

12 A Futures Perspective in Education

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INTRODUCTION

Why do teachers need to address future events and trends with their students? How can we help young people think more critically and creatively about the future? What resources are available to assist in teaching about such matters? This chapter sets out to answer questions such as these and, in particular, explores:

- The rationale for students acquiring a futures perspective in their life and work.
- The international field of futures studies and the conceptual framework this offers for educators.
- How futures related ideas and issues, from the personal to the global, can make a significant contribution to good classroom practice.

RATIONALE

It is as vital for young people to understand the temporal relationships between past, present and future as it is the spatial interrelationships between local, national and global (see Chapter 7). Yet, if all education is in some sense a preparation for the future, when, where and how are students given the opportunity to explore possible futures for themselves and society more widely? Whilst historians deal with time past and all teachers deal with the present, explicit exploration of the future is still generally missing from the curriculum (Hicks, 2006).

So why should it be important to help young people think critically and creatively about the future? Here are eight important reasons.

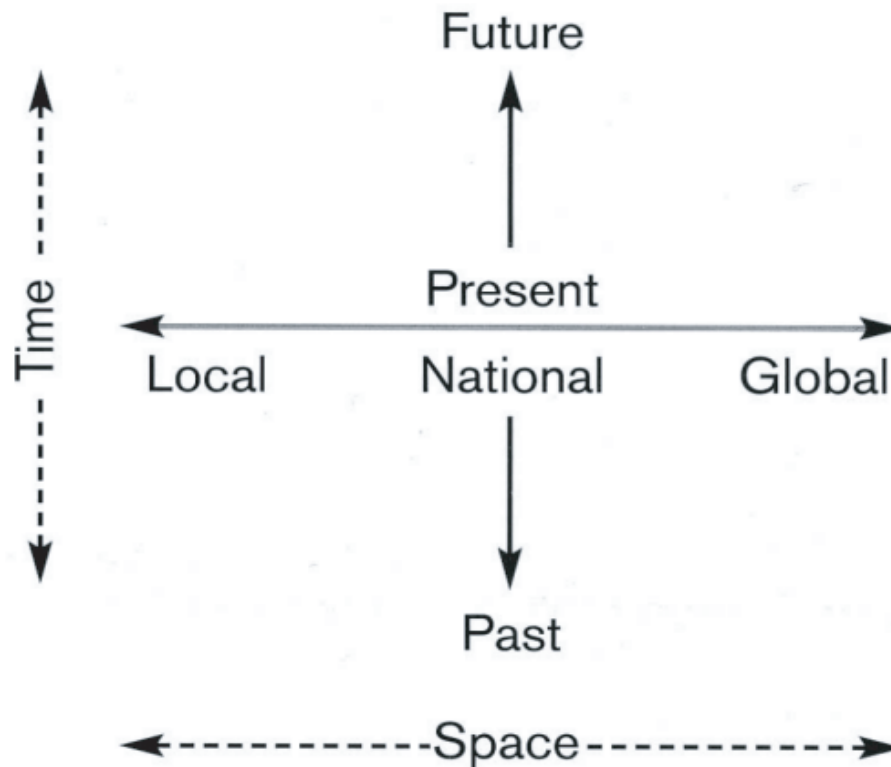


Figure 12.1 The spatial and temporal dimensions

Student motivation

Student expectation about the future can affect behaviour in the present, e.g. that something is, or is not, worth working for. Clear images of desired personal goals can help stimulate motivation and achievement.

Anticipating change

Anticipatory skills and flexibility of mind are important in times of rapid change. Such skills enable students to deal more effectively with uncertainty and to initiate, rather than merely respond to, change.

Critical thinking

In weighing up information, considering trends and imagining alternatives, students need to exercise reflective and critical thinking. This is often triggered by realising the contradictions between how the world is now and how one would like it to be.

Clarifying values

All images of the future are underpinned by differing value assumptions about human nature and society. In a democratic society students need to be able to begin to identify such value judgements before they can themselves make appropriate choices between alternatives.

Decision making

Becoming more aware of trends and events that are likely to influence one's future and investigating the possible consequences of one's actions on others in the future, lead to more thoughtful decision making in the present.

Creative imagination

One faculty that can contribute to, and which is particularly enhanced by, designing possible futures is the creative imagination. Both this *and* critical thinking are needed to envision a range of preferable futures from the personal to the global.

A better world

It is important in a democratic society that students develop their sense of vision particularly in relation to more just and sustainable futures. Such forward-looking thinking is an essential ingredient in both preserving and improving society.

Responsible citizenship

Critical participation in democratic life leads to the development of political skills and thus more active and responsible citizenship. Future generations are then more likely to benefit, rather than lose, from decisions made today.

These eight reasons are a reminder that, whilst the future is yet to come, it plays a vital part in all our lives. Although the future has not happened, we nevertheless think about it, plan for it and may also be concerned about it. In the same way that the today we inherit is yesterday's future, so we can play a part in shaping our future and the future of society – or leave it to others to do, in which case we inhabit someone else's vision of the future. How might one therefore begin to think more critically and creatively about the future?

FUTURES STUDIES

Although interest in the future is as old as humanity itself, serious investigation into different possible futures did not emerge until after the Second World War in the form of strategic planning, technological forecasting, economic analysis and the first major think tanks. Whilst much of this endeavour focused

on economic and military forecasting, there were other, largely European, initiatives that were more concerned with how such thinking could be used to help create better social futures.

Futures studies as a field of academic enquiry emerged in the 1960s and Inayatullah (1993) notes that it 'largely straddles two dominant modes of knowledge – the technical concerned with predicting the future and the humanist concerned with developing a good society' (p. 236). It is the latter strand that is of particular interest to educators. Key resources in the field are texts such as the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (Slaughter, 2005), *Foundations of Futures Studies* (Bell, 1997) and *Advancing Futures* (Dator, 2002).

Bell (1997) argues that the purpose of futures studies is to 'discover or invent, examine, evaluate and propose possible, probable and preferable futures'. He continues, '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)' (p. 73). Dator (2005) elaborates:

The future cannot be studied because the future does not exist. Futures studies does not ... pretend to study the future. It studies ideas about the future ... [which] often serve as the basis for actions in the present ... Different groups often have very different images of the future. Men's images may differ from women's. Western images may differ from non-Western, and so on.

One of the main tasks of futures studies is to identify and examine the major alternative futures which exist at any given time and place. The future cannot be predicted, but preferred futures can and should be envisioned, invented, implemented, continuously evaluated, revised, and re-envisioned. Thus, another major task of futures studies is to facilitate individuals and groups in formulating, implementing, and re-envisioning their preferred futures.

The field of futures studies is a rich and vital resource for teachers and educators more widely. The field provides various conceptual frameworks for thinking about and analysing futures as well as a variety of key concepts that can be adapted for use at all levels in the classroom.

FUTURES IN EDUCATION

Educators who are concerned about this neglected aspect of the curriculum talk about the need for a 'futures dimension' within the curriculum and the need for pupils to develop a 'futures perspective', i.e. the ability to think more critically and creatively about the future. The purpose of such a dimension in the curriculum is to help teachers and pupils to:

- develop a more future-orientated perspective on their lives and events in the wider world;
- identify and envision alternative futures that are more just and sustainable;
- exercise critical thinking skills and the creative imagination more effectively;
- participate in more thoughtful and informed decision making in the present;
- engage in active and responsible citizenship, both in the local, national and global community, and on behalf of present and future generations.

Toffler (1974) was one of the first writers to argue that the curriculum needed to be more future-orientated but progress has been slow in developing this dimension of the curriculum (Hicks, 2006). Nevertheless, valuable surveys of contemporary work in schools can be found, such as that by Gidley *et al.* (2004).

Young people and the future

So what is known about how young people themselves view the future? Understanding how children and young people develop such ideas is crucial because it is from this formative period that adult perceptions of the future emerge. This then affects what people feel is, and is not, worth working for in their own lives, their community or the wider world. Here are some of the things we know.

Early years

Whilst it might be thought that younger children have little concept of the future, early years specialist Page (2000), in her work with 4–5 year olds, found this not to be so. At this age time is viewed in terms of the child's own activities: in four sleeps rather than four days time. They do not understand that time exists independently of themselves, but there is a growing sense of progression beginning with notions of 'before' and 'after', moving on to 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow.' The 'future' means being older or things changing. There is a growing awareness of issues such as the environment, war, music, places and events in the news. Thinking about the future at this age involves imaginative fantasy, which gives a great sense of control and freedom over the future. Whilst this may seem unrealistic from an adult point of view, it is a vital developmental stage. Young children develop positive feelings about their place in the future and their role in its creation.

Primary level

Whilst different levels of ability are found in conceptualising the future at 7–8, this is when a more 'adult' understanding of time begins to appear. Research by Hicks and Holden (1995) and Holden (2007) shows the emergence of an ability to think ahead and the realisation that the future may be something to work towards as well as something to be concerned about. Reality and fantasy may still sit side by side and children sometimes fear that their own area may be subject to violence and conflict seen in other places on TV. There is a growing awareness of social and environmental issues and children are generally optimistic that the future will be better both for themselves and others.

Secondary level

As they grow older young people's concerns for the future tend to reflect current national and global issues and events although these may change over time (Hutchinson, 1996; Holden, 2007). In personal terms secondary students are often concerned about getting a good job, having a good life and doing well at school. In relation to the future of their local community, issues such as crime and violence, employment, and environmental threats are important concerns. In terms of the global future there is often concern about the environment, conflict and inequality. Pessimism appears to increase with age and many secondary students feel that they have not learnt enough about these issues at school.

Youth futures

A recent survey by UCAS and Forum for the Future (2007) invited university applicants in the UK to say what they felt about the future. It asked what they felt life would be like in 2031, in twenty-five years time, when respondents would be in their forties and at the height of their careers. Some of the main findings were:

- Respondents expect the world they'll be living in to be technologically advanced, but environmentally impoverished.
- Three-quarters believe lifestyles will need to change radically for civilisation to survive into the twenty-second century.
- Compared to their parents at the same age, 42% see themselves as more worried about the future.
- Most (69%) believe that individuals are responsible for the change required for civilisation to continue.
- Women are less optimistic about the future than men, feel more change is necessary and are more prepared to contribute to that change.

(UCAS/Forum for the Future, 2007)

What would one need to know and what skills would one need to have therefore in order to think more critically and creatively about the future? Here are nine key concepts which should underpin all subject areas of the curriculum and which highlight the key elements of futures thinking and a futures-orientated school.

Key concepts

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.

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 essential tools for survival. Students need to develop such skills in order to become more adaptable and proactive towards change.

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 differ and the ways in which these affect people's priorities in the present.

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 that 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

GOOD PRACTICE

Hutchinson (1996) has shown that school textbooks often fail to give any consideration to the future and that comics and computer games tend to offer violent and uncritical technological views of the future. It is not surprising, therefore, that young people often have stereotypical views of the future themselves. Most Hollywood movies that are about the future are apocalyptic and violent. What, therefore, does good practice, which helps young people interrogate the images offered them by society, look like? Here are some examples of activities that can be adapted for use with different age groups and different subject areas.

Trends shaping the future

A significant trend of any sort may well have an influence on the future. This might be to do with traffic increase, population growth or global warming. Any trend may increase over a period of time; it may decline or remain stable. Trends do not predict the future but they do indicate important social, economic, political and environmental shifts that are going on. One of the most useful resources for teachers on global trends is the annual Worldwatch Institute publication *Vital Signs: The Trends Which are Shaping our Future* (2007). This comprises a series of double-page spreads each of which crisply summarises an important trend together with succinct figures and graphs.

Some current trends include:

- The global economy continues to grow.
- The world fish harvest is stable but threatened.
- The impact of climate change is increasing.
- The use of wind and solar energy is increasing.
- Vehicle production continues to expand.
- HIV/AIDS is threatening development.
- The number of violent conflicts in the world is dropping.
- Obesity has reached epidemic proportions.

A number of interesting questions arise. Which of these trends will have a local impact in your community? Will that trend bring benefits or disbenefits locally? What will they be? Will some people benefit or suffer more than others? What action is being taken to support or diminish this trend locally, nationally and globally? Who or what provides the driving power behind this trend?

Probable futures

One of the most useful distinctions that futurists make is between probable and preferable futures. Probable futures are those that one thinks are most *likely* to come about. This can relate to your own personal future, e.g. I will be studying at university for the next three years; the local future, e.g. it's likely that traffic congestion will continue to get worse in my town; the global future, e.g. climate change means more floods are likely in the UK. It is important and useful to think about probable futures because these are the futures we are most likely to have to deal with. Civil servants, local government departments, town planners, business and industry are all concerned with probable futures, asking questions such as: How many hospital beds will we need in the near future? How can we meet the public demand for more organic foods? Do coastal sea defences need improving at this place? We are constantly planning

for probable futures. This does not mean that people necessarily agree on what the future will probably be like. It partly depends on what is happening in relation to particular local, national and global trends and how their possible impacts on the future (short, middle and long term) are interpreted.

Preferable futures

Preferable futures are an entirely different temporal category from probable futures. Preferable futures are those that one would most *wish* to come about. They arise out of our deepest hopes, aspirations and dreams, for ourselves, for others and the planet. They may also relate to political and spiritual beliefs about how one would like the world to be. This can relate to your own personal future, e.g. I would like to become a really good teacher; the local future, e.g. we really need to reduce the amount of traffic in the town centre in order to make this a better place for shoppers; the global future, e.g. what needs to be done in order to help create a more, rather than less, sustainable future. Politicians, non-governmental organisations, faith groups, town planners, business and industry are also concerned with preferable futures. They have a vision of what, for them, the future ought to be like and they work towards achieving this. People therefore do not necessarily agree on what a preferable future for society would look like, in the short, middle and long term, although they may well be clear about the preferred future for their own personal life.

In some research at a number of institutions (Hicks, 2006) undergraduates were asked to write about what the main features of their preferable future for society would be. None of them had been asked this question before. Table 12.1 shows the features they came up with in order of importance.

It is likely that the last four features would rank higher now as these issues have been very much in the news in the years since this research was carried out. What would your key features be?

Table 12.1 Students' preferred futures 2020

	%
Green – clean air and water, trees, wildlife, flowers	79
Convivial – cooperative, relaxed, happy, caring, laughter	74
Transport – no cars, no pollution, public transport, bikes	55
Peaceful – absence of violent conflict, security, global harmony	53
Equity – no poverty, fair shares for all, no hunger	38
Justice – equal rights of people and planet, no discrimination	36
Community – local, small, friendly, simpler, sense of community	36
Education – for all, ongoing for life, holistic, community	30
Energy – lower consumption, renewable and clean resources	26
Work – for all, satisfying, shared, shorter hours	23
Healthy – better health care, alternative, longer life	19
Food – organic farming, locally grown, balanced diet	15

N = 90

Timelines

An excellent way of exploring probable and preferable futures is through the use of timelines as shown in Figure 12.2.

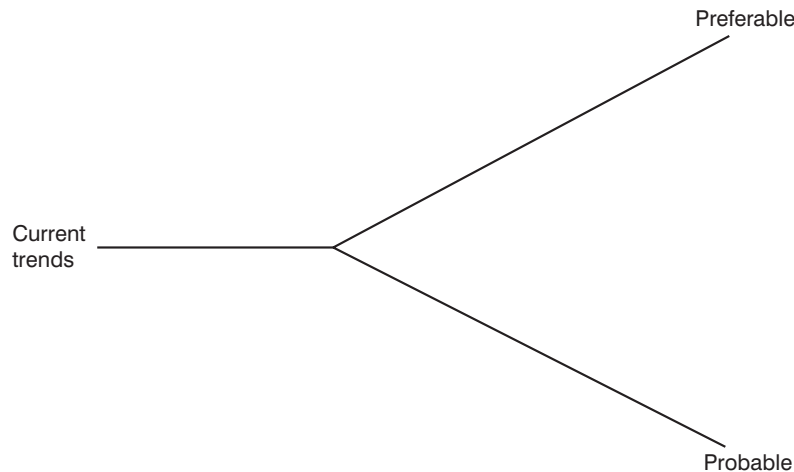


Figure 12.2 Using timelines

The simplest form of timeline is just a straight line with today's date at the left-hand side and some future date at the right-hand side. One then annotates the line with key words, dates, cartoons, icons to indicate the changes that seem appropriate, recorded in sequential order. You may, for example, have used timelines in history to record past events that are already known.

This timeline is more complex in that it is designed to record both probable and preferable futures, as well as recent and current trends that may shape those futures. Where the lines intersect is the present. What is mapped on the timeline and what its overall time frame is depends on the context in which it is used. For younger children a horizon of a year would be sufficient; for older pupils it could be a decade or longer. It also depends on the subject matter.

Firstly, one invites students to note down briefly important current trends that seem relevant to the topic in question. If this was 'climate change in the UK' it might include recent floods, extreme weather, IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports, melting glaciers. Secondly, and the order is important, students should complete the probable timeline. Given these recent events and current trends what is most likely to happen over the next, say, twenty years? Key words, icons, cartoons are used to illustrate it. Lastly, the preferable line is completed. Given the probable future what would students prefer to see happening? Timelines should then be displayed so everyone can see them. Do the probable futures have any common features? If so, what are they? Do the preferred futures have any common features? If so, what are they? With many topics there will be a gap between what students expect and what they hope for. This should then lead on to an exploration of who else shares elements of such a preferable future and is working to help bring this about.

It is important to note that an activity also highlights for the teacher what young people know (and don't know) about climate change or any other topic that has been chosen.

Vision and action

One of the purposes of this chapter has been to set out different ways in which one can begin to think more critically and creatively about the future. It is important to note, however, that people's images of the future will vary depending on their age, gender and culture as they all deeply affect our views of the world. What may appear 'normal' in Europe and North America may look quite different elsewhere and this applies as much to the future as the present (Sardar, 1999; Hammond, 1999). However, some futures are clearly preferable to others: most people would prefer a less rather than a more violent future. Similarly many people would prefer a more equitable and just future rather than an inequitable and unjust one. For many educators today the crucial question is: What does a more sustainable future look like? (See Chapter 11.) Past generations have always had their visions of a better future and many of the things we take for granted in the twenty-first century we only have because our ancestors struggled to create a better world for their children and grandchildren. We inherit both their successes and their failures.

Chapters 7 and 11 highlight the major issues facing world society today and these will continue to challenge us in different ways for much of the century. Thinking about the future should not, therefore, occur in a vacuum. It should, as Dator (2005) argues, help individuals and groups formulate and implement their preferred futures. This could relate to your own personal and professional life, organisations in the community, the school you may teach in, the work of a voluntary group, an activist organisation or an international network (Hicks, 2002). In particular we need to be able to envision clearly what a more sustainable future would look like. However, Meadows *et al.* (2005) point out that:

We should say immediately, for the sake of sceptics ... we do not believe vision makes anything happen. Vision without action is useless. But without action vision is directionless and feeble. Vision is absolutely necessary to guide and motivate. More than that, vision, when widely shared and firmly kept in sight, does bring into being new systems (p. 272).

Taking responsibility for oneself and others in the local and global community is a vital life skill that requires critical and creative thinking about both present and future. Geographers have been amongst the first to embrace the need for a futures dimension in the curriculum (Roberts, 2003; Morgan, 2006), which is equally important in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), in citizenship, religious education and other subjects too. Being able to take a more critical futures-orientated perspective on life allows us to learn from our mistakes, individually and as a species, so that future generations will benefit, rather than suffer, from our endeavours here in the present.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has set out the rationale for a more futures-orientated curriculum that will help students to think critically and creatively about the sort of society that they would like to live in. It highlights the importance and value of the international field of futures studies as a source of key concepts and insights that can fruitfully be adapted for classroom use. Examples have also been given of practical ideas that can be adapted for use with different age groups in the classroom.

SUMMARY POINTS

- All education requires more critical and creative thinking about the future.
- Up until recently this has been a neglected dimension of the curriculum.

- The international field of futures studies provides a vital source for ideas.
- A number of key concepts are identified to aid in curriculum planning.
- Understanding probable and preferable futures is a vital educational task.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 What argument would you use to persuade colleagues of the need for a futures perspective in the curriculum?
- 2 What would be the key features of your preferred future: a) for a school; and b) for your community?
- 3 Which of the resources listed below do you find most useful and why?

FURTHER READING

- Gidley, J. and Inayatullah, S. (eds) (2002) *Youth Futures: Comparative Research and Transformative Visions*, Westport, CT: Praeger. An authoritative source that looks at what young people feel about their future in different parts of the world.
- Hicks, D. (2001) *Citizenship for the Future: A Practical Classroom Guide*, Godalming: World Wide Fund for Nature UK. Designed for Key Stages 2 and 3 this book is full of lively activities to help children think more critically and creatively about the future.
- Hicks, D. (2006) *Lessons for the Future: The Missing Dimension in Education*, Victoria BC: Trafford Publications. A thought-provoking book about the need for a clearer futures perspective in education, drawing on innovative work with both teachers and students.
- Hicks, D. and Holden, C. (2007) Remembering the future: what do children think? *Environmental Education Research*, 13(4): 501–12. A useful overview and review of the research on children's views of the future.
- Pilot GCSE 'Geography 21'. Online. Available <http://www.geography.org.uk/projects/pilotgcse>. An excellent example of how one subject area, geography, has embraced the need for a futures perspective in the curriculum.

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