

Developing a coherent, progressive and sustainable education policy

*A review by the
Social Liberal Forum*

Cllr. Helen Flynn



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Background and Rationale

Rather than taking on current education policies or indeed those from the Labour administration and earlier, and responding to them, the Social Liberal Forum and the Liberal Democrats need to develop a vision for education that is fit for our times. This vision would be

- Forward-looking
- Innovative
- Focused on creativity as one of the main drivers (given that we live in a rapidly changing world, where future career paths are uncertain)
- Focused on the learner and the learner experience

It would have to address the allied questions of “what is education for?” and also “what are schools for?” Both these questions are especially crucial in an age of rapid technological change. The latter question would take us into new territory as a political party, which we should be cognizant of. But it is vital to address both questions for the development of our citizenry in the 21st century as responsible and effective individuals, able to navigate their way through life, able to meet new challenges and adapt to new work environments, and – crucially – to be innovative and creative. The aim is to empower learners and equip them with skills throughout their time at school in such a way that they can become effective, confident and adaptable citizens.

Such an education system would develop individuals and help them reach their own potential, whilst also leading to greater national economic efficiency, prosperity and growth through individuals forging their own path and generating opportunities for themselves and others. A vibrant national economy thus becomes possible from realizing the potential that is stored in individuals. This

argument stems from an *a priori* belief that you are only as good (as a nation) as the use you make of your latent talent pool. You cannot accurately prescribe or predict what your economic make-up will be as a nation (e.g. manufacturing, services-dominated economy, etc.) as you do not know what is locked up in the talent pool. A truly progressive education system needs to engage with and exploit creativity and innovation, producing a vibrant economy, particularly now in an age of fast moving technological change. (This in stark contrast with much of the twentieth century where sharper demarcations and prescriptions were possible within the context of an industrial economy.) To put it crudely, so much is now “up for grabs” and impossible to accurately predict that it is becoming increasingly vital that we adopt different education policies to empower our citizens in this new, knowledge-based economy.

It is not possible for Government to effectively shape or determine what the economy will accurately look like by adopting this policy direction, but it is arguably a more effective route to national prosperity. The challenge, from a political point of view, is that such a forward-looking policy relies on gaining the trust of the professionals – the teaching staff – and according them a high level of autonomy and professionalization, so that they can be responsible for learner engagement and development and “outcomes” (whatever these are determined to be in the new landscape).

Therefore Government would not be able to over-centralise and over-prescribe to get what are deemed to be successful outcomes. Undoubtedly, this would be difficult for a group of individuals who perceive that they have to be “seen as being” effective, rather than simply “be” effective. This is a tension that has to be addressed at some point. (For example, a change of Government can mean a whole raft of new policies that seem to be put in place mainly to

show that there are new people in charge, leading to unsustainable and costly policy initiatives.)

As a result, there have sporadically been calls for de-politicising education. Following on from this, and in the interests of sustainability, as a party, we may want to debate policy options such as: setting up an Education Commissioning Board (along the lines of the NHS Commissioning Board, for example), or maybe, as John Dunford, Chair of Whole Education, suggests, installing a Chief Education Officer at the Dept for Education (DfE). He describes the DfE as:

"...the only major government spending department that does not have a senior professional giving policy advice. The Dept of Health has a Chief Medical Officer and a Chief Nursing Officer, DEFRA has a Chief Veterinary Officer, there is a Chief Scientific Officer and others less well known."

<http://johndunfordconsulting.wordpress.com/2011/04/23/the-department-for-education-needs-a-chief-education-officer/>

The Education Select Committee endorsed his view in April 2011. Some may think it strange, or even weak, for a political party to consider de-politicising education, but we need to consider the best interests of children first and foremost.

The SLF, in possibly adopting policy positions that reflect the observations and arguments set out above, puts current Government educational thinking and policy formation almost on its head and starts from a different place.

Currently, Government arguably over-prescribes the outcomes, methods and content of learning, all in the name of narrow accountability measures and league tables, on the pretext that the market can choose. (Numerous research studies and articles attest

to the effect of over-prescription and narrow accountability measures on learner engagement. A good example “*A Stitch in Time: Tackling Educational Disengagement*” can be found at:

http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Demos_stitch_in_time_report_C.pdf

The effect of this modus operandi is to “force round pegs into square holes” and does nothing to tackle the issue of learner engagement and empowerment, which is fundamental to any possibility of individual success even, paradoxically, in the prevailing context of the over-prescription which has been designed to maximize outcomes! Therefore the current Government policy is arguably always destined to fail an unacceptably high proportion of learners.

Our current system also stunts creativity and perpetuates the idea that one style of learning , i.e. academic, trumps all others, through the adoption of such techniques as teaching to the test and narrow accountability measures achieved through over-examination of learners at different points in their learner journey, for example SATS at Age 11, GCSE’s at age 15-16, etc. Recent initiatives, such as the introduction of the English Baccalaureate which ascribes a lesser value to subjects such as art, music and dance, etc., and the ever-present lesser status accorded to vocational subjects and qualifications, reveal the Government’s academic-focused priorities and backward-looking nature.

With regard to accountability measures, we should always have to ask such questions as:

- What do these examinations actually do for the individual?
- How much do they impede and interrupt an individual’s basic education and greater learning (and scope to learn in different ways)?

- What actual skills do these examinations bestow upon the individual and would any such skills actually have been acquired and maximized in a different way, rather than jumping through centrally prescribed and controlled “hoops” at specific times?

In conclusion, it is fair to say that we are at a real pinch point now because of both the economic environment and the changing technological landscape, and now is the time to be brave in putting forward a different vision for education and a suite of policies to suit. Below are some options for Social Liberals and Liberal Democrats in general to consider. The parameters for a progressive education policy can be drawn from the broad positions we can agree on, in relation to the tensions that are highlighted below. All are evidence-based, taken from examples of outstanding practice both here and abroad.

What is clear and should serve as a warning, however, is that any such policies will only be sustainable and therefore effective if there is cross-party agreement. In fact probably the one basic and fundamental reason behind the much documented and evidenced success of progressive education policies in Finland has been because of political party consensus on the basic structure and direction of educational reform over decades. Here is a highly relevant and revealing extract from the book, *“Finnish Lessons”* by Pasi Sahlberg, Director General of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

“The success of Finnish education is not the result of any major national education reform per se. Instead, education development in Finland has been based on the continual adjustment of schooling to the changing needs of individuals and society... The basic values and main vision of education as public service have remained unchanged since the 1970s. Governments from the political left and

right have respected education as the key public service for all citizens and maintained their belief that only a highly and widely educated nation will be successful in world markets.”

Taking Forward Ideas to Develop as SLF Educational Policy

Here are the basic underlying tensions that would have to be addressed so that a coherent and relevant overarching education policy could be developed:

1. Standardisation vs. customisation

Giving greater autonomy to schools, and in particular to teachers, to develop curricula and methods of learning can provide better educational outcomes. Therefore we would need to consider:

- Possible adoption of a policy towards local curricula (within a much more loose National Curriculum (NC)-entitlement framework, to cover the basics). There is much confusion currently over Government-stated aims of: having a looser framework, whilst still prescribing curriculum content; and also allowing academies, on the face of it, to abandon any form of NC, whilst expecting maintained schools to follow the NC. These issues need to be resolved
- Giving greater autonomy to teachers and trusting teachers more. This surely must come from a greater professionalisation and either building or acknowledging the expertise (focusing very much on pedagogy) of teachers. Government did put forward interesting ideas about having a Masters level degree for all teachers, though the teaching schools initiative is completely at odds with this initial idea and reduces teaching to a mere “craft”. In addition, much more thought needs to be given to the requirement of CPD throughout a teacher’s career and how this can be best facilitated
- Internal assessment, externally moderated, as a more effective means of monitoring learner progress than external testing.

2. Core skills and knowledge vs. creative learning

Though there is no doubt that a firm grasp of maths and English (and to some extent, science) are pre-requisites to most forms of learning (and indeed knowledge economy-based jobs and careers), the level of central prescription is unacceptable and stunts

creativity. At primary level, grasping the basics (imaginatively taught) is key. But secondary education, in addition to building on the basics, can be more fluid, and revolve more around skills and multi-disciplinary projects rather than traditional subject-based learning. In addition, educational establishments have to adapt to the fact that the “knowledge of the world” (to put it crudely) is effectively available to each child on their tablet device or smartphone. How can classrooms embrace this change and incorporate it into school and classroom best practice to facilitate learning? Finally, current educational research demonstrates the advantages of personalized learning over class learning, as a means to unlocking individuals’ talents.

Therefore we would need to consider such issues as:

- how much learning should take place in traditional classroom environments
- what should 21st century schools look like and do. For example, how long should the school day be? How do we group learners?
- how can we develop personal road maps for learning that engage pupils from an early age?
- How do we create an environment where interpersonal skills, team-working and problem-solving are nurtured, recognized and prized, especially in an era that is increasingly reliant on digital technological solutions? It is vital that all pupils develop attitudes and skills for using all available information and opportunities.

3. Test-based accountability vs. shared responsibility and trust

Our current education system judges individual talent by using standardized knowledge tests. These tests are rarely able to cover the non-academic domains that include creativity, complex handling of information or communicating new ideas to others. It is important to assess how students learn the basic knowledge and skills, and creativity as a result of school education.

Therefore we need to consider such issues as:

- What we should be testing, i.e. what do we actually value and what is most useful for learners
- How often we use standardized tests
- What we are using them for (i.e. external accountability or learner progression)
- How sampling can be effectively used to measure the educational “health” of a nation
- Assuming we use standardized testing at least once in a pupil’s time at school, what body/bodies should design the tests and what body should oversee the process
- What is Ofsted for and how it should operate? Should inspection happen at local level?
- Fundamentally, how do we balance teacher responsibility and external accountability measures?

4. Competition vs. collaboration

Many policies pursued over recent decades in some countries (including England) have focused on competition as a driver for school improvement. This is being pursued now through costly structural changes to schools in England. Much of the evidence shows that this makes no impact on overall pupil attainment. (There is much evidence available on this but see for Charter Schools in the USA

http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf; for Academies in England http://www.employers-guide.org/media/21007/academies_annual_report_pwc.pdf).

Yet competition can increase stakeholder anxiety, impact negatively on teacher morale and pit school against school.

Again and again international evidence has shown that collaboration between schools and within schools yields more positive outcomes for learners. Finland (collaborative) has the lowest percentage points difference between schools at the moment of its only standardized test, compared to England (competitive) where there are vast differences between schools at

GCSE level and A level, for example. Interestingly, though apparently ignored by the current Secretary of State for Education, the success of the London Challenge programme launched by the Labour Government in 2003 (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/london-challenge>) attests to the success of local initiatives in increasing attainment for pupils without altering school structures, but through building strong partnerships and local support mechanisms via local authorities, amongst others.

Therefore we need to consider such issues as:

- What we would do in terms of schools structures (including the issues of privatization, academies, free schools, etc.)?
- How we would introduce true equity into the admissions system? In the current situation where the local authority's role in admissions and its funding for education is being cut, owing to academies being able to administer their own admissions and also general cuts to local authority grants, how do we create an effective and fair middle tier—at the local level—that can handle admissions and what would this look like?
- How would we envisage a school system that relies on collaboration as a driver for overall learner development (as opposed to school improvement, though this is inevitably involved—just a different focus)?
- How to enable teachers and school leaders to learn from each other and form networks of mutual trust and sharing of best practice.

Local, regional and devolved government

We should also note that real and lasting change can only take place in an environment where there is genuine equal opportunity for all. The UK is one of the most unequal societies in the world, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the world of education,

where at the extreme end of the scale you can buy advantage through purchasing private education.

Added to this are the changes to legislation and structures which mean that admissions and the role of the current middle tier (ie the LA) become at best opaque and at worst, unfair and redundant.

Can a real re-envisioning of the educational landscape be possible in such an environment? There is a great deal of pressure placed on policy-makers to change our direction of policy, though precious little action on the ground. (If anything we are moving backwards through regressive policy-making.) Though aspects of some reforms such as academisation can be positive (especially in terms of innovation), any chance of success of radical educational policy reform has to be assessed against the prevailing socio-economic factors that govern society.

It strikes me that there is a furrow for the SLF to plough in terms of advocating and putting forward progressive policies that put:

- social justice
- equality of opportunity
- moral purpose
- sustainability

at the heart of everything we do and we should avoid gimmicks and quick fixes at all costs. There is no finer place to start than in describing our own attitudes and policy positions on education.