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Ethical dilemmas: Teaching futures in schools

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ABSTRACT

Educational policy is implicitly futures oriented, yet in most instances fails to engage learners with explicit futures tools and concepts at a school level. Futures studies in education, or futures education has the potential to reposition learning as purposeful and mobilizes the lives of participants by connecting the curriculum of schools with the multifaceted futures of learners. This is a complex task within the tensions often existing between: the cultural role of a school, the expectations of a society, the expertise of teachers, and the increasingly diverse needs of learners (Bateman, 2012). It is between the tensions of these things that the 'ethical' issues of what is taught, or omitted as content in a classroom and the consequences of these choices are evident.

This paper highlights ethical and moral dilemmas, as they were apparent in two futures education projects. In the first study, the teachers discuss the inherent limitations of offering a broader and more futures oriented curriculum. In the second study, teachers reflect upon their students' anxiety with regards to futures images as they are interrogated within a curriculum study. Each of these studies highlights the ethical challenges that arise, when possible, preferable and probable futures are developed as part of learning in school settings, which are culturally and demographically diverse.

Tirri and Husu (2002) highlight the ethical dilemmas, which emerge in classrooms around the world, based on conflicts in values and competing intentions between key stakeholders. In the studies which contribute to this discussion, there is evidence to suggest that futures thinking causes conflict within an individual's perception of how the world should be, or their worldview as a result of futures imagining which goes beyond what is taken for granted, or is an assumed future eventuality. In the same way, Carrington, Deppeler, and Moss (2010) argue that all curriculum choices about what is taught (or not taught) in a classroom reflect an ethical decision made by a teacher, with regards to what is foregrounded for learning and what is omitted.

It is crucial to re-examine the role of a school in educating students for their futures, as opposed to educating students with an aim of furthering governmental agendas. More significantly, however, as this paper highlights, it is exploring the boundaries of what is acceptable or unacceptable, appropriate or inappropriate to teach in a classroom, given the changing diversities of schools and education systems throughout the world.

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1. Introduction

Preparing students for a future is a fundamental part of every society's discourses with regards to the role of education. One of these discourses features the idea that education is a way of sustaining humanity and furthering the western enlightenment stories of progress (Crain, 2011). Another discourse foregrounds a Freirean notion of liberating people from oppression, created through hierarchical societal structures or social and cultural milieu (Freire, 2005). The third is a neoliberal discourse, where education and learners are commodities, positioned as competitors in a global knowledge economy amidst a number of competing agendas (Bateman and Sutherland-Smith, 2011). Alternatively, the futures orientation of school practices, as lived experiences in curriculum and other policy, has been described as tacit, token and taken-for-granted (Gough, 1990).

Over a sustained period, I have argued (Bateman, 2012), along with others such as Hicks (2012), Slaughter (2007), Masini (2013) and Gidley (2012) that futures perspectives are not explicitly developed in school. Moreover, I have argued that *the future* is often presented as singular and uncontested. I have highlighted the benefits of futures learning, through case studies of school practice and teacher professional learning. In this paper, I think more deeply about the 'futures dilemma', which I have encountered through the experiences of teachers. This dilemma highlights the tensions between doing the 'right thing' in educating explicitly for unknown futures against doing the 'right thing' in not changing the way that a learner identifies his/her possible futures. The 'right things' are difficult to substantiate, given that ethics and morality are both cultural and subjective.

This paper begins with a short discussion about the development of Futures Time Perspectives (FTP) and Futures Education. Subsequently, a foundation for thinking about the 'ethics' of teaching and classroom curriculum practice will be established. Finally, the data from two projects will be used to illustrate the tensions which became evident as teachers challenged the taken-for-granted images of the future that their students held, through explicit futures education. Arising from this work are a number of points for consideration for the dimension of futures thinking in schools, and an insight into the delicacy with which such endeavors ought to be pursued.

1.1. Thinking about the future (FTP) and futures in education

A growing area of research in educational psychology is futures time perspective (FTP) and its relationship to the achievement of desired educational outcomes. Time perspectives (TP) organize an individual's capacity to shift cognitive focus to a temporal orientation, such as past, present or future. In doctoral studies I suggested that a benefit of futures education within curriculum is an increased temporal mobility or shift of focus between temporal orientations. An agility to shift one's focus between time perspectives, results in a more critical worldview and deeper understanding of the world in which one lives. The specific capacity to think about one's future is a Futures Time Perspective (FTP).

McInerney (2004) suggests that it is reasonable to assume that a sense of purpose for the future is important in motivating individuals to engage in activities perceived to be instrumental in achieving valued future outcomes, and that there is value in studying FTP. Most of our vision for the future is based in a personal worldview. Our understanding of the future has remained in that early childhood place where we first encountered the non-present. Futures education is a strong temporal orientation in considering the varied future possibilities, probabilities and preferences associated. It contributes a more balanced futures temporal orientation to the past-oriented view of education and the wider society.

Futures education recognizes "the nature of the future that children articulate for themselves" as different to a "world in which baby boomers grew-up as children and adolescents" (McInerney, 2004, p. 142). It acknowledges the many changes that occur within students' life worlds, both personal and shared.

> It was common with earlier generations to have a relatively predictable future that included some schooling, further education for a limited number of individuals, assured work in a career or trade that would be the career or trade for one's entire working life, marriage, family retirement, and pensions. (McInerney, 2004, p. 143)

This suggests that children could be more concerned and involved regarding their futures, and to utilize opportunities, such as education, to shape futures described as uncertain, and a world subject to rapid change. Alternatively, without explicit development of the FTP, it would be easy for students to feel helpless and hopeless, and be disinterested in and disassociated from a future, which is predetermined, or be unable to be affected, as a result of the uncertainty associated with rapid change in the world. The role a school plays in capacitating either of these orientations is at the center of the tension outlined previously.

Hudson (2002) suggests that there is a strong relationship between the development of FTP and the knowledge and skills one develops as valuable and relevant. In this way, the more metacognitive a person is in regard to his/her own futures orientation, the more discriminatory he/she is in attendance to different aspects of learning and engagement. Those with a longer futures time perspective perceive their present behavior as more instrumental in achieving a broader range of both immediate and future goals. Hence, the perceived value of the present task activity is consequently higher. Conversely, individuals with short FTP are "less able to articulate future goals and hence see less value in activities in which they may be currently engaged and which may be considered 'detached' from the real world of their experiences" (McInerney, 2004, p. 143).

Phalet, Andriessen, and Lens (2004) say that schooling is a futures-oriented investment. All curriculum documents reflect a common focus on preparing children for the future, however research often reports, that school students do not perceive an

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