



# Real-life education

**A think piece from the EMLC and NCSL Futures project**

## Real-life education

This think piece reflects a conversation between Rosalyn Rahme, Chief Executive, Gold Recruitment and Andrew Pearson, Headteacher, Bramcote Hills Primary School, Nottingham, as part of the EMLC and NCSLFutures Project.

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

**Edited by Karen Carter and Chris Williams**

© EMLC and National College for School Leadership 2007

# 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](http://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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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**

# Real-life education

*Rosalyn Rahme in conversation with Andrew Pearson*

## Viewpoint

Rosalyn Rahme is a busy person. During the day and during much of what others might describe as their free time, she leads a small group of companies largely focused on getting the right people into the right jobs. If you are seeking a chief executive or an executive with a specific skill-set, from anywhere in the world, her companies can do the business. She aims to fit more square pegs in square holes in the future and increasingly from around the world, as that is where she believes she finds the right attitude to work and loyalty to the company. Add to that a small property business and you can see why Rosalyn says, “there isn’t a day, an evening, a weekend or a time when I might not be liaising, responding, networking or thinking about the business”. A true 24/7 global executive. Oh, and by the way, she has a husband and four children.

When we met, Rosalyn had just returned from two weeks alone in her Hawaiian hideaway; time she devotes each year to thinking through the strategy for her companies and scanning the horizon for future business needs. The happy conflict of time zones means there are a few precious waking hours when no-one back home is likely to be wishing to contact her. Finding thinking space needs to be managed and planned, even if it means travelling thousands of miles.

Rosalyn has experience of the Irish education system which, she believes, is structured so that it “allows all children to blossom and grow”. Whereas the UK system “simply picks the roses” by providing opportunities only for the few to have a privileged education. She was also clear that while the world has changed, deep down, education in the UK has not.

## Mapping the territory

This wide-ranging discussion sees our current schools as time-bound, fixed and strangely disconnected from the world of continuous change around us. It explores how schools built around problem-solving will reject traditional subjects, make wide use of virtual learning, develop emotional intelligence for all and seek to feed the inner-self. Then it takes the ideas further and challenges us all to conceptualise how a very different world of education might look.

## Over the horizon – a business leader’s perspective

We face a series of competing tensions. On the one hand, some things appear to be rooted in the here and now, more comfortable and compelling, perhaps, to those seeking to ‘stop the bus’ or ‘get off the merry-go-round’. Pulling against them are pressures which businesses and schools must respond to if they wish to compete effectively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An acceptance of their inevitability will be a pre-requisite for success.

- **Stability versus change.** Seeing change as inevitable and a mechanism for sustaining success and improvement will be vital. Future organisations and schools will be focused on the business of change; preparing children, young people, employees and executives to foresee, manage and use change as a development tool. People will need to be adaptive, creative and mentally agile. Change also means people taking risks. The growing aversion to risk and the litigious society it breeds, should not be allowed to stifle education. We need to put real-life back into education.
- **Information versus knowledge.** The future will be characterised by an almost universal access to information. Nevertheless, inequalities and the continuation of an underclass are inevitable and will be characterised by generational, low aspiration and low expectation in some areas of the UK where large numbers of people will simply opt out. However, the future will demand more. Success will depend on managing and converting vast swathes of information into knowledge – knowing that is useful, interesting, helpful – and building this into a construct that is useful for the workplace, home-life, relationships and an understanding of the world and how it works. Those with wisdom, applying moral and critical judgements to what we know and what we do with it, will be at a premium.
- **National versus global.** The global perspective will become critical in every aspect of our lives, not just environmental; home-life, media, communications, employment, leisure and so on. The option to say, “we’ve always done that here” will vanish; insularity will not be an option. There will be shortages, that is the only thing that will alter behaviour and everyone should watch the Al Gore documentary ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ which makes a big impact.

- **Linear versus complex.** Young people's ability to focus on a variety of stimuli – listening to music, conversing in a chat room, reading a magazine and keeping an eye on the TV soap story line – is a model for future working behaviour. Linear thinkers will be redundant. Step-by-step approaches to planning and implementing change will fail. Motivation will be key as the desire for, and availability of, immediate gratification and the have it all now society reduces the need for effort and hard work. The work environment and schools will be complex, overlapping and multi-faceted. Those with the ability to make connections, and harness multiple changes and trends will be successful. So will those who can navigate such a world without succumbing to the real dangers of stress and mental disorder.
- **Time versus experience.** Our slavish approach to time will not be required in the future. Flexibility in how time is divided, used and thought about will be key. In commerce, as well as education, assembling and managing experiences will dominate. The tyranny of the rota will be replaced by the ability to manage experiences. This should allow schools to be places where there is time to learn, time to do, time to be and time to build relationships; places where the organisation of learning experiences is unlikely to be linear and strictly timetabled.

### A view from the bridge

So how will education meet these future issues head on? The future school will see:

- **The off-loading of the overload —managing information.** The universal access to information will necessitate the sifting, authenticating and linking of information to construct meaning and embed knowledge. The conversion of knowledge into wisdom is a further challenge for education. In a world in which everything will be possible, deciding what is important and desirable will be the hallmark of the good citizen or productive employee.
- **The death of subjects - solving problems and seeking solutions.** Making sense of and managing a world that is media-rich and multi-sensory will be vital. Thinking in a strictly linear way, 'let's plan this one step at a time' or 'we'll finish this first and then do that' will not cut the

mustard. Multiple lines of enquiry and multi-tasking will be the norm. The notion of subject specific study will decline. This is partly because fully understanding a subject has become impossible due to the breadth of knowledge now available and the globalisation of learning; and partly because the key skill required will be to solve problems by selecting appropriate knowledge, skills and information drawn from whichever specialisms are to hand. Blocks of subject lessons serve only to fragment learning and reduce the opportunity for application. Those able to work in teams, research possibilities, find pathways and create solutions will be the rainmakers of the future and will be highly prized.

- **An end to the tyranny of the timetable — managing time and space.** Future society will require people who can work outside conventional views of time and how it has been traditionally used. Consider the shift from Monday being washing day and Sunday being a day of rest. The notion that pupils, particularly adolescents, should remain locked into a timetable of 70 minute learning blocks cannot deliver what will be required in the future or prepare young people effectively for future work. The combining of learning experiences as part of an agreed learning pathway is the future. Nor will pupils need to be in a classroom to learn. Virtual teaching; distance learning and online assessment has the potential to allow far more young people the chance to learn when they learn best and the straight-jacket of the 9-4 school day will be a thing of the past.

- **Space for feeding the inner self — managing self and relationships.** Schools will retain a key role in personal development as they will be one of the few places where young people congregate, though not necessarily at the same time. They will be places to learn about other people and oneself. This will not be in a timetabled sense but in a community sense with opportunities to undertake learning experiences that explore relationships and issues of self esteem. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will demand emotionally intelligent people. This is because the pace and nature of change, the 24/7 information stream and the need to make progress will not allow time for people to take the huff or go off in a mood. People in the workforce will be expected to be able to get along together to achieve results. The practice ground for this will be our future schools.

## Futures learning – a school leader's perspective

So what might the implications be for schools now? In order to prepare for becoming a future school, school leaders and society will need to start rethinking many currently held beliefs about what it means to go to school.

- **Schools will need to use the fact of constant change to review, innovate and re-engineer schooling.** Seeking a period of stability, a time of consolidation, or a quieter period will be to lead the school into oblivion. It will be important to harness young people's experience of constant change to make frequent alterations to what they learn, how they learn and when they learn, in full consultation with them, in order to release the education system from convention, tradition and backward looking views of what must be known or done. If genuine re-engineering is to take place, the stifling centralising nature of schooling will need to be replaced with some core skills, attitudes and experiences and freed from the constraints of 190 days, 22.5 hours and daily corporate worship. Equality of opportunity can be used as an excuse for locking everyone into one way of doing things.
- **Current notions of the use of time and place will need to change:** The current terminology of after-school clubs, extra curricular activities, twilight sessions, weekend projects and leisure time all need rethinking and reshaping so that each type of activity is valued equally and can be undertaken at any time of day. All such terms are based on the idea that there has to be an eight hour continuous learning day during daylight hours. Future learning will need to be packaged much more flexibly to provide wider access. Thus a visit to the physiotherapist, or a clarinet exam, or a family visit to see a farm park, all currently seen as an interruption to learning and requiring special permission, would be seen as part of a learning day designed to promote being healthy, being safe, enjoying learning, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being. The sum of the learning experiences would make up the learning day with rest and relaxation being assigned equal weight as part of the same being healthy agenda.

- **The use of multi-lateral thinking is a must:** in order to free schools from the restrictions of the rota and the timetable. Education will be packaged in terms of linked learning experiences that require the bringing together of a range of skills, a variety of knowledge, and the discussion of the moral dilemmas and implications involved. Looking back, learners should not say "I did a bit of geography"; rather they will say "we sorted out all the issues and problems and got a result".

### Pause for thought...?

- **How will school leaders build in time to scan the horizon, envision the future and keep in step with the mega trends assailing society?**
- **How can school leaders move away from the tyranny of the timetable towards planning for linked learning experiences?**
- **How can school leaders create a community where experiences to promote good health, personal safety, a positive contribution and community involvement, and economic awareness are of equal worth with learning skills and acquiring knowledge?**
- **What are the high impact changes schools or partnerships can make now to embark on this radical agenda for the future?**

**National College for School Leadership**

Triumph Road  
Nottingham  
NG8 1DH

T: 0845 609 0009  
F: 0115 872 2001  
E: [enquiries@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

**EMLC**

36 Duncan Close  
Moulton Park  
Northampton  
NN3 6WL

T: 01604 817700  
F: 01604 671116  
E: [info@emlc.co.uk](mailto:info@emlc.co.uk)  
W: [www.emlc.co.uk](http://www.emlc.co.uk)