



Dwelling on the future

A think piece from the EMLC and NCSL Futures project

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This think piece reflects a conversation between Lindsey William, Chief Executive and Mark Blighton, Financial Director, Amber Valley Housing and Gordon McBurnie, Headteacher, Heath Fields Primary School, Derbyshire, as part of the EMLC and National College for School Leadership (NCSL) Futures project. Also participating were Peter Smith, Senior Consultant, EMLC and Vanessa Ripley, Heath Fields Primary School.

The views expressed are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of either organisation.

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Introduction

The Futures project

The Futures project is a joint venture between EMLC and NCSL. A key outcome of the project has been the generation of a series of think pieces designed to support the development of futures thinking. This first series has been developed by headteachers in dialogue with senior business leaders. In the future, we propose to undertake similar work with moral, political, community and cultural leaders.

The aims of the project are:

- to stimulate debate
- to give local leaders a voice in shaping education for the future
- to provide materials and processes to help schools think about and plan for the challenges of the future

The work of the project builds on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) scenarios for the future of schooling and FutureSight, a major NCSL initiative to support futures thinking in schools.

Our next steps are to develop tools to help stimulate debate in our school communities, supported by seminars and online materials. For more information please visit www.ncsl.org.uk

The think piece format

To give consistency to diverse views, the think pieces in this series use the same format which is made up of six component parts.

Key components

1. **Viewpoint:** who is talking
2. **Mapping the territory:** ideas and areas of debate
3. **Over the horizon:** a business leader's perspective
4. **A view from the bridge:** what the world of 2030 might look like
5. **Futures learning:** a school leader's perspective
6. **Pause for thought:** questions to challenge thinking

Key ideas for futures thinking

As educational leaders, we are firmly in the futures business. Our role, after all, is to prepare young people with the skills and personal qualities to live long, happy and productive lives. Lifelong learning, changing employment patterns, a world where our children are prepared for jobs yet to be invented using technology yet to be dreamt of – are all ideas we use to shape planning. Our national headteacher standards even talk about 'shaping the future'.

Futures thinking gives us a shared language and tools to step outside the present. To think about the future, we first have to try to understand the trends influencing the present. These are powerful and pervasive areas of change, gathering momentum like a stone rolling down a hill. Work by the OECD in the late nineties identified five areas:

1. **The nature of childhood and extended adolescence**
 - the protection and nurturing of childhood continues for far longer
2. **The knowledge economy**
 - instant global communication
 - shift to knowledge working in post-industrial Europe
 - new technologies
3. **Inequality and exclusion**
 - the proportion of older people in Europe rises and they become richer
 - young people are poorer- with this is the potential for alienation
4. **Changing family and community life**
 - nuclear and extended families are less prevalent
5. **Some broader developments**
 - wide and increasing disparity in global income brings higher levels of economic migration

Work undertaken in England by NCSL and others in 2002, applied a reality check to these trends. There was debate about their impact on schools across the country, but universal agreement that they represented powerful forces shaping the work of schools. At the time, headteachers involved in NCSL's Leading Practice work identified a shift in the location of values from religion and family to media and peer group. Further work has identified, for young people, important issues around the complex nature of identity rooted in location, ethnicity and religious belief and at its most extreme, radicalisation.

From present to future – tracking the trends

These irresistible trends impact on our work in schools each and every day. They span moral, political, social and economic analysis. Out of them emerge key questions, moral imperatives and contradictions. ICT brings instant communication but the potential for physical isolation. Where families do less to nurture, schools are challenged to place themselves at the heart of their community as a force for support, social cohesion and intergenerational learning. Children live uneasily in a highly protected UK society which also, paradoxically, condones their early sexualisation.

Challenges to shifting patterns of employment, continuing skill development and the need for robust interpersonal skills mean that schools have to be adept at helping children to negotiate relationships and difference. Economically and politically, there is a push for better functional skills and higher level qualifications to enable the UK to compete in the global market. Finally, there are pressures on schools to enable children to make more discerning choices about learning to reflect the flexibility of new technologies and in common with best commercial practice, to develop a personalised offer for every child. At its most extreme, this could involve the end of schools as we know them.

Identifying new trends

From a 21st century perspective, it's possible to identify new trends related to sustainability, values and personalisation. As a starter, it may be useful to debate and reshape these and to consider the following questions.

Pause for thought...?

- **Are these genuine trends, with the power to shape everything we do, or just contemporary issues and concerns?**
- **Are there other trends we need to describe?**
- **What the implications for how we shape education?**

- **Sustainability and environment:** The start of the 21st century has brought raised awareness that natural resources are limited. There is also increasing understanding of the impact of fossil fuels on global warming. From initial scepticism, there is now widespread, but not universal, scientific and political acceptance of climate change. This is a recent but powerful trend. Its potential impact spreads to every aspect of education and lifestyle. There is a growing awareness that new technologies need to be found and increasing political tensions as leaders strive to balance economic needs driven by demands for energy and growth with a wider responsibility to conserve and build for the future.
- **Identity and values:** Global mobility has also brought tensions over identity and related shifts in patterns of belief. These changes have the potential for long-term impact on what we value and how we live our lives. In northern Europe and in particular, Britain, the influence and role of the church has diminished. Personal values, once shaped by religion and family, are now increasingly formed by media and peer group. By contrast, in other parts of the world, religion continues to exert a powerful influence. For some citizens of multicultural Europe, our race, where we live and what we believe create tensions over identity. Where this is associated with other feelings of injustice and deprivation, it leads to alienation and radicalisation.
- **Personalisation:** A final trend increasingly recognises and focuses production on the uniqueness of the individual. This aspiration emerges from the capacity of new technologies in a competitive business environment both in products and services. This is a trend which is now increasingly impacting on education, with the potential for more flexible provision or de-schooling.

Futures thinking in action

These ideas for futures thinking are explored in the series of think pieces produced by the Futures project. Out of such analysis, future thinkers identify possible, probable and preferred futures. They also develop scenarios. These are powerful tools. They allow us to walk around in the future, experience how it feels to be a student, a teacher or facilitator of learning or a parent, in such a world. These spaces do not so much allow us to predict the future as to take the time to pause and think a little. At best, such experiences empower us to identify our preferred future and work together to make it a reality at school, regional or national level.

Chris Williams, 2007

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Lindsey William and Mark Blighton in conversation with Gordon McBurnie

Viewpoint

Amber Valley Housing Limited is a charity committed to enhancing the potential of communities to create safer, better places to live. With around 200 employees, it owns and manages 5,500 homes in Derbyshire and was established in response to council tenants in Amber Valley voting in favour of stock transfer.

Whilst the area contains bustling market towns and rural villages, the district also contains areas of significant deprivation and social exclusion, and communities with a declining agricultural sector. Increases in house prices and sales of properties through the 'Right to Buy' have led to high demand for affordable housing.

Mapping the territory

The number and complexity of trends that affect the company are as diverse as the population it houses. The company does, though, have a clear understanding of immediate developments over the next five years.

Changing trends in the environment, technology and increasing expectations in lifestyle are integrated into the company's corporate plan, this together with strategic business planning, maps a future the company hopes will improve the communities they manage. This dialogue explores these trends and how they may impact on a company that has to respond to the changing views of the way that we want to live our lives.

The landscape in which the company works can change quickly and any of the trends or issues above can dominate the geopolitical landscape at any given time. In looking at the future, this think piece sets out a possible future way of living and looks at how an education system will have to adapt to accommodate these changes.

Over the horizon – a business leader's perspective

To plan for the future term our company has a corporate plan and the Board of Directors regularly meet to discuss future initiatives and strategies. We find that we are restricted to a five year horizon as that is the longevity of most government policies. Financially the company has a 30 year plan, as that is the term of our mortgage of over £90 million.

Amber Valley Housing moves with demographics. Population trends for which we must cater include an increasing proportion of older population and more accommodation for the young. Currently the trend is for the elderly to be housed in more purpose-built accommodation. This is leading to a polarisation in society and a need for care provision to be integrated into housing. Some young people, also may need a degree of care provision. Within these demographics is the potential impact of immigration. Amber Valley is not heavily affected at present, but we must be prepared for the influx of people from another country or culture, as seen in some towns where there are population increases of, for example, Polish or Chinese workers.

A rise in expectations hasn't changed our basic housing provision, but in creating better places to live we are striving to kit-out our houses as well as we can with the improvement of housing services a continuing priority. Where 30 years ago council housing may have had an outside toilet, today the expectations are for an extra room and a variety of white goods (fridges and washing machines etc). An interesting recent trend is for divorced and separated fathers asking for an extra room for when their children are visiting. Of course we would like to provide all these, but we are restricted by budget and have to prioritise the use of our resources.

Technology is at the forefront in trends that are affecting how we work. With the use of mobile technology our workers have become more independent. The potential for this is huge. With basic logistics software we will be able to co-ordinate our service engineers more effectively. At the moment, we do not have the customer knowledge that Tesco's or Sainsbury's might have, but in the future we will be able to move more quickly and efficiently to cater for needs and even predict wants using sophisticated modelling software.

Environmental issues are also coming to the fore. As yet they have not made a huge impact on how we work. For example, I don't know the company's carbon footprint, but I can see these issues having greater relevance for our company in the very near future.

A view from the bridge

What will our company look like and be doing in 2030? Business competition and technology will drive the company to offer more customer choice and provision in the future. Our company will adapt to changes in the way we live and the environment and societies we live in to become a flexible provider moving quickly to fulfil our customers' needs.

Already Amber Valley Housing is working with a number of housing associations and will soon be joining up with another to form a larger company. As with many businesses our company is in competition with others and must adapt to survive and merge with others to improve unit costs and share infrastructure. Our company may reach out into other related services as other housing associations have done to manage prisons, offices and other accommodation. Amber Valley works with other agencies and has been involved in individual case conferences with social and medical services. I imagine this may develop in the future where we may offer a wider provision of care and well-being services than we do at present.

Technology will allow us to react quickly to customer needs with improved communication with customers and employees. We will be able to profile individual customers and predict their needs perhaps without the requirement for intervention at all. With improved technology our customers' needs will change, as will the way they live their lives. At the moment our tenants are generally non-professional and levels of home-working and tele-commuting are low. However, if we are to become a knowledge based community, more home working facilities may be required.

The company will have to develop its environmental strategy with the calculation of our carbon footprint. We will have to change how we work due to an awareness of the impact we are having on the environment. Our company will also have to adapt to the impact of global warming with the possible migration of people from lower lying countries or those affected by drought.

What will our neighbourhoods be like? How will we be living? Currently society is polarising and the economic divide is widening. The perfect model of a good safe community is Bourneville created by Cadbury in the 19th century – a model we strive for in the 21st century. This represents an integrated community with wrap-around services. Perhaps we will revert to such communities where the old and the young will live together and commercial outlets and support services are provided at a community level. The environmental agenda will have developed – for example road charging will be in place and I will have my own carbon footprint – I won't be able to afford to commute the 40 miles to work. Communities based on more modest outcomes may have a centralised working area with 'hot' computers which may be used by the employees of any company housed in a centralised community centre.

Perhaps our whole way of living will require another level of flexibility where we may have to provide housing for people who live and work here for six months and then six months in Spain. This may occur for any number of reasons including working patterns, a different work-life balance or trends in demographics influenced by migration. This leads us to the area of migration which will undoubtedly lead to a change in demographics. Our company will have to adapt to survive this myriad of changing influences. The structure of the company, what we ask of our employees, the way we work and perhaps the purpose of the company itself may change. Currently we aim to enhance the potential of communities to create safer, better places to live – this may be developed to provide those wider services that our customers require which will put our company in a better position when in competition with other similar providers.

The government's policy on social housing is to provide a stepping stone so that people on less income can step up into the private renting market or home ownership. Going against this policy is the fact that if tenants pay their rent on time then they will remain within our housing provision. To develop and support this policy our company may need to widen to include provisions for people to improve themselves including education. Education will have to provide the skills that our employees require; these will include skills in new communication technologies and an understanding of foreign languages and cultures. Education providers may change and we may become part of that system.

Futures learning – a school leader's perspective

What, how, where and when we learn will change dramatically. What we are learning is already changing. A more skills-based curriculum will quickly develop over the next few years creating, hopefully, a more confident learner who can communicate and be a citizen in the 21st century global community. The skills and attributes the future citizen will need are becoming clear: a proactive nature with the ability to change; the ability to be a life-long learner who can develop as society develops; skills in communication using technology to solve problems; the ability to synergise in groups, creating answers to questions that we haven't even thought of yet. Living in the 21st century will require global knowledge or a set of communication rules that will overcome any cultural or language barriers. We will have to create a new language of behaviours that is acceptable to all. This will only be made possible through a true global understanding.

Global warming and its impact on the environment will require an even greater general understanding of the world than we have now. This in turn will create a whole new industry of environmental sciences and a complementary industry that will provide a reaction to these changes in the form of greener energy and transport and carbon trading. This new sector will require a workforce educated in these areas with the populace having a deep understanding of the importance of such issues.

The curriculum will change dramatically and the different parts will diverge so that students will be able to balance different issues and ideas, and use them to design solutions to problems that reflect the complexities of a future society and environment. Recent research shows that the brains of younger people – now known as IT natives – can manage different streams of information, with the ability to scan pages on the internet while listening to their MP3 player, playing on their Nintendo and texting their friends. Evidence illustrates that children can do this and society will create a market for it. Our knowledge of how the brain works may have developed so far that we have the ability to upload knowledge and skills directly to our brains. Already scientists are attaching our neurological connectors to instruments so this is not completely unfeasible.

Above all, education will have to provide each citizen with a sense of self. With the polarisation and secularisation of society, the break up of community and changes in family changing the paradigm of what life will look like; schools will have to provide an understanding of the self, developing the idea self-fulfilment and people's place in the world. With mental illness on the increase, this is a science that is fast developing, focusing on connecting pupils with their communities and with individuals in the form of mentors, creating a feeling of citizenship and an understanding of their own emotional intelligence.

A more conservative perspective may ask us what 'schooling' will look like. Where and when we learn will become more flexible with institutions adapting to the polarised communities within which they find themselves. This may take the form of education centres in smaller rural or sub-urban communities. In these, children will learn using technology managed by learning facilitators. In more urban areas, these centres will be larger and connected to a vast number of supporting services providing a one-stop shop for citizens in that community. These perhaps will be run by public/private companies, so we might find ourselves going to a Tesco Community Centre within

which we would find our learning centre. Looking at these larger FTSE companies, there is evidence of a core diversifying their interests and streams of income. For example, Tesco's now sells insurance, banking, mobile phones and even housing. So why not health and education?

Government policy, support and financing will have to be more flexible as what we call 'education' will diversify with an increase in parents unhappy with state schooling and teaching their children at home. This will become more and more economically viable for many families as the quality of life, which includes the education of their children, becomes increasingly important, while their economic position improves as a result of the economic divide. This flexibility will be required in both when and where learning takes place. It will take many forms in the gap between home-learning and learning in large urban organisations.

This diversification will also come about after the education sector finally realises that not only do children have different learning styles, but also their own preferred learning environment; this may take the form of smaller groups, individual learning in a home environment or education in preferred contexts. After all, when again will adults be put in a cramped room with large numbers of people for extended periods for weeks at a time? To many it sounds like torture.

Pause for thought...?

- **In the case of rapid global warming, the submerging of low lying countries and drought prevailing in temperate countries, what would world demographics look like and how would this impact on education in England?**
- **What would be the implications of large private multi-interest companies having a say in education?**
- **How can education help future citizens cope with the polarising and secularisation of society, the break up of community and changes in family life?**
- **How are we going to make sure that education can keep up with the big ideas in the face of bureaucracy and an ever increasing workload?**

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