“If education is for the future, then the future needs to be a more explicit concern in education” (Hicks, 2004)

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In a rapidly changing and technological world, education has a level of responsibility to encourage positive values and adaptability in young people as they face an unpredictable future. However, is the current education system itself adaptable and capable of teaching and thinking openly about the future? Rather than compartmentalising subjects, perhaps education needs an interdisciplinary approach that recognises global interconnectedness. Current teaching systems do not necessarily encourage inquiry and creative thinking in students and this can lead to disempowerment, whereas empowerment is a crucial contributor to the belief that an individual has the ability to make changes. There is a need for education to show more explicit concern for the future whilst recognising the importance of maintaining a positive attitude. Futures education is argued to be an appropriate way to encourage increased understanding of the links between the past, present and future. It offers opportunities for young people to question their futures and consider a preferable and probable outcome, whilst assisting the ability to think critically and creatively. A more balanced approach could be needed in education to produce a system that not only facilitates the ability of students to gain employment and contribute to the economy, but to one that also creates responsible and adaptable citizens capable of thinking beyond their personal needs: education has a responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to form a peaceful and fair society of the future.

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All education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future. Thus all education, whether so intended or not, is a preparation for the future (Toffler, 1974 in Hicks, 2004, p.169).

The future is an intrinsic part of our everyday lives, it affects our actions and decisions and our need to think ahead:

Virtually every activity that we engage in presumes some future continuation in time. Whenever we have aims, ambitions, make plans or take precautions, speculate of make commitments, we are concerned with the future. (Hicks, 1991a, p. 89)

Undoubtedly, education needs to equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their adult lives; but how will success be measured in the future? In a rapidly changing and technological world, we need to consider what and how we can teach more explicitly about the future in education. In 1974, Toffler recognised that ‘unless we
understand the future for which we are preparing we may do tragic damage to those we teach’ (in Hicks 2004, page 169), and his statement is still applicable today.

Toffler’s concerns reflect the need to ensure that young people are taught to be adaptable enough to cope with an unpredictable future, and to recognise that what they are taught is crucial to how they will apply their knowledge. Education holds a level of responsibility to young people, to encourage positive and well developed values and attitudes, ensuring that they have the foresight to be concerned about, and the desire to improve their future prospects. Equally, education has a responsibility to inform young people about social justice, peace, environmental issues and current affairs both locally and globally.

However, one question is whether the education system in its present state is itself adaptable and capable of teaching and thinking openly about the future? The current system of league tables for schools might induce reluctance to change. This statistical method of measuring schools’ performance allows parents to analyse a school’s academic success easily; there appears to be little measure of the students’ attitudes, values and responsibilities to society. This leads to the question of what type of citizens will be needed to create a fair and just society, where people recognise the global repercussions of their actions: ‘…we need to think more carefully about how choices in the present will have consequences for both people and planet in future time’. (Hicks, 2001a, p.231)

In order to realise global interconnectedness, education would need an inter-disciplinary approach that would not necessarily reflect the current national curriculum of compartmentalising subjects. Do we therefore, need a complete transformation of the current curriculum or is it capable of adjusting to accommodate a different approach? To analyse this question further, it is necessary to consider some of the teaching methods that are currently in use;

Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) discusses the commonly used ‘banking’ system of education where the teacher transfers information to the student, who is effectively a ‘container’ where knowledge is deposited. The deposited information is then retained in memory and extracted as and when required or instructed, such as recalling information for exams. This type of education implies that the teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing, detaching the student from the process of learning about something themselves. Richard Shaull (1970, p2) summarises when he says ‘This transfer of information becomes an emblem and an instrument of oppression that inhibits inquiry, creativity and dialogue’

As well as inhibiting inquiry, banking education eradicates the need to inquire and think creatively. This can lead to disempowerment of the student, and in order to produce proactive and motivated citizens, empowerment is crucial as it contributes to the feelings of having the ability to do something about a situation. Equally, disempowerment could lead to individuals only caring for themselves and not considering the issues faced by the wider community or globally. These individuals could be referred to as the oppressed with the teachers as the oppressors because there is an imbalance between those who believe they hold all the knowledge and power and those who feel powerless to make any changes to their lives, or who do not question whether there could be any alternative. Freire argues that ‘Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’ (Shaull, 1970, p.2).
If we acknowledge that the future is unpredictable, then we need to consider how we teach students to prepare for such an unpredictable outlook. What does the current education system offer in terms of preparing students for this uncertainty? Hicks (2001a, p.230) asks:

If all education is for the future, where is the future explored in education?

There are currently several forms of teaching about the state of the planet, society and the environment, namely Global Education, Environmental Education and Education for Peace, amongst others. Hicks (1991b, p.625) recognises that these initiatives tend to overlap but they have a common belief that ‘…young people should have the opportunity to explore a range of contemporary issues … an interest in the human condition and its improvement’. However, these and other initiatives such as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are not necessarily as well incorporated into the whole school ethos of mainstream education as they could be, but have the capability of being tools with which to explore such contemporary issues.

Gidley and Hampson (2004, p. 256) highlight the importance to teachers of continuing as they always have, by ‘delving into the world of traffic jams and oxygen masks, space stations and tent cities’ but they urge more explicit expressions of concern. They stress that in doing so, it is vital to encourage positivity and hope to ensure that young people do not envisage a bleak future of hopelessness and despair. They further recognise that students can experience personal empowerment when the teaching conditions are right, as shown in research with Steiner-educated students. Their ability to problem solve lessened their ‘…feelings of powerlessness in the face of global problems and also increased enthusiasm about personal future prospects’ (Gidley and Hampton, 2004, p. 261). This is reiterated by Hicks and Slaughter (1997) when they argue for ‘the need to educate in a spirit of hope during turbulent times’ and by Dutch sociologist Fred Polak (1972, in Hicks 2004, p.171): ‘A society with no positive images of the future…indicated a society in decline’.

In addition to schools and other educational establishments, perhaps there needs to be a greater community and social acceptance that we are all responsible for educating young people; not all education has to take place in the classroom. Moral values and communication skills are vital to create balanced and caring citizens and these need to be taught in families and the wider community. Respect for the local environment, whether natural or man-made, could enhance the aesthetics of a place and lead to positive attitudes and uplifted spirits, which in turn might contribute to an emotional connection and sense of belonging.

Futures education is argued by many as the appropriate way forward to introduce opportunities for young people to question their futures, both probable and preferable, and to identify their hopes and fears. Futures education can be implemented in schools, but also in the community by workshops and community groups. It advocates and assists the ability of students to think for themselves, and asks them to consider the welfare of the planet and its inhabitants, encouraging a sustainable future for both. Equally, futures education encourages increased understanding of the links between people in the past, present and future and how influences and decisions, whether economic, political or cultural, affect society’s perceptions of the future, both locally and globally.
Futures education is about applying ideas from the academic field of futures studies. Academics within this international field are from a range of disciplines and they do believe that there need to be changes to the curriculum that will provide opportunities for students to ‘think more critically and creatively about the future’ (Hicks, 2001a, p.231), providing a more open and holistic approach to the education system which allows for the application of futures education. Futures studies is not about attempting to study or predict the future; it analyses and identifies the patterns and causes that bring about change including human interaction and the planet’s natural transformation, in order to plan and examine ideas about possible alternatives for the future.

As indicated in the application of futures education, academics within the field of futures focus on possible, probable and preferable futures. It is important to recognise that hopes and expectations for the future will vary depending on the group or individual. These variations can be due to influences such as gender, age, religion and geographical position. This is elaborated by Dator (1996, p. 231 in Hicks 2001a):

One of the main tasks of futures studies is to identify and examine the major alternative futures which exist at any given time and place. The future cannot be predicted, but preferred futures can and should be envisioned, invented, implemented, continuously evaluated, revised and re-envisioned. Thus, another major task of futures studies is to facilitate individuals and groups in formulating, implementing, and re-envisioning their preferred futures.

There are proven benefits to futures education as research carried out by Martha Rogers into the psychological processes in futures techniques shows. The research established ‘that futures education is not just a cognitive process, but also moves the hearts and souls of those who enter into it’ (cited in Gidley and Hampson, 2004, p. 262). Considering this, futures education is a contributory factor in encouraging students to explore how global decisions affect them as individuals and as part of society, allowing empathy and appreciation. Rogers suggests a journey of emotions that students experience when studying futures; from anger, guilt and despair to elation and a new found care for the world and others. If futures education can encourage hope and care, then this must be the way forward in education to encourage citizens of the future to be responsible and to recognise global interconnectedness.

Richard Slaughter (2008) reflects on the current status of future studies, commenting that there has been positive progress in their application into higher education, with new university courses and literature being introduced, but he adds that there are also failures:

One of these is the near-universal failure to have futures concepts, tools, thinking and appropriate methods incorporated into educational systems worldwide as part and parcel of their ‘core business’.

In his reference to ‘core business’, Slaughter is possibly implying the failure to incorporate future studies into the whole school ethos as an inter-disciplinary concept. The introduction of ESD into schools has gone some way to teaching about sustainable lifestyles, but this has encountered a similar problem in the sense that ESD can be considered an isolated subject rather than being applied across the curriculum to show the links to all subjects.
Hicks considers that there are opportunities for future studies to be woven into the curriculum, and recognised the introduction of citizenship as a curricular subject in 1999 as an ideal opportunity to do this. Hicks emphasises the reasons why there is a need to help young people think more creatively about the future: he highlights the fact that our rapidly changing and technological world means that there are no certainties that can guide us into the future as there have been in the past. Hicks (2001a, p. 231) also believes that the ability to ‘…think ahead more clearly and thoughtfully’ is not only an important survival skill, but it could help ‘…to make wiser choices in the present leading to a more responsible and future-orientated citizenship’.

Additionally, other life skills could play a more intrinsic role in education: a greater focus on healthy living and staying fit could be incorporated into school life as a role model, encouraging personal responsibility for healthier lifestyles. This could lead to healthier citizens of the future, less dependent on costly health services and authorities and placing a greater responsibility on the individual. Freire’s ideas of ‘Empowerment Education’ have been recognised as important to the empowering process in health education. Bernstein & Wallerstein (1988:?) consider this an effective health education and prevention model, suggesting:

Participation of people in group action and dialogue efforts … enhances control and beliefs in ability to change people’s own lives

Therefore, by encouraging young people to believe in themselves and their abilities, empowerment can promote positive health choices to enable young people to create a preferred and less dependent future for themselves.

In Teaching for tomorrow: How can futures studies contribute to peace education? (Hicks, 2004) Hicks refers to international research that was carried out to establish the concerns of young people about their futures. The research showed that young people’s preferred futures were generally optimistic and that they hoped for a peaceful and fairer world, although their opinions of their probable future were quite pessimistic. They envisaged a future society of greed and emphasis on material wealth and the individual, whereas they expressed a desire for cooperation and a caring family and community focused society, a utopian vision.

The studies showed that increased pessimism was directly linked to age; as people grew older, they became less optimistic about the future. Hicks questioned whether this indicated ‘a growing realism on the part of young people or a growing sense of disempowerment?’ (2004, p.171). The concern therefore, is that if there is a growing sense of disempowerment and people do not believe that they have the ability to make positive change to their future prospects, then they will not try. Therefore, the trend needs to be reversed to encourage a greater sense of human enrichment and belief; it is more important than ever to ensure that educators teach about future local, global and citizenship issues sensitively and realistically but maintain a hopeful and positive perspective.

It is argued that teaching of the current curriculum only prepares students for employment and contribution to the economy, rather than creating responsible and adaptable citizens who are capable of thinking beyond their own personal needs. Orr (2004, p.32) draws on this when he says ‘… the modern curriculum teaches little about citizenship and responsibilities and a great deal about individualism and rights’. Citizens are needed who can adapt to the changes ahead
and be proactive and forward thinking rather than respond reactively when a situation arises. However the ability to problem-solve as indicated in the Steiner education comparison by Gidley and Hampson (2004), is also a crucial skill when facing an unpredictable future.

In conclusion, education does have a responsibility to prepare young people for the future, so the future should play a more explicit role in education. Education should do more than facilitating for academic success and creating citizens who are moulded and directed to slot into careers that boost the economy. Alongside families, communities and the wider society, schools and other educational establishments are responsible for encouraging foresight, respect and the ability to care for the planet and the future.

Opportunities do exist within the present education system to incorporate a holistic, interdisciplinary approach, but these are not currently used as well as they might be. League tables, compartmentalising subjects and ‘banking’ education do not encourage change in an industry focused education system.

If we are to recognise the importance of educating for the future, then there must be a greater level of responsibility from all those involved in education to act now and improve the existing approach: communication between the organisations involved in all disciplines of education needs to be increased to help gain a balanced approach. As stated by Hicks, the teaching of citizenship in the curriculum has offered the ideal opportunity to incorporate a futures perspective which could be incorporated into the whole school ethos. Research shows that young people want a peaceful and fair society in the future; education has a responsibility to give them the tools they need to create this preferred future. By offering an education that is less passive with a more emotional connection, we could create autonomous learners who are educated for life, empowered and willing and able to influence positive changes for a more fair and just world.

References


