Neoliberalising Learning: Generating alternate futures consciousness

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Both educators and education policies have long claimed a role in preparing students for ‘the future’. This has been referred to as the rhetoric of futures in education, as the notion of a future is assumed, abstract and not articulated (Bateman 2010). Recent research indicates that teachers give little attention to futures thinking in interpreting and enacting curriculum documents. Only when their ‘futures consciousness’ was increased were they able to generate explicit alternate futures scenarios and make connections with learners (Bateman 2012). In light of international educational policy agendas pressing countries to adopt economic competitiveness in national curriculum policies, the ‘future’ vision looks narrow and constrained. We argue that current educational reforms in Australia provide little scope to address the concept of multiple futures, which are significant in enabling citizens to shape and contribute in personal, local and global contexts.

International and national discourses of educational policy

Since the early 1980s, education and political leaders across Australia have identified themselves as contributing to students’ futures. “The view that one of the key roles of schools is to develop and prepare young people for ‘the future’ is a given, and rhetoric around this theme has long been a feature of curriculum” (Gidley et al. 2004: 24). Schools in recent history have, for example, been referred to as Schools of the Future (Schools of the Future Coordination Branch and Directorate of School Education, 1996) and Lighthouse schools (The Coalition of Lighthouse schools 2003), acting as beacons in the metaphorical waters of life’s journeys. Today, we have Blueprints for the future (Department of Education & Training Victoria 2004), Essential Learnings for the future (Department of Education Tasmania 2002) and a range of Pathways (ACT Department of Education and Training 2008) to be explored dependent upon the state or territory in which a person lives, learns and/or teaches. The rhetoric of looking to the future is often shaped by international education agendas, which have an underlying assumption of education moulding economically productive citizens to enable countries to compete on the world stage. A neo-liberal discourse of measuring educational success through statistically verifiable means such as league tables and world rankings, colonise students futures within a global framework that is business-centred and restrictive. Restrictive refers both to the discourses of economic rationalism that play out in higher education in performativity and commodification measures (Ollsen and Peters, 2005) as well as to the nature of innovation. As the 2008 OECD paper on trends shaping education states, “economic views at best take a restricted view of the nature of innovation, and of the role of universities in innovation processes” (OECD, 2008:120). Global educational policies are key drivers of the ways in which futures education may be interpreted and actioned.

One of the most important recent drivers of international reshaping of higher education and its purposes has been the 2006 General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS), developed as a treaty through the World Trade Organisation. This international agreement has meant that higher education has been placed in the discourse of a tradeable commodity, or in GATS terms ‘an internationally tradeable service’. Positioning the overall purpose of education as a commodity – to be traded, bought, sold, packaged and delivered has implications for the ways in which ‘futures’ are interpreted in various curriculum documents, as indicated above. Whilst the knowledge economy view of the overall purpose of education for the citizens of the world is not universally supported, an emerging global trend positions education as a tradeable commodity that is embodied in policies such as GATS and enacted by global corporations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. For example, Shuyler and Vavrus (2010) argue that the World Bank provided $123.6 million USD to Tanzania to rewrite national curriculum which embodies ‘the discourse of education for global competition’ and ‘minimises the cultural, economic, and political dimensions of secondary schooling that impinge on the ability of higher education students to become engines of innovation’ (p.178). The GATS agenda means that education shifts from being a national ‘public good’ and an issue of a government’s
social responsibility, to one of economic competitiveness as seen in the rise of ‘the corporate university’, ‘the entrepreneurial university’ and ‘the bureaucratic university’ (Barnett 2011). Such discourses embody the notion of competition as evidenced by educational institutions increasingly striving for a competitive edge in international education markets. Competition is actioned by institutions increasing their international marketing drives for new international students; selling their courses overseas as educational ‘product’ and establishing their campuses (and university cultures) in other countries. As DeWit and Adams (2011: 222) argue, ‘internationalisation of higher education is influenced by the global knowledge economy, and is moving from a cooperative to a more competitive approach’.

There is an underlying assumption in global economic rationalist policies that competition brings out the best in people and institutions and is for economic good. However, it is evident that for some countries and citizenships, such economic ideologies are imposed at the expense of other values such as public good; collaboration; sharing free information; education for the sake of individual development and educating citizens for futures not based solely on economic drivers. As Smith argues this ‘market-driven approach to education frames each learner as a neo-liberal individual separated from society . . . it leaves ideas of community largely unexamined and unsupported’ (2011: 25). It is important to understand that global economic policy imperatives are implemented in a neoliberal framing of education for economic, competitive advantage rather than alternative ways of imagining educational policy through national curriculum documents. Lingard (2010) suggests policy is, ‘the authoritative allocation of values, which mean that the ideology (values) is an important component part of any policy’ (132). If this is so, then the ideologies framing attitudes and values of teachers and students as to their possible futures, and the purposes of education in and for the future are already embedded within policy frameworks. Smith agrees, and writes that curriculum ‘constitutes a potent expression of formal policy intent and can also convey, informally, the climate in which it is written’ (2011: 27). The international policy framework is one of neo-liberalism, where economic imperatives drive the mandate for an increasingly educated populace. In the Australian context, this has played out in competition between schools – for students, resources, funding and status in the belief that competitiveness will ‘push up values and strengthen accountabilities’ (Lingard 2010: 132). However, many involved in the sphere of education argue that education must move beyond neoliberal agendas and reposition itself upon ‘a new social imaginary’ (Taylor 2004; Bussey et al. 2008) that values the creative possibilities of multiple purposes for educational futures. Educational futures documents, like those listed above, provide some insights into the values and accountabilities driving Australian curriculum.

**Disrupting neo-liberalism: Futures education in an Australian setting**

Australian curriculum documents reflect a common focus on preparing children for the future. Holding valued future goals is important because these give meaning to school tasks:

> Future goals indeed play a pivotal role in giving a sense of purpose and direction to activities in which students choose to invest themselves … without this future time perspective many activities that might otherwise seem intrinsically or extrinsically motivational in the short term are relatively ‘hollow’ in garnering a real commitment to learning (Miller and Brickman 2004: 147).

However, as Gough (2010) and Hicks (2008) both suggest, there is limited examination of how futures knowledge is developed in classrooms, and how it could be developed in classrooms to generate alternative paradigms for and of education. The study referred to in this paper (Bateman 2009) sought to identify and examine the ways in which futures and temporality influence schools and school curricula and the ways in which schools and school curricula influence teachers’ perceptions and enactment of futures and temporality. It was framed within the contexts of:

- Psychological understandings about how human capacities of temporality and time perspectives develop
- Curriculum documents which demonstrate temporal bias in the ways they are traditionally oriented towards the past, yet simultaneously claim a role in educating for the future.

The research was based on an individual case study undertaken at a primary school in Australia. It incorporates the perspectives and experiences of six teachers situated within the Grade 5/6 Autonomous Learning Unit, where 120 students negotiated independent learning pathways based on a common topic of inquiry. The participant action researcher facilitated two types of targeted professional learning to increase the teachers’ futures consciousness and understandings of how futures studies could occur within a learning environment. In the first instance, through directed Professional Development [PD], the teachers were introduced to the field of futures studies. Through this PD they participated in focused activities intended to raise their futures consciousness, and, in turn their capacity to reflect upon their teaching through
these increased futures perspectives. In the second instance, the teachers participated as a professional learning team [PLT]. With ongoing support, as a PLT the teachers collaboratively planned and reflected upon what occurred as they enacted their futures learning within their classroom practices. They also participated in cyclical action research and evaluative interviews to identify ways in which futures time perspectives affected their curriculum practices. Analysis of the data in this research has been undertaken using analytic bracketing (Gubrium and Holstein 2000) which identified disjuncts between discursive practices and discourses-in-action.

There were many instances in the professional discussions of the teachers where references to the future were made in regard to their roles. These arose alongside conversations about learning 'which was connected to the world' or in regard to 'making sense of the world'. These teachers lacked futures consciousness with regard to education at the outset of this project. When asked at the outset about the role of a teacher with regard to the future of the student, a common response was:

I've never really thought about it ... I'm more of a day-to-day person, and the future just seems too far away. It's hard enough dealing with keeping up with what is expected without getting ahead of ourselves.

or:

I do have to equip students for the future, that's my job as a teacher. I've never thought about the actual future, though ... [laughs] ... That makes our job seem a bit more complicated, doesn't it?

In this research, the teachers assumed the 'future would just occur' which is what Toffler (1974) referred to as assumed futures. They assumed that everything they teach equips students for some type of future. Specifically, teachers asserted that schools prepared students for the future by teaching them to read and write. They also claimed that specific knowledge assisted them to function within the future. For example, one teacher claimed that the 'maths curriculum helped students to be able to shop, manage accounts and become tradies'. In this way, notions of the future were manipulated to fit the curriculum, as opposed to generating curriculum which would explicitly address the possibilities of multiple futures. Teachers made assumptions about educating for the future which are easily linked to Inayatullah's concept of used futures (2003), where curriculum is designed to meet a future that has already occurred as the past. In assuming replications of the past, education does a major disservice to future generations.

Retrospectively, the teachers realised just how little schools actually encouraged students to think about the future. With increasing futures consciousness, the teachers became more aware of the disjuncture between the rhetoric of preparing students for the future, and the ways in which schools did not explicitly address these claims (Bateman 2012). One reflected upon her own experiences as a secondary teacher, and the limited opportunities the students had had to think about the future:

Look, you often have secondary school students who never get an opportunity to really discuss or think about their own future. It's all rushed upon them in the final years of schooling and everyone's in a panic and course advisors are overworked, and all of a sudden the future is there and they have to think about it. That in itself is a decent reason to do more of this stuff.

Teachers also grappled with the school's role in educating for the future and were often 'shocked that they had not thought about this more'. At the conclusion of this research, it was clear that their thinking was explicitly futures focused and informed by their experiences and professional learning. This was demonstrated in the ways that student learning was facilitated and through an increased presence of futures discourse within curriculum activities. Whereas previously the teachers had 'just assumed' that the school prepared students for a future, they were now more critical in the ways this intent was achieved, or could be addressed through classroom practices. In the same ways that I had initially challenged their assumptions, they increasingly questioned and responded to others' taken-for-granted futures notions (Gough 1990). As an example, when introducing the potential of a new National Curriculum to a staff meeting, these teachers facilitated activities utilising futures tools they had learned. The teachers often commented that they had never engaged in such futures based thinking in their professional experiences. They enjoyed the opportunities to discuss futures in education and to bring 'these ideas to life in the classroom'. These opportunities had been 'worthwhile' and 'added a whole new agenda' to the ways in which they worked. Sadly, there is a distinct lack of research in this area, and the rhetoric around the role of a school in educating for the future remains rife. One teacher represented the group's thinking in claiming that:

We've always been told that our kids will be doing jobs that aren't around now, but we never guess at what these jobs are, or what the kids will need to be able to do. Schools have to prepare students for many futures outside of work, too. Education really rips kids off ... without the future in it.
Throughout this study, teachers described the many ways in which their curriculum and other school-based experiences provided the students with 'ways to understand their world better'. However, whilst providing rich, relevant and authentic curriculum, there were a number of subjects or points of interest which were considered highly problematic within these students’ lives and not addressed within curriculum. The teachers considered some topics ‘taboo’ as they arose in discussions about possible futures investigations within the classroom curriculum. For example, they were very concerned about the topic of religion, for fear of parents’ perceptions and possible actions. In some instances, the teachers described how particular children could not participate in activities as the content was ‘not seen as appropriate by his parents’. The study of the future, itself, initially was considered ‘worrisome’ in presenting information to the parents about what the children would be learning.

Teachers were concerned about how they would ‘deal with things which might come up, and make the future pretty bleak to the kids’. They were also concerned about the negative images that some of these students had, and how these could be ‘avoided in the classroom for everyone else’. In some instances, these teachers were limited by the assumptions they held about student futures, which in many ways reproduced the ‘hopeless feelings some of our kids have … you only have to see where they come from’. Teachers ‘almost perceived the future doing things to them’ or in other instances ‘merely waiting for the future to arrive’. From phrases such as these, the teachers and their students were positioned as passive, and the future as active. It was a repressive force to be feared, in its unknown shape – inaccessible, looming and unfamiliar. This was interesting as a counterpoint to other descriptions of a future which will replicate the past.

Teachers’ perceptions of the student context influence the ways in which they do and do not engage with futures education (Bateman 2012) and other curriculum (Moore et al 2002). Within this study, teachers perceived parental resistance to openly discussing aspects of children’s home lives such as religious affiliations, and parental hypersensitivity to what the teachers deemed as ‘controversial issues’ such as futures education. The teachers’ perceived that students’ bounded conceptions of the future were also present, and entrenched within classed and milieu practices of what is typically done within schooling and what might be expected (Ayon 2006). All of these are teachers’ perceptions and may not reflect the actual views of parents, but they drive the ways in which teachers enact futures education. As a result of these perceptions, futures studies is omitted from classroom practices, thus again making the futures purposes of the school mere rhetoric.

Within this study, teachers often commented that there was ‘never enough time’ to ‘fit everything within the curriculum’. In part, this is due to what is often referred to as the crowded curriculum (Crump 2005), that is, the pressures which teachers face in responding to mandated curriculum documents as well as any other local demands driven by policies or events within the school context and within the confines of its timetable and resources. The teachers experienced this pressure in a number of ways. This is reminiscent of an observation Slaughter (2004) makes in theorising why it is so difficult for teachers to transform educational practices to include more explicit futures studies:

Typically, there is a minister at the top; teachers and students are at the bottom – not unlike a 19th century army. The ‘meat in the sandwich’ is a layer of bureaucracy that must at all times obey prevailing political priorities. Teachers and students remind one of marginalized, disempowered ‘foot soldiers’ (2004: 195).

The perceived control of curriculum from outside the site inhibits the practices and agendas for curriculum and learning within the site. Whereas teachers often identify learning which is potentially meaningful and empowering to their students, such as futures education, their practices are inhibited by the ongoing and competing demands of everyday school life within the context of their particular site and the specific group of learners.

Conclusion
Discourses of economic neoliberalism are infused into the international education policy sector. Countries are encouraged through various treaties and funding incentives to adopt a narrow economic lens through which to shape national curriculum and its citizens’ educational outlooks. Such a future promises increased competitiveness and education for the purpose of enhancing the economic standing of the nation. Whilst economic gain is certainly one of the purposes of the education of a nation’s citizenry, it is not the only future vision. Current neoliberal discourses supporting practices of standardised curriculum offerings, increased accountability and performativity measures must be challenged in educational policy and teaching practice arenas. When students become aware of the multiple futures for which their education prepares them, an economic gaze becomes merely one of the many lenses through which they are empowered to re-imagine their future. Futures thinking and awareness training for staff and opportunities for students to demonstrate futures thinking in their assessment provides an innovative means for teachers to reimagine educational horizons.
References


Authors

Dr Debra Bateman is a passionate educator who works in teacher education at Deakin University. Over the past two years, Debra has won a national citation for enhancing students’ learning through imaginative and creative curriculum and pedagogies, and two national teaching excellence awards. Her research focuses on transforming educational practices and policy agendas through an increased articulation of multiple futures which are possible, probable and preferable for personal, local and global contexts. Debra is fiercely opposed to replicating used futures for antiquated political agendas and outdated notions of culture and society. For her, there is great potential in broadening futures discourse.
and increasing reflective practice between the links of learners, curriculum and futures and the role that all educators must play. Debra finished a PhD in 2010 and has since been writing furiously about National Curriculum, social media and creative and playful approaches to curriculum and pedagogies.

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**Tree of Wisdom**

This wise tree owns time
That has left indoor’s greyness,
Forgetting all luring tunnels,
Has crossed a Gobi desert
While camels plunge,
Racehorses of sand ribbons.

A ladybird lets steps fall
Along a path, will lead
Into shadow’s mystery.

A bee lands on a dandelion’s
Shudder, troves of gold
Gladden wings in ashes,
Antennae curled, dreams a queen,
She summons him from generations
Her bidding, lies by her,
No foretaste of doom, haunting,
Wings fold in hope.

Old in watchfulness,
Stoic with change beneath creature’s feet
The tree oversees time.

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**Variety #004**

Tyranny.
Tyranny.
We speak of it
In matters of opinion.
We never engage in it.
It is what someone else
Is doing to us.
We are sensible.
Sensible.
We never tolerate tyranny.
Not in our transcendental
behaviour
Nor in our immaculate
Dreams.

*George Gott,*
*Superior WI, USA*

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