

## **The future only arrives when things look dangerous: Reflections on futures education in the UK**

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### ABSTRACT

This article takes the form of a personal reflection on the struggle to establish futures education in the UK school curriculum. After promising beginnings in the 1980s under the aegis of global educators the 90s saw a retrenchment in order to create a research base and to develop appropriate support materials for teachers. Whilst until recently not understood or accepted by most mainstream educators a futures perspective is now beginning to be included in the work of geographical educators. In particular some aspects of futures thinking are also becoming enshrined in initiatives relating to education for sustainability. Encouraging teachers to develop a futures perspective in their own curriculum area may be a more profitable way forward than trying to promote futures education as a separate entity. Dominant neoliberal ideology and its influence on education will always make it difficult to challenge mainstream views of the future.

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### **1. Introduction**

During the years that I taught on the Education Studies degree at Bath Spa University (1991-2007) I was able to design and teach a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate module on 'Education for the Future'. This degree was aimed at students who had an interest in education many of whom, but not all, would go on to teach in primary schools. Since the degree did not lead to a teaching qualification - that came later at post-graduate level - staff were free to strike whatever balance they chose between academic study and classroom practice. In the case of this module it meant highlighting the distinction between futures studies and futures education. I take the former to be the academic field of enquiry which investigates futures whilst the latter refers to helping teachers, trainee teachers and pupils in school to think more critically and creatively about the future.

The purpose of futures studies is to 'discover or invent, examine, evaluate and propose possible, probable and preferable futures' since 'futurists seek to know: what can or could be (the possible), what is likely to be (the probable), and what ought to be (the preferable)' (Bell, 1997: 73). The term futures education is used more specifically to denote the translation of futures concepts such as these into learning experiences appropriate for primary and secondary school students (Fitch and Svengalis, 1979).

In relation to futures studies I was able to draw on a wide range of sources including Bell's *Foundations of Futures Studies* (1997), Sardar's *Rescuing All Our Futures* (1999) and Slaughter's *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (2005). Materials on how to teach about futures in the classroom, however, were generally more difficult to find despite the existing work on early years (Page, 2000), primary school (Hicks, 2001) and secondary level (Hutchinson, 1996). Why was this always a problem, I wondered, given the plentiful

availability of resources for teachers and pupils on global issues such as wealth and poverty, peace and conflict, environment and development?

The 1970s and 80s in the UK and internationally saw a flourishing of interest amongst progressive educators in how best to help young people make sense of the world. This period saw the emergence of a number of initiatives which each focused on a particular aspect of the human condition. Amongst these were global education, development education, peace education, environmental education and anti-racist education (Goldstein and Selby, 2000). At that time there was considerable jockeying for position and competition over resources as these initiatives strove to influence the mainstream curriculum in the UK (Hicks, 2010). What they nearly all lacked, however, was any understanding of the need for a futures perspective on such issues. How in the 1980s could this have been the case? Since the quest to answer this is both personal and professional I take myself as a representative researcher into this question.

## **2. Early days**

My interest in futures began when, as a young geography teacher, I watched a TV documentary entitled 'Due to lack of interest tomorrow has been cancelled'. This looked at predictions of ecological disaster made by scientists such as Paul Ehrlich, the nature and extent of the problems and what could be done to combat them. My immediate personal and professional response was that as far as I was concerned tomorrow could not be cancelled. My own engagement with futures in a general sense thus came out of that period of ecological awakening in the early 70s which saw the publication of classics such as *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), *Only One Earth* (Ward and Dubos, 1972) and *Blueprint for Survival* (The Ecologist, 1972).

In 1975 I moved from school into initial teacher education determined that these global matters should be part of any curriculum that I had responsibility for. It was then that I came across two crucial texts which related respectively to futures studies and futures education. The first was an Open University course called Man-Made Futures which had a unit on *Designing the Future* (Cross, Elliott and Roy, 1975). In particular I was taken by the section which explored optimistic, pessimistic and neutral visions of the future. This included an alternative futures matrix which took as its two axes optimistic-pessimistic forecasts and centralised-decentralised control in society - I had my first tools for engaging critically with the future. Soon after I discovered Toffler's *Learning for Tomorrow* (1974) which I still consider to be one of the classics of futures education.

The back cover states:

All education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future. Thus all education, whether so intended or not, is a preparation for the future. Unless we understand the future for which we are preparing, we may do tragic damage to those we teach. Unless we understand the powerful psychological role played by images of the future in motivating – or de-motivating – the learner, we cannot effectively overhaul our schools, colleges or universities, no matter what innovations we introduce (Toffler, 1974).

The course I subsequently taught in the mid-70s at Charlotte Mason College of Education in Ambleside was entitled 'Only One Earth' and had the following aims.

1. To give a global perspective, both in space and time, relating awareness of environmental problems to changing attitudes and values.
2. By using the key concepts of change and conflict to see environmental problems as symptoms of disequilibrium rather than causes.
3. To promote informed opinion about the Third World and recognition of the multiple links between rich and poor.
4. To be aware of the interrelatedness of the world system and the need to plan for alternative futures.

I was not alone, of course, in designing and teaching such courses as there was a surge of interest at that time amongst progressive educators in 'bringing the world into the classroom' through exploration of a range of global issues. These were all issues that in some way threatened the future of humanity on a greater or lesser scale, whether in relation to the environment, conflict, injustice, poverty or racism. The focus at that time and in the 80s was on developing materials and resources that would enable teachers and pupils to become more knowledgeable about and proactive in relation to global issues.

During the 1980s there were two national curriculum initiatives which included a significant futures element in their work. These were the World Studies 8-13 Project in Lancaster, which focused on primary and lower secondary schools, and the Centre for Global Education in York which focused more on secondary schools. Both initiatives took as their brief issues of global interdependence and how these could be explored in the classroom, both were concerned about the substance and process of education. The Centre for Global Education set out key knowledge objectives under the following headings: Person, Systems, Development, Environment, Peace and Conflict, Rights and Responsibilities, and Alternative Visions. The latter included reference to the following:

- a) *Futures*: students should be aware that there is a range of alternative futures open to humankind and they should know what contribution they can make to the realisation of their personally preferred futures.
- b) *Sustainable life-styles*: students should know about the arguments and practices concerning the limiting of economic growth and how their own life-styles can contribute to or negate a process of sustainable development for the planet (Pike and Selby, 1988).

The curriculum objectives for the World Studies 8-13 Project are shown in Figure 1 below. The essence of 'The world tomorrow' was summed up as:

Pupils should know how to investigate and reflect on a variety of possible futures: personal, local, national, and for the world as a whole. They should also be aware of ways in which they may act to influence the future (Fisher and Hicks, 1985).

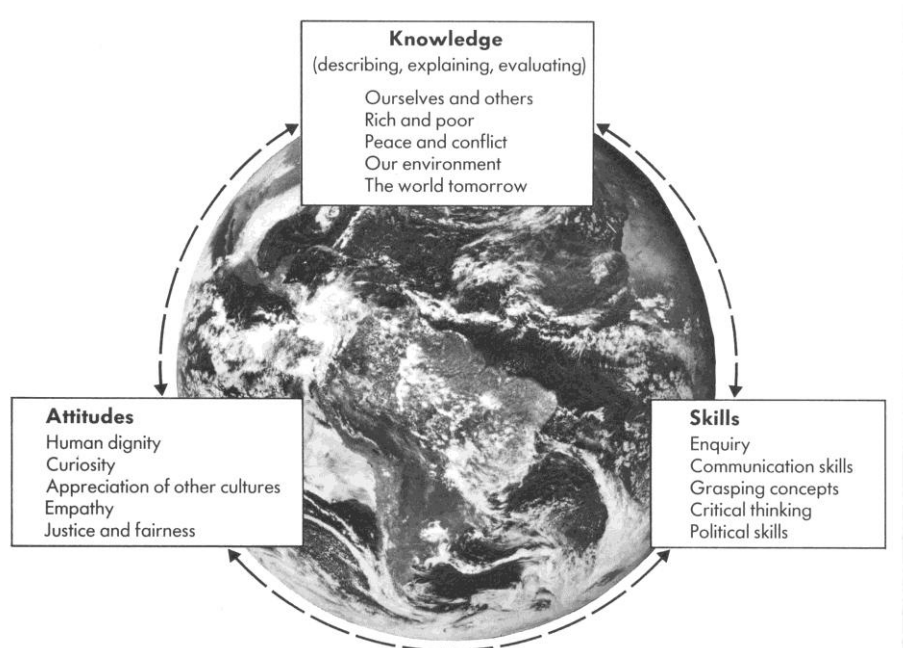


Figure 1 – **Objectives for World Studies**

Both of these initiatives acknowledged the influence of *Futures Unlimited: Teaching about worlds to come* (Fitch and Svengalis, 1979) in their thinking as UK literature on futures education was virtually non-existent at that time. This was the first time that futures ideas appeared in mainstream educational publications in the UK. The World Studies 8-13 Project developed teaching activities on possible, probable and preferable futures as well as on scenarios, children and the future, personal futures, images of the future, projects for a better world, alternative technology and action for change (Fisher and Hicks, 1985). The Centre for Global Education had teaching activities on timelines, space/time grids, futures wheels, development-consequence charts, cross-impact matrices and Delphi forecasting (Pike and Selby, 1988). During the 1980s these two projects had considerable influence nationally and worked with two-thirds of the Local Education Authorities in England and Wales.

Whilst global education argued that the curriculum should explore a range of global issues including the environment, development, conflict and injustice, development education at that time focused more narrowly on issues of poverty and injustice. Global education had an academic base then in teacher training whilst development education drew on the work of NGOs. When the original Centre for Global Education at York and the World Studies 8-13 Project both wound down during the early 90s it was development education that then claimed the high ground in promoting global learning in the UK. However, development education failed to build on the pioneering futures work that global educators had carried out. I suspect this was in part due to the unspoken rivalry that existed between some proponents of development education and those of global education. It was also a period when educators felt that the most important task was to focus on the immediate problems in the present. Many in development education saw thinking about the future as a luxury the poor could not afford.

### 3. The Global Futures Project

It was during the early 90s that the notion of sustainability entered into international discourse particularly as a result of the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Issues of development and environment, people and planet, were now seen as two sides of the same coin so environmental educators and development educators gradually began to acknowledge the others' existence. Each initially believed that they were the main contributors to 'education for sustainability'. However, things had changed since the 80s when the different fields were competing for attention since each began to perceive their interests more widely. Although they had begun from different starting points – environment and development – and in so doing had developed considerable expertise in their fields they now also shared more in common. Gradually the terminology began to change so that educators in the UK spoke more often of global citizenship and education for sustainability. But they still tended to see futures as a marginal or even unnecessary concern.

In 1989 the Global Futures Project was set up at the Institute of Education, London University, and later at Bath Spa University, since it seemed time for an initiative that specifically set out to promote futures education (Hicks, 1991). Whilst I had come across teachers who expressed some interest in futures matters the only educators I had met in the UK who really knew the futures field and saw the benefits of this to education were David Selby and Richard Slaughter. Setting out to explore the university library I hunted for works that combined an interest in both education and the future. Each time I found a possible text I was disappointed to find it had so little to say about futures. This lack had, of course, been previously recognised by Gough when had analysed educational documents for their conceptualisation of the future.

Even a cursory analysis of educational discourse reveals its temporal asymmetry. That is, by comparison to the future, the temporal categories of past and present receive more frequent and more explicit attention (Gough, 1988).

All educational writers, he argues, implicitly use some concept of the future and these can often be discerned even when not overtly described. They tend to be tacit inferences, token invocations or taken-for-granted assumptions. 'Tacit futures' are those which are implied but never clearly stated. The National Curriculum entitlement at that time to preparation for adult life would be one example. Tacit futures are virtually invisible to the untrained eye, says Gough. 'Token futures' are a bit more visible but tend to be rhetorical references only, examples from conference titles in the 90s would be 'Education for the future', 'Education for the twenty-first century' and '2020 vision'. 'Taken for granted' futures are the most visible of the three but tend to propose one particular view of the future rather one amongst other alternatives. One of the most common is that continued economic growth is the answer to all possible future problems.

Whenever I ran a professional development session for teachers someone would always come up and say 'Oh, so that's what the future bit is about. It's really important isn't it?' But it was difficult to find any evidence of futures thinking being promoted in schools. One reason was the lack of materials and so part of the task of the Global Futures Project was to provide appropriate resources for teacher such as *Educating for the Future: A practical*

*classroom guide* (Hicks, 1994) and *Visions of the Future: Why we need to teach for tomorrow* (Hicks and Holden, 1995). The first was published by the World Wide Fund for Nature UK, the NGO which funded the project. Whilst it sold well in terms of WWF's publications list it was not distributed to bookshops so there was relatively limited teacher awareness of the book. The second text had three strands which explored the central role images of the future play in social and cultural change, research on young people's hopes and fears for the future and the need for schools to educate for a future that would be very different from the present. It was the first book of its kind in the UK - but finished up being remaindered, perhaps because it seemed irrelevant to busy teachers and because it did not seem to be related to a particular curriculum area. By this time I was teaching the module at Bath Spa University on education for the future.

The notion of futures education that I work with is based around the key concepts shown in Table 1 below (Hicks, 2008).

Table 1 – **Key concepts in futures education**

*1. State of the world*

In the early twenty-first century the state of the world continues to give cause for concern. Issues to do with sustainability, wealth and poverty, peace and conflict, and human rights, all have a major impact both locally and globally. Students need to know about the causes of such problems, how they will affect their lives now and in the future, and the action needed to help resolve them.

*2. Managing change*

In periods of rapid social and technological change the past cannot provide an accurate guide to the future. Anticipation and adaptability, foresight and flexibility, innovation and intuition, become increasingly essential tools for survival. Students need to develop such skills in order to become more adaptable and pro-active towards change.

*3. Views of the future*

People's views of the future may vary greatly depending, for example, on age, gender, class and culture, as well as their attitudes to change, the environment and technology. Students need to be aware of how views of the future thus differ and the ways in which this affects people's priorities in the present.

*4. Alternative futures*

At any point in time a range of different futures is possible. It is useful to distinguish between probable futures, i.e. those which seem *likely* to come about, and preferable futures, i.e. those one feels *should* come about. Students need to explore a range of probable and preferable futures, from the personal and local to the global.

*5. Hopes and fears*

Hopes and fears for the future often influence decision-making in the present. Fears can lead to the avoidance of problems rather than their resolution. Clarifying hopes for the future can enhance motivation in the present and thus positive action for change. Students need to explore their own hopes and fears for the future and learn to work creatively with them.

### *6. Past/present/future*

Interdependence exists across both space and time. Past, present and future are inextricably connected. We are directly linked back in time by the oldest members of the community and forward nearly a century by those born today. Students need to explore these links and to gain a sense of both continuity and change as well as of responsibility for the future.

### *7. Visions for the future*

The first decade of a new century provides a valuable opportunity for reviewing the state of society. What needs to be left behind and what taken forward? In particular, what visions of a better future are needed to motivate active and responsible citizenship in the present? Students therefore need to develop their skills of envisioning and use of the creative imagination.

### *8. Future generations*

Economists, philosophers and international lawyers increasingly recognise the rights of future generations. It has been suggested that no generation should inherit less human and natural wealth than the one that preceded it. Students need to discuss the rights of future generations and what the responsibility to uphold these may involve.

### *9. Sustainable futures*

Current consumerist lifestyles on this planet are increasingly seen as unsustainable, often causing more damage than benefit. A sustainable society would prioritise concern for the environment, the poorest members of the community, and the needs of future generations. Students need to understand how this applies to their everyday lives and possible future employment.

By definition these key concepts are not the sole property of futures studies or futures education and in this may lie some of the difficulties encountered in trying to promote futures ideas to teachers. I have never argued for a specific body of knowledge in this respect although it would be most satisfying to find a good futures module in teacher education or at secondary school. Rather I have pragmatically taken the existing educational scene and tried to highlight the various topics, issues, themes and subjects which would benefit greatly from the inclusion of a futures perspective.

The outcomes of the Global Futures Project were gradually subsumed into my work at Bath Spa University where, as both a researcher and tutor, I was able to make wider national and international connections (Hicks, 2006, 2008; Hicks and Holden, 2007). But how did the UK futures education scene compare with other initiatives? The emergence of futures into the educational mainstream has been well mapped by Slaughter (2002) as well as some of the obstacles to its introduction into the curriculum.

What stands out very clearly is that forward-looking approaches appeal very strongly to the young, visionary educators, school principals, and schools take up and apply a wide range of futures tools with clear and documented success. But what has also stood out is that as soon as one passes beyond the middle level of any school system, futures approaches are of minor interest at best; they vanish like smoke on a windy day and are seen no more. Grassroots practitioners are

denied the long-term support they need; initiatives die and are forgotten. If you return a few years later it is as if they never existed; business-as-usual rules (Slaughter, 2002: 175).

The reasons Slaughter gives for these difficulties is that school systems are 'industrial era' organisations and thus hierarchically organised, inflexible and not centrally concerned with human and social needs. Gidley and Hampson (2005), in their reflection on the evolution of futures in school education, also note the limited progress that appears to have been made. Using four quadrant analysis from integral thinking they observe that most work in futures education has focused on the development of the individual. Equally important, but underdeveloped they note, is research into the psychological processes involved in teaching futures (but see Bateman in this issue), creation of cultural resources and artefacts on futures, lack of attention to social futures and analysis of education systems themselves. All of these missing elements are true of the UK futures education scene.

#### **4. Could sustainability make a difference?**

In the late 90s the UK Panel for Education for Sustainable Development (1998) published a report to the then Department of Education and Employment on 'Education for Sustainable Development in the Schools Sector'. Part of the rationale read:

Education for sustainable development is about the learning needed to maintain and improve our quality of life and the quality of life of generations to come...It is about preparing for the world in which we will live in the next century, and making sure that we are not found wanting (UK Panel for ESD, 1998).

Key concepts included interdependence, citizenship and stewardship, diversity, quality of life and the needs and rights of future generations. At last here was an educational document that made one sit up.

The elaboration of 'Future generations' read as follows:

*Values and dispositions*

Appreciation that the quality of life of future generations is endangered or enhanced by actions we take now.

*Skills and aptitudes*

Consider the future direction of society and the environment, and personal role and contribution to the future.

*Knowledge and understanding*

Conservation, efficiency and restraint in use of resources is necessary to ensure quality of life in the future.

The inclusion of 'future generations' as a key concept in ESD was a significant step forward for futures education. Unfortunately this was marred by later reference to distinguishing between 'probable and possible futures' which should have read 'probable and preferable futures'. Whilst the future now appeared to be taken more seriously in

educational documentation it was without any understanding or knowledge of futures studies or the futures field more widely. Dator argues that this is probably because:

you have never taken a course in futures studies, never met a person who taught it at the university level, teach or study on a campus where futures studies is not offered, and probably associate 'futures studies' (if the term means anything to you at all) with astrology and charlatans ... (Dator, 2002:1).

Over the last two decades my teaching, research and writing has focused on the role of education can play in helping to create more sustainable futures. With an eye on official initiatives to include citizenship in the school curriculum the WWF book was rewritten as *Citizenship for the Future* (Hicks, 2001a) and continued to sell well but with the same proviso as before - it was not available in bookshops. A decade of futures education research was also drawn together in *Lessons for the Future: The missing dimension in education* (Hicks, 2002). Although with a mainstream publisher the initial hardback was prohibitively expensive and a paperback edition not deemed worthwhile. When the latter was finally accomplished it was only through an on-line publisher (Hicks, 2006).

One of the struggles over the years was with educators who took futures education to refer only to the future *of* education as against the study of futures *in* education. Publications, conferences and websites which deal with the former tend to ask few critical questions about educational futures. Starting from an exploration of the drivers of change, generally free-market economics and technological gadgetry, they extrapolate into some unbelievable hi-tech version of today. Futures *in* education, by which I mean futures education, is about helping young people to think more critically and creatively about the future, whether personal, local or global. It therefore asks questions about the nature of the good society rather than presuming we are already in it.

An example of the former approach is the Beyond Current Horizons programme (2009). This was a partnership between the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) and Futurelab (2010) to explore the socio-technological developments likely to shape the future and the subsequent challenges this will pose for education. The evidence base was provided by experts in areas such as knowledge and communications, work and employment, identity and citizenship. The omission of environmental issues meant that no account was taken, for example, of the impact of climate change or peak oil on the future. The idea that young people themselves should be taught to think creatively and critically about the future was also dismissed. What could have been a significant educational initiative in futures thinking was premised on an uncritical notion of pedagogy in which education merely responds to extrapolated socio-technological demands.

An interesting insight into youth perceptions of the future in the UK comes from Forum for the Future and UCAS (responsible for university applications) who carried out a Future Leaders Survey asking applicants about their thoughts on the future. The most recent survey asked students what they felt the world would be like in 2032, when many of them could be leaders in their fields. Of the 25,000 respondents, 89% felt it likely/very likely that oil would be expensive and in short supply; 84% felt the effects of human-made climate change would be increasingly evident; 80% felt the frequency of natural disasters would have increased; and 75% that inequality between rich and poor countries would

have grown. The survey noted that 'The most materially affluent generation that has ever lived seems to be growing more aware of the environmental cost. As well as 86% supporting the idea that material consumption must reduce, more than two-thirds claim they would be happy without a car if public transport were good enough.' But differences were evident between different sub-groups identified in the survey - African, European and Far Eastern students were more positive about the world in 2032. They felt they were more ethically minded in their choice of university and the job they would be seeking as well as more likely to give to charity (Forum for the Future, 2007).

Things began to look up in another direction due to the interest that geographers have in change. Since geographical educators explore a variety of issues relating to social and environmental change it should not have been a surprise to find that they were beginning to include a futures element in their work. In preparing for the 2007 conference of the Geographical Association I discovered that geographical educators had begun to take up the futures challenge for themselves (Roberts, 2003; Morgan, 2006). Having begun my professional career as a geographer it was gratifying that this subject was the first in the UK to embrace the need for a futures perspective on local and global change (Hicks, 2007). Figure 2, for example, shows the response of 11-14 year olds to a question in an Ipsos MORI survey (2009) about whether geography should help them learn about how the world is currently changing and may change in the future. It will be interesting to see how geographers further develop futures thinking in their subject at both primary and secondary levels.

**Figure 2 – Learning about future change in geography**

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? It is important to learn/think about ...

	% Def. agree	% Tend to agree
How the world I live in might change in the future	59	35
Changes to the world around me and why they occur	56	37
Where the things I use, such as food, energy and water come from	52	40
Peoples, societies and cultures in other parts of the world	49	42

598 children, aged 11-14, in England  
Ipsos MORI (2009)

**5. But now it's getting dangerous**

Over the last few years other official curriculum developments have begun to recognise the importance of a futures perspective. *Cross-Curriculum Dimensions: A planning guide for schools* (QCA, 2009), identifies the global dimension and sustainable development as one of seven dimensions which are 'unifying areas of learning that span the curriculum and help young people make sense of the world.' Within this is a clear futures element.

## Table 2 - **The global dimension and sustainable development**

Learning about [the] global dimension and sustainable development can help young people to understand the needs and rights of present and future generations, and to consider the best ways to tackle climate change, inequality and poverty. It can also motivate learners to want to change things for the better – equipping them with the knowledge, skills and values that are crucial to envisaging and creating a sustainable future.

The global dimension and sustainable development engages pupils critically with the following three questions:

- What are the biggest challenges facing our planet and how might they alter its future?
- How can I enjoy a good quality of life, without transferring problems to people in other parts of the world?
- How can I become an active global citizen and help look after the planet for future generations?

Through this dimension young people learn to:

- understand long term global challenges including climate change, conflict and development and how these issues impact on and change society
- reflect on the consequences of their own actions and take account of the needs of present and future generations in the choices they make
- think imaginatively about what individuals can do to develop a more informed society and sustainable future

To achieve these outcomes learners need opportunities to:

- make links between personal, local, national and global issues and events
- investigate how environmental change arises, including the impact on human activity
- consider alternative future scenarios for the planet and the risks associated with not tackling sustainability
- use their own ideas to act and contribute to change

(QCA, 2009)

At this point in time the extent to which this futures element is being taken up more widely is not known. What is clear, however, is that the number of references to the future is increasing in some educational documents and moving away from the tacit and token. The most recent examples come from the work being done under the umbrella terms of education for sustainability, education for sustainable development or sustainable schools.

The DCSF has also initiated a sustainable schools strategy in which it would like (as against requiring) all schools to be models of sustainability by 2020. To this end some useful official publications have been made available, such as *Planning a Sustainable*

*School* (2008), which set out in some detail the steps needed for this to come about. A sustainable school is defined as follows:

A sustainable school prepares young people for a lifetime of sustainable living, through its teaching, fabric and its day-to-day practices. It is guided by a commitment to care:

- for oneself (our health and well-being)
- for each other (across cultures, distances and generations); and
- for the environment (both locally and globally).

The explanation for teachers of what is meant by the term sustainable development is also illuminating.

Sustainable development is a way of thinking about how we organise our lives and work – including our education system – so that we don't destroy our most precious resource, the planet.

From over-fishing to global warming, our way of life is placing an increased burden on the planet, which cannot be sustained. Things which were once taken for granted, such as a secure supply of energy or a stable climate, do not look so permanent now.

If our prosperity is tied to the health of the planet, then no one's well-being is secure unless the environment is protected. If we cannot prosper in a world that suffers from poverty, inequality, war and poor health, then our future is intimately bound up in the future of other people and places.

Sustainable development means inspiring people in all parts of the world to find solutions that improve the quality of life without storing up problems for the future, or impacting unfairly on other people's lives. It must be much more than recycling bottles or giving money to charity. It is about thinking and working in a profoundly different way (DCSF, 2008).

Whilst this statement has been written for busy teachers and glosses over many of the academic debates about the nature of sustainability it is nevertheless a good starting point. An unpacking of the debates and dilemmas can come later.

Some of the strongest future orientated statements so far come from a thinkpiece commissioned by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services called *Every Child's Future: Leading the way* (Porritt et al. 2009).

Should schools be in the business of reflecting back to young people the contemporary paradigm of progress – in terms of values, material aspirations, consumerist behaviours – that has dominated people's lives since the middle of the last century? Or should they be actively preparing them for the very different world that awaits them and will be asking very different things of them?

...The answer must be that we aspire to a time when all schools are microcosms of the world as it will need to be in 2025, that is:

- living exemplars of sustainable practice

- achieving self-sufficiency in energy, generating zero waste and zero emissions
- growing and cooking as much fresh food as possible
- bringing the natural world back into the school and its grounds
- promoting diversity, equality and social cohesion in the school environment
- learning how to create and inclusive local and global community
- learning and teaching, through the entire curriculum, that reflects this and prepares pupils for the challenges of the future (Porritt et al. 2009).

Of course such statements are not the same as good practice but they are an important finger pointing the way. The future is beginning to arrive in UK curriculum documentation and in some school classrooms – but, it could be said, only because the future itself looks threatening. Whilst the education for sustainability literature is not directly informed by futures education or futures studies it does grasp the seriousness of current unsustainable practices and their likely impact on the future. It also directly recognises the role that schools and education more widely have to play in this endeavour. There is thus a significant role for futures educators to play in informing and enriching work on issues of sustainability in the classroom (Hicks, 2012).

## **6. Overview and conclusions**

One has to say that the past timeline for futures education in the UK is a sketchy one involving a few positive and several negative influences. The main features can be summarised as follows.

- 1970s: a period of radical initiatives in education, although from the periphery rather than the centre, which brought global issues into the school curriculum. Material on futures studies and futures education limited and little known
- 1980s: the continued emergence of issue-based educations and the acceptance by global educators of the need for a futures dimension in the curriculum. Development of exemplar teaching materials by two national curriculum projects.
- 1990s: as two key global education initiatives wind down development education moves centre stage, but with little interest in a futures dimension. At the same time research on futures education carried out and teaching materials developed by Global Futures Project.
- 2000s: geographical educators accept the need for a futures dimension in the curriculum and are the first subject to do so in the UK. At the same time education for sustainability begins to acknowledge the need to educate for a future that will be very different from today.
- In each decade only a small number of educators have been involved in such innovations. It remains to be seen whether, in the face of climate change and peak oil, education for sustainability and other initiatives can learn from and utilise the insights of futures studies and futures education.

Whilst it is possible to talk about the evolution of futures education internationally (Gidley and Hampson, 2005) practice in the UK is still in a sense at a pre-emergent stage. It remains to be seen whether teachers and teacher educators will recognise the value of futures thinking to their own work. It remains to be seen whether potentially interested

parties, such as geography teachers and sustainability educators, will develop a critical futures strand within their own teaching and research.

At a time when creative and critical thinking about the future is urgently needed at all levels of education what can be learnt from the UK experience?

### *General*

- It could be said there is little educational interest in futures in the UK because, as Dator points out, there is little familiarity with the field of futures studies or futures more generally in society. Whilst this may be one reason for its neglect there are also other factors at play.
- Firstly, the future is something that most people tend to leave to others because the pressures of daily life feel more than enough to deal with. There seems little time to think about the future because the demands of the immediate present always edge it out.
- Secondly, the future may become of greater concern if it suddenly appears threatening or dangerous to one's family or community, but at the same time this may lead to denial as a way of avoiding feelings of responsibility.
- Thirdly, there are of course those who take a wider interest in futures but this is generally because they are either futurists or activists seeking to change society for the better. Whilst the first group is not widely known to the public the latter group are dismissed by many as merely protestors.

### *Education*

- Teachers, teacher trainers and educational publishers still find it difficult to grasp the nature of futures and futures thinking because they take it to be too abstract for the classroom and/or they are uncertain about who should take responsibility for such a dimension in the curriculum, i.e. the curriculum is still viewed largely in 'subject' terms
- What educational interest there is tends to be in the form of tacit or taken-for-granted futures since mainstream education sees the most important drivers of change as the knowledge economy and future developments in technology.
- However, progressive educators concerned with issues of inequality and injustice, global citizenship and education for sustainability, are more likely to ask questions about the directions in which contemporary society is heading and to propose alternatives for the future.

### *Ideology*

- Education in society always reflects the values of the dominant political ideology which in the West is that of neoliberalism (Apple, 2006). This advocates an unfettered technocentric and business-as-usual future based on free market economics, constant consumerism and narcissistic individualism. This ideology is inevitably reproduced in schools and underpins most western views of the future.
- However, other more radical ideologies have been influencing society from the margins in the form of global social movements. Amongst the most important are

those to do with poverty, gender, human rights, globalisation, the environment and climate change. Their proponents often try to live as if they were experiments from the preferred future that they wish to create.

Terms such as futures education are very useful at an international level because they signal a common interest and a shared expertise. At national and local levels, however, such terms can also become obstacles. In the UK it is more appropriate to talk about the need for students to develop a futures perspective because that is closer to the language of teachers and more immediately understandable to them. I think it unlikely that educators in the UK will ever get excited about futures education per se but one hopes they could become interested in how a more futures orientated perspective can enhance their existing work.

Many of the difficulties found in the UK are reflected in Bateman's (2009) work with Australian teachers and the degree of unease they expressed at being asked to think about the future. However, their initial lack of confidence in trying out futures ideas in the classroom was countered by the degree of interest, enthusiasm and knowledge shown by the students themselves when encountering such ideas. Whilst there are some materials available for UK teachers as well as research on children's thinking about the future what is still missing is the experience and professional development opportunities that are needed to give teachers and trainee teachers the confidence to engage critically and creatively with the future. That the future looks increasingly dangerous makes the need even greater. Given the hazards of climate change and peak oil education for sustainability may become the main arena for debating alternative futures. However, the repertoire of insights and skills provided by futures education is still needed in order to inform that debate.

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