

# The downside of internationalization: when universal policy damages localized practice

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The benefits of international collaboration for research and teaching purposes are manifest but this paper sets these aside. It focuses instead on the negative consequences when policy and practices developed in one context are applied more universally without thought to their effect on existing traditions. In short, the argument is against the imposition of extraneous practices without consultation with those already working in the field and without tailoring changes to improve rather than override existing practice. Imposition of new ideas is seen to be particularly damaging when strategies or structures are adopted at a superficial level without sufficient attempt to analyse the underlying premises and values or to consider how these could be transferred beneficially between contexts. In particular, this can lead to compromises that would be unnecessary if new practices were developed for specific contexts rather than adapted from practice elsewhere. The discussion will commence with a broad overview of 'globalization' before narrowing down to an adult education focus with examples drawn from original research in an early years training context within further education. The strength of many practices in both adult and early years education is that they developed from grass roots movements that met the needs of users rather than from top-down policy initiatives, a tradition that is increasingly challenged.

The current commonly held conception of lifelong learning is that it is a policy essential for competitiveness in the worldwide market. Thus, the prime official expectation for adult education is that it is a means of developing the workforce, of improving industrial inputs. In a global economy, nation states can no longer manipulate the market by artificially controlling supply and demand, however, the workforce, now designated 'human capital', is a factor that can be influenced. A simple reductionist view is that improvements in the workforce lead directly to improvements in the economy, or obversely, 'any country's prosperity depends above all else on the skills, knowledge and inventiveness of its people' (Brown, Blunkett and Harman 1996, in Hodgson and Spours 1999, p.7). Similar beliefs were embedded in Conservative Party policy under Margaret Thatcher; made manifest in the commodification of education (now a good with value in a market economy), in policies favouring privatization (local management of schools, incorporation of colleges, training credits), and credentialism (often through National Vocational Qualifications, NVQs) (Hodgson and Spours 1999, p.11). There is no sign that the *a priori* importance of the economy will alter under the current coalition but signs that there may be a greater devolution of managerial powers and, in the re-establishment of a Department for Education, a clearer focus on education *per se*. Indeed, one interpretation of the much-contested notion of the 'Big Society' is that it is a further attempt to control the voluntary sector, seeking to promote, even enforce, grass roots involvement.

There is no simple direct link between education and economic improvement, however. The alternative, even obverse, argument is that the focus on education camouflages an inability to influence the economy. Extensive Canadian research demonstrated that credentialism stems from the 'relative withering of good jobs with

decent pay' (Livingstone 2002, p.50). 'Upskilling' 'converts deep-seated economic problems into short-lived educational projects' (Coffield 2002, p.183) and the 'coercive discourse of training and development' withholds support from those who refuse to upgrade their skills (Field 2006, p.6). A once cynical view, that the renaming of lifelong education as lifelong learning enabled the government to relinquish responsibility for education (Elliot 1999, Griffin 2002) becomes less cynical when viewed retrospectively. The Labour government's cuts to funding for adult classes in the 'noughties' that resulted in a 'substantial loss of opportunities for thousands of adults who have found their way back to education and training' (Tuckett, *TES* 13.5.05), and the current coalition government withdrawal of the teaching grant for higher education, are not actions that demonstrate support for universal educational opportunity. Standardization, targeted funding streams and inspection continue but control does not equate with responsibility.

The cuts in adult education were cast as a demographic problem associated with a 'temporary bulge' in the 16-19 year old population (Flint, *TES* 10.6.05) but coincidentally brought under government control a sector once deemed 'too resistant for incorporation' (Jarvis and Griffin 2003, p.10). Within FE colleges, policy reforms – based on European objectives – added to pressures on staff rather than directly meeting student and lecturer needs. Certainly, the adoption of a rigid financing policy disabling localized decision-making and the restriction of priority spending to young people, basic skills, a first level 2 qualification, and entitlement to level 3 vocational training in priority sectors only (a condition later relaxed) (Forrester, *TES* 1.7.05), implied political as well as economic control.

According to the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA 2003) the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) report *Beyond rhetoric* sought evidence of educational outcomes to verify an earlier (2000) finding that the average long-term impact on *per capita* output of one year's additional education was between 4 and 7%. As with the UK *Wider benefits of learning* (WBL) project, policy makers were to facilitate investigation of learning outcomes – whether economic, individualized or participatory – to motivate less educated workers to take up training opportunities (p.9). Employers were to be made aware of the 'direct value' from continued vocational training (5.2) and in Britain there were repeated demands for employer funding of training. Teacher training was considered to be 'the most neglected aspect of adult learning' (6.1) with teachers out of touch with the realities of the labour market – providing a rationale for the insistence on teacher qualifications in the post-compulsory sector. The report highlighted the UK *Investors in people* label as an example of good practice (5.1) and called for a focus on basic skills (2.3) and mastery of ICT (6.2). It called for a coherent adult education policy (4.4) that among other criteria should include possibilities for cooperation with related policy areas such as employment, social, economic or health activities. The review concluded by pointing out the lack of evaluation studies on what works in adult education, highlighting the need for better data on participation, financing and outcomes. It recommended a wider variety of approaches to evaluation over longer time periods in order to determine the total impact – social and economic – of training courses (8.2), creating a clear rationale for longitudinal studies and reviews of provision. The extension of the *Wider benefits of learning* project (Feinstein *et al* 2008), the *Teaching and learning research programme* (TLRP) projects (2005, 2007, 2008), the National Institute for Adult and

Continuing Education (NIACE 2005) *Eight in ten* report and the official *Foster review* into further education (DfES 2005) were timely.

The LSDA (2004) overview states how the subsequent OECD report, *Promoting adult learning*, looked thematically at policies and practices in 17 countries, particularly barriers to learning and its promotion through improved financing, delivery, quality control and policy coherence. In human capital terms, it found that overall economic growth was better promoted by raising the basic skills level of all the population and suggested embedding qualification within wage structures to encourage participation, looking in detail at ways that this might work. It also proposed better advice and guidance; free for basic information, fees charged for more focused career guidance. This was to be available face-to-face as the internet often missed those students who most needed skills acquisition. It advocated personal learning coaches, service networks, one-stop centres, second-chance programmes and intergenerational learning – ideas that were clearly implemented in the UK but with rigid entry criteria that excluded some of those who might have benefited. The report recommended that ‘much of adult learning should be financed privately, as it largely generates private returns’ encouraging withdrawal of public funding but with some co-financing measures to support participation of the lower-skilled and smaller firms. It also put early years education at the start of lifelong learning practices thereby giving further impetus to the *Every child matters* reforms arising out of the Department of Health *Laming inquiry* (DoH 2003) following the death of Victoria Climbié. Thus European clearly shaped British policy but it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the influences were reciprocal.

The report found that in real terms UK educational participation rates ran second to those in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, but after ‘adjustment’ to facilitate fairer comparison, the UK headed the list with an index of 6.9% compared to the average of 3.5%. This leads one to wonder whether the report precipitated the crisis in adult education. If the UK was perceived to be doing so much better than its competitors there was a safe margin within which to test the market and see if individuals and employers would pay for their own training. As better advice and guidance was deemed to create more sophisticated users there was support for a consumer-pressure approach forcing providers to raise standards. Such initiatives, together with a call for shared goal formation and quantifiable targets and outputs were not measures likely to make life easier for colleges or their staff.

To return to the Early Years sector, internationalization is evident in the detail of some of the top-down initiatives. The recent curriculum changes provide one example. England has created an *Early years foundation stage* (EYFS) (DfES 2007) that is structurally similar to the New Zealand *Te whariki* curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996). However, *Te whariki* was ‘developed in response to initiatives from the early childhood sector’ and starts from a firmly held desire to protect the bicultural heritage of the country. It is formed around a set of strongly held ethical and spiritual values embodied through the metaphor of a woven mat which represents the interlacing of two cultural traditions as equal and mutually dependent partners. The *Te whariki* curriculum starts with four founding principles, identifies five significant strands and then outlines 18 key goals and a further 117 learning outcomes that explain these goals, adding comments about skills and learning areas to support implementation. On paper the English *EYFS* shows striking

similarities. It lists four principles, identifies five overarching inspection outcomes and groups 69 learning goals under 30 aspects divided into six areas of learning.

Superficially the *EYFS* follows a similar structure to the New Zealand model but the international transfer is one of form rather than meaning, for the English model is a composite one rather than one developed from underlying principles. The original curriculum (QCA 2000) was a subject-based educational model for 3- to 5-year-olds that focused on six areas of learning and individual goals. The aspects, that make sense of the goals, were only highlighted in 2001 as part of guidance to enable more generic planning (QCA 2001). The four principles originated in a framework for under threes, *Birth to three matters* (Sure Start Unit 2002) and the five overarching inspection outcomes arose from the *Every child matters* agenda (DfES 2003). Thus the 2008 *EYFS* comprises a number of different elements put together strategically rather than a unified whole built up from fundamental principles. Indeed, a core statement about the *EYFS* is that it is 'central to the delivery of the new duties on improving outcomes and reducing inequalities', a very different mission to that of *Te whariki*.

Yet this statement does align with the initial governmental concern to raise educational standards so is consistent with the original curriculum focus on areas of learning and the 2004 OECD report that put the early years at the start of the lifelong learning process. In terms of social constructs of childhood, governments are viewing the child as a labour market supply factor (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999): both a resource that must be managed in order to enable mothers to return to work and an embryonic future worker, hence the focus on educational attainment. The *EYFS* clearly states that parents will 'want to know that provision will keep their children safe and help them to thrive'. The concern for quality provision in the early years gained momentum in the early 1990s. The reform of the compulsory sectors post-1988 (the Education Reform Act) enabled business interests to turn their attention to younger children and throughout the decades either side of the millennium the early years sector was subject to unprecedented levels of change culminating in the *Every child matters* agenda that sought a radical restructuring of all aspects of childcare and, through the 2006 Childcare Act, committed local authorities to providing childcare places for all working parents who needed them. Thus it was the globalized economic prerogative that underpinned the call for increased provision, higher standards and a better-trained workforce.

The economic agenda is clearly identifiable, less so the needs of the child, the parents, the local communities and the staff who work in childcare settings. We should consider the human manifestations of this 'silent revolution' (Hodge 2001) in childcare and ask what this looks like in real life. How does the governmental economic agenda, aimed to protect Britain's position in the global market, affect real people and their local communities?

My doctoral research set out to explore the educational experiences of 150 mature women training to work in childcare, choosing 33 to interview in depth. In taking a biographical approach it left the women to choose the content of their personal narratives and, incidentally, offers insights into some of these questions. During interview it became clear that the government agenda for change manifested in troublesome ways as longer hours, more paperwork, higher expectations and more

stress – also as less opportunity to play with the children. Women who had drifted into childcare because they liked being part of their local community, liked caring for children, and wanted convenient work that fitted around their families' needs were increasingly frustrated by the breakdown of traditional patterns of part-time childcare work. Some were beginning to leave the profession, as job satisfaction and convenience no longer compensated for low rates of remuneration. As Greta complains: 'I just feel it is drudgery now'.

You may be thinking why does this matter? Any bid to raise standards is likely to cause some wastage of human resource. But the evidence reveals that this *does* matter: the unplanned social payback from women integrating their lives through childcare work is significant for society. Easy and incidental access to childcare work encourages women to return to the workforce after childbirth in a gradual and manageable way, minimizing stress to women and their families. Childcare training and the associated work, particularly in community groups within the voluntary sector, serves as a transitional space for women wanting to work outside the domestic sphere. This is of benefit to our children. At home they are cared-for by their own parents, and in groups by women familiar with their needs who enjoy working with young children. In community groups the part-time coming and going of mothers and fathers who volunteer in the settings and sit on their management committees significantly raises the levels of social interaction within local communities – building and strengthening the bonds so vital for social capital development. This continually changing flow of different parents safeguards the children in the voluntary groups: child abuse is unlikely to occur in open environments where parents have unrestricted access and know the staff inside and outside of the settings. Pre-schools provide a joint focus for children and parents, thus encouraging intergenerational learning. Their localized and only semi-professional (non-threatening) status makes them more accessible for parents often labelled hard-to-reach. Thus in encouraging the participation of all parents they contribute to a social justice agenda.

In teaching women to meet the basic educational needs of children, childcare training also provides successive generations of women with a basic knowledge of how to educate and care for children. As my research findings demonstrate, women take this knowledge into other domains – the nuclear and extended family, the neighbourhood, schools and children's clubs. Thus, without any coercion or stigma it provides many parents with the skills needed to organize their own families obviating the need for parenting classes for those who fail to cope instinctively in contemporary society where the wisdom and support of earlier generations is no longer geographically proximate. Some women continue to work in childcare settings as their own children grow older, providing these with the continuity they need to operate efficiently. Others move into the school system in parallel with their children – providing society with a steady stream of teaching assistants and administrators, trainee teachers and parent governors or simply informed parents who understand what is required and how best to achieve it. All these advantages unfold at very little expense yet indirectly meet a range of government initiatives. Yet they could disappear if the globalized economic agenda promotes increasing standardization, regulation and inspection.

The practitioners' concerns reveal how the pursuit of national objectives for economic may put at risk local practices that benefit future generations of children and, therefore, society. As Frieda complains, rewards and responsibilities are no longer attuned.

I have got an enormous issue with successive governments ... increasing the responsibilities and ... expecting a more professional standard ... but not being prepared to take us ... under the government wing and giving us a pension and all the rest of it ... it seems to me that nobody actually outside the job really understands how much responsibility you hold ... there is still this kind of public notion that you just have a cosy little job down at the school and you are just a mum who's got a nice little job and aren't you lucky you get the holidays off.

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