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Exploring the impact a school partnership can have on the school community in challenging stereotypical images

Stewart Cook
2022

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You can reach Stewart on cookie866@hotmail.com or @cookie866 on Twitter.

Abstract

This research project aims to evaluate the impact that a British Council Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning project had on the children and parents' stereotypical views and images of the Middle East. This study focuses on a largely monocultural school in rural Lincolnshire and a large, diverse school in the centre of Beirut, Lebanon. It begins by identifying the children and parents' initial perceptions and views of the Middle East. After a series of small-scale projects to widen children's knowledge of the area, pupils and parents' perceptions are collected again, using the same method. These results are then analysed and compared to see if the project can impact on the stereotypical views of the parents and pupils.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the time and willingness of the parents, staff and most importantly, the children in my school and our partner school in Lebanon.

I would like to thank Myassar Al Itani for all her help in facilitating the projects in Lebanon and for her constant help and advice. I would also like to thank Hannah Boydon, Collette Cotton, Joanna Speak and John Rolfe for their constant words of encouragement.

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Contents

Introduction

This study took place in a rural church primary school in an area of monocultural Lincolnshire.

Research aim and research questions

The research aims to assess the impact that our Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning (CCGL) international partnership project has had on the cultural stereotypes held by both the children and parents in the school. The project aimed to outline what stereotypes and images children and parents associated with the Middle East *before* taking part in the work with our partner school, and how this then developed over the course of the year. It responds to the following research questions:

1.   What are pupils' and parents' initial perceptions of Lebanon/ Middle East and their partner school in Beirut?
2.   To what extent do the activities impact on pupils' and parents' perceptions of Beirut/ Lebanon / Middle East and their partner school?
3.   How does cross-cultural communication challenge stereotypical images and promote critical thinking in pupils?

Rationale for research

The aim of our school link has always been strongly linked to awareness of other cultures and diversity, and helping our children become culturally and socially aware, responsible global citizens. Right from its inception, our partnership was built on being mutually beneficial and has become an important part of the ethos of both schools and something the pupils are incredibly proud of. A visit to Beirut took place in May 2013 and this helped to firmly embed the partnership within the schools and helped to build the children's enthusiasm for the project. Since then, we have secured Connecting Classrooms funding for four more visits to Lebanon and for teachers from Lebanon to visit us in the UK. The school partnership is in its tenth year.

It is apparent that the children and parents have very little knowledge of the Middle East before they engage in the partnership, and the ideas they do have are very stereotypical and clichéd. Through this research, by mapping ideas and perceptions of the Middle East, I want to see if using cross-cultural communication with a partner school in Beirut, through a range of in-depth projects over the course of a year, would challenge pupils' and parents' images, perceptions and stereotypical views of the Middle East and Lebanon. By doing this, it is hoped that the partnership activities in future years will be better tailored to plugging gaps in children's knowledge and challenging the views they hold of this area.

Context to the research

About my school: The school is smaller than the average-sized primary school. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is in line with similar schools. The percentage of pupils who speak English as an additional language is well below the national average and the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is also well below average. I have been a teacher at the school for 15 years, and have developed our international dimension through school linking for the past 13 years, having previously held partnerships with schools in Guadeloupe, Poland, and Belize.

About the partnership: Since 2012 I have led a British Council Connecting Classrooms project with a school in the centre of urban Beirut. This has since been extended to leading a cluster of 12 schools in rural Lincolnshire and Lebanon. The project has been met with enthusiasm by all the children and they look forward to their turn to take part in the work when they are in Year 6.

Literature Review

What are cultural stereotypes?

Stereotypes are mental pictures that we hold about the people of a certain cultural group; these are unconscious and instinctive views: individual differences are not accounted for. These stereotypes can be so ingrained that any knowledge that is not consistent with the stereotype will be disregarded (University of Notre Dame, 2020). The stereotype can both be a positive or negative belief that we hold about certain groups of people (Jhangiani et al 2014). Bar-Tal (1996) described it as stored beliefs about characteristics of a group of people.

It has been recognised that stereotyping is based on a categorisation process (Allport, 1958; Bar-Tel, 1996; Green et al, 2020) and is formed as the mind thinks in 'categories'. It is these that explain the world and our experiences. However, the problem is that the mind can also over-simplify things. It is these 'natural', simple deductions that cause the stereotypes that people hold. Mohamed (2020) believes that these ideas are formed when we ignore individual differences, creating over-simplified ideas and views of cultures. Bar-Tel (1996:341) thinks that young children first acquire a category for their own social group and this in turn leads to the children assigning characteristics to the group (i.e., forming a stereotype). To begin with, in very young children, these categories or concepts are formed around the '*natural, visible characteristics such as skin colour, facial features, body structure, or clothing.*' Further research (Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991; Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992) has reached similar conclusions, as well as that our stereotypes and categorizations are formed on the basis of many other group memberships, including race, academic status, and social roles, and that we can have difficulty *not* forming opinions about others in terms of their group memberships.

Jhangiani et al (2014) posit that categorization has some benefits as it allows us to consider the role that we play in our own social groups, but on the other hand, it also has some conceivable negative results, for instance '*overgeneralized stereotyping and ingroup favouritism'.*

Forming cultural stereotypes

There is considerable variability reported when it comes to the age at which children start understanding and constructing stereotypes. Pauker, Ambady and Apfelbaum (2011:4) found that by 3–4 years of age, children can sort people by race and start to have some basic preconceived notions of different races and cultures. They believe that once young children understand that their own and others' racial group membership cannot be changed,

they may consequently search out explanations for perceived similarities within, or differences between, racial groups. Similarly, Barrett and Oppenheimer (2011 cited in Oberman et al 2014:23) report that negative stereotypes can already be formed by the age of five or six, and continue to develop into strong beliefs by the time the child reaches age ten or eleven. Hirschfield (1995, cited in Ramsey 2008:226) suggests that it begins even earlier than this, perhaps as early as pre-school. Conversely, Hughes (1997) suggests that negative stereotypes don't appear until at least 7 or 8 years. Barrett (2005:5) explains that the way children learn about the world happens sequentially: from about the age of 5 they learn about their own country, then their knowledge about other countries develops a couple of years later. Geographical knowledge about their own and other countries then expands significantly through middle childhood and into adolescence, although this can be affected by the child's social class, gender, location, and ethnicity. Jahoda (1962 cited in Barrett 2005:5) investigates children's feelings towards different countries. He suggests that before the age of 8 children have positive feelings for distant and exotic countries which are picturesque and on the other hand, they express random dislikes of countries based on limited and indiscriminately acquired pieces of information. However, from about the age of 8, he found that children's views about other countries were mostly based on typical physical features: sun, snow, skyscrapers, etc.

Stereotypes can be formed in several different ways. Bar-Tal (1996:342) understands that the most influential factors in the formation of stereotypes are children's parents, especially in the earlier part of a child's life. Children hear their parents and other family members talking and referring to other groups and in turn absorb this information. Furthermore, as children get older, this information is sometimes transferred directly as family members discuss and answer questions about other cultures. If parents have a high level of prejudice, this correlates directly with the children. Weldon (2010 cited in Oberman et al 2014:23) identifies some of the most significant factors in the construction of negative stereotypes as '*advertising, family influences, and, as they get older, peer influences*'. She believes that children start to have negative stereotypes before they even have any real knowledge of the country's culture and its inhabitants. Wood (n.d. cited in Bourn, Hunt and Ahmed, 2017:8) shows that children within Key Stage 1 have negative stereotypical views formed through '*subliminal messages and media influence*'. Lambert & Klineberg (1967 cited in Barrett 2005:120) notes that 6-year-olds learnt about other countries and their inhabitants from their parents, direct contact with 'foreigners', television, and movies. Likewise, Barrett and Short (1992 cited in Barrett 2005:12) see television as an especially influential source of information, as well as parents, holidays, and books.

School partnerships and cultural stereotypes

The role of schools and teachers is important in the formation of stereotypes, as they provide children with the skills to question negative stereotypes. It has been shown (Bourn, Hunt and Ahmed, 2017:7) that it is essential that children in the early years are introduced to

global learning, as during these precious years, children are constantly questioning who they are and their place in the wider world. It is important that early teaching is put in place as it will allow children to challenge negative stereotypes before they become in-built; they also provide the children with the building blocks onto which more complex ideas can be attached at a later stage (Hunt 2012, cited in Bourn, Hunt and Ahmed, 2017:7). Barrett (2005:21) observed that school was a key factor in the development of children's knowledge of beliefs about other countries. Mirza (2020) believes that it is vital that as soon as children start to become conscious of cultural differences (and before they are exposed to negative stereotypes) we should be appropriately educate them on the importance of cultural diversity.

School partnerships are one potential approach that schools can use to challenge the formation of intercultural stereotypes. One of the main aims of Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning is to '*equip pupils with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to act more thoughtfully, ethically and responsibly as citizens*' (British Council 2020:3). However, research has shown that intercultural learning with a partner school can actually reinforce negative stereotypes. Martin (2005) discovered that even schools that had considerable experience in international work still tended to focus on poverty, which in turn reinforces stereotypes. Ajegbo (2007:2) finds similar results: that linking can emphasise stereotypes if it is not properly embedded in the curriculum. Martin and Wyness (2013: 15) believe that there is a danger that, through taking part in school linking programmes, teachers can focus on what things are different compared to the UK, rather than focusing on challenging the view that the 'South' is poverty-stricken and in need of our help.

That said, school linking has many benefits. Disney (2009:215) observes that children and teachers who participated in one of these schemes had a greater real knowledge about the country linked with them and were able to challenge preconceptions. She gives the example of a boy who, on reading a letter from a Zimbabwean boy, exclaimed '*he likes pizza!*' because, before reading this letter, he had the entrenched view that African children were all starving and living in poverty (Disney, 2009: 108). Disney (2009:186) suggests that the partnership had an impact on the parents' views of the world, with the project breaking down preconceived barriers. Axia (1998 cited in Barrett 2005) indicates that children who receive formal teaching about countries show a greater understanding than those children who do not. Lewis (2016 :27) shows that by taking part in a global learning project, pupils gain a much wider knowledge of the country studied with an increased knowledge of the cultural and historical aspects of a country and much less reliance on the natural environment. However, her research also concluded that school linking can reinforce '*colonial power relations and stereotypes'* with children believing the purpose of the link is to help their partner school. It is therefore essential that all learning is collaborative, with schools working as equal partners. Qutub (2013:144) believes that in order for '*intercultural understanding'* to take place, direct contact needs to take place: communication with the inhabitants of the country helps children to understand and comprehend their '*customs, values and views, it*

can provide an 'insider perspective'. Hobbs et al (2010:5) notes that projects that promote a global understanding are invaluable in fostering '*acceptance, tolerance and inclusion*'.

Cultural stereotypes of the Arab world

It has been shown that people in Britain have little knowledge of the Arab world, with research by Mohammad (2020) showing that 81% of Britons know little or nothing about this area of the world. She suggests it is this lack of understanding that causes many people to hold stereotypes. Mohamad (2020) believes that positive images of Arabs do not exist, and that people tend to only hold negative views. Her research reveals that 14% of British people associate Arabs with violence, 25% with extremism, 46% with Islam, 6% with poverty, and 50% with strict gender roles.

As stated before, the media can have a great influence on the formation of stereotypes. This is particularly true for Middle Eastern countries because, as Qutub (2013: 139) points out, Hollywood tends to portray Middle Eastern men as either '*terrorists or billionaires*' and women as '*belly dancers'* or in need of being rescued. This persistent negative stereotyping is preventing the reality of life in Middle Eastern cultures from being seen. Mohammad (2020) shows that, out of 1,000 films from 1896 to the present day that include Middle Eastern and Arabic themes, only 12 give positive depictions, 52 are neutral, and over 900 are negative. Shaheen (cited in Arti 2007:3) posits that Arabs are the most defamed group in the history of Hollywood. Though portrayed as subhuman since the very early days of cinema itself, Qutub (2013) believes many of these most recent stereotypical views are a result of the 9/11 attacks and the association this has with Muslim individuals. Hobbs et al (2010:4) goes on to show that the portrayal of Arabs in children's media again reinforces these negative stereotypes. One only has to look at the famous Disney film 'Aladdin', which portrays Arab countries as mysterious and exotic, to see how clichéd views of the area can be formed. Even the original opening song emphasises these negative stereotypes:

> *Oh, I come from a land a faraway place where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric but hey, it's home. Caabu (date unknown).*

Mohamed (2020) points out that, when children are introduced to the idea that Arabs are violent and aggressive, these ideas become normalised and that children come to expect this of all Arabic people. It is through this "Orientalism" that stereotypes of the Middle East are being reinforced.

> '*It is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S.' (Arab American National Museum, 2011)*

As pointed out by Shaffi (2022) and Evans (2022), one only has to look at the Oxford Reading Tree book, The Blue Eye, to see how children are introduced to negative images of the Middle East from an early age. In the book, beneath an illustration of a busy Arabian marketplace, full of people wearing turbans and niqabs (see Figure 1), one of the children says '*The people don't seem very friendly*'. Evans (2022) believes that it is images and ideas like this that are introducing children from a very young age to negative ideas about the Middle East. Shaffi (2022) reports that the use of images and words in children's early picture books is reinforcing and introducing damaging ideas and perceptions of the Middle East.

Figure 1: Page from Oxford Reading Tree book (Hunt and Brychta, 2001).
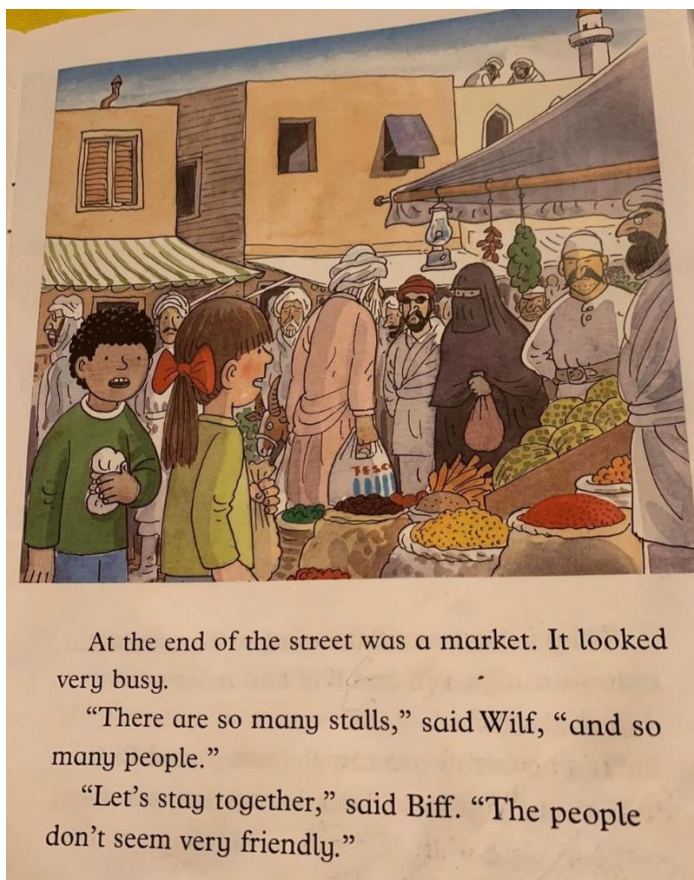
Beirut itself is often portrayed very negatively. As Diffin (2010) points out, *'it's like Beirut'* is a much-used comparison for everything from *'violent riots to a teenager's bedroom'*. This further reinforces those negative images of a city in chaos. One only has to do a quick internet search to see how much this phrase is still used, and part of everyday language. For example, the Member of Parliament for Birkenhead, Frank Field, in 2015 used the phrase '*like Beirut*' to describe the anti-social behaviour and yob culture that was taking over parts of his constituency (Riches, 2015). There is little doubt that this stems from the civil war, but that ended 30 years ago, and since then we have had conflicts in Sarajevo, Baghdad, and

Damascus; but these cities are not used in this way. Diffin (2010) believes that this negative stereotype is still so regularly used because the Beirut Civil War was the first international conflict taking place in the age of 24-hour news. People were updated almost daily. People saw images of chaos constantly, and then it became 'personal' with UK nationals John McCarthy and Terry Waite being taken hostage during the crisis.

Methods

Approach to research

Overview: This research began by asking the question: '*What are pupils' and parents' initial views, perceptions and stereotypes of The Middle East and also of Lebanon and Beirut?*'. This was then followed by a series of small-scale projects with our partner school in Beirut, including video calls with the children at the end of each project to discuss findings; these were then shared with the parents. Following this, I returned to the original data collection methods in order to measure impact.

Data collection

There were various approaches to collecting data.

Children's drawings

To begin with, an activity was adapted from the RISC toolkit (2015): '*What would you see in a country in Africa?*' The pupils were asked '*If you visited the Middle East, what would you see?*', and then asked to draw a picture of what they imagined this area of the world would be like. This was chosen as a research technique as the use of children's drawings as a research tool has been shown to provide '*rich and diverse information*' (Bakar 2001). The children were also encouraged to make sure their images were labelled so that they could be easily interpreted later; this is important because '*children's drawings can easily be misunderstood by adults*' (Hall, 2015:4). They were urged to work independently, as it was their own views that were wanted and not views distorted (or influenced) by the other children in the class. Also, while the children were drawing their pictures, anything they said was written down – because, as Mitchell et al (2006 in Hall 2015:11) point out, it is '*essential to engage children in conversation about their drawings because drawing and verbal language are inextricably linked*'. Before and during the activity no discussion took place within the classroom, and the children were reassured that there was no right or wrong answer. This was important because, for the best results, '*interaction with an adult researcher*' should be kept to a minimum (Mitchell 2006 in Hall 2015:3). Drawing is an activity that most children find enjoyable and Hall (2015: 2) found that the motivation for making drawings was much higher than that of reading and writing.

Following the activity, the drawings were analysed and sorted into the categories suggested by the RISC toolkit (2015), these were:

- Natural Environment (climate, landscape, animals and plants)
- Built Environment (buildings, any development of land by people)
- People and society (daily life, food, relationships, poverty/wealth, health)
- Culture and history (historical events, monuments, aspects of cultural life, language, music)
- Energy, transport, and communications (electricity, technology, transport)
- Economic activity (means of earning income, trade, industry, tourism)
- Places (countries, cities, rivers, mountains)

This activity provided both qualitative and quantitative data; the qualitative data came directly from the pupils' drawings and labels, whereas the quantitative data arose from analysing the percentages of drawings in each of the categories. The findings could also be examined to see if they present a positive or negative view of the area. The images can also be studied to see whether there are any common trends between the children's views.

I collected baseline drawings from children before the intervention and impact drawings from after to try to gauge any differences.

Online questionnaire

Another important part of the research is how the views of parents of the Middle East and Lebanon change over the year. Prior to the children starting the work with our partner school, parents of the cohort were encouraged to take part in an online questionnaire administered via Survey Monkey. They were re-sent the same questions after the intervention to see if there were any changes. These were sent to all parents of Year 6 pupils through ParentHub and Seesaw, the two main methods of online communication with parents, and received 12 responses from the parents.

Intervention

After baseline data collection activities and before impact data collection, the students participated in nine months of activities with our partner school in Lebanon. Throughout these projects, the children video called our partner school in Beirut to discuss their findings and share their work. Within the video call the children were given time to just chat and question their peers. This was an important part of the project, as spending time with people from other cultures '*allows you to know what they struggle with and their traditions as a community.*' Furthermore, it also gives the children an opportunity to reconsider any preconceptions they have about other cultures: meeting and interacting with people allows you to '*diversify your communication and look at the world from a different perspective*' (Les Elfes international, 2021).

Our first activity was based on the Risc Toolkit (2015) activity '*China, UK or both?*'.

Through this activity, the children studied images and then decided whether they would expect to find that item in the UK, in Lebanon/ The Middle East, or in both places; the children then sorted the printed images and placed them in the relevant categories. This activity was chosen as it allowed us straight away to discuss similarities between the UK and Lebanon, and gave the children an opportunity to consider what their preconceptions of lifestyles, food and products were. It also gave us a focus for our video call as the children were then able to question their peers in Lebanon to see if they were correct.

Following this, we took part in a project called *'View from our window'*. This was carried out during a period of Covid-19 related home-schooling, and meant our project could continue even when we were not at school. Through this project the children were encouraged to take a picture of their local area out of their window, and post it to a 'Padlet'[1]. The children in the UK and Lebanon then studied the photos, ready to ask each other questions on the video call about what they had seen.

For our next activity, the children took part in a picture sorting task; this is a valuable research technique for the '*analysis of how people evaluate and categorise ideas'* (Lobinger and Brantner, 2020). During this task, the children studied a wide range of photographs of locations in both the UK and Lebanon. The children then organised the pictures into places in the UK and places in Lebanon. Throughout the activity, the reasoning of the children was recorded. This is important, as emphasis should be put on the discussion and consideration behind the decision made, and not just on the actual result (Arthur et al 2013 in Fincher and Tenenberg, 2005: 90). These were then analysed by the type of comment made: which are observations (from the photo), and which are assumptions? Are they mainly positive, negative, neutral, or a mixture? Picture sorting, in this way, is a *'knowledge elicitation technique'* that is based on the idea *'that the way in which participants categorize entities externally reflects their internal, mental representation of these concepts'* (Fincher and Tenenberg, 2005: 90).

An area that the children were interested in was the weather, and during the previous exercise the children had asked lots of questions about this. As a result, it was decided to look at the British Council Connecting Classrooms Weather and Climate Project (British Council, n.d). The aim of this was to encourage the students to share information about the weather and climate with their partner school. During the video call, the children discussed the similarities and differences between the weather and climate in their countries. It was extended to encourage the children to research and discuss flora and fauna in each country, especially in relation to Lebanon cedar trees and the climate they need to grow.

Our next project was adapted from the Empatico '*Food with Friends'* activity. Food is such a large part of everyday life and culture, that it was decided we would have a look at what

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[1] https://padlet.com/simplicity/windows

foods we eat at home, recognising the influences of our communities, culture, and personal preferences. Before our video call the children from both schools choose a food that is important to at least one of the following:

- Culture - foods associated with their heritage, holidays, traditions, etc.
- Region - foods invented or enjoyed by people in their area
- Family - foods their family members often prepare or enjoy
- Self - their favourite foods

It was also decided, from some comments made earlier during our first activity, that we would look at which restaurants and fast-food eateries each country shares and which common food the children both enjoy.

Throughout all of the projects, the children were encouraged to question each other and lead their enquiries in whatever direction they wanted with minimal input from the adults in class. The children all thoroughly enjoyed the activities and were eager to move on to the next one in order to find out more about each other's countries.

Engagement with parents

Initially it was planned that parents would be invited into school to take part in the projects with their children and take part in the video calls. However, because of Covid restrictions this was not possible. In order for parents to be involved we shared all of our work directly with them using Seesaw (an online learning journal) and Padlet. The parents were then encouraged to comment and discuss the findings with their children.

School and Sample

All research was from a small rural church primary school in an area of (largely) mono-cultural Lincolnshire. The school is located just outside a small market town and has a mixed catchment of village and town children. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is well below the national average, as is the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups.

All 28 Year 6 pupils, with slightly more boys than girls, and 12 parents, took part in the research.

With regards to the parents: there were 12 respondents who took the initial baseline survey and the end survey. We ensured that we only received the same sample by asking parents to record their birth month and their house number on their questionnaire so their responses could be tracked.

Study limitations

When considering the results from the research, it needs to be considered that this is a small sample size and that the results from this may not be entirely representative. Also, the interventions were carried out during the Covid 19 pandemic, which limited how deep we could go into some of the projects - as some of them were done as home learning. During the pandemic, the school in Beirut had limited access to home learning meaning that it was hard to engage some of the children in the project. Another thing that needs to be considered is that the children might already be pre-disposed to be positive about Lebanon and the Middle East as the international work is such a huge part of the identity of the school and is something the children look forward to taking part in during Year 6. Another important aspect to contemplate is that, as we have been working with our Lebanese partner for the last 10 years, some parents may have had previous engagement with the project through older children. During the planning stages of this project, it was hoped that parents could be active partners in the intervention activities and join in with the video calls, however due to Covid restrictions we were unable to do this, and parents had to join in by sharing work virtually.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues associated with this study were carefully considered in line with British Council Guidance. All of the parents were informed of the aim of the study and all 28 children in Year 6 were given permission to participate. Both the parents and children were made aware that they were under no duty to take part and that their work could be withdrawn at any time. The parents and children were assured that even though their drawings may be reproduced in the final report, all work will be anonymised and unidentifiable. All data collected in this research was anonymous, although pupils and parents were asked to record their birth month and house number on their work and questionnaire so that their responses could be tracked, and I could be sure that the same sample was used for both. The school and the partner school have been anonymised.

Before starting the research project, it was emphasised to both the pupils and parents that there was no right or wrong answer and that the purpose of the work was to help me with a piece of research I was conducting.

Findings

This section looks at pupils' initial perceptions of Lebanon and the Middle East, by studying their drawings and seeing what their ideas and understanding of this area of the world were.

It will also look at parents' understanding and views of the Middle East, prior to their children starting the work with our partner school in Lebanon. These results will then be compared to responses given to the same activities following 9 months of intervention with our partner school. These repeated responses will give us an indication as to whether the projects planned have had an impact on the children's preconceived/ stereotypical views of the Middle East.

Pupils' and parents' initial perceptions of Lebanon and the Middle East

Pupils' initial perceptions of the Middle East

The children's drawings of the Middle East were collated into seven themes (natural environment; built environment; people and society; culture and history; energy, transport and communications; economic activity and places) as suggested by the RISC toolkit (2015). An overview of pupils' initial drawings can be seen in Table 1. Each of the themes is then discussed in more detail below.

Table 1: Overview of pupils' initial drawings of the Middle East (N=28)

Theme	Name	Frequency
Natural Environment (climate, landscape, animals and plants)	Hot	25
	Dry (never rains)	20
	Desert	24
	Cactus	10
	Flat	5
Built Environment (buildings, any development of land by people)	Shacks, huts, tents	11
	Mosques	8
	Markets	7

People and society (daily life, food, relationships, poverty/wealth, health)	Muslims	25
	Poor	22
	Refugees	12
Culture and history (historical events, monuments, aspects of cultural life, language, music)	Pyramids	18
	War (Syria)	13
	Terrorism	8
	Islam- Muslims	14
Energy, transport and communications electricity, technology, transport)		
Economic activity (means of earning income, trade, industry, tourism)		
Places (countries, cities, rivers, mountains)	Egypt	25
	Lebanon	14
	Syria	13

The images and comments from this initial activity unmistakably show the pupils had a narrow perception of the Middle East, including references to refugees, war, shacks/huts/tents and terrorism (Table 1). I will now look at the responses to the categories in more detail.

Natural environment: The weather was a recurring theme in a lot of the children's drawings with nearly 89% (25 out of 28 children) recording that it was hot (Image 1). When the children were drawing many remarked that they knew it was always hot as they had seen photographs of deserts and seen pictures in films of boiling hot sunshine and sunsets. Many of the children also believed that the Middle East was all desert, with some of the children believing that the sand covered a large area as again this is the images they had seen on the TV and in books of this area.

Image 1: Examples of pupils' initial drawings related to the natural environment
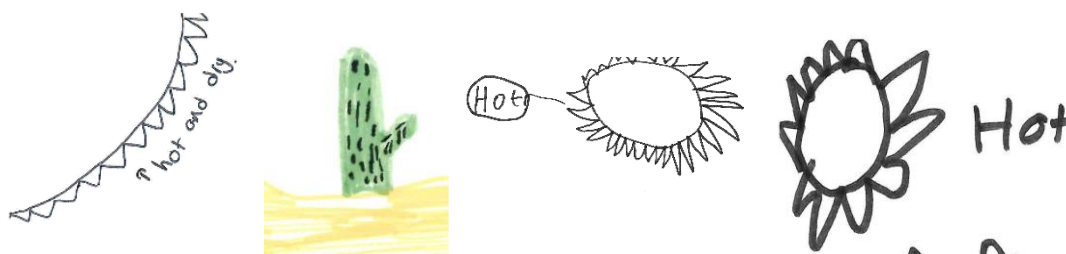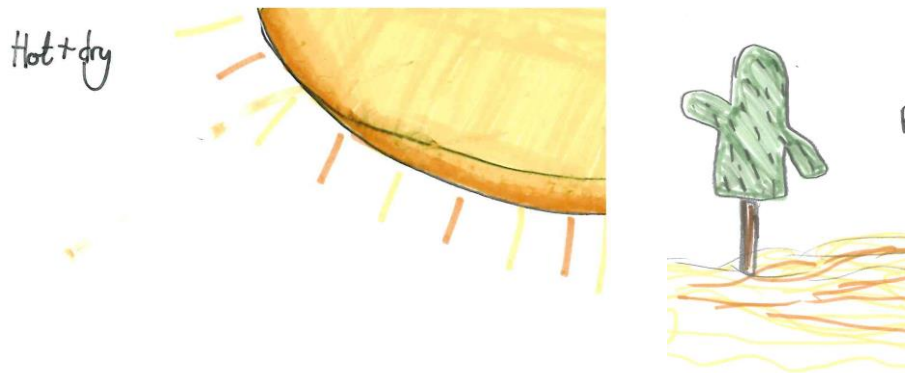
Built environment: The children mentioned that as all people in this area of the world are Muslims then they will need mosques (

Image 2). Another key focus of the drawings are the negative images of available housing options, with a large majority of the children thinking that people in the Middle East lived in huts/ tent shelters as this is what they had seen in the news/ media when images of refugees and the war in Syria were shown. There was no mention of shops to buy items and many children thought people in the Middle East bought all their items from open-air markets as this was what they had seen in films.

Image 2: Examples of pupils' initial drawings related to the built environment

People and Society: The children had very little idea about the people that live in the Middle East beyond that they thought everyone was a Muslim (Image 3). Some of the children commented that they had seen pictures of people wearing headscarves (the hijab) so they knew they must be Muslims. Related to the idea that they lived in tents, the children also believed that people in the Middle East were poor or refugees, again as these were the images they had seen in the media.

Image 3: Examples of pupils' initial drawings related to people and society
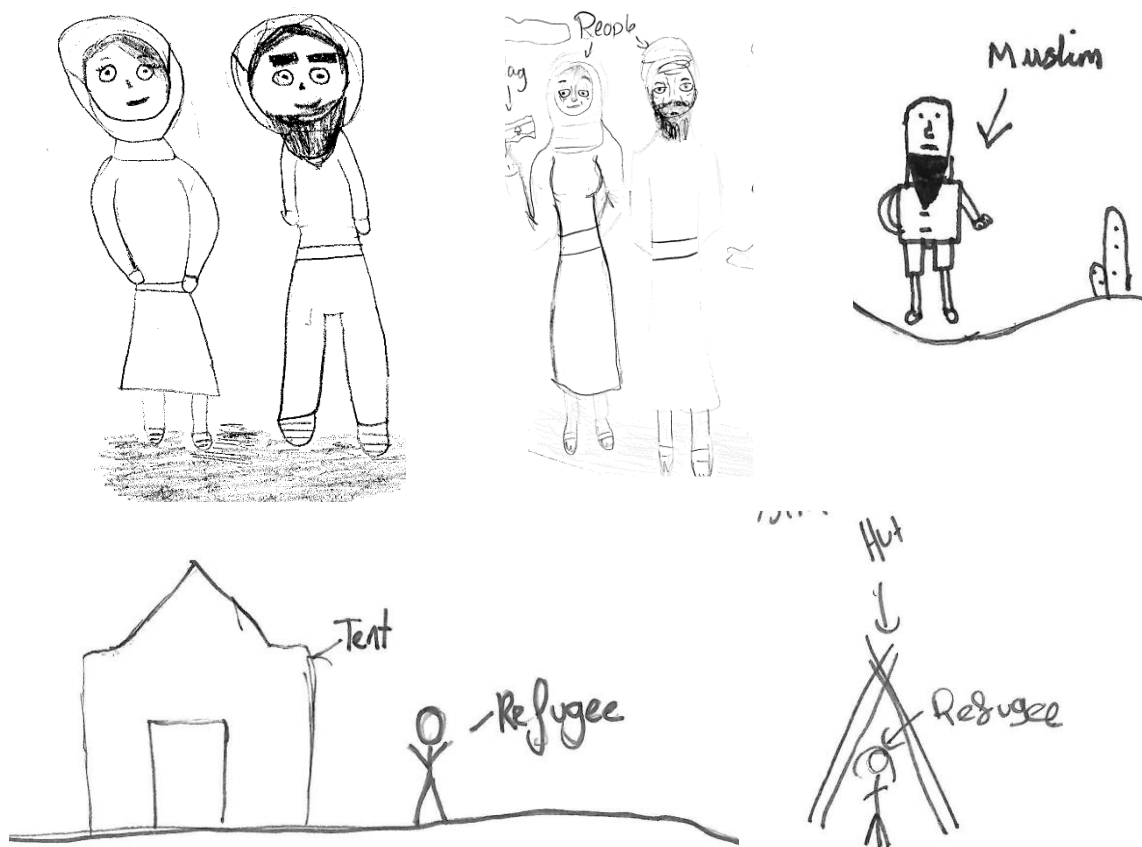
Culture and History: The children had very limited knowledge of culture and history (Image 4). The main structures that the children knew were the pyramids, which is not surprising when you consider the only time the Middle East is mentioned in the National Curriculum is in relation to the achievements of ancient civilisations. The children also made reference to the war in Syria as they had seen this in the news. Terrorism also came up in a few of the children's drawings - the children remarked that they had seen this in films and on the news,

especially in relation to the 9/11 attacks - which could be a result of the data being collected around the anniversary of the attack.

Image 4: Examples of pupils' initial drawings related to culture and history
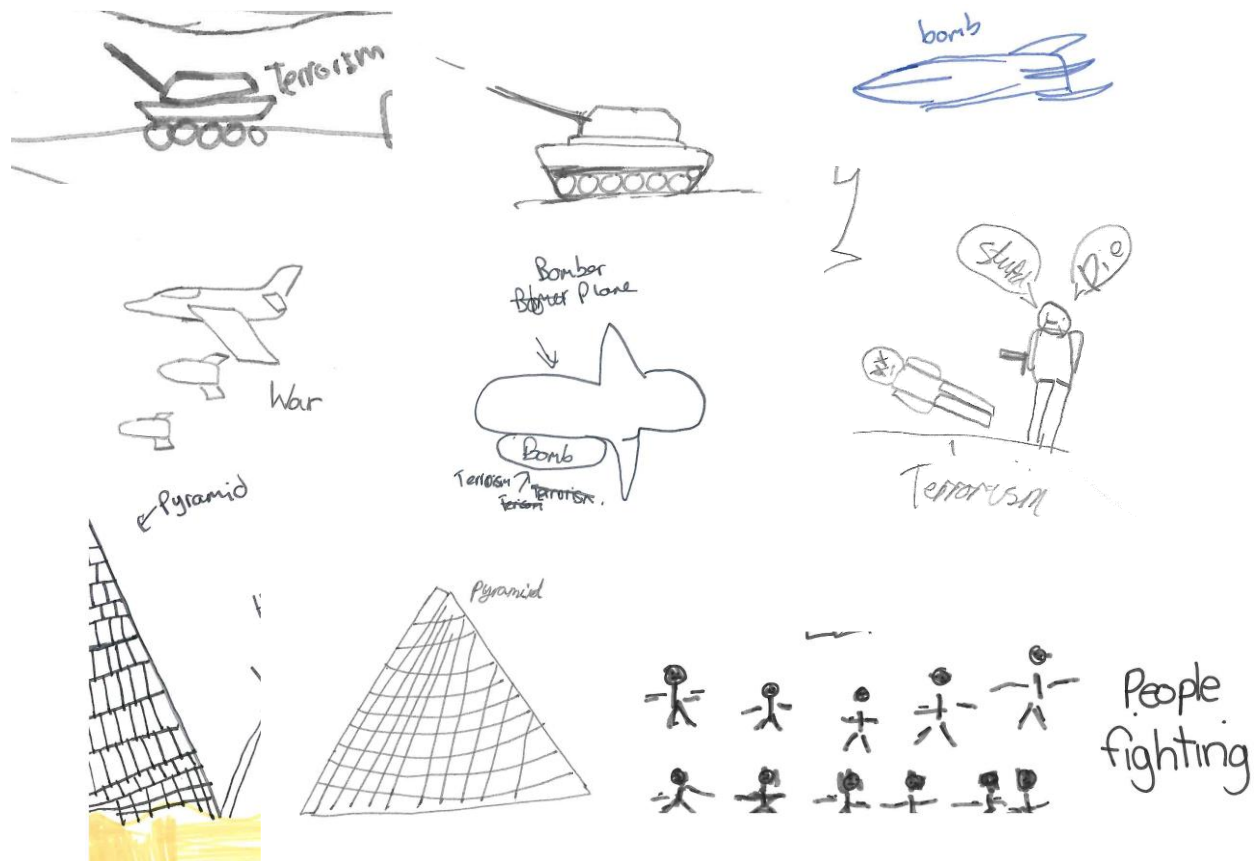
Places: The children were not able to name many places in the Middle East. Unsurprisingly Egypt was the main place that the children labelled; again, this is down to the fact that this is one of the only Middle Eastern places studied in the National Curriculum. The children also mentioned Lebanon, this was mostly down to the fact we have had this long-standing partnership and that previous Year 6s had taken part in projects. Syria was named regularly, but as previously stated, the children had heard of this and seen images in the news regularly over the previous few years.

Parents' initial perceptions of the Middle East

Prior to the children starting the project, their parents were encouraged to take part in an online questionnaire administered via Survey Monkey. It was decided to keep this very short, with only two questions:

- How would you describe the Middle East?
- How would you describe Lebanon/ Beirut?

12 parents completed the questionnaire, giving several responses to each question. Their responses have been collated into a Wordle, to give a clearer representation of their answers. The larger the writing the more often it was given as an answer (see Appendix 1 for the raw data).

Image 5: Parents' initial description of the Middle East (N=12)

The parents had a very negative and narrow view of the Middle East (see Image 5) before starting the project. Nearly 43% of the responses were negative and portrayed the area badly, with only 7% of the answers having something positive about the Middle East. The rest of the responses focused on stating physical features or the weather. The climate in the Middle East was a recurrent theme with over 50% of the respondents referring to it as either being hot or dry. War was another widespread notion with 75% of parents believing that the Middle East was a troubled war-torn area; stemming from this were lots of other beliefs relating to hatred and terrorism.

Image 6: Parents' initial description of Lebanon/Beirut

Beirut and Lebanon fared worse in this exercise than the Middle East as a whole, with over 75% of parental responses portraying a negative aspect and only 12% having a positive response (Image 6). War, and answers related to the impact of war on the country, accounted for nearly half of all the responses and only two parents out of the 12 made no reference to the war. The parents also viewed it as a very chaotic and troubled country and made lots of references to the troubles it is facing.

Impact of activities on pupils' and parents' perceptions of Beirut, Lebanon and the Middle East

Pupils' perceptions of the Middle East following the intervention

This section looks at pupils' perceptions of Lebanon and the Middle East, following the nine months of intervention with our partner school. It focuses on children's drawings taken after the intervention. Again, these drawings are collated into the seven themes, as suggested by the RISC (2015) toolkit.

Table 2 provides an overview of the children's drawings following the intervention.

Table 2: Overview of pupils' perceptions of the Middle East following the intervention (N=28)

Theme	Name	Frequency
Natural Environment (climate, landscape, animals and plants)	Hot	25
	Cooler winters	20
	Snow (on mountains)	15
	Mountains	15
	Deserts	10
	Trees	10
	Sea	6
Built Environment (buildings, any development of land by people)	Mosques	25
	Church	20
	School	15
	Fast Food outlets	15
	Apartment blocks	10
	Shops	10
People and society (daily life, food, relationships, poverty/wealth, health)	Muslims	25
	Christians	20
	Middle eastern foods (hummus, falafel, lentils etc)	16
	TV	15
	Children gaming	15
	Fast food	15
Culture and history (historical events, monuments, aspects of cultural life, language, music)	Pyramids (Egypt)	10
	War	10
	Arabic- language	22
Energy, transport and communications (electricity, technology, transport)	Cars (busy)	11
Economic activity (means of earning income, trade, industry, tourism)		
Places (countries, cities, rivers, mountains)	Egypt	25
	Lebanon	28
	Beirut	22
	Syria	13
	Iraq	10
	Iran	10
	Dubai	9

Overall, the results show that the children have a greater understanding of the area, with more information across 6 of the 7 categories.

Natural environment: The weather is a recurring theme in the children's drawings and has been something that the children have been interested in and talked about throughout the interventions (Image 7). The children showed a greater understanding of the weather systems and understood that the weather varied greatly across the Middle East. Lots of the children showed that it was cooler in the winter, especially in Beirut. During our weather activity, the children were surprised by the fact that they had snow in the mountains, and this obviously stuck with the children as more than half of the children remembered this. The children also showed a greater awareness of the different landscapes from the coast and seas, to the mountainous and the desert areas.

Image 7: Examples of pupils' drawings related to the natural environment after the intervention

Built environment: The children showed a greater awareness of the built environment (Image 8). During the intervention, the children were surprised to learn that not everyone in the Middle East was Muslim and this probably accounted for the massive increase in the number of churches appearing alongside the mosques. School was also portrayed in over half of the children's drawings. Another new addition was the inclusion of fast-food restaurants; the children were interested to find that the children in the Middle East enjoyed similar food and visited the same outlets as them. The children also showed a greater understanding of the most common housing, with apartment blocks being drawn, but they were very careful to label and discuss that not everyone lives in this type of building.

Image 8: Examples of pupils' drawings related to the built environment after the intervention

People and Society: The children included Christians in their pictures (
Image 9). Over half the children referred to Middle Eastern/ Lebanese food and this idea probably stems from the experiences the children had during our 'foods with friends' project, but the children in their drawings and during discussions made it clear that this is not the only food they eat, with fast food also appearing in a lot of their drawings (53%). The other interesting inclusion in the drawings was the inclusion of 'gaming', through their discussions the topic often got onto what games they played, and the children were surprised to find that they enjoyed the same video games.

Image 9: Examples of pupils' drawings related to people and society after the intervention
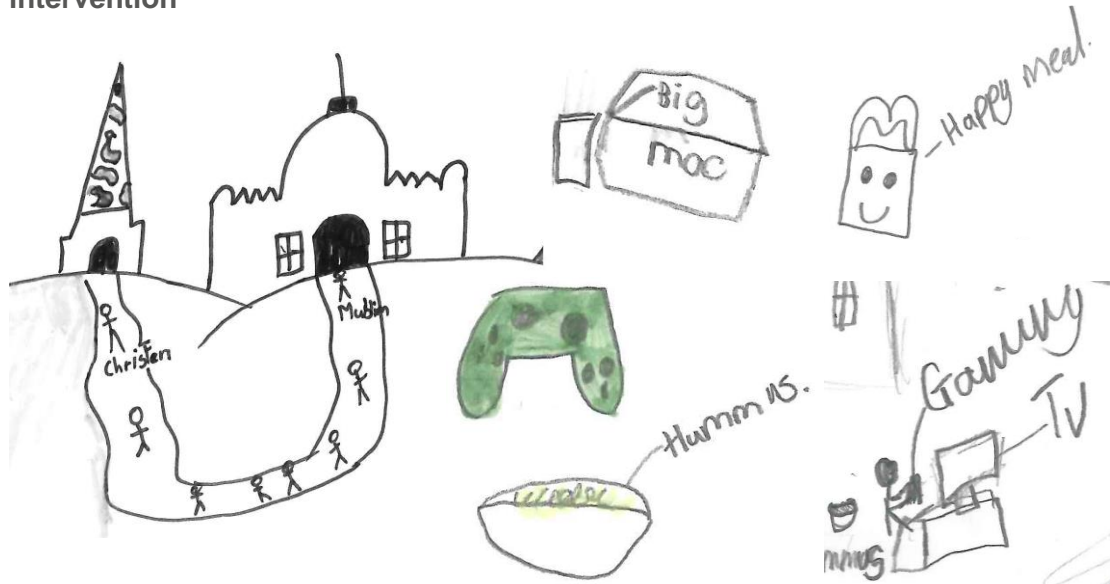
Culture and History: Pyramids featured heavily again in the drawings, although this time the children labelled them in Egypt. War was still a strong idea, although the children discussed and labelled how this was in the past in Lebanon. Arabic, as the language, figured in over 79% of the children's drawings (Image 10). Throughout the video calls the children were very interested in learning some simple Arabic phrases and they enjoyed using these in the classroom.

Image 10: Examples of pupils' drawings related to culture and history after the intervention
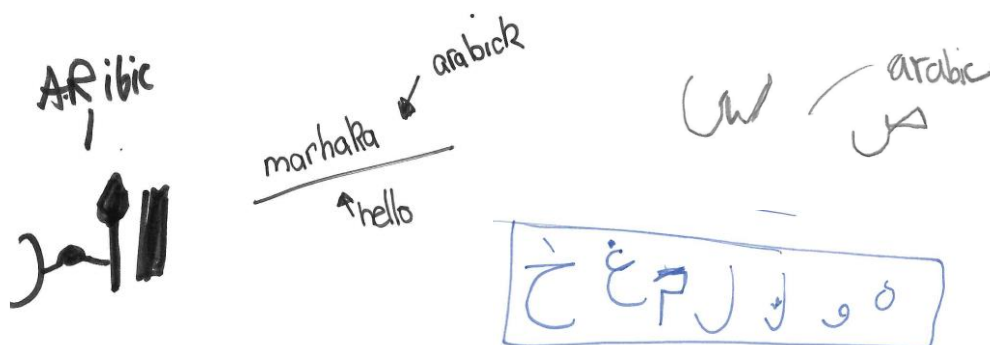
Energy, transport and communications: Ideas around transport were very limited, with only 39% of children drawing cars onto their pictures, with the children labelling that the roads are busy (Image 11).

Image 11: Examples of pupils' drawings related to energy, transport and communication after the intervention

Economic activity: The children did not consider any economic activity, which is probably down to this being an off-limits topic with our partner school due to the political situation in Lebanon at the present time.

Places: The children's knowledge of places in the Middle East had increased; unsurprisingly every child labelled Lebanon or drew its flag and 79% of the children remembered its capital Beirut. Egypt was again very popular, especially in relation to the pyramids. The children were also able to name, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Dubai as places in the Middle East.

Parents' perceptions of the Middle East following the intervention

Following the intervention, the 12 parents who completed the initial questionnaire were asked to complete a second questionnaire. This had the same questions as the first and therefore allowed the results to be compared. Again, the parents' responses have been collated into a Wordle, to give a clearer representation of their answers. (See Appendix 2 for raw data).

Image 12 shows parents had more knowledge of the Middle East than previously, with them describing more of the physical features and the natural environment and much less focused on the negative stereotypical views of the previous questionnaire. However, war was mentioned regularly and shows how engrained this impression is for the parents. There is much less focus on negative views of the people and more of the parents mentioning the developing nature of the area.

Image 12: Parents' description of the Middle East after the intervention (N=12)

Following the intervention, there was much less reference to the impact of the war on Lebanon, with only one parent referring to this (Image 13). However, the data collection for this questionnaire took place in September 2020 and Beirut was still very much in the news following the August 2020 port explosion. This had a massive impact on the responses, with two thirds of respondents referring to the explosion and the damage it caused to the country. Overall, the comments were more positive than during the first questionnaire, with much more focus on the idea that the country is changing, and upon its cultural elements that had been shared during the projects, rather than focusing on the wars of the past. There was also a move towards actually describing its location, with many parents mentioning it being on the Mediterranean, and mountainous, whereas in the first questionnaire no one mentioned where it was located - reinforcing the idea that people actually know very little about the area other than what they had heard on the news.

Image 13: Parents' descriptions of Lebanon/Beirut after the intervention

How cross-cultural communication challenges stereotypical images and promotes critical thinking

In this section, I respond to the third research question which looks at stereotypical images and critical thinking through the research project.

Many of the images the children drew in the initial activity could be identified as stereotypical. Preliminary findings from the drawing activity 'If you visited the Middle East, what would you see?' showed that the children had a very narrow view of the Middle East. The children's ideas focused highly on the natural environment, people and society, and culture and history.

Also, as was evident in the children's drawings, they concentrated very closely on very clichéd views of the Middle East; that the whole area is very hot, dry, flat, and desert like. This supports the views of Jahoda (1962, cited in Barrett 2005:5) who found that, from the age of 8, children's views about other countries were mostly based on the typical physical features; '*sun, snow, skyscrapers'*.

Within the children's drawings there was a substantial reference to: inequality and images of poverty; lack of money; and war and the impact it has had on the area. The children seemed to concentrate very closely on things that were different and not things that were similar.

What also became very apparent was that the children had very little actual knowledge of this area beyond Egypt, with the pyramids being the only actual physical structure they could name. This, however, should not come as a surprise, because within the English national curriculum one of the only references to this part of the world is an in-depth study of the Ancient Egyptians. The children also had a very limited knowledge of the people of the Middle East with them considering the only people who lived there to be Muslims, with many comments about seeing people with headscarves on television when watching the news.

The ideas from the parental questionnaires again showed a very limited understanding of the Middle East, and what they did think they knew concentrated substantially on conflict and the political situation in the area, both presently and in the past. This mirrored the findings by Mohamed (2020) who shows that Britons know little or nothing about the Arab world and people tend to only hold negative views. When questioned about Lebanon and Beirut itself, nearly all of the respondents mentioned the civil war and the damage this has had on the country. Even though the war ended nearly 30 years ago, it is still engrained in adults' memories.

Throughout the interventions, the children, in both the UK and Lebanon, enjoyed discussing the similarities between the UK and Lebanon; this enabled the children to consider what their preconceptions of lifestyles, food and products were, and to question whether these were correct or not. Throughout our video calls, there were many times where the children stopped to consider their preconceived ideas and then discussed these further. For example, during the *Food with Friends* activity, the two groups of children were surprised to

learn they all enjoyed going to McDonald's and Burger King, which lead them to question each other on their favourite items from the menu, and on similarities and differences in the menu. During the picture sorting task, where the children were tasked with organising a range of images into places in the UK and places in Lebanon, it was very interesting to listen to the conversations the children were having. While looking at the pictures, the children jumped to many assumptions; one child remarked that those buildings must be in Lebanon as Lebanon has dirty and dilapidated buildings; another commented that the house could not be in the UK as it looked poor and run down, and houses in the UK are not like that. It was these views that were discussed with their peers in Lebanon and photos were shared of their neighbourhoods to counteract these stereotypes.

The drawings collected after pupils had taken part in interventions, and discussed their views with their peers in Lebanon, challenged the stereotypical views seen during their initial drawings. They demonstrated a much wider interpretation of the Middle East, with obviously a greater focus on Lebanon. In the repeat drawings there is a rise in the number of comments about the natural environment focused on the weather. The children were all fascinated to learn that the Middle East is not just hot and dry as they thought in their initial drawings, but in fact during the winter seasons some areas, Lebanon being one of them, actually experience snow and very cold weather.

Another interesting development in the children's perceptions is the movement away from all people in the Middle East being Muslim; within their drawings the children now included churches to represent that Christians also live in this area. The children were surprised to learn this and lots of them commented that when they have seen images of the Middle East, they have seen people in the hijab or images of mosques, but never a church. The children showed a greater awareness of the built environment, with children drawing apartment blocks like they had seen during the '*View from our window'* project, and unlike the first session there was no depiction in the drawings of people living in tents.

Another interesting observation that could be made from comparing the two sets of drawings is that in the first set of drawings the children very much commented on the differences they perceived between the two areas, and only included things they thought were significantly different. However, in the second set of drawings, the children also considered the things that were the same; for example, fast food restaurants and traffic. One of the most important aspects of the project was that the children appeared to realise that not everyone in Lebanon and the Middle East lived life in the stereotypical way that they have been shown in the media and films.

Following the project, the parents' perceptions of the Middle East were much less focused on the conflicts of the past. However, what was also apparent is that their views are also very influenced by what they see in the news and on television, with two-thirds of all the respondents commenting on the port blast of August 2020 and the damage this had done to Lebanon, even though this was only a very small part of the whole country. The parents on the whole were more positive about the Middle East and less focused on the troubles the

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area has / is facing. However, because of the Covid restrictions put in place, we were unable to invite the parents into school to take part in our interventions and all of our work had to be shared virtually.

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Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to see if using cross-cultural communication with a partner school in Beirut, through a range of in-depth projects over the course of a year, would challenge pupils' and parents' images, perceptions and stereotypical views of the Middle East and Lebanon.

What the research has shown is that, through taking part in this CCGL project, children, and to a lesser extent parents, have a greater understanding and awareness of people in other parts of the world and it is this greater knowledge that has broken down stereotypes and preconceived ideas.

Through our Lebanon/ Middle East partnership we are challenging barriers and negative preconceptions of other cultures, and the partnership provides openings for pupils from widely different cultural backgrounds to enjoy meeting each other in constructive and inventive learning environments. Our partnership has created a deeper connection and understanding between countries and allowed the children the opportunity to critically evaluate their perceptions and beliefs of a largely misunderstood area of the world. The use of video calling throughout our interventions and children discussing their thoughts directly with their peers in another country brought in new ideas and new philosophies; it enriched their knowledge of the area and allowed them to critically reflect on what they thought they already knew. By providing our children, and parents, with these opportunities to learn directly with peers in another, often misinterpreted area of the world, we are giving them the skills to challenge the negative stereotypes they may have learnt.

Ways forward

This has been a very informative piece of research for our school and our school community, and has wider implications for how other schools approach global learning. It has become apparent that schools need to be careful with the images of the world and language they use with their children, as stereotypical views of an area are learnt very early in a child's life.

Throughout this project it has been shown that negative descriptions of the Middle East are apparent in our everyday lives - in the television we watch, and in the books that we read. We, as educators, need to ensure that we are challenging these views and giving the children balanced perspectives of the world around them.

Although this project has focused on the Middle East, I feel the results and findings could be easily transferrable to other areas of the world and that the resources we use in school when teaching about contrasting localities should not just focus on the differences, but also on the similarities, as this will help to combat the formation stereotypical views.

When embarking on a school partnership, it is important to include what the country can offer us, as well as what we may offer them, as this will ensure that the children, and

parents, realise we can learn from each other - that the partnership is reciprocal, as well as help us to move away from the 'charitable' notion that we are 'helping' them, and dispelling the negative stereotype that they are a country in need of our help. Another important thing to consider before starting to teach about another country is to make sure that you allow sufficient opportunity to explore students' prior understanding so you can deal with any misconceptions or stereotypes and allow time for the children to enquire and reflect on their beliefs.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Parents' initial perceptions of the Middle East

Question	Parental responses
How would you describe the Middle East?	Hot Historical Desert Wartorn, Oil Rich, Corrupt Divided, Inequality, Unrest, Muslim Islamic, troubled, violent, arid, Conflict, dry, hot, oppressed, ancient (pyramids) Arabic, Violent, oil rich, poor people, lots of refugees Dry, deserts, hot, oil, wars Wartorn, explosive, Muslim, Islamic, hot Desert, hot, oil, terrorism, wars Dry, camels, hostility, hatred, discrimination Cultural, beautiful, diverse, misunderstood, Poverty, Oil rich, inequality, Arabic, Nomadic, Islamic, big difference between rich and poor,
How would you describe Lebanon/ Beirut?	Chaotic, damaged, corrupt, war, refugees, Wartorn, divided, dangerous, violent, oppressed Chaos, overcrowded, refugees, war, cultural Ancient, dangerous, warzone, busy, Violent, destroyed, chaos, refugees, war Cultural, ancient, beautiful, diverse, troubled Islamic, barren, bombsite, destroyed, crumbling Troubled, damaged, diverse, corrupt, beleaguered Ravaged, war-torn, bombed, dangerous, Mediterranean, Cultural, ancient, developing Muslim, war damaged, oppressed, violent Chaotic, busy, deprived, poverty, refugees

Appendix 2: Parents' perceptions of the Middle East following the intervention

Question	Parental responses
How would you describe the Middle East?	Hot cooler in winter Desert War, developing Mountainous, diverse, changing, hardworking, war dry, hot, ancient, change, war, Dry, Hot, cooler winter, rebuilt, wars Oil, rich, poor, war-torn, busy Hot, Wartorn, dry, developing, busy Dry, very hot summer, cooler winter, mountainous areas, desert areas Hot, deserts, changing, diverse, mixed Ancient, cultural, oil, developing, Arabic, Developing, hot, dry, deserts, war Islamic, war-torn, hot, cold winter, developing
How would you describe Lebanon/ Beirut?	damaged, rebuilt, blast damaged, war-torn, changed Bomb damaged, overcrowded, cultural, ancient, Ancient, busy, damaged, poor, Mountainous Mediterranean, destroyed, damaged (bomb), diverse Changing, cultural, ancient, beautiful, sea Damaged by blast, poor, struggling economy, diverse, corrupt, Troubled, damaged, cultural Mountainous, high rise, bomb damaged, diverse, poor economy ancient, developing Mediterranean, Cultural, Arabic, Islamic, damaged, Ancient, hot, mountainous, Mediterranean,

About the Author

Stewart Cook is the Assistant Head Teacher of a small rural school in Lincolnshire, England. He has developed global learning across the school and supported schools throughout Lincolnshire and the Middle East. Through his work as a British Council Ambassador, he has led a cluster of 10 schools in Lincolnshire and Lebanon as part of the Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning Project.

About Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning

Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning is a free and flexible programme for schools around the world based on learning, knowledge sharing and international collaboration. Connecting Classrooms supports teachers to equip pupils with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to act more thoughtfully, ethically and responsibly as citizens and contributors to society.

Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning is funded by the British Council and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and runs from 2018 through to 2022. For more information go to: www.britishcouncil.org/connectingclassrooms

The CCGL Practitioner Research Fund

The CCGL Practitioner Research Fund runs from 2019-2022 with the aim to support educators to conduct research related to global learning and overseas school partnerships within schools. DERC was contracted by British Council to support educators in the research and writing process.

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