Who’s thinking about the futures? Challenging the ways we think about curriculum

Dr Debra Bateman
Deakin University

Abstract

Across Australian curriculum documents and in curriculum practices, there is much that is assumed about preparing students for their futures. The key assumption is that the same future which this and previous teachers were prepared for, is the same future which students are being prepared to live. Another assumption is that everything done in a classroom contributes in some vague way to a student’s capacity to live in a future world. Drawing upon a number of school based research projects, I argue that little consideration is given to the explicit development of futures perspectives, and that futures knowledge is largely implicit. Moreover, I suggest that threading explicit futures perspectives through provided traditional disciplinary content enables students to make stronger life-world connections to their learning and futures.

There is much rhetoric in education about the ways in which students are prepared for “the future”. The notion of the future in Australian education is dominantly singular, vague and abstract. Building upon previous publications and Gough’s (1990) identification of futures perspectives within curriculum as tacit, token and taken-for-granted, this paper focuses on the ways that futures perspectives can be recognised as implicit or explicit. Moreover, drawing upon research projects (Bateman, 2012; Bateman & Smith, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Gidley, Bateman & Smith, 2004) which examine teachers’ articulations of futures perspectives within schools, I argue, as did Hicks (2002), that futures are a missing dimension of curriculum practice. And, whilst from a temporality concept, futures perspectives enrich history practice (see Harris & Bateman, 2007; Harris & Bateman, 2008), the use of futures as an interdisciplinary thread enriches all domains of learning associated within the Humanities (History, Geography, Economics, Civics and Citizenship). This paper is timely, providing a new lens for reviewing current drafts of Australian Curriculum and for challenging the ways in which education colonises students’ multiplicities of 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, p. 15). Since the early 1980s, educational and political leaders across Australia have identified themselves as contributing to students’ futures. Schools in recent history have, for example, been referred to as “schools of the future” (Directorate of School Education Victoria, 1996) and “lighthouse schools” (The Coalition of Lighthouse schools, n.d.), acting as beacons in the metaphoric waters of life’s journeys. Today, there are blueprints for the future (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2005), essential learnings for the future (Department of Education Tasmania, 2002; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], 2006) and a range of pathways (ACT Department of Education and Training, 2008) to be explored dependent upon what state or territory a person lives, learns and/or teaches in. Yet, the ways in which these futures dimensions are developed in school curriculum are not explicitly articulated within the various curriculum documents which guide planning within schools.

Building on the work of Gough (1990), I will talk about futures perspectives as being either implicitly or explicitly positioned. An implicit futures perspective is one in which the role of education in preparing students for a future may be claimed; yet there is no specific place in which this learning may be identified within the written curriculum. An explicit futures perspective is one where claims are made about the role of education for the future, and the curriculum clearly denotes where this learning will occur within the curriculum. Gough (1990) described what he saw as three levels at which futures education was occurring: tacit, token and taken-for-granted. He said that assumptions about futures are a tacit presence in
educational enquiry even when the object of study is thought to be located in the past or the present. He also described the imbalance of attention paid to the domains of history, present and futures: “by comparison to the future, the temporal categories of past and present receive more frequent and more explicit attention” (p. 301). In this, Gough also described the ways in which curriculum is temporally biased, though did not use this term. In fact, it was through a deep analysis and study within my PhD studies that I used this term (Bateman, 2009).

Gough’s second level of futures engagement within education is token futures. He described this as the utilisation of futures concepts and terminology for purposes which are chiefly rhetorical, or to rationalise choices, decisions or judgements which may, in fact, have been made on other grounds. This is uncritical futures, where the reiteration of clichés and stereotypes are reproduced and passed through temporal frames. There is no fostering of thinking, nor questions about the images provided, but rather they act as stimulus for a range of activities which then perpetuate the idea that schools are “doing” futures. In many ways, these ideas are also assumed within Gough’s third level of approaching futures within education: taken-for-granted futures. Taken-for-granted futures are passively received as we pass through different phases and stages of our life. Livingston and Evans (1956), for example, summarised the basic tenets of these futures when Doris Day sang:

When I was just a little girl I asked my mother, what will I be?
Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?
Here’s what she said to me:
Que Sera, Sera, whatever will be, will be.
The future’s not ours to see. Que Sera, Sera,
What will be will be.

Gough suggested that there is little futures speak at governmental levels, which does not allow the exploration of multiple possible futures. In turn, the futures that are taken for granted limit the usefulness of much of the work in which it is engaged, as when such “assumptions set restrictive program that is on inquiries, which deserve to be more open-ended and the exploratory” (Gough, 1990, p. 305). In particular, much current rhetoric concerning futures in Australian education takes for granted the prospect (and the desirability) of an education-led economic recovery. It is a rhetoric largely generated by, and debated within, the unlimited constituency of economic rationalists (Bateman & Sutherland-Smith, in press).

Gough and others warn that children’s concepts of futures need to be interpreted cautiously and critically. A critique of futures education is that there are boundaries imposed by adult needs and stereotypes concerning future possibilities and potentials. Furthermore, there are other suggestions that futures education may be a way of pushing a particular agenda to serve the political interests of the research:

Adults should be cautious and confident of their moral grounds before setting out to design curricula which, deliberately or otherwise, tamper with children’s concepts and images of futures, regardless of whether or not these concepts and images reflect, distort, confound or transcend those of adults. (Gough, 1990, p. 308)

Gough’s cautionary advice supports the need for deeper temporal understandings to be developed for both students and their teachers. Building upon Gough’s identification of futures within curriculum, I will identify the ways in which futures time perspectives can be implicitly or explicitly identified within Australian curriculum documents.

**Implicit and explicit futures education**

Implicit futures education refers to statements, comments and curriculum outcomes that refer to the future, but are framed as tacit, token or taken-for-granted (Gough, 1990). Gough (1990) argued that a concept of futures is present in all educational discourse, even if it presents as no more than a tacit inference. Such comments and statements do not suggest the ways in which futures concepts will be developed through the curriculum, nor how they have been considered in developing the curriculum. Typical curriculum statements include: developing citizens of the future (Department of Education and Community Services ACT, n.d.) and personal and civic development of the person (ACT Department of Education and Training, 2008; Department of Employment Education and Training NT, 2004). Such claims are broad and not connected to specific images of the future, nor associated with explicit ways in which the curriculum will develop these futures capacities.

There are multiple curriculum areas in which futures education is implicit such as Science, Humanities
(History, Geography, Economics and Civics and Citizenship), Environmental Education and Technology. The assumed and taken-for-granted futures perspectives within these curricula are based upon the notion that in thinking about the sustainability of the environment, for example, we are automatically considering the future. While offering a range of important concepts and skills, the taken-for-granted future is often considered in terms of vocational orientation, civic responsibility and lifelong learning. Such approaches tend to be reactive in terms of the future, and more often than not will serve to enforce the status quo through an uncritical adoption of a taken-for-granted future with an unexamined past in terms of worldview. Implicit futures concepts include sustainability, technological futures, change and continuity, civic responsibility, globalisation, vocation and careers knowledge – the future of work and personal development.

Within an implicit futures approach, the learning is described as lifelong, holistic, flexible or just in time. Alternatively, it is seen in connection with skills associated with problem solving, cognitive development or in preparation for a complex world. In these ways, implicit futures in education may be seen as valuable, but they still markedly limit the ways in which students can engage in, explore, share, shape and critique the possible futures in which they might exist. For this reason, futures education more strongly values futures perspectives, tools and processes which are explicitly developed within curriculum (Gidley et al., 2004).

Explicit futures education as an overarching framework for curriculum work is considered as a missing dimension in education (Hicks, 2002, 2008). Explicit futures education is that which attempts to develop futures literacy, drawing widely upon futures studies literature for processes and content, and expressed in curriculum statements and outcomes that clearly problematised the future. In particular, an important point of departure from implicit futures is the use/inclusion and reference to the explicit knowledge bases, concepts and tools around possible, probable and preferable futures. Explicit futures also consider deep structures using a variety of approaches which encourage exploration of issues at the level of paradigm/worldview. Explicit futures perspectives within curriculum may be identified as those which directly develop temporal awareness as evidenced by relevant standards or outcomes for assessment. Furthermore, they will be apparent through the ways in which curriculum embraces specific futures thinking, and the inclusion of the multiple levels of futures possibilities – personal, local and global.

Table 1
Implicit and Explicit Futures Time Perspectives (FTP) in Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implicit FTP in curriculum</th>
<th>Explicit FTP in curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Introductory claims which link curriculum and school to idea of educating for the future</td>
<td>• Curriculum document leads with strong statements regarding the ways in which it educates for the future(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Document broadly describes the notion of a singular future</td>
<td>• Document acknowledges multiplicities of futures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Generalised claims which connect what occurs within curriculum to a vague notion of the future</td>
<td>• Document contains guiding learning standards/outcomes which might be evident in student learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other publications (Bateman, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010a), I have undertaken document analyses across a number of curriculum documents, identifying the ways futures perspectives are positioned across a number of learning areas. In looking for the temporal domains of curriculum, what was clearly evident is the strong presence of history. In each state and territory’s curriculum documents, there was a clear intention that Australian and other global histories should be taught as core components of curriculum content. This supports my claim that Australian curriculum is temporally biased towards the past. Moreover, with the emerging drafts of a national Australian Curriculum, this is reinforced through a prioritisation of History within curriculum. However, as well as being present within curriculum documents, I contend that educators must also become more conscious of, and explicit about, the futures dimension in order to assist students to access both their personal and global futures. This futures consciousness and a more temporally balanced curriculum will only arise through change in teacher practices and curriculum development.

In the next section, I provide a brief snapshot of the ways in which teachers talk about futures in classrooms. This snapshot is based upon a number of research projects which are more fully detailed in other publications (Bateman, 2010b, 2012). The futures discourses have been drawn from professional...
learning activities, individual interviews and across a number of focus group discussions. Teachers involved in these projects have worked across primary and secondary sectors, in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching areas. My role in these projects has been as a participant researcher facilitating professional learning, and/or as a critical investigator seeking through various methods to observe and understand how these futures perspectives are realised. Across the sites of these research projects, key assumptions have been apparent.

**Teachers thinking about futures**

Teachers clearly link their roles as school educators as preparing students for the future. There are many instances in the professional discussions of the teachers which align the notion of preparing students for a future with a notion of learning which is connected to the world or in regard to making sense of the world. In the early stages of each of the projects, it was evident that teachers lacked futures consciousness with regard to education. When asked 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. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2008)

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? (Anonymous, personal communication, 2008)

This lack of explicit futures consciousness means that teachers do not consider the connections between what students do in classrooms and the ways in which these experiences specifically inform or contribute to the shaping of a student’s image or capacity for the future. Rather, they assume 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 and manage accounts. In this way, notions of the future are manipulated to fit the curriculum, as opposed to generating curriculum which would explicitly address the possibilities of multiple futures. Teachers make 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.

With increased futures consciousness, teachers become more aware of the disjuncture between the rhetoric of preparing students for the future and the ways in which schools do 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. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2008)

However, insofar as the teacher recognised the importance of thinking about futures earlier in a student’s life, the study of the future, itself, has been considered worrisome in presenting information and justifying student learning. In some of these projects, there have been topics which are considered highly problematic within these students’ lives and not addressed within curriculum. Teachers have been concerned about how they should deal with things which might come up and make the future pretty bleak to the kids. They are also concerned about the negative images that some of these students have and how these can be avoided in the classroom for everyone else. In some instances, teachers are limited by the assumptions they hold about student futures, which in many ways reproduce the “hopeless feelings some of our kids have … you only have to see where they come from” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2008). Teachers almost perceive 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 are positioned as passive and the future as active. From this stance, the future is constructed as a repressive force to be feared, in its unknown shape – inaccessible, looming and unfamiliar. The teachers consider some topics taboo as they...
arise in discussions about possible futures investigations within the classroom curriculum.

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, Edwards, Halpin & George, 2002), and there is an acute awareness of parents’ potential perceptions and possible actions. In some instances, teachers described how particular children could not participate in activities as the content was not seen as appropriate by their parents. Within these studies, teachers’ perceived parental resistance to openly discussing aspects of children’s home lives, for example, religious affiliations, and of parental hypersensitivity to what the teachers deemed as controversial issues such as futures education. The teachers perceive that students’ bounded conceptions of the future are also present, and entrenched within classed and milieu practices of what is typically done within schooling and what might be expected (Anyon, 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 are omitted from classroom practices, thus again making the futures purposes of the school mere rhetoric.

Teachers often comment that there is 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. Teachers experience this pressure in a number of ways. This is reminiscent of an observation Slaughter (2004) made 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 marginalised, disempowered “foot soldiers”. (p. 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, such as futures education, which is potentially meaningful and empowering to their students, 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.

After being engaged in explicit futures learning, teachers are often shocked that they had not thought about this more. When their thinking is explicitly futures focused and informed, it is demonstrated in the ways that student learning is facilitated and through an increased presence of futures discourse within curriculum activities. Whereas teachers initially just assumed that the school prepared students for a future, they become more critical in the ways this intent is achieved and 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, in one site, when introducing the potential of a new National Curriculum to a staff meeting, these teachers facilitated activities utilising futures tools they had learned. 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 are described as worthwhile and as adding a whole new agenda to the ways in which they work. 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. (Anonymous, personal communication, 2008)

Conclusion

In summary, there is a great deal of futures education rhetoric published in social forums and educational institutions. Page (1996, p. 128) argues that “researchers and policy makers frequently pay lip service to the importance of preparing students for the future without seriously addressing this as an objective in their curricula and methodologies”. It is crucial that teachers, schools and curriculum writers become more reflective and cognisant of the critical impetus with which the future(s) implore curriculum development for our present and future generations of learners and livers and those who live beyond the institutions in
which we teach. Schools are under enormous pressure to introduce new aspects of curriculum. Futures education is not a new aspect of curriculum – it is an underdone aspect of curriculum. I argue that, as educators, we need to be critical and discriminating in offering our students open-ended, relevant and temporally inclusive learning experiences. As the ongoing cycle of curriculum reviews are undertaken and new curriculum documents flourish, it is crucial that we rethink the role of schooling. It is only through a renewed sense of what schools aspire to achieve that we will effectively and critically refocus attention on the possibilities which exist within a multiplicity of futures.

References


Livingston, J., & Evans, R. (1956). Whatever will be, will be [Recorded by D. Day]. On *Que Sera Sera* [Record]. North America: Columbia Records.


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.