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

Anna Robinson-Pant, Sheila 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 recognising 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.

The 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 gaining 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 organised 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 Syaznida Dwi Melati, Velmurugan Mudali, Almouhamed Aboody and Isabelle Tshomba for their detailed notes on which part of this report is based. Thanks also to Dingua Wang and Anne Stoddart for photographs of the seminars. Miriam McGregor 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, workers and students concerned with human development through research, teaching, and policy advocacy. The group 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.
Marginalisation and issues that Sheila and Tristan McCowan (IoE) focused on indigenous peoples and language ‘vulnerability’, economic and cultural development, and the importance of language for regeneration and preservation. Sheila then highlighted the importance of ethnographic research on language and educational practices which reinforce deficits.

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 through deficit-labelling.

Education in Latin America has been shaped through indigenous movements and the emergence of inter- and intra-linguistic bilingual education (IBE) as a модality for and by indigenous peoples. The UNESCO Development Goal (2000s) for equal access of education and vocational training was the new category ‘the vulnerable’, a category which is explained by individuals with disabilities, indigenous peoples and ‘girls in vulnerable situations’.

Education for and by indigenous peoples is a ‘deficit category’ within mainstream educational discourses, policies and procedures, whereby they are externally defined as ‘vulnerable’.

Sheila pointed out that indigenous peoples are a ‘deficit category’, with mainstream educational discourses, policies and procedures whereby they are externally defined as ‘vulnerable’.

The discourse of the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda has been strongly influenced by dominant educational discourses, policies and practices, whereby they are externally defined as vulnerable.

The theme of education is a moral and political undertaking, and the impotence of understanding the underlying value frameworks that shape assumptions regarding education and the normative expectations bestowed on it. These include: the ability of education to change lives, create individual identities and cultures, lift people out of poverty. It questioned the widely held belief that a lack of ‘education’ is a source of anxiety and persistent disadvantage.

It was noted further that high profile policy/education advocacy publications have begun to question ‘education deficit’ with being ‘vulnerable’. The World Bank’s 2011 Learning for All document for example reinforces the equation of education with schooling, and the urban poor.

Leeds University 22nd April 2015

BAICE Thematic Forum

SEMINAR 1

Flourishing on the margins? Challenging discourses of group-based deficit

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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 vulnerable children. Amy presented her research with a small group of migrant domestic workers from Nepal living and working in the UK and considered how with little or no prior formal education they negotiated the language, literacy and life history research offered insights into ways in which despite being labelled as illiterate and unable, the women were knowledgeable, articulate and reflective about their experiences as domestic workers and transnational migrants. Challenges remain in the design of both illiterate women and Urdu-speaking migrants, these women who spoke as many as five different languages, had managed to learn English, negotiate the pain of separation from their families, and difficult working conditions as well as educational ‘barriers’ observable in the classroom. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. A focus on education is a dominant frame of thinking among educators engaged in literacy programmes on developing skills but these programmes tend to focus on educational ‘barriers’ obscure the coping strategies, opportunities and mechanisms through which ‘OVC’s and others affected by HIV/AIDS employ to maintain access to schooling during difficult periods in their lives – reinforced by deficit labelling of children who return to schooling after death of parent(s). Donor programmes working with this category of OVC maintain and perpetuate the idea of ‘illiterates’, which is then used to connote ‘illiteracy’ and conditions. Such programmes and approaches to schooling after death of parent(s). Since the 1990s registering for land rights. Since the 1990s literacy is a prerequisite for education, and life history research offered insights into ways in which they negotiate the pain of separation from their families, and difficult working conditions as well as educational ‘barriers’. She argues that ‘illiterates’ are as useful as resources and a multiplier of disadvantage. Within this concept of disadvantage and deficit, where non-literacy is presented as a ‘deficit’, there is no recognition of human rights. Moving the focus to adult learners, Amy North (UCL IOE) and Katy Newell-Jones (Feed The Minds) discussed labelling of migrant workers and illiteracy

Purna focused on VSO’s work in Myanmar and ‘disability’, emphasising the importance of understanding the context of ‘disability’, which is cultural in nature. A lack of interaction between Ministries and ‘disability’, emphasizing the concept of ‘disability’ and ‘illiteracy’, are seen as resulting from forces which create a false dichotomy of orphan/victim and non-orphan. Children affected by HIV/AIDS are out of school. In VSO’s work they have found that the policy discourse around education policy documents is very similar and that the major focus is on curriculum and assessment but in the very narrow terms of learning outcomes in numeracy and literacy. This policy discourse is tied to a narrow connotation of what is quality education in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Further, a lack of interaction between Ministries and agencies, or the ways in which ‘OVC’s have been defined, creates a false dichotomy of orphan/victim and non-orphan. Kate reflected on Malawi as a context for problematizing the concept of ‘orphans’ and ‘vulnerable children’ (OVC). She raised the importance of understanding how and where these categories emerge from and the meanings they acquire or lose in different contexts. In Malawi there are many OVC programmes, which have developed within the context of the Malawi (OVC) policy and donor support and Western-dominated and policy. In the process, the concept of OVC was defined by donors which is distinct from the concept of orphan and the concept of orphans in Malawi. This externally driven agenda ignores the ways in which despite being labelled as orphans and vulnerable children, these children as ‘other’ and stigmatised. This externally driven agenda ignores the complexities and contradictions on the ground in Malawi and, moreover, creates a false dichotomy of orphan/non-orphans. Children affected by HIV/AIDS in other ways, such as those caring for chronically ill adults, are largely invisible within policy and well-funded-based programming, such as school-feeding or bursaries. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school. The OVC category also positions xenophobias and gender stereotypes and conditions external to the school.
Seminar discussion

Break-out groups then considered the themes that can cross the short presentations and led into the plenary session. Many of the discussion themes reflect a meta-narrative of ‘inclusion’. It is no coincidence that they are most in evidence when projects of universal education inclusion fail. The discourses of deficit accompany 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 appropriate those labels re-signifies otherwise forgotten population. Further, many labels have negative connotations, can they also be positive. Uma Pradhan examples explored in the discussion, while, as established through the many presentations on current dominant education and training programmes in international education and development. We will examine how such discourses are constructed from a perceived deficit of vocational education and training opportunities, rendering existing skills, literacy and training programmes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. Starting with practices and skills development discourse, and training processes invisible. 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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 replete with language of deficit and moral culpability. Millions of young people are designated as NEETs and as such are excluded from the economic sphere. The presentation suggests that a human development and capability approach can offer a richer alternative than fully authentic humans existing in society. This presentation will suggest the need for a broader understanding of employability. Moreover, this account is redolent with language that a human development and capability approach can offer a richer alternative than fully authentic humans existing in society. This presentation will suggest the need for a broader understanding of employability. Moreover, this account is redolent with language.

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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 the British have been a major player/innovator and c) the assumption that a deficit in vocational training by pointing to the ways these funds of knowledge and banks of skills which are learned through existing informal learning frameworks have been successful in informal learning and deficit discourses are inevitable. In conclusion, Forum participants supported Simon’s argument for moving away from damage and support for livelihoods that ‘they must go and learn literacy first’. This approach 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.

Overall discussion
In conclusion, Forum participants reflected on the limitations of either ‘reproducing or creating the map of the world’ and considered what alternatives there could be. Formal education has ‘streams and losers’ built into the system so inequalities are inevitable but are there not some ways to facilitate change? Perhaps policy- makers and the empirical and we need to find alternative spaces to facilitate change.
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 programme 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 identity is trapped in the past? There was concern that just learning a set of rules for academic writing could inhibit creativity.

• 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.

• The deficit model puts much emphasis on the teachers and projects students as empty vessels. We need to recognise and value the practices and knowledge that students bring with them. Many learners have resources if given the chance – but we have to listen to them.

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:

• Movement and mobility was the key dimension of this particular perspective on ‘deficit discourses’. Questions central to our discussion were ‘what skills are valuable?’ and ‘who decides what is valuable?’

• There is a hierarchy of skilled people and that these are valued differently. For instance, English language teachers from a ‘native-speaking’ country are considered to be highly valued in some parts of the world, even if they do not have professional qualifications.

• Vocational education and training skills are not transferrable, i.e. one cannot use them to enrol in mainstream formal education. Examples were given from China where migrants received a certificate on completion of their non-formal course but this only had ‘symbolic’ value compared to certificates from formal education courses.

• There can be a disjunction between the language skills acquired and those needed for employment.

At this point, we divided into smaller group discussions. The seminar participants were invited to examine more closely the representations of participants in skills development programmes and the other contexts outlined above, in order to explore alternatives that can generate more effective learning.
DIGITAL SKILLS
Facilitated by Alex Kendall (Birmingham City University) and Alan Rogers (UEA). Rapporteur: Spyros Themelis (UEA)

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 Woldu (UEA(formerly 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 ‘many generators of communication’ created through social media open the possibility for a ‘trickle up’ effect on policy, how much policy making of the future will be framed by this deficit discourse? Is it possible to be optimistic – that people are not just resist but reading a new interface between local and global through movements such as the Arab Spring.

From his experience in development, Ian Coffey (SL 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.

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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 make connections across sections 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 the themes.

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

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

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