



How far can you go?

A think piece from the EMLC and NCSL Futures project

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This think piece reflects a conversation between Sara Parkin OBE, Founder Director, Forum for the Future and Jackie Fisher, Headteacher, Market Harborough Church of England Primary School, as part of the EMLC and NCSL Futures project.

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, a 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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Sara Parkin in conversation with Jackie Fisher

Viewpoint

Forum for the Future is a national charity dedicated to building a sustainable way of life by applying practical solutions in the UK through working with partner organisations in the private and public sectors. The Forum employs approximately 70 staff in offices in Cheltenham and London. Its organisation is divided into four main areas: business programme, public sector programme, communications, and central services. The Forum also has a masters programme in leadership for sustainable development for 12 students each year. There are also many interns and volunteers who stay with the organisation for shorter periods of a few months at a time.

Mapping the territory

This is the question posed in the title of a novel by David Lodge. The novel looked at the dilemmas of sex and moral issues facing Catholics in the sixties. The question, however, is just as relevant to each of us today when considering the irreversible damage we are doing to our environment. How can leaders influence a shift towards a more sustainable future and a realisation that there is more to morality than just sex?

Since the start of the 21st century, there has been rapid rise in our awareness of limited resources and the growing need to develop an environmental contract to limit the effects of climate change. Carbon emissions have already pushed up global temperatures. We are already seeing more extreme weather patterns and melting glaciers will increase flood risk. Crop yields will decline and all these factors will have a growing impact on the global economy. Higher standards of living have brought about higher expectations for all, yet debt is now higher than it has ever been. Over the years there has been a breakdown of relations between people and the environment. Environmental change is affecting the life of every one of us. As educators, there is an urgent need to develop the concept of 'sustainable literacy' in the curriculum.

Over the horizon – a business leader's perspective

As campaigners for a sustainable way of life everything our organisation does is driven by evidence and the belief that each human being must take an active role in shaping the future. What's more, political parties

are now realising that change can only take place by people and organisations understanding the need to alter lifestyle and consumption habits.

The power, influence and leadership to tackle these issues lie in and beyond Whitehall and Westminster. The education system has a key role to play in helping society learn how to manage with radically less impact on the environment without forgetting social justice. Wealth has given people greater life opportunities but research evidence shows us that happiness is increased more by secure relationships than wealth. We should remember the African belief that it takes a village to raise a child. Today's emphasis on family units forgets that any dysfunctions can be mitigated if there are lots of examples of good relationships nearby.

Supporting healthy communities is what matters. Britain is obsessed with the notion of class and this is one of the central issues that require rapid change. We need to know what social inclusion really means. We have a society that has been narrowly trained to see a career or job as being for life. When this fails, it creates stress and tensions. In Britain, unlike some other countries, we have created social ghettos. Moreover, over the years we have reduced biodiversity, the 'green stuff' on which all life depends. Buildings and roads have consumed the countryside. Hedges have been pulled up, trees felled without being replaced, and concrete and brick have taken the place of pathways and lawns. We separate ourselves not only from each other, but from nature too.

Every day we hear how we need to reduce our waste and carbon emissions. We are familiar with the three R's: reduce, reuse and recycle. But do the people responsible for recycling understand the key scientific principles that lie behind this 'waste hierarchy'? For example, turning a tree into paper, then reusing it as packaging or animal bedding before recapturing energy via composting or efficient burning, will cause less pollution than recycling. We recycle glass, but should we be looking at ways of reusing bottles rather than wasting energy breaking them down and then re-producing them? By contrast, the energy and pollution costs of making aluminium makes it worth recycling, but do we really need to put all that sugary water into cans? Growth in domestic product, the key indicator for wealth, encourages economic activity that is profligate with resources.

A view from the bridge

So, looking further into the future – what can we see? There are probably very few massive technological breakthroughs to come, but certainly refinements of what we already have. The vast amounts of data already available means the knowledge economy is here to stay, but it will still take human wisdom and experience to put it to good use. People will not have a job for life, so there will be a need to educate with a wider range of knowledge and skills. Work will be more locally based and undertaken more virtually. This will require society to move toward a completely new way of meeting needs and systems will have to be to put in place make things happen. Will this be more a mix of formal and informal working, like for example, in Lima, Peru. There, many people use their skills to work together to provide for community needs? It will become the norm to help each other and concurrently to become more locally self-reliant.

Some young people of today have gone adrift and in some families the most disaffected teenagers are now third generation rebels, lacking role models of good parenting or responsible citizenship. This may reflect a general malaise in communities, schools or society that lack a shared idea of morality. In most societies, teenagers through the ages have always had a passage to adulthood, a ritualised channel for acts of rebellion. Today, however, there is an ever-diminishing distinction between childhood and adulthood as the process now begins before the young person has gained maturity. Young people need and want a framework that gives guidance towards shared values and a sense of purpose. This is why a society with justice systems and a government that can be trusted have an important part to play. Though this doesn't reduce the need for personal responsibility for one's own actions.

Latest news raises awareness of the amount of food we are wasting through overbuying both nationally and locally. Supermarkets are currently competing on who will be greenest. Tesco plans to label everything according to its carbon content. Forum for the Future works with many of these large companies on the growing need for sustainability. Undoubtedly, educating the future generations will be a key to greater understanding and future practice in building a more sustainable way of life. Forum for the Future is currently working with the DfES on a project to bring sustainability into the post-school curriculum and with scientists and others, trying to identify what we

might expect a future school leaver to know and be able to do in order to be considered sustainability literate. Some knowledge and skills will be generic, others will be specific to particular occupations. By eschewing a broad approach to learning in favour of separate subjects, has our current education system and curriculum content limited the capacity of many young people to meet the challenges of the 21st century?

So what will happen if we don't tackle these big environmental and social issues? We are already aware of climate change. International conflict over resources will inevitably occur between countries, possibly culminating in war. There will be increased flooding and drought. Coastal regions will be dramatically affected by sea levels rising due to arctic glaciers melting. There will be a rise in migration. The Treasury's Stern report and Environmental Agency research give greater detail on the likelihood of events. Only by urgent action now, can we hope to limit the consequences of climate change, to our own species in particular. The Earth will regain control of its ecological systems, come what may and it is the higher mammals that are more dependent on a reasonably stable environment that will suffer first and most.

Futures learning – a school leader's perspective

So what will be the role of school leaders in managing this change towards a sustainable literate society? Leadbetter wrote: 'The curriculum needs to change to encourage creativity, problem solving, team building, as well as literacy and numeracy.' Beck also refers to the need for curriculum change which supports the thinking of Sara Parkin:

One of the main political responses to globalisation is...to build and develop the education and knowledge society; to make training longer rather than shorter; to loosen or do away with its link to a particular job or occupation. This should not only be a matter of 'flexibility' or 'lifelong learning', but of such things as social competence, the ability to work in a team, conflict resolution, understanding of other cultures, integrated thinking and a capacity to handle the uncertainties and paradoxes of the second modernity.

Beck, What is Globalisation?, 1999

This type of learning and curriculum redesign has indeed been encouraged since the introduction of DfES guidance in Excellence and Enjoyment. Leaders need to have the confidence to take greater risks to develop this further to address these issues alongside the tension and challenge of raising attainment, test results and league tables. Early Years education is already recognising the benefits of taking learning outside of the classroom and having a more holistic approach to learning. However, children are then narrowly measured and tracked throughout the whole of their education. A curriculum based on broader approaches to knowledge and skills could be built around the local and global environment. Literally learning from life, for life.

ICT will continue to be an essential tool for learning but with an increased eco understanding we will need to save energy in this and many other ways in our schools. School buildings will still exist, but they will be community hubs with access to a range of agencies and opportunities. Building Schools for the Future and the Extended Schools agenda are the beginnings of this development. Working locally and flexibly will allow parents more time to engage and interact with their children's learning and to grow a sense of belonging to and responsibility for the local and global community.

Pause for thought...?

- **Should all schools be required to achieve and regularly update eco-school status?**
- **Should school development plans require leadership to identify improvements towards energy efficiency within the existing provision?**
- **Greater affluence and cheap air travel has enabled more people to travel and holiday abroad. Has this improved social integration or developed greater cultural and economic understanding?**
- **Is our consciousness of risk, and health and safety regulations limiting our children's opportunities to explore and begin to understand their world?**
- **What would the curriculum look like if it were to offer enough opportunities for our children to develop their creative thinking, curiosity and questioning skills with regard to global concerns and the environment?**

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