From celebrating to valuing global citizenship: lessons from a Norwich high school

Michael Watts describes two global citizenship projects which enabled students from the UK to gain understanding of their own lives in relation to those of their counterparts in schools in Malawi. As well as considering the students’ shift from acknowledging cultural differences to recognising a supracultural common humanity, he draws attention to the potential problems of introducing students to other countries and cultures.

The World Voices Project

The World Voices Project was established by Norfolk Education and Action for Development (NEAD), the local Development Education Centre (Watts, 2003). The aim of the project was two-fold: (a) to enable young people and their teachers to learn about other countries and cultures directly from people whose cultural heritage is rooted in countries of the South; and (b) to develop global citizenship by showing the interdependence of our world, addressing local/global sustainable development issues, promoting multicultural awareness and fostering anti-racist attitudes (NEAD, 2001). Most of the World Voices were volunteers (many of them from the local University of East Anglia) who were willing to share their cultural heritage with a wider audience. NEAD produced and distributed a handbook listing them and indicating what they could offer schools. After making initial contact through NEAD the schools made further arrangements – including the content of the visit – directly with their chosen World Voice.

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However, it was clear that, across the whole World Voices Project, the students typically focused on the storyteller rather than the tales told. Close questioning of the students’ recollections of these visits indicated that they were superimposing their previously held conceptions of the countries upon their memories of the World Voices’ visits. The same information that enabled the celebration of diversity also reified perceptions embedded in socially constructed hierarchies. So, in considering the value of John’s visit, some of the students explained that:

- If someone tells you how bad it is, it might make you feel a bit guilty. Or it might make you feel like helping them. So then you’ll sort of lend them a hand.
- It helps you think ‘Well, I’m the lucky one.’ Not like in a poor country where they’ve got problems.

Forgetting what John had told them about Malawi, such views were embedded in the all-too familiar views of sub-Saharan Africa presented in the media (Watts and Savage, 2003):

- Africa is a poor continent.
- I knew they had lots of poverty.
- People just see the (charities’) adverts and think Africa is just really bad. No-one’s happy there. They want technology. They want food.

Although the last observation indicates sufficient sophistication to perhaps see beyond the media-generated images, these comments suggest a superficial concentration on differences created by income-based notions of well-being. Of course, these differences should not be dismissed and knowledge of the historical and current causes is necessary to the responsible exercise of global citizenship. Where the World Voices visits were followed up – typically by using the visits as a starting point for closer investigation of particular issues – the personal stories allowed the students to begin the process of negotiating partial and stereotypical images generated by the combination of available media, indifference and ignorance (Watts, 2004).

The visits laid the foundations for valuing global diversity and extending the franchise of global citizenship.

The Kwathu Project

In Chichewa, the Malawian national language, kwathu means home; and the Kwathu Project (Watts and Savage, 2003) was intended to link schools in Norwich, England with schools in Zomba, Malawi. The main aim of the project was to enable students in both countries to explore and share their ideas of the meaning of home at local, national and global levels, thereby infusing an international dimension into each school’s curriculum through peer learning with children and young adults from another culture. That is, the project was immediately concerned with moving beyond the simple celebration of diversity.
The beginnings of the Kwathu Project predated John’s World Voice visit to Notre Dame High School, which was arranged to give the students a greater insight into the lives and lifestyles of young people in Malawi before they wrote their penpal letters. The penpal link, however, was not sustainable. As well as the logistical problems of exchanging letters between different groups of students, the students in both countries found it difficult to progress beyond the sharing of simple information that merely repeated social scripts embedded in daily routines. It was felt that this would achieve little more than the further reification of self-expressed identities grounded in cultural differences, so continuing the superficial celebration of diversity without enabling the deeper valuation of common humanity the project sought to uncover.

It was decided that the students in each country should take and exchange photographs that illustrated their lives and lifestyles. Disposable cameras were sent to Malawi and the Norwich students analysed the subsequent photos, using them to identify similarities and differences with their own lives and drawing up lists of questions they wanted to ask their Malawian counterparts. One particularly revealing discussion took place around a photograph of a group of boys spreading a sheet on the ground. Eventually, the Notre Dame students concluded that they had been washing bedsheets and spreading them out to dry. So far, so different from UK life. However, they did note that they have grass and trees in Malawi – a recognition that, as argued below, is considerably more important than it might initially seem. They also recognised that the Malawian students were wearing school uniforms, just as they were. Referring back to what they had been told by John, they began to question whether or not the Malawian students had to work at school as well as study, which led to a further series of questions about what chores they might have to perform. At first, this simply established more differences. Yet when they were told that chores such as chopping wood and sweeping classrooms are commonly handed out as punishments, they began to perceive similarities with punishments meted out in their own school, such as clearing trays in the canteen.

Discussion

Although the students had typically used John’s visit as a focal point for their preconceptions, it enabled them to celebrate North-South diversity at the level of personal engagement that encompassed the pluralism of a global citizenship. However, this engagement initially took place within – and contributed to the maintenance of – a socially constructed hierarchy that placed the Notre Dame students ‘above’ their Malawian counterparts because they perceived themselves to be ‘better off’. In many real senses, this may be true; but it led to a process of ‘compassionate colonisation’ (Watts and Savage, 2003) whereby well-intentioned help was offered where none had been sought. Whilst this signalled a growing awareness of global inequalities and responsibilities, grounded only in the acknowledgement of cultural differences – and obscuring the depths of common humanity – it also positioned the Malawian students as second class world citizens, in need of Western munificence. Had no more been made of John’s visit, it is likely that the students’ views would have been ossified; and the cultural differences would have continued to obscure the supracultural common humanity.

Yet what John had told them of Malawi gave them the opportunity to see beyond these differences and take in more familiar sights captured in the photos. The familiarity of the grass and trees was important because such images are rarely, if ever, seen in the usual pictures of famine-struck Africa. The grass and the trees were located on common ground – quite literally – and once this common ground had been acknowledged, these students in Norwich were able to identify more and more points of similarity. The cultural differences remained, but underneath them they were able to perceive so much more that they had in common.

Conclusion

Punishments handed out in schools in Malawi and the UK (as well as other subsequently acknowledged similarities) enabled the students from Notre Dame to realise that their lives are not always so different from those of their Malawian counterparts. There are significant cultural and economic differences, but these should not be used to deny the franchise of global citizenship located in our common humanity. These students began the process of recognising this by meaningfully relating their own lives to those of their Malawian counterparts; and, from there, to their fellow citizens around the world. They have been given the opportunity to value not only the concept of global citizenship but, in looking at their own lives in relation to those of their counterparts from the South, to more properly value their own place within it.

References


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