

Globalisation and the international context for literacy policy reform in England

Dominic Wyse and Darleen Opfer (University of Cambridge)

Abstract

The nature of globalisation and its affects are an area of intense interest worldwide. These economic and socio-political affects have had a bearing on education. Control of the curriculum and pedagogy is a key area in relation to this. Of particular significance is the way that globalisation is perceived and how these perceptions influence political change. England's National Curriculum and National Literacy Strategy is used as a case to contextualise the exploration of globalisation and the international context for literacy in the chapter. It is concluded that by appealing to the inevitability of globalisation the scope of political decision-making was unacceptably narrowed.

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Globalisation is a key idea in relation to policy development; in particular it forms a spatial frame within which policy discourses and policy formulations are set (Ball, 2008). One feature of globalisation is the hegemonic role of economics in developing educational policy, with the associated targets and quantifiable indicators. Tikly describes such global economics-driven policy as a *new imperialism* which he argues ignores the processes at the heart of education, namely those of the curriculum and pedagogy, but which can be challenged by grass roots social movements linked to specific forms of critical pedagogy representing “globalisation from below” (Tikly, 2004, p. 193). A global focus by policymakers has often resulted in control of teaching being taken away from teachers and teacher educators. The change in the locus of control is at the expense of teacher-owned deeper levels of knowledge and critical thinking, which may, if allowed to flourish, be more likely to result in increases in learning and teaching quality (Tatto, 2007).

The focus of this chapter is on understanding the larger contextual conditions associated with globalisation and regulation. In view of the claims made by politicians in England about a *world class education system*, the actual and potential influence of policy in England on other nations, and the reliance on the theory that education is an economic driver in a global market place, there is a need to subject such policy thinking to critical scrutiny as a means of evaluating the rationale for claims about a world class system. England’s National Literacy Strategy (NLS) is used as a case to be analysed through a theoretical framework derived from policy sociology, political science, and critical theory. Scholars such as Deborah Stone (1997), Murray Edelman (2001) and John Kingdon (1997) have all demonstrated the importance of investigating the intersections of policy and politics in providing an understanding of complex, ideological policy

problems. The theoretical frame allows us not only to understand how policy ideas emerge, but, as Blyth shows (1997), we are also able to illustrate “how or why certain ideas come to be accepted over others.” (p. 238) It is a selective review of theory and evidence with a main focus on conceptions of globalisation and the potential links with national policy on curriculum and pedagogy.

Despite the predominance of globalisation rhetoric by policy makers (and researchers) Hay (2004) contends that even the crudest of aggregate data reveals there is little evidence of the effects of globalisation that are so freely and loosely invoked. Empirical research shows that developed nation states are not more affected today by a ‘global market’ than they were in previous historical periods. If anything, Britain has been shown to be less economically global today than in the past (Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Rugman, 2000). Dreher *et al.* (2008), using the KOF Index of Globalization which measures the amount of economic, social and political globalisation for each country, have shown that overall, globalisation for Britain increased until the 1990s. However, since then, the degree of globalisation in the country has stagnated. Further, the degree of globalisation is due mainly to political and social globalisation, where the country is ranked 7th and 5th respectively, rather than economic globalisation where the country is ranked 27th. This picture is found in many other developed nations including France, Germany, and the United States such that those researchers who measure globalisation have concluded that any world-wide increases in economic globalisation are due primarily to expansion by developing countries. Developed countries have become less economically open while still maintaining a political and social dominance in world affairs (Chase-Dunn, Kawano, and Brewer, 1999). We are not arguing here that there are no external economic pressures on countries – the globalized ripple effect of sub-prime mortgage lending in the US certainly illustrates that there are – rather,

we contend that the real impact of these pressures on state institutions such as education, is shaped by policy makers' *perceptions* of the extent of the country's exposure to them.

To understand the affects of globalisation we also need to account for the importance of 'ideas' as a context for policy debates and their outcomes (Moore, 1988). A key idea in relation to globalisation is the belief that it exists and has a powerful affect on the nation state. Marsh, Smith and Hothi (2006) argue that "if policy-makers *believe* in globalization, that is likely to shape their approach *whether or not globalization actually exists.*" (p. 177 - emphasis in original). Hence, ideas can play an independent causal role in shaping policy outcomes that can result in material effects. "By behaving *as if* it were a reality, policy-makers may actually be *making* it a reality." (op cit, emphasis in original) This certainly seems the case in England where policy makers constructed a discourse about globalisation that implied inevitability. In so doing, they created a context where change was required and current practices were shown to be unable to meet the demands of this new competitive context. Thus, as Prime Minister Tony Blair said,

The key to new Labour economics is the recognition that Britain [has] to compete in an increasingly international market place.... Today's Labour Party, New Labour, is the political embodiment of the changed world – the new challenges, the new policies and the new politics. (Blair, 1996 quoted in Watson and Hay, 2003, p. 296)

Adding to the idea that globalisation exists was the perception of globalisation as an economic phenomenon requiring a new approach and urgent attention. Policy makers blur the distinction between the inevitable and the desirable so the 'inevitable' requires new policies.

We therefore need to consider globalisation as a political consequence rather than a purely economic one; by doing so we open the possibility for shaping and resisting the educationally less desirable influences that the globalisation rhetoric creates. Hay and Marsh (2000) believe we

must ‘rediscover the capacity (that the rhetoric of globalization so frequently denies us) of shaping, steering and ultimately transforming the globalized world that *we have made*.’ (p. 14, emphasis added)

Regulating the Risk of Globalisation

Watson and Hay (2003) have shown, with regard to other policy sectors in England, that appeals to the notion of globalisation and its constraints can institutionalise the consequences of the discourse. One consequence is the need for management of ‘risk’ – for example, the risk of losing economic competitiveness; the risk of falling behind other countries. The necessity to manage risk results in incessant demands for ever more elaborate regulation (Moran, 2001). In adopting the inevitability of globalisation and its incumbent risks, policy makers narrow their options for action: “the limits of a rational administration’s ... activism are in supplying the market with information about its intentions. This it does by publicising a series of medium-term ... targets.” (Watson and Hay, 2003, p. 297) Power (1997) has labelled this kind of response as “the remanagerialization of risk” (p. 138) where risk prompts the creation of new managerial structures in order to develop techniques of control of the perceived risk.

The sheer range of regulatory bodies involved in education in England since the late 1990s is one feature of this remanagerialization of risk – The Teacher Training Agency then Training and Development Agency for Schools (note the loss of the word ‘Teacher’ in this rebranding); Her Majesty’s Inspectorate then augmented to The Office for Standards in Education; the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority then the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; The Department for Education and Skills then The Department for Children, Families and Schools; in addition to all purpose regulatory agencies such as the Audit Commission and the National Audit Office. As Moran (2003) has shown in other policy sectors:

the state is forced to concentrate on the regulation of risk, not necessarily because risks are greater than in the past, but because the cultural climate in which risk is experienced and debated has changed radically, simultaneously heightening knowledge of risk, heightening sensitivity to its consequences, and heightening the capacity to mobilize to demand action against those perceived consequences. (p. 27)

A consequence of the rise of the regulatory state in response to perceived risks from globalisation is that the regulatory state spreads beyond traditional markets to encompass social institutions. Moran (2001) explains the regulatory state in Britain as a product of the rise of market-forces thinking where the ideologies of private enterprise are applied to the public sector. Hay (2004) summarises the position as follows: “All aspects of state policy are essentially exposed, in an era of heightened capital mobility, to an exacting and exhaustive competitive audit at the hands of globalisation” (p. 40).

A good example of the rise of the regulatory state and the links political perceptions of globalisation can be clearly seen in the context that was set for the flagship programme of the New Labour government in England – the National Literacy (and Numeracy) Strategy (NLS). In 1996 a *Literacy Task Force* was established by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. It was charged with developing a strategy for substantially raising standards of literacy in primary schools in England over a five to ten year period. The expectation was that the strategy would be implemented if the New Labour Government was elected in 1997, which they duly were. The literacy task force report, *A Reading Revolution: How we can teach every child to read well*, unfavourably compared England’s performance with other countries: “International comparisons of children’s achievements in reading suggest Britain is not

performing well, with a slightly below average position in international literacy ‘league tables’ ... Most studies show also a long ‘tail’ of underachievement in Britain ... most [people] are agreed that the educational system bears the main responsibility” (Literacy Task Force, 1997, p. 10). The sources for the “international comparisons” (op cit) were revealed in a retrospective analysis of research and other related evidence, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (Beard, n.d.), as *The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (Elley, 1992) and a report by Brooks, *et al.* (1996). Brooks *et al.* (1996) did indeed identify a “long tail” of underachievement in the reading results for England and Wales (a phrase which was used repeatedly as part of the justification for the government’s intervention), which they described as the performance of lower ability pupils tailing off drastically which tended to lower the average score in international comparisons. However a point that was not emphasised as part of the task force report was that the nature of the data that Brooks *et al.* examined meant that it was “impossible to deduce any trend over time” (p. 18). The Task Force report went on to comment on national assessment data suggesting that the range of performance among schools with similar intakes was “profoundly disturbing” (op cit, p. 11). Although it is always the case that performance among schools with similar intakes differs, no evidence was presented that the NLS was the best way to address the perception of ‘profound disturbance’. In fact the Task Force report admitted that “detailed data have not so far been made available nationally on the results in the reading component of English alone” (p. 11), a further indication of the perceptual nature of the risk.

In 1997, the government’s ‘answer’ to the risk posed by international and national comparisons of literacy test results was to implement the NLS as part of its “crusade for higher standards” (Literacy Task Force, 1997, p. 15) that was a feature of the government’s approach to

education, signalled by Prime Minister Tony Blair's commitment to 'education, education, education' above all other policy areas. At the very heart of the strategy was the teaching of reading: "The core of our strategy necessarily relates to improving the teaching of reading in primary schools" (op cit, p. 16). The single most influential feature of the strategy was the setting of a national target: "By 2002 80% of 11 year olds should reach the standard expected for their age in English (ie. Level 4) in the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests." (Department for Education and Employment, 1997, p. 5), by which progress could be measured and control could be maintained. The testing and target-setting system has been the most enduring, and powerful, regulatory feature of education in England since 1997.

The rise in the regulatory state continued through the years of the NLS (1997-2006) and provided one point of reference for the intensification of regulation in a number of education areas. For example, the requirements for initial teacher training (ITT) contained in a government circular in 1998 (DfEE, 1998) specified a national curriculum for ITT for the first time, with 14 pages of content for the subject of English alone which had to be covered. The structure of this English curriculum for ITT mirrored most of the features of the NLS. *Auditing* of trainee's subject knowledge in relation to this content was required (in addition to assessments that would always be undertaken as part of a course of study at a university). By 2002 this text was reduced to the expectation that trainee teachers must demonstrate that they could teach literacy through the NLS in order to gain qualified teacher status (Teacher Training Agency, 2002).

Regulation in education thus emerged "as a certain style of processing risk ... Audit is a normalized style of analysis, and a way of categorizing and breaking down objects, tasks, and needs." (Power, 1997, p. 138) The emergent literacy policy in England thus represented not only a set of educational decisions but resulted also from the perceived risk of declining global

competitiveness and the resulting need to regulate this risk. The chosen policy was structured to allow for external auditing and regulation – instruments for risk reduction. Literacy and mathematics lessons were prescribed as one hour per day, a short-term objectives-based model was used in the Framework for Teaching, appropriate teaching methods were increasingly specified, and all was to be inspected.

Decline in Trust

In his groundbreaking work on *The Audit Society*, Michael Power (1997) illustrates that the rise of audit and regulation is accompanied by a widespread decline in trust within a society. Decline in trust results in an increase in the regulation of professionals. The increasing regulation of schools and teachers mirrors a larger trend in decline in professional self-regulation more generally in Britain. Moran (2001) provides examples of how doctors, accountants and the financial markets all saw increases in governmental regulation under New Labour. Evidence of a decline in trust and self-regulation in education can also be seen in the recent history of national curriculum developments in England.

The government challenge to self-regulation was memorably exemplified by the metaphor of the primary curriculum as a *secret garden*, a phrase which has often inaccurately been attributed to Prime Minister James Callaghan. In fact the origins of the secret garden began considerably earlier. Prior to the modern period of regulatory control of education in England, there began to emerge a dissatisfaction among government ministers and the public that schools were too free to do as they please, with little apparent accountability. Until 1926 the legal powers established in the *Elementary Code* in England meant that the Board of Education held the right to approve the school curriculum and timetable through the work of inspectors. In 1926 the regulations were revised and any reference to the subjects of the curriculum was removed

(Cunningham, 2002), something which effectively gave schools complete control over their curriculum. In the 1960s, after a lengthy period of very little government control of the curriculum, government began to take a strong interest once more. The idea of the primary curriculum as 'Secret Garden' was coined by David Eccles (Minister of Education from 1954-57 and again from 1959-62) in a debate on the Crowther Report in the House of Commons in March 1960. It became a very powerful slogan especially in the subsequent attempt by the government to set up a Curriculum Study Group in the Ministry of Education in the face of opposition from teacher unions. The compromise was the Schools Council for Curriculum Reform which had more teacher representation and less dominance by civil servants than the Study Group. Shirley Williams, as Prime Minister James Callaghan's Secretary of State for Education and Science, initiated the Great Debate. She called Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to account for the curriculum in a way which her broad powers under the 1944 Education Act entitled her to, but that had not conventionally been exerted in respect of curriculum especially given post-war sensitivities about curriculum control in totalitarian states, and possibly some respect for the professional judgment of teachers (Cunningham, 2009, personal communication). James Hamilton, a Permanent Secretary at the Department of Education and Skills signalled that the department would be taking a much closer look at what was taught in schools: exposing the "secret garden of the curriculum" (Chitty, 1989, p. 138), by which he meant a curriculum that teachers were able to control without influence from government, and one that government felt was not producing the necessary outcomes for the country's economy.

The oil shock of the 1970s and high inflation resulted in governments in western countries looking again at public spending (Chitty, 1989). Comparisons with other countries led to concerns that Britain was not producing high enough numbers of appropriately qualified

engineers, mathematicians and scientists. The economic conditions and the dissatisfaction with the lack of accountability culminated in the highly influential 'Ruskin College Speech' by James Callaghan, in which schools' role in preparing the future generation to contribute to the country's economic success was articulated.

Following the Callaghan speech a period of intense focus on education by government resulted in proposals for a significant change in legislation, one aspect of which was the proposal for a national curriculum. The consultation on the proposal resulted in fierce criticisms:

These proposals are wrong in principle and we oppose them utterly ... None of the documents makes any mention of the effects the proposed changes will have on present pupils of our schools, their teachers or on the role and responsibilities of head teachers. None draws on either experience or research to inform the ideas contained in them. There is a fundamental inconsistency in the proposals which is so blatant that we must look to the political philosophy which has generated them to find an explanation. (Campaign for the advancement of state education - Haviland, 1988, p. 5)

The consultation paper offers no philosophical or other justification for the list of foundation subjects proposed (or even for a subject-based approach). Historical divisions of knowledge do not necessarily provide a satisfactory way of describing curriculum needs for the future, given the rapid change in society. There is a danger too that such an approach will accentuate an emphasis upon knowledge itself rather than upon its application. (Royal Society of Arts Examination Board – op cit. p. 12). Never-the-less the national curriculum and associated national testing system were enacted. The Education Reform Act 1988 (ERA) gave statutory power over the curriculum to the Secretary of State for Education.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the government adopted a proposal that was shown in consultation to have potentially serious weaknesses. Stone (1997) has suggested that policy contexts built on perceived threats and causes for action lead policymakers to adopt a crisis mentality which generates a spirit of closing ranks on the enemy and “constrains policymakers from questioning feasibility or seeming to be soft on the problem.” (p. 295). Edelman (2001) takes this argument further to suggest that perceptual politics begins a chain of policy events which “build an impression of beneficial social change even while typically erasing the possibility of change.” (p. 129). Thus not only do perceived threats and risks result in real effects, the regulatory strategy which results from these perceived risks may hamper effective change in the future.

In addition to the changes to the curriculum the national testing system and associated target setting, the role of the inspectorate changed from a more benign regulatory organisation to take on a more explicitly campaigning role to raise educational standards (Smith, 2000). Part of this involved new rounds of inspections of ITT which departed from the previous practice of inspecting the whole curriculum to an exclusive focus on literacy and numeracy. The expectation from the inspectors was that providers would ensure that trainees understood and were able to teach using the NLS Framework for Teaching. Likewise in schools the inspection process emphasised the importance of the NLS Framework. So although the national curriculum was the statutory framework, and the NLS Framework for Teaching was technically non-statutory guidance, the pressure of a centralised system built on national targets, enforced by the inspectorate, meant that the NLS framework was, *de facto*, statutory.

Although the main feature of the NLS, the literacy hour, introduced a new level of government control through its specification of the timed segments of the hour, the requirement

for whole class teaching, and the short-term objectives-led planning and lessons, teachers initially has some control over teaching methods that they thought were most appropriate to deliver the teaching objectives. As opposition to the NLS Framework continued to grow the national coordinators of the NLS began to make changes to some aspects of the expectations for teaching offering teachers a little more freedom (Stannard and Huxford, 2007). But these flexibilities were to be removed in 2008 when the approach to the teaching of reading known as *synthetic phonics* was made statutory through changes to the national curriculum, in spite of research evidence showing that alternative possibilities were likely to be more beneficial (Wyse and Goswami, 2008). This was further enforced by the introduction, for the first time, of statutory control of education from birth to age five in the *Early Years Foundation Stage*. This meant that over a period of 20 years government had assumed control of the curriculum and significant aspects of pedagogy from birth to age 18.

With the emergence of distrust of educators and the decline of professional autonomy, regulations triumph over other sources of legitimacy such as community and state (Power, 1997). Regulation produces an ever more auditable structure, regardless of effectiveness. The regulation of the curriculum in general and literacy in particular created the impression that something was being done to lessen the risk of failure. The information produced through assessment and inspection provided a sense of transparency and comfort to policy makers and the public. But the information produced through regulation does not build the capacity in teachers and schools to improve learning. As Power (1997) argues,

the audit society is a society that endangers itself because it invests too heavily in shallow rituals of verification at the expense of other forms of organizational intelligence. In

providing a lens for regulatory thought and action, audit threatens to become a form of learned ignorance.

(Power, 1997, p. 123)

Thus, teachers become less inclined to engage in reflective and responsive teaching and in the process become deskilled; targets were missed, public distrust of institutions and government increased and the only response available in this scenario is more regulation.

Conclusion

A series of interrelated shifts in political discourse and perceived risk occurred which presuppose the necessity and benefits of a curriculum and pedagogy that are amenable to regulation and inspection. Thus 'the tail has wagged the dog' and in the process the literacy policy adopted provides delusions of control and transparency which satisfy politicians and some section of society but which may not be as effective (or as politically neutral) as commonly imagined (e.g. Wyse, McCreery and Torrance (2008) cast doubt on the claims made by politicians about the gains made as a result of the NLS). By appealing to the inevitability of globalisation as a constraint, policy makers in England established parameters limiting the scope of future political decision making on literacy policy by creating a narrative which entrenched and institutionalised a course of actions and outcomes which appeared predestined but were once merely contingent. In so doing, they also constructed a causal discourse which appeared to depoliticize policy decisions which in other circumstances would be considered politically ideological.

The key to resisting the orientation of literacy policy in England, which many educators wish to do, is not only to resist certain curricula and pedagogies but also to resist the political

context from which such a regulatory pedagogy has emerged. As Moss (2004) has demonstrated in her examination of the National Literacy Strategy, “to be properly understood, NLS needs to be seen as part of a target-setting and performance-monitoring regime that is integral to New Labour’s management of the public sector more generally.” (p. 126) Multiple voices are required to provide a discourse of resistance: arguing for different traditions of evaluation and control; appealing to collegiality and trust; and casting doubt on the efficacy and cost of auditing (Power, 1997). Challenges can also be made by critically interrogating the evidence base for policy decisions about curriculum and pedagogy. Critical pedagogy and curriculum movements can be coupled with a culture of resistance to inappropriate control, something which has been a feature of a minority of teachers’ and schools’ work, for example by refusing to implement government pedagogical and curriculum requirements. It is a moot point whether critical interrogation of curricula and pedagogy or critical interrogation of the political context which creates a narrative of rationality, or a combination of both, is the most likely way to positively effect change – this is a potentially rich area for future research. Implementing tactics of resistance requires a reorientation, from the comfort gained by the rituals and instruments developed to deal with an unknown and unknowable risk, to an orientation to discomfort.

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