002; Mahadeo and McKinney, 2007; Versi, 2009). Who is speaking for whom, and more importantly from the perspective of young people, whose voices are reaching young people? The central thesis of this article is that despite the different means by which young people learn about the developing world, the key messages still paternalistically frame the developing world, or parts of it, in a state of passivity and deficit and this is what young people pick up, despite efforts by NGO educators to challenge this.

It has been argued that voices from the developing world in NGO material are either muted, mediated by NGOs or absent (Njoroge, 2009; Davis, 2010; Gallwey, 2010; Murphy, 2011). Radical or dissenting voices are often absent. For the student in the classroom, with varying degrees of exposure to international media, the most significant lens by which certain places and people in the developing world can come to be seen is through an NGO. It is

often their primary lens. Connectivity with the distant Other, despite advances in communication technology is still problematic. Most young people in New Zealand have access to the internet and to a wide range of media sources. In theory, the media is wide open and marketing and representation should be a level playing field, but this is not the case. Within the formal setting of the classroom NGO material and messages have the potential to dominate and frame their formative perspectives of the developing world.

Empirical research in the New Zealand context

Referring to empirical research from the New Zealand context, three different types of message delivery and their respective consumption by students will be shown. The discussion focuses on how the intended message may not be what is actually learnt by the students. The three examples used are: the impact of an NGO resource used as a central part of the curriculum; student impressions from a visiting speaker who had volunteered with an NGO; and finally, some students questioning the messages about the developing world they are receiving from general NGO campaigns and wider media. The examples from this research illustrate that the *impressions* that students are left with often frame the developing world in a deficit mode, as ‘catching up to us’, and that diverse (and political) voices of the developing world are notably absent.

Fieldwork in five secondary schools was carried out in 2011-12 as part of a doctorate in development studies. The aim of the research was to explore how students make meanings from images of NGO material that they are exposed to both in the formal education setting and in general media. The research took a qualitative approach and the methodology chosen promoted discussion among the participants and it is this discursive account that is of interest here. The data collection involved working with seven teachers of six social studies classrooms (one class was team-taught with two teachers) and their year 10 (aged 14) students in five secondary schools. The schools were selectively chosen to be geographically and socially representative of the range of schools in New Zealand. For each school, there were three activities for each class involved: the first involved each student providing written answers to a four page questionnaire about images, the terms associated with development and the impressions gained from learning about the developing world, whether directly from a topic that employed NGO material or from general school

activities (such as fundraising events, visiting speakers etc.). This activity was largely a ‘warm-up activity’ designed to get the students thinking about their perspective on the topic of how they ‘see’ and learn about the developing world.

This activity was followed in the next lesson by voice recorded focus groups that were moderated by the students themselves. In groups of between two and five self-selected students, they answered further questions around meanings associated with the terms and questions around a selection of generic NGO-style images (NGOs interested in the research supplied images, but stylised graphics were also used). The questions were open-ended and designed to promote discussion and debate on the various terms used. Following these activities, there was a semi-structured interview approximately five weeks later with the teacher to gain their perspective on the role of NGO material in the classroom. Each teacher was sent an ‘initial impressions’ summary of key themes that arose, including some of the students’ aggregated comments as well as the interview questions prior to their interview to allow for greater reflection.

The data from the questionnaires and the transcripts were entered into the NVivo software programme for analysis. The data was coded to respond to the research questions of the study. These included ‘What impressions of the developing world do students have from studying these places in the classroom?’ and ‘what meanings of development do students make from images provided by NGOs?’ Descriptive words and phrases (such as ‘inhospitable’ or ‘I feel sad’) were then coded when they were part of responses to these questions. The emotions expressed by the students, such as pity or annoyance, were also coded. For the purposes of this article, data from three of the schools will be called upon to illustrate the key issue of the consumption of NGO messages in the classroom context. All participants remained anonymous and all names given for the schools are pseudonyms.

Three examples of different media sources that NGOs employ, both within the formal education sector and in general media are given. In the first example, NGO education material used in the classroom is evaluated and in the second, the significance of NGO visiting speakers is illustrated. In both these examples, the intent of the NGO material or outreach is not to create nor maintain stereotypes, but other aspects influence the reception of the material so

that the lasting impression may undermine the original intent. In the third example, some student reflections on general NGO campaigns are discussed. These different media sources, educational material, visiting speakers, advertisements on TV were sometimes specified by certain questions, at other times students raised them of their own volition as part of a wider discussion. The schools in the study had varying engagement with NGO material, some had NGO material readily available, such as posters on the walls and classroom resources, others less so. For most of the students the most readily available image that they called upon in the discussions was the child sponsorship advertisements they see on television.

Example one: the dominance of the NGO resource in the classroom study

At Treeview College, the teacher had taught a topic called 'Water Wars', which looked at access to water and the use and value of water in different countries. Using material from World Vision New Zealand (Crosbie, 2006) as part of the unit, there was a focus on access to water in the sub-Saharan country of Niger. In the research in the focus group activity the students remarked that their overall impression of the region was that it was dry, dusty and inhospitable but that the people were resilient. In the interview with the teacher that followed the student activities, the teacher reflected on the aggregated comments and was aware of the imbalance of the images that were shown, in that an overly negative impression was created not just of Niger, but of the continent of Africa. In this excerpt from the interview she is responding to the students' aggregated comments.

T (teacher): *[...]there were two things that surprised me...but useful to know...number one was that they just thought that sub-Saharan Africa all dry and dirty and everything's like that. And I thought, 'gosh, yeah perhaps I've given them just that one perspective...' and the other one is...that they wouldn't want to go to any of those places...*

RT (Rachel Tallon): *Yeah, that was interesting...but they felt that the people were nice...but they definitely didn't want to go there.*

T: *No, well why would you? Because the only image we've given of them of those countries is of poor, dry...places with people suffering...we've not given them an image of actually Africa...you know...*

RT: *Is a safari-driven, tourism...*

T: *Beautiful, incredible [...] I need to [...] here - where they've said the developing world is dry and dirty and not particularly desirable...and that's because of the tunnel vision that they've done in those topics...*

At this point in the interview I considered that she might be being a bit harsh on herself, so I interject to say that this 'tunnel vision' may be widened in the senior school:

RT: *Which is balanced out a wee bit if they do senior geography...because then they might look at...say tourism or look at something...different...*

T: *Yeah, but no...not well, I don't think we focus on Africa...though we go to all sorts of other places [...] But they don't really get another view of Africa other than one we've given them here...so I need to think about that...and look at some of the beauties and wonders of Africa...*

The teacher astutely identifies two issues here. Firstly, that in framing the topic as an 'issue', other aspects of the place and people of Niger have been marginalised. Niger becomes identified primarily through a negative lens, a problem, an issue. Secondly, that for their compulsory secondary years in her school, these students will only study Africa in this topic, largely through this lens of 'difficulty', in what the Africans lack, like good infrastructure and adequate access to water, and that they struggle. The teacher does contextualise the region's difficulties, covering aspects of colonialism and trade inequalities with her students (some do mention these factors as being part of the reasons for the issues), but the overwhelming impression that is left is the sharp

economic and development difference between them and us, their deficit and by implication, need.

The difficulty for this teacher is two-fold. Firstly, the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) for the social sciences at this level has, as one of its objectives of learning, that students understand how communities and people respond to challenges, which results in a focus on issues which can lead to ‘deficit thinking’ about other people (this connects to debates concerning the cultural turn in the social sciences, see Standish, 2009). Secondly, there is a lack of readily available resource material on this region outside of those provided by NGOs. Language barriers with foreign websites, time constraints and a lack of knowledge about other sources of information means that almost by default, World Vision’s resource on water access in Niger becomes a significant and *authoritative* source of information about the region. The region is effectively viewed almost entirely through the NGO’s framework and the underlying message can be ‘this is the region, they have issues, this is how people cope and this NGO helps in these ways’. This may be the intent of the World Vision resource, but it is probably not their intent that their resource is the sole message concerning this issue or this region, but for this teacher there was no other realistic choice of resource material.

One of the difficulties that Smith has raised is the creation of binaries when the pedagogical frame of comparison is used (Smith, 1999). Young has also commented that these binaries of ‘They live like that, and we live like this’ can cause easy stereotypes to form (Young, 2010). If binaries are emphasised and perhaps in education this is done to maintain student interest, then it is much harder for wider perspectives to be engaged with and stereotypes to be challenged (Lutz and Collins, 1993). In this example, the teacher faced curriculum and resourcing constraints that meant that the dominant viewpoint was that of the NGO and she herself recognised this imbalance.

Example two: impressions left by the visiting speaker

NGOs often have a presence in schools other than through providing classroom resources (Sinclair, 1994) and in New Zealand many NGOs organise fundraising events, student action groups and have visiting speakers that tour the country speaking to assemblies and individual classrooms. These events are

diverse and often well received by schools. What is not so well researched is the impact of these events and activities on how students learn about the developing world. At Northern Plains High School, a past pupil who had recently been volunteering with an NGO in Fiji had spoken to the school assembly and the students talked about their impressions of Fiji from her account. This was part of their response to an opening question in the focus group activity asking them to list all the NGOs they have heard of:

Girl A: *Volunteer ones...we heard of...a lady came to our assembly yesterday and described to us about a volunteer teaching thing um...that she did in Fiji...what was it called?*

Boy A: *Tears, I think?*

Girl A: *No...it started with 'L'...*

Boy A: *Just to build on that...um another one of ...what she was saying...she was helping out in a country, um Fiji.*

Girl A: *Was less fortunate...*

Boy A: *...was less fortunate than us, she was supposed to be the assistant teacher...she ended up being the teacher because the music teacher couldn't even read music and they only had one piano keyboard, no guitars or anything like that so that does made us feel more fortunate.*

Girl A: *And thankful that we have a government that can control and you know, respect our all of our stuff.*

Girl B: *Even though we may not agree with them all of the time, they do provide us with good learning and we're lucky at [Northern Plains] here.*

It is unlikely that the impressions of Fijians as being incompetent, lacking in facilities and in need of our assistance are the sole impressions the visiting speaker wanted to leave with the students. These impressions of 'feeling

fortunate and thankful', have been well documented as typical of the encounter that many people have when learning of the difficult circumstances of other people (DFID, 2000; VSO, 2002; Smith and Donnelly, 2004; Marshall, 2005; Dalton et al., 2008). In the interview with the teacher of these students, I enquired if the students learnt formally about Fiji either in their previous year of study or in their current year. The teacher remarked firstly that the visiting speaker had travelled to Fiji shortly after some devastating flooding, so the infrastructure was particularly hard hit at the time. He noted that the students do not specifically learn about Fiji in either year 9 or 10. It is possible however, if they continue on to study senior geography at years 11 through to 13, that they will study Fiji in some manner.

The concern here is that of voice. A visiting speaker breaks though the mundane routine of school life, and by giving their impressions of how they helped Fijians, they position the New Zealand student and culture in a superior position, while the voice of the Fijian people or their agency is notably absent. The isolating context and lack of background information or Fijian voice causes this teacher to remark during the interview that for his students (in a rural area of New Zealand), the lack of a connection to the people of the developing world and their voice can create problems:

T: *The resources in our local community and that isolation can breed a skewed viewpoint on some of those kinds of issues, I think.*

RT: *Can you elaborate on that?*

T: *Just a lack of access to that...[...].a multicultural perspective to an issue, it means that they....they yeah...develop somewhat of a saviour complex around developing nations and things like that where in actual fact it's not fundamentally necessary in many of those places in the world.*

The teacher comments that in a previous school in which he has taught, there was a higher multicultural ratio and the students rubbed shoulders with students who identified as being from the developing world and there was less distance between 'them' and 'us'. With this situation, the concern is the

lack of voice by Fijians. This is problematic as most NGOs recognise that they are often an integral aspect of relations between people of the developed and developing worlds and most are keen not to aggravate any unequal relationships. What is significant is the impact of the visiting speaker and the power they have to create an instant impression of a country and in this example, to posit the New Zealand students in a superior position and the Fijians remembered in a particular way.

Graves (2002) and Gallwey (2010) have both argued that the perspective of those in the developing world is often sidelined, and that the story told is packaged for the benefit of those in the developed world. The story becomes more about what we can do for them, with Jefferess (2008, 2012) arguing that the enterprise (of learning about the developing world) becomes a way of improving ourselves as global citizens. The issue that this example highlights is that the visiting speaker has an educational impact. By telling one side of the story, it can be argued that they are unintentionally 'double-victimising' developing world people by representing them in a certain manner that maintains their needy and passive position – they are awaiting 'our' help. For young and impressionable students this may become the authoritative story.

I followed up this sense of distance and connection with a teacher from another school in the research. I asked her specifically about the impact of visiting speakers from NGOs that visit the school periodically for various international campaigns.

RT: *What are the impressions your students are left with from NGO visitors who come to your school?*

T: *I think they're...they're left thinking this is a group of people who live in another country far away, who are poor, who are needy and we are the givers who come in and make their lives better.*

(Teacher, Cameron Heights College)

The problem is that these isolated campaigns are often around issues in other countries and sit outside the planned teaching programme. So if the country is not chosen specifically as a context by the teachers in the school then

the NGO perspective is the sole lens by which the country is viewed and remembered. NGOs may be unaware that the picture they are painting, the story they are telling, is quite likely to be the only narrative that these students will hear of that place and people whilst in the formal school setting. In the New Zealand curriculum there is no directive to teach a comprehensive and objective historical and geographical study of all of the world's regions at any level. This means that many regions are not covered in class and often, the NGO visiting speaker's address will be the sole source of information about a place and people.

Example three: Impressions and questions from NGO campaigns

The final illustration is from young people's impressions from general NGO messages that are not necessarily those produced for use in the classroom or school setting as well as other media. In the research, for both the individual questionnaire and focus group activities the students were shown stylised NGO images, but they were encouraged to think of the images and messages they see on posters around school, in any resources, on television and on the internet. Two themes present in the findings were a questioning of the accuracy and authenticity of NGO imagery and the emotional pull of NGO marketing. Posters and appeals in general were questioned for their accuracy in all the schools with many students expressing their opinion that NGOs stage the images of destitution to force an emotional response. In this exchange, a focus group of four students are responding to a question at the end of the activity: is there anything concerning this topic (about images and development) that you think we've missed or not discussed fully?

Boy 2: *I think something that we've missed in this topic would be like...how over exaggerated these photos are [referring in general to photos of poverty by NGOs].*

Girl 1: *or could be...so we don't know for sure if they're exaggerated but then we don't know for sure if they're even exaggerated or how much exaggerated they are. For all we know they could be 100% true because you see some photos of this poverty, then you see other photos where it's like a holiday country, like how do you know what to believe?*

Boy 2: *Yeah, like you've got sort of two different...like ideas, they're pulling off...*

The girl is aware that there is 'spin' in the presentation of overseas places and she can identify the difference and she is questioning who to believe. In another focus group from the same classroom, in answering the question 'What impressions do each of you have about the places and people in photos produced by NGOs?' this discussion showed some doubt about the representation of the images as well as questions concerning their emotive manipulation:

Girl 1: *I think that they over-exaggerate the whole concept of what the country's actually like.*

Girl 2: *They probably show that the whole country's like that but it's not really...*

Boy 2: *Where most of the country wouldn't be in the whole poverty just like the small areas that they show on the ads on TV.*

Boy 1: *Just to use an example there...I have a friend from Africa...and when she said she came from Africa...I sort of...couldn't quite make the connection...because she had nice clothes and she you know, didn't look like the people you see on television and I can remember talking to my parents and saying 'Did she come from Africa, because all the people on TV, look like they come from a different place?' And she said, 'well, no, there are different parts of Africa, there are places in poverty, but then there's towns and cities and that are like quite normal'.*

Girl 1: *I think that's why they try to make you guilt trip into the whole situation of trying to give money and things like that.*

Boy 1: *Another way of looking at it is that they've taken a picture of the country and cropped it and made it suitable for what their organisation wants. They want us to feel sorry for...*

These exchanges reveal a high level of media scepticism and these students are not afraid to question and critique the marketing practices of NGOs. They show that the students recognise that NGO representations have an agenda and that they need to be 'on guard' when receiving these messages. In both these groups, other sources of information about the developing world competed with the 'generic' NGO message and the students negotiated these and determined for themselves which was the most authentic. What is often not present in the mix of sources that students are exposed to is both the ordinariness of the Other, and the voice of the Other, a critique that has been made by many commentators concerning issues of representation of the developing world (Lidchi, 1993; Alam, 1994; Rigg, 2007). The insight from the boy above who has a friend from Africa illustrates the power of the ordinary voice to challenge the dominant representation of places like Africa.

Conclusion

From analysing the findings from these three schools, it was evident that for some of the students in this study they were receiving unchallenged messages about the developing world and this formed their impressions of people and places there. For two of the examples, the NGO education material and the visiting speaker, the developing world was represented by the NGO sector. The exchanges presented here showed that messages from the NGO sector were still largely framed and received in the traditional charity framework. In the final examples given, it could be seen that the young people actively negotiated the authenticity of the various messages they were receiving. This negotiation is positive as it shows awareness of imbalance and inauthenticity in representation. In a sense, this questioning drew the students closer to the Other, with the students starting to want to know what it's really like for those people.

Young people are impressionable and even though their geographical and historical knowledge of the world is still forming, they can be critical of their sources of information. In this article I have shown how three types of NGO outreach have been problematically received by their intended audiences. Two aspects of the reception can be identified. First that the intended messages of NGO material may be received and these may reinforce a paternalistic framework and that secondly, these same messages may be challenged and other

impressions formed that are far removed from the intent of the NGO, but are not necessarily negative.

One of the key concerns that commentators have of the power of the charity framework is that it does not shift thinking from charity to justice despite the rhetoric that it strives to do this. Kirk comments that the NGO campaign work surrounding the Make Poverty History campaign did not change public attitudes, but actually reinforced certain paternalistic attitudes (Kirk, 2012: 254). He argues that NGOs are locked in to a short term marketing framework to *sell* charity without being fully aware of their long term impact on the forming of public opinions of the developing world. Thus, the long term educative impact of NGO marketing is not fully evaluated nor appreciated. The short term goals of ‘awareness-raising’ are often privileged above long term attitude formation. Kirk argues that NGOs are attached to their charity framework and need to understand both why they are attached and the various difficulties in moving towards a new way of engaging developed world publics (Kirk, 2012). Graves (2002) and Pardi az Solis (2006) have made recommendations that address these issues specifically within NGO development education.

The division between NGO marketing and education is fluid and a greater awareness and critique by both educators and NGO marketers is needed to fully understand how their messages about the developing world are being received. Young people are already ‘charity literate’ and know what is expected of them when they see NGO campaigns. They are aware of the emotional pull and that it can be evaded. It is their first impressions about the Other that, if left solely to the NGO lens, can lead to life-long attitudes towards the developing world that can be difficult to unlearn. Awareness, empathy and possibly social action may have been the intent of the resource material, but the result is shallow stereotyping and a gentle mockery of a place and its people. If the same messages continue, both in their format and in their structure, then nothing will change and the people of the developed world will continue to see themselves as the superior givers, and the ‘Others’ as the grateful (but easily forgotten) receivers. Kirk argues that NGOs need different and independent expertise to advise them on their marketing (Kirk, 2012: 257). On the basis of the research outlined in this article, I suggest that both NGOs and educators need to consider the dictum ‘we teach, but what do they actually learn?’ Those

involved in this sector need to reflect upon what happens when marketing melds with education; that the messages, the signals and what is actually learnt about the developing world can be the opposite of what is intended. Those involved in creating NGO material for schools and have an advisory role to those in their respective campaigning departments need to call upon empirical research such as that presented in this article and others to both alert and convince NGO marketers that audience reception is not always as simple as it seems.

The author would like to thank the teachers involved in this study and Mike Taylor of Victoria University of Wellington for his input into this paper.

Note on terminology: the terms developing world and developed world are those most commonly used in the New Zealand classroom for the global economic divide.

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