BAICE Thematic Forum
Challenging deficit discourses in international education and development
2015

Anna Robinson-Pant, Shella Aikman, Caroline Dyer, Nitya Rao, Alan Rogers and Spyros Themelis

This report is available online:
https://www.uea.ac.uk/education/research/areas/literacy-and-development/conferences-and-seminars
Research and policy in international education has often been framed in terms of a deficit discourse. For instance, policy debates on women’s literacy and education have begun by positioning women as a group who need to ‘catch up’ on certain skills in order to become more active in development. Rather than recognizing the skills and knowledge that participants already have and practise in their everyday lives, researchers who adopt this deficit perspective on learning and education may find that the research agenda and questions will already be shaped to a large extent by the providers’/policy makers’ standpoint.

This BAICE Thematic Forum aimed to deepen understanding around how deficit discourses have shaped the questions and objectives of international educational research, as well as deconstructing and generating greater knowledge into why and how these dominant deficit discourses have influenced the research agenda. We also set out to investigate and propose alternative conceptual models through two linked seminars. The seminars were intended to explore and challenge dominant deficit discourses that have shaped the way researchers/policy makers look at specific groups in development and thematic policy areas.

The Thematic Forum was organized by a team from the Literacy and Development Group*, University of East Anglia and University of Leeds: Anna Robinson-Pant, Caroline Dyer, Nitya Rao, Sheila Aikman, Alan Rogers and Spyros Themelis. A grant from BAICE provided funding for the seminars, including travel bursaries for speakers and student participants.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Nur Huslinda Che Mat, Vivemarlyne Mudin, Ahmmardouh Mjaya and Isabelle Mudge for their detailed notes on which part of this report is based. Thanks also to Dingyong Wang and Anne Shibasaki for photographs of the seminars. Mireille McGonigal provided excellent administrative support and design work for the seminars.

*The UEA Literacy and Development Group was set up in 2003 to bring together researchers working across the University of East Anglia and wider afield who share a ‘social practice’ approach to literacy. The group now has a national and international profile, established through commissioned research for international agencies (particularly UNESCO), convening international conferences and publications on adult learning, literacy and development.
Flourishing on the margins? Challenging discourses of group-based deficit

This seminar explored the ways in which particular groups of learners are constructed and (mis)represented in discourses of policy and advocacy, asking why their visibility is often achieved and ‘vulnerable’, including indigenous peoples, girls and women, ethnic minorities and Roma, migrants, victims of gender-based violence, (LGBT), small scale farmers, women, unemployed and the urban poor.

This seminar heard and responded to a series of invited presentations explaining to include: the ability of ‘education’ to change lives, breadth individuals’ freedoms of choice and action; lifting people out of poverty. It questioned the widely held belief that a lack of ‘education’ is a source of vulnerability, while highlighting the High Level Panel leads to a targeting of so-called poor, seen as ‘the best tool for unleashing the potential of the human and’.

What can be done about it?

Wednesday 22nd April 2015 University of Leeds

Sheila pointed out that indigenous peoples are a ‘threat category’, within mainstream educational discourses, policies and practices, whereby they are essentially defined as ‘vulnerable’. However, indigenous peoples are diverse, multiple, and changing.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes the right to education in several forms including, but not exclusively, schooling. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 calls for equal educational opportunities for all, with context setting, revisiting the key discourses of policy and advocacy, asking why their visibility is often achieved and (mis)represented in education and Inclusion: re-examining the narratives.

Flourishing on the margins? Challenging dualities which reinforce deficits.

Marginalisation and issues that Sheila and Caroline raised in their 403013 editorial ‘Education and Exclusion’ in examining the current.

This framing stressed that education is a moral and political undertaking, and emphasized the importance of understanding the underlying value frameworks that shape assumptions being made about education and the normative expectations bestowed on it. These include the ability of ‘education’ to change lives, broaden individuals’ freedoms of choice and action; lifting people out of poverty. It questioned the widely held belief that a lack of ‘education’ is a source of vulnerability, while highlighting the High Level Panel leads to a targeting of so-called poor, seen as ‘the best tool for unleashing the potential of the human and’.

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What can be done about it?
Tristan focused on Indigenous Peoples and education in Brazil. He began by calling attention to historically located schools based upon their values and recognition of and autonomy of indigenous in community based education and work and scholars’ who amount to public legislation to specific curriculum but have public funding; and ii) opportunities for higher education and the creation of a new kind of institution, which values different concepts of knowledge including for example environmental stewardship, narratives of origin and contemporary indigenous economies.

There are important parallels and differences with the initiatives and challenges being made here in both schooling and higher education. In other parts of Latin America, such as Mexico. There has been important work with the University of Sao Paulo and new collaborations between Indigenous peoples and their organizations and indigenous and non-indigenous staff, opening up new directions and concepts of ‘intercultural dialogue.

iii) research-based curricula, organised and defined by Indigenous communities themselves for their own children which are not bound by public legislation to specific curriculum but have public funding; and

iv) opportunities for higher education and the creation of a new kind of institution, which values different concepts of knowledge including for example environmental stewardship, narratives of origin and contemporary indigenous economies.

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The next set of short presenters, Purna Kumar Shrestha (VSO) and Catherine Jere (GMR) focused on deficit labels associated with disability and orphaned and vulnerable children

Purna focused on VSO work in Myanmar and ‘disability’, emphasising the important differences in the way that different inequities intersect in individual’s lives and that single categories are of limited value. Malawi is a country in Myanmar and other low income countries with disabilities as one of the biggest needs. In VSO’s work they have found that the policy discourse across education policy documents is very similar and that the major focus is on curriculum and in many cases the lack of interaction between Ministries of education and disabilities. Furthermore a lack of interaction between Ministries creates a false dichotomy of orphan/vulnerable children and orphans and vulnerable children.

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Kate reflected on Malawi as her context for problematizing the category and ‘orphans’ and vulnerable children’ (OVC). She raised the importance of understanding the social context of ‘disability’ and how these categories emerge from the meanings people are making in different contexts. In Malawi there are many OVC programmes, which have developed within the context and have been responded to donor support and Western-dominated policy. The term ‘orphans’ – and the conception of OVC – used by donors is distinct from the concept of orphan and the nature of parentage in Malawi. This externally driven agenda is of the nature of presentation and understanding how and where these different terms of learning outcomes in numeracy and literacy. This policy discourse is tied up with a narrow consideration of what is quality education in the context of Malawi. Further, the focus on a lack of interaction between Ministries in Malawi means that there is no strong and for those learners with disabilities who do access schooling their inability to complete this schooling should be seen as resulting from forces which push them out rather than ‘drop out’.

Donor programmes working with this category of OVC maintain and perpetuate a sense of group-based deficit. Such as strong normative stances with preconceived notions of gender and accountability to the exclusion of research and policy on issues of resilience or agency, the way in which OVC programmes on developing skills but these mechanisms are not seen as ‘benefits screeners’ or as victims, as helpless, as vulnerable. The more complex, detailed and intricate picture is of women who, despite engaging in education and difficult working conditions as well as the pain of separation from their families, had managed to learn English, negotiate with immigration authorities and employers across the globe, and, through their negotiations had bought property and funding schooling for family members to the point of debt. Moving the focus to adult learners, Amy North (UCL IOE) and Katy Newell-Jones (Feed The Minds) discussed labelling of migrant workers and literancy

Amy presented her research with a small group of migrant domestic workers from Nepal. She considered how with little or no prior formal education they negotiated the language barriers of schools and home and life history research offered insights into ways that despite being labelled as illiterate and unable, the women were knowledgeable, articulate and reflective about their experiences as domestic workers and transnational women. Challenging dominant discourses on both illiterate women and unskilled workers. She argued that ‘Illiterates’ are seen as victims, as “benefits scroungers” or as victims, as helpless, as vulnerable. The more complex, detailed and intricate picture is of women who, despite engaging in education and difficult working conditions as well as the pain of separation from their families, had managed to learn English, negotiate with immigration authorities and employers across the globe, and, through their negotiations had bought property and funding schooling for family members to the point of debt.
Seminar discussion

Break-out groups then considered the themes that ran across the short presentations and led into the plenary session. Initially, plenary discussion themselves reflect a meta-narrative of ‘inculcation’. It is no coincidence that they are most in evidence when projects of universal education inclusion fail. The discourse of deficit accompanies attention to those who appear to have been left out; swiftly grouping them and then assuming one—or several—group characteristics. No diagnosis of ‘deficit’ is neutral; it is used to decontextualise normalcy, thus gender, age, race, ethnicity etc. which legitimize particular models of education and development. We examined how such discourses are constructed from a presumed deficit of vocational education and training opportunities, rendering existing skills, literacy practices and skills development programmes invisible. The seminar began with two plenary presentations on current dominant policy discourses around skills development and training programmes in international education and development. We examined how such discourses are constructed from a presumed deficit of vocational education and training opportunities, rendering existing skills, literacy practices and skills development programmes invisible.

Building on the characterisation of deficit, the plenary reflected on the need to pay more attention to uses of new and established labels, and particularly how people thus identified engage with such characterisation. Attending to who is utilizing these labels and for what purposes reveals not only that they can contain consistent biases but also that they can be used to expand them. Reflections on language among indigenous peoples, for example, that another discourse of deficit accompanies attention to different groups and differential access to education, but conversely, to bring local languages into national education frameworks and transform the terms on which they are represented.

Invisible or hidden? Challenging discourses around ‘skills deficit’

This seminar explored dominant policy discourses around skills development and training programmes in international education and development. We examined how such discourses are constructed from a presumed deficit of vocational education and training opportunities, rendering existing skills, literacy practices and skills development programmes invisible. The seminar began with two plenary presentations on current dominant policy discourses on TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) (Simon McGrath) and a critique from the perspective of informal learning and skill development (Alan Rogers). We thus moved into three groups to discuss the following three sub-themes in relation to discourses on ‘skills’.

BAICE Thematic Forum
University of East Anglia

6th May 2015

Invisible or hidden? Challenging discourses around ‘skills deficit’
1. Opening plenary session

Simon McGrath, University of Nottingham

No NEET solutions: youth, skills and employability

ABSTRACT

The orthodox vocational education and training account is redolent with language of deficit and moral culpability. Millions of young people are designated negatively as NEETS - not in employment, education or training - whilst public providers are routinely castigated for their failure to make these undeserving poor into good citizens by addressing their employability. Meanwhile, the account reduces young people to numbers and atomistic economic individuals, rather than the relational and systemic actors in society. This presentation will suggest that a human development and capability approach can offer a richer alternative that a human development and capability account can offer a richer alternative to labelling both learners and institutions as 'failures'.

Questions raised in discussion included:

- Who is vocational education for?
- Who are the targets of such programmes.
- Who is creating and perpetuating dominant discourses on TVET?
- How do changing social values influence deficit discourses?
- Who is literate? What about hierarchies of skills?
- What about the ‘hidden literacies’ - the skills and practices people need to make a living, for example, the rapid growth in learning how to use mobile phones. Alan suggested that this is about making invisible the ‘hidden literacies’ which training brings to bear.
- How are funds of knowledge and banks of skills learned through existing informal learning frameworks been successful? Alan Rogers is suggesting that we need to ‘make visible the ‘hidden literacies’ which training brings to bear.’
- How do changing social values influence deficit discourses?
- Who is literacy? We need to draw a very clear distinction between language learning and literacy learning. In some contexts, if someone is not able to write English, they may be considered ‘illiterate’. What are the implications of having a literacy as the means to do something else.

Alan Rogers, University of East Anglia

‘Skills deficit’: what skills deficit? Looking again at skills in development from the bottom up

ABSTRACT

In this presentation, drawing on experience of development programmes from the fish development colleges of Tanzania to support livelihoods that ‘they must go and learn literacy that can empower.

Overall discussion

In conclusion, forum participants reflected on the limitations of either ‘reproducing or creating the way of the state’ and considered what alternatives there could be. Formal education has ‘voters and losers’ built into the system so inequities and deficit discourses are inevitable but there are options to make a change. For example a good clear distinction between language learning and literacy learning. In some contexts, if someone is not able to write English, they may be considered ‘illiterate’. What are the implications of having a literacy as the means to do something else. This idea of ‘embedded literacy’ could be limiting and we need to ensure that the process of literacy learning is empowering.

- What about hierarchies of skills and how do changing social values influence deficit discourses? Is it really ‘hidden literacy’ or skills, or is it really about what is valued in society? An example was given from Nepal of how parents used to discourage children to go and learn literacy first’. This approach could be the means to do something else? The idea of ‘embedded literacy’ could be limiting and we need to ensure that the process of literacy learning is empowering.

- What about hierarchies of skills and how do changing social values influence deficit discourses? Is it really ‘hidden literacy’ or skills, or is it really about what is valued in society? An example was given from Nepal of how parents used to discourage children to go and learn literacy but ‘they must go and learn literacy that can empower’.
- How do changing social values influence deficit discourses? Is it really ‘hidden literacy’ or skills, or is it really about what is valued in society? An example was given from Nepal of how parents used to discourage children to go and learn literacy first’. This approach could be limiting and we need to ensure that the process of literacy learning is empowering.

- Overall discussion

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Alan argued that the deficit discourse was causing the argument for moving away from negative labels like ‘NEET’ and emphasised the need for a broader understanding of work. As deficit discourses around skills have been constructed due to adopting a narrow definition of work as ‘jobs’. As Simon suggested, the goal of TVET should be around ‘producing lives’, expanding opportunities for developing new skills.

- Who is literacy? We need to draw a very clear distinction between language learning and literacy learning. In some contexts, if someone is not able to write English, they may be considered ‘illiterate’.

- Overall discussion
ACADEMIC SKILLS
Facilitated by Purna Shrestha (VSO) and Anna Robinson-Pant (UEA). Rapporteurs: Frederick Odindo (UEA) and Charlotte Martin

This group began by looking at deficit discourses around academic reading, writing and analysis skills in a range of organisational contexts, including volunteers in international development programmes and students in universities. The aim was to explore assumptions around skills, skill development and skill exchange in these specific contexts as the basis for looking at processes of informal learning. Issues to emerge from the discussion included:

- Written language is typically valued more than what is expressed orally within UK higher education, and this may differ from other cultural contexts. Examples were given of UK professionals going to work in other countries as volunteers who had to learn to place higher value on oral communication in their work there.
- Academic language is more or less like a ‘closed shop’ and therefore creates some kind of a barrier for students, including professionals who have been used to writing reports and other texts in the workplace.
- Movement and mobility was the key dimension of this particular perspective on ‘deficit discourses’. Questions central to our discussion were ‘what skills are valued?’ and ‘who decides what is valuable?’
- There can be a disjuncture between the language skills acquired and those necessary for employment. For instance, English language teachers from a ‘native-speaking’ country are considered to be highly valuable in some parts of the world, even if they do not have professional qualifications.

LIVELIHOOD SKILLS AND MIGRATION
Facilitated by Ian Cheffy (SIL International) and Nitya Rao (UEA). Rapporteur: Isabelle Mudge (UEA)

This group explored policy discourses on skills for improved livelihoods, particularly within the context of increasing migration and globalisation of economies. The aim was to look at both formal and informal learning processes to understand how people are developing skills for and through migration. The main discussion points included:

- Awareness of cultural diversity among the students was considered vital for staff when dealing with academic skills.
- Essay writing often valued more than other forms of assessment and wondered whether it was now time to find other ways of assessing students’ competences.
- Essay writing often valued more than other forms of assessment and wondered what skills are valued differently. For instance, English language teachers from a ‘native-speaking’ country are considered to be highly valuable in some parts of the world, even if they do not have professional qualifications.
This group examined discourses on digital literacy skills, in the context of the growing importance of social media and spread of ICT. The aim was to consider ICT not only in terms of ‘skills’ that are required for economic growth but also as alternative modes of learning and communication.

Participants noted that:
- There were differences in the use and learning of technology in individual and community use; formal and informal learning.
- The social media was creating new ways of communicating, being, and doing things. New groups are forming new networks for their own ends.
- New technologies are leading to alternative and innovative ways of using language and new modalities of learning and communicating. New technologies are supporting informal learning, such as the use of Twitter to pursue common goals.
- Technologies were providing some means of escaping marginality (creating new identities)
- When talking about digital skills there is need to make a distinction between ability to use the technology and knowledge of the operating systems
- There is need to do more studies exploring what technology means and on whether technologies always bring about positive outcomes.

At the end of the plenary report-back session, it was noted that the ‘digital skills’ group had been ‘less negative’ in terms of the points emerging – maybe due to this being ‘a path less travelled’.

3. Plenary Panel

The panel reflected on the Forum discussions in the light of their own experiences and in terms of making connections with the BAICE Thematic Forum at Leeds.

Demelash Wolde (UNESCO Ethiopia Education Program Coordinator) reflected that EFA is the driving force behind national policy making in many countries and that deficit discourses have led to the neglect of certain marginalized groups, such as pastoralists in Ethiopia. The post-2015 development agenda may offer an opportunity to highlight these issues around marginalisation.

Simon McGrath (University of Nottingham) noted that it is currently a ‘double moment’ for UNESCO - bringing together their adult literacy and vocational education expertise and grappling with the ‘old TVET orthodoxy’. To what extent is it useful to talk back to policy? If UNESCO recommendations look more progressive in the end, what does that amount to? Is policy impact a good thing?

Spyros Themelis (UEA) began with the tensions between the local and global, suggesting that ‘now many movements of communication’ created through social media open the possibility for a ‘trickle up’ effect. What an policy, how much policy making of the future will be framed by this deficit discourse? Is it also possible to be optimist – that people are not just resisting but reading a new interface between local and global through movements such as the Arab Spring.

From his experience in development, Ian Chaffey (University of International) observed that change does happen – but slowly. UNESCO has adopted a more sophisticated understanding of adult education and the notion of ‘literacies’, for instance, is now more mainstream. Comparing the two seminars, he suggested that whereas in Leeds we focused on the ‘victims’ of deficit discourses, at UEA we were looking at the ‘perpetrators’ of these discourses.

Purna Shrestha (VSO) brought politics back into the picture, emphasising that development is about political will and that we need to recognise the power dynamics influencing these discourses.

Technology is a good example – even if people have access to a computer, due to language barriers and the dominance of English they may not be able to access the information.
4. Next steps

At the end of the second seminar, we discussed how to take forward the BAICE thematic forum through follow-up advocacy, publication and research activities.

- Network to be established, particularly for the 3rd sector to liaise with DFID and other donors. This could be an interest group focused on youth employment and training.
- The Forum could be linked/feed into ongoing UKFIET activities, such as a Skills Conversation.
- A Compare Forum has been agreed with reflective pieces based on the two Thematic Forums – contact Nitya Rao for further details.

Feedback on the Thematic Forum seminars included:

- This has been an opportunity to discuss the wider context of, for instance, literacy and skills development, and enable us to make connections across sectors which are often discrete.
- For those based outside academic institutions, the forum provided a space to engage with theoretical ideas around deficit discourses.
- We are often having similar but separate conversations in NGOs and the Academy. This was a chance to have a conversation together.
- It was very positive to include research students as well as NGOs and academic staff in the two Forums.
- The interactive format increased participation and interaction among participants.
- Both seminars generated ideas and interest in further collaborative working and thinking on this theme.

Thanks to all those who participated in the Forums and we look forward to others joining us in the proposed follow-up activities.

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