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## Intercultural Understanding or Neo-colonialism? A critique of Global School Partnerships

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### Background

Global education is high on the government agenda. In 2000, the DfEE produced guidance for schools on including a global dimension across the curriculum. 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, known as Global School Partnerships (GSPs). However, there is growing evidence that schools are ill equipped to respond to the differences that are inevitably encountered (Wood, 2006; Disney, 2004). Issues of power and the effects of colonialism are central to how such global school partnerships develop and the learning that takes place within them; lack of understanding of these issues is leading to practices within some GSPs 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 (Martin, 2007; Oxfam, 2007; DEA, 2009).

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. This paper presents the early stages of three-year ESRC funded project into, "Global partnerships as sites for mutual learning: teachers' professional development through study visits".

### Research Questions

The project aims to investigate 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?". This will be investigated through the following supplementary questions:

1. How have two N-S partnerships developed and what context do they provide for educational study visits?
2. What do teachers from both North and South learn about development and global issues from their involvement in study visits?
3. What are the key factors that prompt any changes in knowledge and beliefs?
4. How does this learning inform their practice over time?

The focus of the investigation is on two long established global partnerships and the study visits courses that are run within these. One partnership is between Tide~ Global Learning, a Birmingham based education centre, and the National Environment Agency of The Gambia. The second partnership is between Canterbury Christ Church University and Goodwill Children's Homes, a charitable organisation based in Tamil Nadu, Southern India. The Tide-NEA partnership runs courses for qualified teachers; the CCCU-GCH partnership runs courses for student teachers.

### Methods

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. In this respect, a participatory approach will be taken to the research (Bennett and Roberts, 2004) to ensure a voice for all actors in the research and embody the principle of the right of people being researched to influence how the research findings are portrayed and the public debate that ensues.

An ethnographic approach will be taken to gathering data from the study visit courses. Data will also be gathered about the development of the two partnerships through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. In the second year data will be gathered from previous course members in order to investigate the impact of the course on their professional practice over time.

## **Frame**

Analyses of policy documents that promote intercultural learning and global citizenship have revealed an over-riding colonial discourse (Zemac-Bersin, 2007; Andreotti, 2008; Jefferess, 2009). 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. Study visit courses that enable teachers to deconstruct how North-South relationships are conceptualised at both societal and personal levels are thus 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); this has been explained in terms of the construction of identity (individualist vs. socially constructed) and positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Fiedler and Andreotti suggest that a critical approach to global citizenship education within a postcolonial framework is needed if teachers are to 'critically examine [their] own assumptions and perceptions vis-à-vis the world and other cultures' (Fiedler, 2007:53), and to begin to establish 'an ethical engagement with the Other' (Andreotti, 2007:73). A combination of postcolonial, identity and positioning theories will thus be used to support data analysis and interpretation.

## **Research findings**

The study will make a significant contribution to theoretical knowledge in the domains of transformational learning through intercultural, collaborative experiences and application to professional practice over time. In particular the study will bring much needed southern perspectives to our understanding. This paper presents the findings from the first year of the project. Teachers' knowledge and understanding of North-South relationships, global and development issues and the relationship between this and their changing views on school partnerships will be explored.