

## 6. FUTURES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

### ➤ LECTURE NOTES

#### **Younger children**

- Children and the wider world
- Insights from the early years

#### **Age differences**

- 7-8 years: the beginning of adult understanding
- 10-11 years: developing more mature thinking

#### **Classroom activities**

- Resources encouraging futures thinking
- Children's views of the future

### ➤ KEY READING

- Hicks, D. & Holden, C. (2007) Remembering the future: what do children think? ([Downloads](#))

### ➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What would good practice in futures education look like in the classroom?
- How could this be related to different areas of the curriculum?

### ➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Critical awareness of good classroom practice
- Understanding how age affects perceptions of the future

## LECTURE NOTES

### 1. YOUNGER CHILDREN

#### Children and the wider world

Early years educators are very aware that at quite a young age children are beginning to make sense of the world around them and the changes that they see occurring. However, there are still those who consider very young children as either oblivious to the 'world' or needing to be protected from it. Are local-global issues and futures thinking therefore something best left to the secondary stage of education?

Susan Fountain (1990) observed that, in their own way, young children are very aware of issues in the home and classroom which relate to the wider world that they are growing up in. Thus she observed that nursery and infant children regularly: i) call each other names (prejudice); ii) arbitrarily exclude others from their play (discrimination); iii) argue over materials (resource distribution); iv) protest that rules are not fair (human rights); v) quarrel and fight (peace and conflict); vi) waste consumable materials (environmental awareness); vii) find that more can be accomplished by working together (interdependence).

Younger children are thus already experiencing and learning about issues to do with prejudice, discrimination, resource distribution, human rights, peace and conflict, environment and interdependence. They can either do this without adult support and guidance or, more sensibly, supported by parents and teachers who can help them develop the appropriate intellectual and emotional skills needed to negotiate such matters.

#### Insights from the early years

One of the best sources on early years work and futures is Jane Page's *Reframing the Early Childhood Curriculum: Educational imperatives for the future* (2000). In this she explores the very different attitude towards the future, time and change, that pre-school children have and argues that early childhood specialists have an important role to play in supporting children's longer term needs.

In her research Page interviewed four-and five-year old children in order to find out what the future meant to them. They were then asked to draw a picture of what they felt the world might be like when they were adults. What she found was that for this age group

thinking about the future often involves imaginative fantasy where past and future often get mixed together. I find this interesting because sometimes teachers say that when asked about the future young children will talk about the past, i.e. demonstrating that they can't yet tell the difference between past and future. However, this is to oversimplify child development at this age. Both past and future are part of the temporal dimension. What the four- and five-year olds are demonstrating is an awareness that some events are 'not now', i.e. they are elsewhere in time. This is the vital first step which leads on to distinguishing between past time and future time.

Whilst children's references to past and future in their imaginative play may seem idiosyncratic and unrealistic from an adult viewpoint, Page points out, it represents an important developmental stage in which they can experience a sense of control and freedom over the future. The future can literally be anything one wants it to be in the world of imaginative fantasy. Children at this age are more positive about the future than older children since they are gaining positive feelings about their place in the future and their role in its creation.

Children are therefore learning to think about the future at an early age. This also occurs through the exploration of key questions and ideas such as: i) What happens next? (sequencing); ii) What might happen if? (consequences); iii) When? (locating things in time); iv) Before and after; v) When you wake up; vi) Tomorrow; vii) At the weekend; viii) Next weekend; ix) Next birthday.

## **Aims of futures orientated early years work**

As a result of the above Page (2000) suggests a number of vital curriculum aims for futures work with this age group. These include: i) for children to engage with the concept of the future through fantasy and role-play; ii) for children to explore the concepts of continuity and change; iii) for children to imagine preferred and desired states; iv) for children to develop a sense of agency; v) for children to appreciate other points of view, to cooperate and resolve conflicts peacefully. The importance of Jane Page's work lies in the fact that most futures researchers have overlooked the nature of child development in the early years and thus mistakenly assumed that notions of the future do not emerge until children are older.

## **2. AGE DIFFERENCES**

### **7-8 year olds**

Considerably more research has been carried out on how older children at primary school may feel about the future. The summary given here is based on the work of Hicks and Holden (1995) and Holden (2007) which, in particular, focused on 7-8 and 10-11 year olds in the UK. Some of the key findings relating to 7-8 year olds are as follows.

In terms of their *personal* future children were mainly concerned about their health and the health of those in their family, that they would grow up to have a good life and with work that they enjoyed doing. In terms of the *global* future they were particularly concerned about natural and man-made disasters, pollution and war.

- It was found that an initial manifestation of 'adult' understanding of time begins around 8 years old but that different levels of ability in conceptualising the future still occur at this age. There is an emerging ability to think ahead and the realisation that the future may be something to work towards as well as perhaps something to be concerned about.
- Reality and fantasy still often sit side by side at this age and children may fear that they will be subject to the conflicts and violence in other parts of the world that they witness 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. Some, however, think that problems such as pollution and poverty may get worse globally. Boys often fear global disasters such as the world exploding or aliens landing.

## **10-11 year olds**

- In the last years of primary schooling UK children are more rooted in the impending adult world and their hopes and concerns are closer to those of secondary students. Their *personal* hopes and fears relate to employment, income, health and violence. They are now more aware of racism, bullying, vandalism and crime. In terms of the *global* future children have become more pessimistic with age and are concerned about the environment, poverty, war and relationships between countries.

Chantelle wrote:

In the year 2020 I would like there to be  
Trees, fields and grass  
And houses for the poor and lonely  
For people to have jobs  
No more wars and fighting  
I would like to live in a house with a big garden

And children who are sensible  
With thoughts for the future  
And happy minds

To summarise, by the end of primary school children [in the UK] are increasingly aware of social, environmental and economic issues. They are concerned about their own future and that of their local community and are fairly optimistic that things will improve in the future. They are less optimistic about the global future improving but hope for a future more based on environmental awareness.

### **3. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

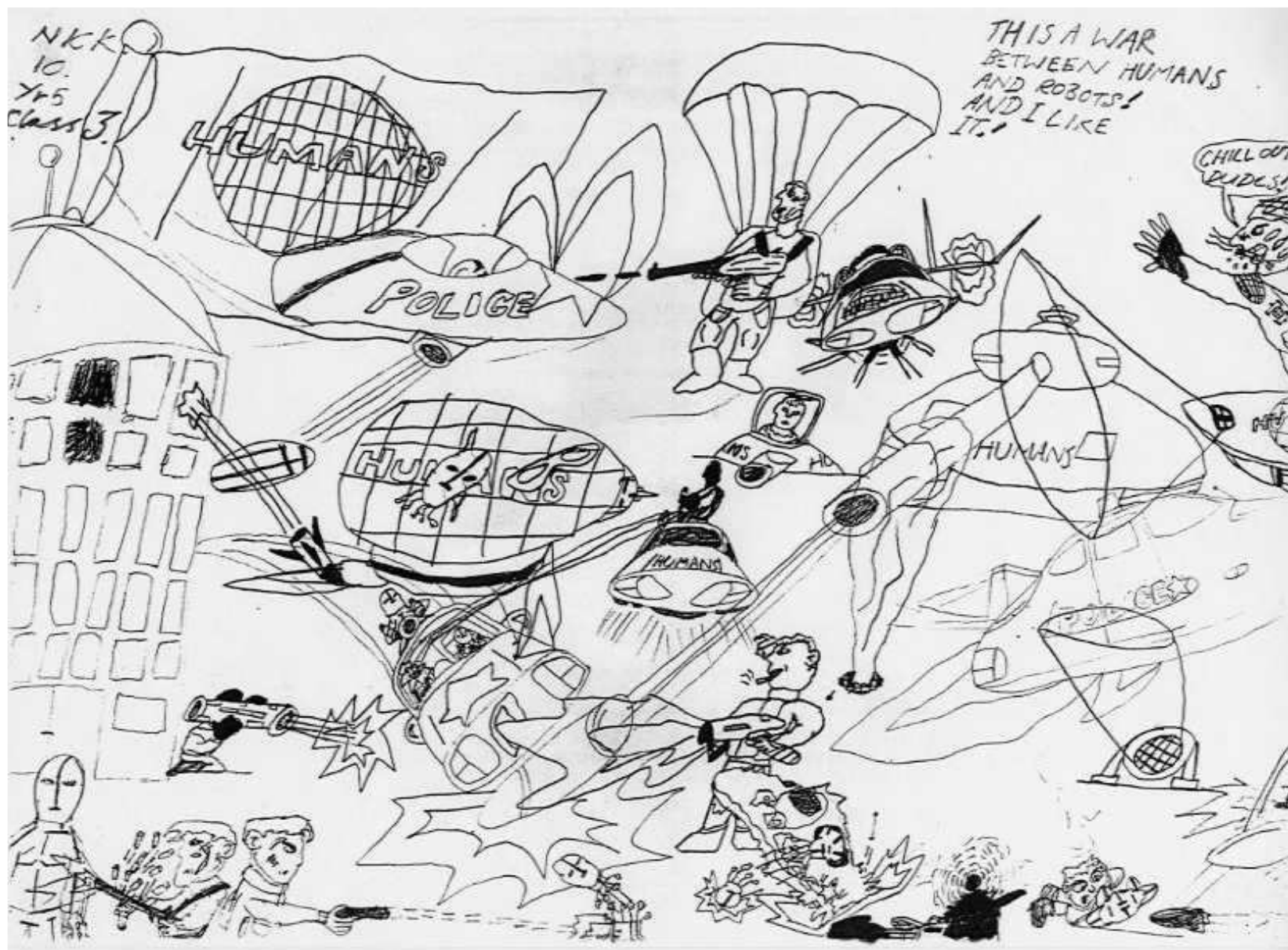
#### **Resources to consult**

There are a small but growing number of resources that can be used in the primary classroom to help promote more critical and creative thinking about the future. These include Fountain's *Education for Development* (1995), Pike and Selby's *In the Global Classroom* (Vol. 1, 1999), *Citizenship for the Future* (Hicks, 2001) and *Sustainable Schools, Sustainable Futures* (Hicks, 2012). Three particular classroom activities suitable for primary pupils are outlined below.

#### **Children's views of the future**

It is often useful to begin by finding out what images students have of the future before one begins any other futures work. Even with primary pupils this should not begin with an explanation of what 'the future' means because this will influence what they draw. The brief should be 'I'd like you to draw a picture of what you think of when I say the word 'future'. Whatever comes to mind is fine. Draw that.' Encourage children not to copy what others are doing. Afterwards one can mount a display and begin to get a sense of common features and concerns.

Two examples are given here, the first from a 10 year old boy and the second from an 8 year old girl. They were taken as representative of a wider set of class images from a UK primary school. What is striking about both is the gender stereotyping that occurs.





The boy's picture emphasises excitement, technology, space, warfare and violence in the future. It is a young boy's stereotype of the future but nonetheless valuable. The girl's picture, by contrast, is peaceful, calm, green, convivial and caring, also a stereotyped view of the future. What is interesting about such responses to the word 'future' is the very fact that they come: i) as stereotypes and ii) mediated through gender differences. A wide range of follow-up work is possible including the following.

Classroom discussion on where such images come from. Influences are likely to be comics, computer games, stories and the media. Also discussion on why the two pictures should be so different. What *sort* of image do they each represent? Gender is a key variable in all elements of education so it should be no surprise this emerges in views of the future.

What needs questioning is the limiting nature of these images for both boys and girls. In a nutshell they show the males going off to conquer the 'enemy' and the women staying at home to care for others and the environment. In what other more liberating roles can both boys and girls see themselves in the future?

In his research with secondary students, including an examination of teaching materials used in school, Hutchinson (1996) spoke of 'foreclosure' on the future. By this he meant that the images of the future available to young people in western society today are extremely limited and limiting in both scope and content.

Whilst the examples of research and classroom activity used in this Session are taken from a European context the principles are applicable in and transferable to any cultural context. What images of the future do young people have? What are the sources of such images? How do they vary with age and gender? How might such images influence the notion of their future selves? As educators what images might one want to promote and which to interrogate? If young people are unable to envision futures which are more just, peaceable and sustainable they are unlikely to be able to help bring them about.

## REFERENCES & KEY READING (\*)

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about promoting futures thinking in the classroom. After checking 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down your response to the following questions:

1. What do you think good practice in futures education looks like in the classroom?
2. How can this be related to different areas of the curriculum?

After discussing each question (it is useful to agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?