

Viewpoint

POLICY AND PURPOSE: WHERE NEXT FOR GLOBAL LEARNING?

Cathryn Gathercole

In this article, **Cathryn Gathercole** draws comparisons in the educational policy environment under the previous British administration and the new government at Westminster. She assesses the impact and challenges arising from changes in educational policy-making, particularly in the formal sector, drawing upon the work of her own organisation, Tide~ global learning.

Introduction

In 2003, I was appointed Co-ordinator for the East Midlands Network for Global Perspectives in Schools. The network was the East Midlands' response to the Department for International Development's (DfID) Enabling Effective Support (EES) initiative. EES was a strategy developed by the Department to provide support to schools in delivering the global dimension across the UK. One of the first events I attended as Co-ordinator was a development education conference held at Stoke Rochford Hall in Lincolnshire. A contribution to one of the debates, which has stayed with me since, referenced a quote on the back of the DfID Enabling Effective Support publication, which stated:

“Enabling Effective Support will succeed when it manages to unlock the creative potential from within the education sector so that the agenda concerned with preparing young people to understand and feel able to shape the changing world will be set by educationalists themselves” (DfID, 2003).

The contributor asked who had locked up the creative potential in the first place? Eight years later, the statement still offers a powerful vision for the education sector which is worth pursuing – and in order to pursue it, we must consider seriously the question given our experiences in the intervening years.

In this reflective piece I use ‘we’ to mean Tide~ global learning which is a teachers’ network that supports creative work to meet young people’s educational entitlement to global learning. But I hope that others may feel that

the comments have resonance with and relevance for their own educational contexts. While the article draws upon discussions within the Tide~ network, most recently at a seminar titled ‘Where next for global learning?’ held in July 2011, it forms part of an on-going debate within Tide and the wider education sector.

The article begins by outlining some of the changes in the educational policy environment under the previous British administration, and draws comparisons with the current context in England drawing particular reference to education and international development. I will then share some thoughts about the implications for Tide~ global learning as an organisation seeking to achieve the objective stated in the EES document, thereby examining how the creative potential may have been locked up, so to better understand how to unlock it.

The Policy Environment (2003-2010)

In the period 2003 to 2010, a series of policy initiatives at Westminster created an environment within the English education system which was conducive to enhance the practice of global learning. Citizenship was introduced as a stand-alone subject; the global dimension and sustainable development were included as one cross curricular dimension for Key Stage 3 pupils; the Sustainable Schools initiative gave greater prominence to sustainability issues across the curriculum, school grounds in tertiary education and the wider community; and the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) inspections included community cohesion as a key criterion. These initiatives brought with them some funding and more importantly profile and status within the curriculum and among teachers. Over the same period, DfID increased the amount of funding available for development awareness activities, and formally extended support for EES from the initial five year agreements to ten years. Collectively, these initiatives amounted to a positive environment for global learning in regard to funding, profile and a potential UK-wide structure for learning and collaboration.

The situation has changed significantly since the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010, following a series of policy changes and initiatives. The drivers for these changes have been both financial and ideological; financial in the sense that there have been significant cuts in public spending including on education provision; ideological in that changes have been driven by a conviction that ‘centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure’ and ‘that the time has come to disperse

power more widely in Britain today' (*The Coalition: our programme for government*, 2010: 7).

The Ideological Shift

The impact of the financial side has been relatively easy to see, with significant reductions in government funding mainly affecting the public and voluntary sector. However, the impact of the ideological changes has been more difficult to discern. The concept of the 'Big Society' still appears to be unclear in many people's minds, and even more slippery in their reality. The ideological shift represents a need to readjust thinking in terms of the role and expectations of central and local government. In the meantime, there appears to be something of a vacuum, with new ways of thinking yet to be established, or practices proved fit for purpose.

The ideological shift is also reflected in the schools White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* published in November 2010, which will bring about major changes in the English education system. Among the identified priorities in the White Paper is an emphasis on teacher-to-teacher professional development; the creation of schools outside of local authority control with greater autonomy over their curriculum, such as free schools or academies; a shift towards schools becoming the principle provider of initial teacher education; a curriculum review with the intention of reducing statutory elements; and the introduction of the English Baccalaureate as one measure of success for secondary schools.

Alongside this, bodies such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) are being disbanded; local authority support is significantly reduced; and initiatives such as Sustainable Schools no longer receive central funding or promotion, driven largely by non-governmental organisations such as the Sustainable Schools Alliance. The education policy and funding environment has changed from one which positively endorsed learning about global and sustainability issues, to one where individual schools make decisions about which activities to prioritise, and how to fund them - becoming 'active consumers' of the myriad of support options available to them.

In contrast to the cuts within many government departments, DfID's budget has increased in line with the commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of the UK's gross national income on international development, due to be realised in 2013. Although the international development budget has been ring-fenced the new government commissioned a 'Review of using aid funds in the UK to

promote awareness of global poverty’ with the outcomes published in May 2011. The report concluded that although it was not possible to establish a direct link between awareness raising activities within the UK and poverty reduction globally, it was likely that it did so. DfID has restated its commitment to development education, and prioritised the formal education sector as the focus for activities through four Global Learning Projects in the UK – one each for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, alongside continued support for school linking programmes.

Implications of Policy Changes

So how will these policy changes impact on a small education charity like Tide~global learning? And more importantly, how will they impact on the education system with the continuing challenge to ‘unlock creative potential’?

There is no doubt that the creative potential is there within the education system given the plethora of projects and resources developed over the last eight years. Nor is there any doubt that many teachers are passionate about ensuring that their lessons include learning about the wider world and all that that entails – the number of participants in professional development activities and the use of resources supports this view. What is a matter of discussion, however, is how best to support a process of autonomous agenda setting by educationalists. We know from recent experience that government policy is liable to sudden and significant change, with a knock-on impact for funding, support and profile. It is always necessary to seek influence, and of course it is preferable to have a supportive policy environment, but national policy and influence can only ever be part of a process of change, not the finished article.

Conclusion: responding to change

So where are we now as we seek to make sense of the new environment, and respond to the opportunities and challenges which this presents? Our starting point has to be a recognition that we have not simply reverted to the situation as it was in 2003. There is now a significant legacy in terms of capacity, experience, resources and profile, but we need to build on this legacy, while recognising that only the inevitability of change is certain in the coming months. And just as inevitable is the recognition that if an organisation is to not only survive but also thrive in times of change, it must be resilient, adaptable and with a clear sense of purpose. In this case our purpose is re-affirmed as the desire to meet the needs of learners growing up in a changed and changing world, so that ‘global learning’ simply becomes accepted as what is after all the core business of schools – learning.

So what is the best way to meet those needs? Well, not just the best way, but the only way to meet these needs is through the actions of teachers. Expectations and behaviour are transient if they are only ever cultivated in response to an externally generated agenda. Sustainable change happens when it is driven from within, with a strong sense of ownership from those who are responsible for implementation – in this case teachers. Hence the focus of our activities has to continue to be on building capacity and creative practice with individuals and institutions within the education system, accepting that change is incremental and takes time.

Tide's recent work with groups of teachers in the West Midlands for the 'Bill Scott Challenge' identified some key factors which support the process of educational change. These factors included: giving ourselves permission to be curriculum makers responsible for developing the right curriculum for our learners and recognising that this may mean less teacher control; greater prioritising for learner led activities; taking risks within a disciplined framework; and relating learning more closely to real life contexts. There have always been spaces for creativity and independence although the confidence and opportunity to make the most of them have been lacking. At Tide~ we have sought to: create those spaces where teachers come together in teacher groups to learn from each other; work collaboratively in a professional environment; create new ideas and develop new ways of working; innovate for themselves; take control of their own development; identify and feel able to respond to the needs of their learners; and use their talents and trust their judgements.

That is why we are a teachers network; why we will use the opportunities of greater curricular autonomy for schools; why we will work with the new wave of training schools; why we will support the emphasis on teacher to teacher collaboration; why we will seek to be involved in and influence the DfID supported Global Learning England Programme – because ultimately we believe that this is the only way to '...unlock the creative potential within the education sector so that the agenda concerned with preparing young people to understand and feel able to shape their changing world will be set by educationalists themselves'.

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For more information about Tide~ global learning visit: <http://www.tidec.org>

For an introduction to Sustainable Schools please visit: <http://www.se-ed.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Framework%20Resource.pdf>

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