



Small voices

A think piece from the EMLC and NCSL Futures project

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This think piece reflects a conversation between David Morgan, Director of Operations Services 3663 and David Slee, Headteacher, Eskdale Junior School, Chilwell, Nottinghamshire, as part of the EMLC and NCSL Futures Project.

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

Edited by Karen Carter and Chris Williams

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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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David Morgan in conversation with David Slee

View point

Operation 3663 is a national food distribution company. It employs 6,800 people nationally and is the market leader in its field, with an operating profit of over 50 million pounds in 2006. As a supplier of many household name fast food outlets, it responds quickly to compete successfully in a fast changing market where trends demand swift solutions. An example of this is the rapid move to fresh food in the wake of Jamie Oliver which echoes the trend towards increased health and enjoyment.

At first glance, the company faces similar long-term planning constraints to those experienced by the education world. Both worlds, however, need to identify longer-term trends and address them through their long-term plans.

Mapping the territory

The Kyoto accord, the Paris Intergovernmental panel report and the Stern report leave little doubt that climate change issues must be addressed as a matter of urgency. The full extent of the global threat is still to be realised, but most agree that we cannot leave solutions to others. At a national level, the UK is ahead of most countries in meeting its Kyoto commitments, has committed to a further 60 per cent cut in carbon emissions and has been at the forefront of international efforts to tackle climate change in the UK, G8 and via the United Nations. At home, targets have improved recycling, encouraged greater use of brown sites for urban development and are currently seeking to address the greening of transport systems.

This think piece considers the need for a universal response to sustainability from business, education and government. It explores the need to create the capacity to allow leaders to lift their heads from the here and now and devote time to understanding and addressing the problems the world is facing. The worldwide battle for hearts and minds is yet to be fought and climate change is no respecter of national borders. In such a context, it will be increasingly important to broaden our horizons, share our knowledge and expertise and maximise our creative avenues. The old adage 'act locally, think globally' still applies but is surely moving towards, 'think globally, act globally'.

Over the horizon – a business leader's perspective

As a food distribution company, the issues of CO2 emission, obesity, recycling, sustainable sourcing of foods, energy efficiency and ethical trading are increasingly important, but always from a market driven perspective. As a consequence, we take our social responsibilities seriously with a sustainability board and environment teams to give all employees a voice. Our staff feedback has highlighted children's futures as our prime concern.

A new generation of customers is emerging which has green credentials and makes its purchasing choices accordingly. As a customer led company, we recognise the potential impact of these trends, but live more as 'a now' company committed to rapid response. As a consequence, the trends we recognise are more localised, such as the increasing spending power of the over 55s as a percentage of the pub food trade, the growth in popularity of Italian cuisine and the move away from traditional family mealtimes towards flexible eating.

We could do more to develop our approach to long-term horizon scanning and recognise this. Our primary purpose, however, is to make a profit: our mission is, 'to satisfy our customers' needs, to value and develop our people, thereby to make more profit'. Nevertheless, 3663 is aware of its carbon footprint responsibilities and is the only company in its sector to hold ISO14001 corporate accreditation for its environmental management system. We use the greenest refrigeration units available. Our most recent depots are energy efficient and designed to give zero ozone depletion. Over 50 per cent of our fleet also uses Bio-Plus diesel. We have first class purchasing and marketing procedures which recognise the importance of ethical trading and transparency, have signed up to fair trade agreements and offer a wide range of organic, low salt, additive free products.

The increasing demand for fresh food delivery now brings a need for a 24 hour response time. It also, however, means more lorries on the roads. We believe that technology will create technical solutions to the problem of fossil fuels and have an eye towards alternative fuel technologies. Fleet suppliers are undoubtedly developing alternatives, and we are investigating alternative fuel strategies.

3663 is also engaged in partnership working, encouraging like minded companies to come together to allow the cross-fertilisation of ideas. We understand the need to support these interdependent companies and provide training and support to smaller, more vulnerable links in the chain. We offer, for example, health and safety expertise and encourage financial viability and sustainability through fair pricing policies. All of these partnership areas are expected to develop further in coming years.

Finally, we recognise our key role in succession planning through the training and development of our staff and firmly believe that people are the company's best asset. 3663 has been listed in the Sunday Times UK's 20 Best Big Companies to work for 2007.

A view from the bridge

So what will the world of 2030 be like for Operation 3663? We believe that we will still exist, largely as we are today, with our recently built depots designed to be future proof. This means we can restructure units physically in response to changes in customer trends and adapt over time to meet the needs of future customers.

Innovations in technology will have occurred rapidly in response to the threat posed to the UK by climate change and energy security issues. This will have greatest impact on the organisation of transport and fuel changes, with the purchase of a carbon neutral transport fleet. As a company, we will be more eco-friendly with major reductions in food miles through the creation of local food hub networks, each with local ranges, in line with government focus on sustainable food provision.

There will be a return to fresh, locally sourced fruit, vegetables, meat and fish, a greater trend towards local solutions and a self-sufficient 'village' mentality. Could the days when there was a butcher, baker, grocer and fishmonger in every village be about to return? If so, this will be driven not only by sustainability issues, but by an increasing drive towards good health and well-being, with 3663 focusing on high quality to produce goods you would be happy for your own children to eat.

Road and rail travel will be more difficult. Congestion will be worse and it will be normal practice to work from a home or local hub base, especially where child care provision is not required. By contrast, in a strange

echoing of the Victorian mill school social and learning centres, catering for child care, education 3 to 18 and life-long learning will be located in industrial settings to meet the needs of the workforce and the training needs of the businesses in close proximity to them. They will have a multitude of agencies located or accessible from that location.

Declining birth rates will continue to be a factor and as a consequence, recruitment and retention of staff will feature strongly. Companies will offer improved leisure facilities, support systems and development opportunities for staff, to tie them into the business. The importance of staff fulfilment and aspiration will feature ever more strongly. Leisure opportunities, through sport or eating out will become even more important as a means of compensating for the increased isolation associated with home-based working and the computer generated virtual worlds of the future.

Futures learning – a school leader's perspective

From the school leader's perspective the issues are clear. So are the challenges.

Real progress on climate change and its implications for migration, poverty reduction, energy security and sustainable development will increasingly demand the full support of public services, the business community, extended use of technological developments, integrated international engagement and unification of purpose.

If we allow ourselves as leaders to become tied up with day-to-day maintenance matters in our schools and take our eye off the bigger, global picture, we risk fiddling while Rome burns. Somehow we must create the capacity, across the educational spectrum and beyond it, to focus on the long-term while at the same time dealing with the day-to-day. If we do so, we will be truly proactive rather than reactive, leading rather than managing. We must challenge ourselves. To do nothing is not an option.

The first and most important function of a business is making a profit. Consequently, responses to the bigger world picture will be from that perspective. The primary function of a school is to develop the individual and facilitate learning. The challenge, is to ensure that these two standpoints are inextricably linked rather than mutually exclusive.

In our schools there have never been so many pressures. It is understandable that some school leaders ask: “What can my school achieve in the face of such global problems?” Pressures of finance, staffing, curriculum delivery and the burden of constant accountability weigh heavily upon us all, but they cannot be allowed to be the dominant factors. As schools are increasingly seen and used as a bulwark against social division, family breakdown and alienation, so it is understandable that the challenge of the next 30 years may seem too much.

The educational world has, through its target driven examination results, created its equivalent of the business world’s short-term profit making position. Level 3 at Key Stage 1, Level 5 at Key Stage 2 and 5 A*-C’s at 16 represent profit of a sort, but are these really the most important measures of a successful journey? There are bigger challenges to face and it is through education that they must be faced. We must challenge our political leaders to free us from some of these narrow prescriptive targets and the ever increasing administrative burdens, to create the capacity where innovation and long-term planning will thrive.

The national curriculum must give way to the international curriculum. We must listen to the small voices of the children in our schools. Each and every one of them has a part to play.

Pause for thought...?

- **How do we create the capacity in leadership which allows us to get beyond the maintenance level and into the developmental level?**
- **At a time when coming to terms with and engaging with system leadership is proving challenging enough, how can we raise the bar even higher to engage with international system leadership?**
- **Should we make it an expectation that every school is twinned with both businesses and with other schools worldwide to share problems and seek solutions? How might we do this?**
- **Isn’t it time to reconsider the balance between risk-taking and accountability not only in our schools, but in our society? How might this be achieved?**
- **Should sustainability be part of every school improvement plan and every Key Stage curriculum from 3 to 18? How might this be achieved?**
- **Some of the greatest change agents, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Charles Darwin, Wangari Maathai began as small voices in schools like ours. How can we, in turn, release the voices of the future?**

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