

**ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL FUTURES:
PEDAGOGIES FOR EMERGENT WORLDS**

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Sense Publishers
Rotterdam
2008

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4. FUTURES EDUCATION

Catalyst for our times

PREAMBLE

The study of Futures is intellectually stimulating and seeks to empower students. It draws on the innate capacity of the human mind to engage in foresight, or futures thinking enhanced by concepts, tools and techniques. When this enhanced capacity to engage with 'the future' is implemented in specific areas ... Futures can contribute substantially to social and economic well-being. Students who take this course will be encouraged to transform their view of the world. As they develop informed foresight about the 21st century they may experience many shifts of value, focus and attitude and they should discover that most fears, negative attitudes and 'doomsday' images of the future rest on misperceptions. In learning how present actions will shape future consequences, students gain access to new sources of understanding and action ...

Futures also address the critical issues of late adolescence and provides a valuable preparation for working life. Therefore, instead of looking ahead to the world beyond school with anxiety and fear, students will be able to look ahead with much greater clarity and confidence. Such attitudes and skills clearly provide a sound basis for decision making ...

Citizens of tomorrow need to be prepared for a world which will be significantly different from the world of the 1990s: a world characterised by rapid technological change, major environmental challenges, globalism and expanding information networks. This syllabus provides the opportunity for students to develop the skills that will enable them to develop leadership in shaping their own future and Australia's. (Pre-Pilot Senior Syllabus in Futures, Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, Brisbane, April 1998, pp. 1-2)

INTRODUCTION

It is startling to realise that the first attempts to teach in a specifically futures-oriented mode took place in the 1960s, half a century ago. Back then, far-sighted individuals could clearly see some of the challenging global issues and problems that have since become daily news. What is striking, however, is that despite many attempts to bring futures education (FE) fully into the mainstream of educational thinking and practice, it still remains surprisingly rare. This chapter therefore

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begins with a brief overview of the global outlook. Next it considers some of the ways bureaucracies de-focus this outlook and marginalise innovations intended to address it. Finally it reviews what FE offers schools, teachers and students in the early twenty-first century—a catalyst for deeper understanding of the world and ways out of humanity’s self-constructed trap.

THE STORY THAT CONNECTS

Over the last 30 years a reliable and, one might say, ‘scientifically informed’, series of publications has appeared that describes the human predicament with increasing clarity and precision. For example, beginning with the *Limits to Growth* (Meadows, 1972) and currently ending with *Beyond the Limits: a Thirty Year Update* (Meadows, 2005) the Meadows team provided an evolving perspective that tracks our growing understanding of global change and also what this means for human life and culture. More recently the International Geosphere Program (IGP) sponsored another series of publications that brought together the work of many scientists from around the world. One of these is called *Global Change and the Earth System* (Steffan, 2004) and it also provides vital new depth understanding about the context in which human life is framed. Here is a sample:

Many human activities that reached take-off points sometime in the 20th Century have accelerated sharply towards the end of the Century. The last fifty years have without doubt seen the most rapid transformation of the human relationship with the natural world in the history of the species. (p. 258)

As a consequence:

The Earth is currently operating in a no-analogue state. In terms of key environmental parameters, the Earth System has recently moved well outside the range of the natural variability exhibited over at least the last half million years. The nature of the changes now taking place simultaneously in the Earth System, their magnitudes and rates of change are unprecedented. (p. 262)

Overall, works of this kind describe how, over the last 100 years, our species has grown fundamentally out of balance with its world. It follows that we need to understand this in some depth and discern wise, informed, society wide strategies of response. I call this ‘the story that connects’ because the perspective brings together hitherto separate pieces of information, creating the clarity that necessarily precedes action. But, of course, what has been called the ‘blizzard of change’ confronting us is not limited to humanity’s many impacts upon the external world, significant as these are. The range of change processes can appear bewildering because they operate across many different domains. That is why change analysts and foresight practitioners have adopted various methods for managing this complexity.¹

Two other works provide a flavour of the rich web of understanding that has arisen in relation to a variety of change processes, including social, economic and

political ones. The first is by Mikhail Gorbachev, former President of the Soviet Union. His book, *Manifesto for the Earth*, sets out a brief, but coherent, analysis of the global situation along with some clear recommendations for change (Gorbachev, 2006).

Gorbachev is no idealist. As one who lived through the multiple privations of life in war-torn and post-war Russia, his view of the world is grounded in the realities of life as seen from a small farm in the Stavropol region of the North Caucasus. As Russian President he is known for initiating certain democratic reforms that opened up the Soviet Union, bringing it forward out of the totalitarian era. He is therefore well qualified to state that “the opportunities on offer at the end of the cold war were for the most part not taken up” (p. 31). And he is clear about why: lack of vision, lack of political will and the spread of economic liberalism around the world. This was demonstrated at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development where a variety of progressive measures (such as investment in renewable energy by the OPEC countries and measures to curb excessive consumption in the rich West) failed to be taken up and implemented. For these and related reasons he considers that global politics is in a genuine crisis.

Gorbachev writes about how the Chernobyl disaster affected him personally. It was “a decisive test for glasnost” (openness), it “shattered” his belief in the “absolute reliability of technology” and it radically changed the time-scales that he'd been implicitly using. “What right have we to burden our descendants with such a problem?” (p. 22). In the book he writes succinctly about the “three crises”: economic, social and ecological. After lamenting the widespread failure of the UN and governments to respond, Gorbachev calls for a rejection of the consumer society (which he regards as “a disaster”), a re-assessment of economic liberalism (“the growing ecological crisis shows that a liberal economy functioning mainly according to the criteria of profitability and a return on capital is not capable of coping with the ecological challenge” (p. 41)) and a wholesale commitment toward re-thinking and re-prioritising human activities on the Earth. “What we need is not a revolution but an evolution of the idea we harbour about ourselves and about how the world might be organised and what its new shape in the age of globalisation might be” (p. 53). We may note in passing that it is just such questions that have considered within the futures domain for some time.ⁱⁱ

Gorbachev's solution is to put his energy into initiatives like the Earth Charter, Green Cross International and the Earth Dialogues process. He's accepted that governments *per se* and the UN simply will not act in the ways that will achieve sustained change. Therefore the only route left is direct engagement with people around the world and, especially, through the NGO movement. He does, however, overlook the role of education.

The second example is a work that explores the dilemma of the US and, by extension, other technically developed societies. *The Long Emergency* is a challenging book that employs an uncompromising cultural analysis of the US to take issue with nearly all of the underlying myths and cultural assumptions that have become widely accepted, not only there, but around the world. (Kunstler, 2005, Sardar & Davies, 2004) Kunstler, a US citizen, thinks that the US has been “sleepwalking into the future” for many decades by adopting and promoting a

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short-termist, exploitive and self-defeating set of policies and practices that will cost it dearly. These include:

- the 'fad' of globalism and a 'magical' market economy;
- present-day profiteering at the expense of future well being;
- a “colossal mis-investment” in suburbia;
- the creation of an unsustainable economy from a formerly sustainable one;
- dishonest government where vital trends are dismissed as “unthinkable”; and, overall,
- a Las Vegas-type culture of dependency and purposeless dissipation.

Underlying all this are issues of modernity and the projected decline of fossil fuels. Kunstler suggests that the former is much more dependent upon the latter than anyone is prepared to admit. He points out that the peaks of US and world oil discoveries were in the 1930s and 1960s respectively. The significance of subsequent oil 'shocks' and temporary shortages was overlooked due to an inherent American complacency, its belief that it could secure supplies from overseas and then by the emergence of new fields in Alaska and the North Sea. But the figures from the Middle East are uncertain and the growth of China has helped to accelerate demand right at the point when supply is fully stretched. In this view, we have already reached the period of 'peak oil', and the ride “down from the peak”, as it were, will be far more difficult than current decision makers realise. There's also a deeper and more vexing issue that is seldom considered anywhere. Kunstler views the oil era as having permitted the world's population to rise to its current level, a level that cannot possibly be sustained. He writes:

The current world population of 6.5 billion people has no hope whatsoever of sustaining itself at current levels, and the fundamental conditions of life on earth are about to force the issue. The only questions are: what form will the inevitable attrition take, and how, and which places, and when? (p. 61)

About half of the book deals with the post-oil world that he believes will occur before mid-century. He suggests that:

eventually all nations will have to contend with the problems of the Long Emergency: the end of industrial growth, falling standards of living, economic desperation, declining food production, and domestic political strife. A point will come when even the great powers of the world no longer have the means to project their power any distance. Even nuclear weapons may become inoperable, considering how much their careful maintenance depends on other technological systems linked to our fossil fuel economy. (p. 98)

Unlike some other commentators he believes that, with the possible and temporary exception of nuclear power, there are simply no viable alternatives to oil. For a variety of reasons, the so-called 'renewable' sources of energy such as solar, wind, wave, hydro and hydrogen, will not replace oil and gas. Nuclear power may produce some base load electricity but this will fail to serve the wider spectrum of energy needs. The underlying theme of the book, therefore, is that of a

culture that lost its grip on reality, created a fantasy world predicated on cheap, easily transported energy, and now faced with chronic entropic decline.

Clearly this is a powerful and challenging thesis. There is, however, one very significant omission: he says virtually nothing about the many sources of vitality, creativity and depth innovation within US culture, including those found within a variety of educational settings. I will return to this point below.

What we have in these brief samples from an extensive futures literature is the beginnings of a diagnosis of the 'state of the planet' in the early twenty-first century. A central claim of this chapter is that, equipped with this resource, it is well within the capacity of human societies to respond. A well-grounded and informed futures perspective goes a long way beyond allowing us to propose a variety of actions to preserve the environment, vital as this is. It also provides the tools to understand deeper issues like the fallacies of economic growth and discerns some of the more subtle drivers of unsustainable outlooks within the heart of the Western worldview itself (Berman, 1981; Slaughter, 2004). Is all this too difficult for young people? Well, expressed in that manner, perhaps. Yet, the starting points for a futures discourse are quite straightforward. Again, we'll return to this later. First I want to consider how educational bureaucracies have responded to this unprecedented outlook and to some of the innovations intended to address it.

HOW BUREAUCRACIES DE-FOCUS THE FUTURE AND UNDERMINE INNOVATION

The first, fairly obvious, point to make is that bureaucracies are not designed to be forward thinking. They exist to carry out a range of administrative tasks in the here and now as dictated by past practice and current political realities. The Directors and CEOs of such organisations must first and foremost serve their current political masters or they are quickly out of a job. In working with such entities it is striking to see how the focus of attention is not only short term but also largely internal. Broadly speaking they are not densely connected to the wider world but operate unthinkingly within a pre-defined sense of what has been called 'bounded rationality'. They are profoundly rational, and there are reasons for everything, but reality is deeply filtered and simplified. There are two immediate implications for the topic under discussion. First, approaches to 'the future' when they do occur, tend to be stereotypical. Second, as I will show below, innovations with any potential for deep-seated change are quickly marginalised.

Over several decades it becomes clear that government departments, bureaucracies, decision-makers in school systems are far more comfortable with initiatives addressing the futures of education. The basic reason for this is that such exercises are largely extrapolative, tend not to question bureaucratic assumptions and do little to question or challenge existing educational practice. On the other hand, approaches that consider futures in education introduce dynamic new features into present-day administration, theory and practice. Thus, overall, it tends to end up in the 'too hard' basket despite its many positive implications (Hicks, 2002; Gidley et al., 2004).

A second point about bureaucracies is that they do not welcome innovations ‘from the outside’, as it were. Many futures initiatives I’ve known of, or been involved in, worked very well at the school level and were enthusiastically embraced. But as soon as one moves beyond particular schools to the system level everything changes. Here futures in education initiatives seem to vanish like smoke on a windy day and are seen no more. Perhaps the central reason for this is that school systems are governed, in turn, by two powerful sets of background forces that have no real interest at all in education or, indeed, our collective futures. Those forces are politics and economics. In fact education, politics and economics are themselves mediated through an ideological framework that has become hegemonic over recent decades (Milojević, 2005). This managerialist, market oriented, growth-addicted view of the world has actively worked to de-focus and hold back many useful social innovations, not only this one (Fisher, 2006). The result is that teachers in schools (and let us not forget, teachers and learners in very many other locations) have been undermined by these background forces that all-too-often lie out of sight and unregarded. Bringing futures work in education back into focus and freshly comprehending its individual and cultural value is indeed a challenging task. Yet it is a vital step toward a worthwhile future for humankind.

A specific example occurred in Queensland, Australia, during the mid-1990s when I made many trips from Melbourne to Brisbane to chair a committee convened by the then Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (BSSSS). The committee had been formed following a government report that had recommended a more explicitly futures-oriented approach (Queensland Government, 1994). The result, after about two years’ work, was a detailed outline of a two-year subject for Years 11 and 12 called: *Futures Personal, Social, Global* (BSSSS, 1995). The subject was put out for trial in a number of Queensland schools and a formal evaluation was undertaken (Underwood, 1996). It’s worth noting some of the reasons provided to the official evaluator *by the schools* for choosing to trial the draft subject:

- at each school there is a teacher or teachers enthusiastic about the challenge of this innovative syllabus;
- the subject is seen as a means of making available the skills of the humanities’ disciplines as students move from traditional disciplines to new technology-based subjects;
- Futures is seen as being relevant to the needs of students in a changing world. They will learn to cope with change by understanding it; and
- The subject offers opportunity for students to acquire and develop in the areas of basic competencies and the core curriculum elements. (p. 3)

Equally interesting are the reasons given *by students* themselves for wishing to take the subject:

- the content of the course is appealing;
- the belief that students should develop an active relationship with the future;
- (it is) the best subject available on the subject choice line;
- the belief that it would help them to get an overall position in the Student Evaluation Profile needed to obtain tertiary entrance; and

- the expectation that it would be helpful or needed in a future job. (p. 4)

While it can be argued that creating a new Futures subject is not the only—nor even the best—option, clearly this one was going to be a success. The summary of the evaluation highlighted the following points:

- an “encouraging number of students” had taken part;
- the teachers involved were “highly qualified in a number of disciplines”;
- there was “favourable parent reaction” to the work carried out;
- the trial subject offered “attractive and innovative learning experiences”;
- teachers were having “some difficulties with the assessment of students in group work”;
- there were some concerns about “insufficient detail in the curriculum document”;
- also, “locating and adapting resources for classroom use are concerns”;
- yet there was also “an impressive enthusiasm for the new subject amongst Administrators, Heads of Department and Teachers”; and, finally,
- “this new and innovative subject is being enthusiastically received in the trial schools and, though there have been some difficulties and concerns, is progressing satisfactorily”. (p. 10)

The results of this evaluation are given in some detail because they show very clearly that, with some predictable and routine teething issues, the new subject was enthusiastically received by schools, teachers, students and parents. You’d think, therefore, that the innovation would be well enough established to enter into common practice. Yet that is not what happened (see box, below).

<i>How to Kill a Curriculum Innovation: 1988–1999</i>	
1987-88	Futures curriculum project initiated within the Catholic Education Office, Brisbane.
September 1993	B. P. O’Rourke, principal of Corinda High School, publishes Futures and the Curriculum discussion document.
March 1994	Review of the Queensland School Curriculum (the <i>Wiltshire Report</i>) published. Recommends that ‘every syllabus in every subject should have a futures perspective’.
1994—1995	Subject Advisory Committee (SAC) meets under auspices of the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (BSSSS) to develop Futures curriculum framework.
12 May 1995	BSSSS votes unanimously to adopt the new Futures subject.
June 1995	Trial of Senior Syllabus in Futures confirmed.
6 October 1995	Teacher’s Conference on Senior Futures held at Education House, Brisbane. Trial schools selected soon thereafter.

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June 1996	Favourable first evaluation report on trial of Senior Futures subject.
December 1997	Final report on trial of Senior Futures. Recommends subject continue to full pilot stage.
April 1998	Pre-Pilot Syllabus released by BSSSS. Intended for use in 'approved schools' commencing with Year 11 in 1999.
1999	BSSSS under threat from 're-organisation'. Pilot abandoned.

Following the successful trial, and for reasons never openly explained, the BSSSS shelved the new subject indefinitely. And it has remained shelved ever since. This is not unusual for such would-be innovations—it is more often the norm. The result has serious individual and social implications. A generation of young people has been denied access to the field and thus also the chance to acquire many of the skills of proactive citizenship. A little of what has been thus far lost is evoked by this statement from a Year 11 student in one of the trial schools. She wrote:

This has been a very empowering experience for myself, as this (subject) created an opportunity for the advantages of the internet to be experienced first-hand. The due date provided just that little bit of extra inspiration. However, this driving force was ultimately eclipsed by the motivation from the desire to achieve something that I have never tried before. It really opened my eyes. Having the occasion to teach others about the Futures Field forced me to re-think what it means to me, and my relationship with its role now and in the future. In a sense it restored a feeling of 'awe' that I initially experienced when I first encountered the field, and has cleared away a lot of the baggage and associations that accumulated throughout the year. The fact that it has occurred through a blossoming and thriving new medium has been a bonus and I feel that I have learned a great deal about my own capabilities ... (Rundle, 1996)

Responses of this kind are not uncommon when FE work is carried out sensitively and well, and when teachers are adequately supported in these tasks. The fact that the innovation was set aside is evidence of an acute systemic difficulty that thrives in state bureaucracies, i.e., their long-standing habit of eliminating the very innovations that would have enhanced the human and social ability to address what is clearly an unprecedented and challenging global outlook. This remains a scandal and an embarrassment to the teaching profession, to the authorities responsible and to any meaningful vision of healthy and forward-looking civil society. But the good news is that this state of affairs can be changed very quickly where the point of so doing is understood.

'JOINING THE DOTS' THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING AND STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

If there is a summary statement that describes the predicament of school systems today it is that they are still caught up in 'past perceptions of problems'. This was

demonstrated very clearly in Australia during 2007 when there was a politically driven and nationwide shift away from various progressive innovations—including futures—in school curricula and a strong call for ‘back to basics’. The states came under severe pressure to bring back traditional disciplines such as English, history and geography. Some indication of the depths to which the education debate had fallen was suggested by the former prime minister’s willingness to personally become associated with the kind of crass and negative opinionising normally found only in the tabloid press and to launch a book that was not only spiritually and ethically arid but also betrayed a deep ignorance of the wider context of human life.ⁱⁱⁱ

As time goes by it becomes increasingly clear that the lack of an explicit futures perspective in any curriculum—be it ‘traditional’ or ‘progressive’—leads to the same general consequences, i.e., a new generation of students lacking any real grasp of the human predicament and of the ways it can be addressed. This is not simply a lost opportunity, it actively undermines any notion of a viable wider social project as it passes from generation to generation. Clearly this dilemma will not be solved overnight.

I mentioned above how short term politics and conventional economics, in a sense ‘conspire’ to restrict educational thinking, practice and administration very much to the here-and-now (Slaughter, 2004, Chapter 13). We do not have to look far to find a telling comparison from another domain that contrasts in almost every detail with currently accepted practice in educational settings. While I in no way condone the values and culture involved, the following example demonstrates two vital points. First, for any organisation interested in understanding broad processes of change, systematic scanning of the environment (a precursor to disciplined forward thinking) is both possible and highly desirable. Second, the skills involved have been around for some time, are not particularly esoteric and could easily be widely adopted if the will was there to do so. Consider, therefore, the following passage that describes a typical early morning meeting at a large international merchant bank:

... Seated round the table are people who have got to the top of their product speciality at the world’s biggest financial players. These people know what they are doing, and they know everything there is to know about their product area. They get together daily; they are not discussing the weather or the sports scores, they are discussing business threats and opportunities, ‘anticipated market movements’ to use one of their favourite phrases. These are real-life, dynamic meetings not dull bureaucratic risk-control affairs. These are firms in a state of ‘constant communication’ ... not just in the meetings but outside too, using the informal networks that the organisational structure develops ... This is an industry taking a great deal of trouble to join up the dots at every conceivable level. (Augar, 2005, p. 113)

Although I’ve not visited more than a tiny fraction of the world’s educational bureaucracies, I’d venture to suggest that not one of them has meetings of this kind anywhere, at any time, whose purpose is to scan broadly and “connect the dots”. We’ve already seen why. Like the governments they serve, they are simply not alert to dynamic shifts in the macro-environment. Nor, on the whole, do they have

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the skills that this alertness requires. Bureaucracies serve as agents of government policy for social administration in the here and now. In this role of ‘minding the shop’ they have no interest in, nor any capability for, forward thinking. It is simply not within their remit or job description. One could argue that they are concerned with continuity, not with change. So when ideas, people, books, curriculum innovations with some of these features appear, a well-oiled ‘immune system’ not dissimilar to the white cells in the human bloodstream, is activated and the ‘invaders’ are repelled. Yet for those with eyes to see, historically unprecedented changes can be clearly discerned ‘in the pipeline’ or, to change the metaphor, ‘tsunamis of change’ can be seen moving steadily toward us from the near future (Dator, 1992). What therefore are some appropriate responses?

FORWARD-LOOKING EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES

A number of educational thinkers and writers have addressed this issue and come to similar conclusions. For example, Peters covers much of the relevant territory in his paper on “Educational Policy Futures” (Peters, 2005). What is clear from this and similar sources is that the grounds for including explicit futures perspectives within educational administration and school curricula are now compelling. Ironically, this case was made quite explicitly in what became known as the *Wiltshire Report* commissioned by the Queensland Government in the 1990s (Queensland Government, 1994). An overview document states very clearly that “the Panel recommends that every syllabus in every subject should have a futures perspective, tackling new timely topics and crucial current social issues” (p. 5). One reason this did not occur is that there was no real support for it in the bureaucracy, which continued along its well-worn ‘business-as-usual’ path, with the results discussed above.

In contrast to this sad and familiar picture it seems rather obvious to suggest that educational bureaucracies need to be re-designed (not re-structured along similar lines) for a very different world. It is a world that is, or should be, informed by what I termed ‘the story that connects’. *It is simply no longer good enough for large-scale economic interests to draw on advanced thinking and innovative practice for commercial gain while educational interests continue to lag decades behind. The environmental scanning capabilities, the same global connectivity and the sense of urgency to ‘connect the dots’ should now be designed into school systems.* This means new structures, new operational units, new job descriptions and a new, or renewed, sense of ‘what education is about’ in the early twenty-first century (Beare & Slaughter, 1993).

Another way to approach this question at the system level is to consider how strategic foresight differs from old-style planning. One definition of strategic foresight is:

The ability to create and maintain high quality, coherent and functional forward views and to use the insights arising in organisationally useful ways. For example, to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy, and to explore new markets, products and services. (Slaughter, 1999, p. 287)

Most, if not all, educational bureaucracies have some sort of planning and/or strategy function, albeit one that is inward looking and stereotypical. On the other hand our understanding of foresight has developed rapidly in recent years and we can now regard it as a human capacity with considerable power when it is properly developed and applied. Thus, the process of adding ‘foresight’ to planning and/or strategy is profoundly enlivening and can readily be seen to ‘refresh’ the latter. It does so by bringing into play ideas, methods and capabilities that had earlier been overlooked. Moreover, there are sufficient case studies available to demonstrate these gains in capability very clearly (Slaughter, 2007). Such changes are needed at the highest levels—from ministers to department heads to professors in universities—before innovations at the school level can thrive.

Thus far I’ve argued that FE is mandated by threats to human civilisation that are now rebounding upon humanity from an over-stressed global system. But we should also be clear that the intrinsic value to young people provides equally powerful grounds for innovations of this kind.

WHAT DOES FUTURES IN EDUCATION OFFER YOUNG PEOPLE?

Again, this is not new. The many constructive consequences of teaching and learning explicitly within a futures mode are well understood and documented (Hicks, 2002). It has long been understood that for young people ‘the future’ is a topic of deep and abiding concern. For example, one researcher looking at the experiences of teenage girls recently reported that: “every single girl had these massive feelings of doubt. A lot of them ask: ‘what am I doing here? Do I have a future and what is it?’” (Sullivan, 2007). All are, quite reasonably, interested in the unfolding of their own lives and not a few can see that there are a number of issues that give rise to concern, if not outright fear.

Unfortunately, however, it has been the case that young peoples’ images of futures are largely and one-sidedly derived from the mass media: films, computer games, TV and Internet subcultures, with few resources available to process or mediate their implicit and explicit content, and with all-too-familiar results. A 2007 survey found that:

The future most young Australians want is neither the future they expect nor the future they are promised under current national priorities ... Most ... see the expected or probable future of humankind largely in terms of a continuation or worsening of today’s global and national problems and difficulties. The probable future is also the problematic future. (Eckersley et al., 2007, p. 13)

While such images are certainly not without value when considered carefully, they also tend to exert a distinctly negative influence. Hence many young people grow up fearing the future, learning to avoid it, and unaware of either its positive potentials or the many ways that they could act to address issues of concern. On the other hand, FE provides the perspectives and understandings that provide a basis for many long term solutions to the human predicament: active foresight, sustainable cultures, stewardship of the Earth. If we recall the “feeling of awe” and

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the “clearing away of (mental) baggage” mentioned above by the student from a trial school, one can readily detect the kind of fruitful engagement between alert youngsters and the challenges ahead that stand at the heart of ‘effective schooling’.

What’s currently missing from educational thinking and practice is a specifically futures discourse. It is absent from the highest levels of executive decision making, from universities and professional associations and also from classrooms. Yet it is growing mastery here that actually provides the symbolic starting points to move ‘the future’ from being a domain of fear and avoidance to one of agency and personal power. The point is that even a very basic familiarity with, and competence in, a futures discourse has catalytic effects. In a nutshell, and most centrally, *it ‘unlocks’ the Futures domain and catalyses human and social potential*. What does this mean? Ideas that seemed vague are clarified (e.g., how human foresight can become a principle of great social utility and power); global problems that seemed ‘too hard’ now admit a range of solutions (e.g., peak oil and alternatives for an over-dependent world); the links between individual and collective action are revealed (e.g., how political systems can be influenced through various forms of ‘right action’) and so on. It is appropriate, therefore, to return to the ‘good news’ mentioned above, i.e., *the starting points for a futures discourse are simple, straightforward and well within the capacity of every young person*. Given the chance, all young people can understand concepts such as the following:

- the use of foresight in everyday life;
- the use of different time frames for different purposes;
- exploring the 200 year present (stretching 100 back and forward);
- the use of simple tools such as time lines and futures wheels; and
- how to change fears into motivation.

This is merely a small sample of the resources available (Slaughter & Bussey, 2006).

At first sight, and without the symbolic support of a futures discourse, the futures domain may appear either threatening or ‘empty’. Yet the latter is an illusion woven from habit, linguistic traps (such as past, present, future tenses) and cultural assumptions that have not been clearly reflected upon, problematised and re-framed. Solutions are not distant but, in fact, surprisingly close at hand. Anyone who looks at daily life carefully enough soon discovers that without a very personal mastery of applied foresight no one would rise from their bed each day. No one would go to school or work because they’d have lost all motivation and purpose. It’s the fact of having an open future that makes it possible, indeed, requires us, to think, evaluate and plan ahead in virtually everything we do. Understanding this makes it a good deal easier to explore the implications of futures enquiry and informed action at the organisational and social levels.

The key point is this: exploring the futures domain at a range of levels provides some of the most valuable ways to get to grips with human life and culture in time. *Despite a current preoccupation with ‘back to basics’ in school curricula around the world and the false sense of security that it provides to some, forward thinking should be seen as a core skill, requirement and focus at every level of every school system*. This was the conclusion reached by the *Wiltshire Report* in Queensland in

1994 and subsequent events have only served to confirm its veracity. Executive decision-makers need an immersion in Futures so that they can become attuned to the meaning of signals of change in the wider world. Teacher educators need it because successive generations of teachers are preparing young people for a progressively altered world. Young people themselves need it because they face a number of powerful systemic challenges, any of which could bring the species to its knees, and they need to be prepared (Slaughter, 2006).

BEYOND DENIAL, AVOIDANCE AND REPRESSION

It was suggested above there have been many curriculum innovations directed at bringing futures thinking and perspectives into educational thinking and practice but hitherto they have generally been marginalised. The Queensland trial subject in Futures is a case in point. The common strategies of denial, avoidance and repression of unwanted knowledge screen out uncomfortable truths at every level and in every sector of society. Now, however, ‘signals’ from the global system regarding conflict, climate change, water supply, chronic over-dependence on cheap oil—these and many others—are confronting everyone with facts that can no longer be ignored. We are living through the most profound, many-stranded, global transition in history. It is one in which the human species needs to pay close attention to the many ‘signals’ emerging from the global system. According to the Meadows team three basic responses are available:

- deny, disguise or confuse the signals;
- alleviate the pressures from limits by technical or economic fixes; or
- acknowledge that the human socio-economic system as currently structured is unmanageable and seek to change the structure of the system. (Meadows, 2005, pp. 235-236)

Any look at the mass media will find the first solution highlighted clearly and often. A particularly obnoxious example is *The Australian* newspaper’s monthly glossy high-end publication called *Wish Magazine*. At an estimated cost of perhaps AUD\$2 million per year, it engages the best visuals and advertising talent to, in effect, push the message that ‘you, too, deserve the very same lifestyles as the rich and famous’. It is a futile and counter-productive message that perversely works against any shared social interest in a more sane and equitable world. Why? Because, if we were smart, we’d not be expending wealth generated during the temporary summer of oil’s peak on further stimulating yet higher levels of consumption. Instead we’d be investing those very same temporary riches in adapting to a changed world. Similarly, a quick scan of the news will reveal many technical and economic fixes designed to facilitate more growth and development in an already-stressed system. The third response—changing the structure of the system—is currently beyond the capability of present day decision-making, even though it is where we need to go. The fact is that it may only be invoked when one or more sufficiently serious ‘inflections’ in the world system (such as a stock market crash, a human pandemic or a large-scale environmental catastrophe) reveal the poverty of present practices. Clearly ‘social learning’ of this magnitude will be

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a very expensive exercise indeed. But we would be foolish to merely sit back and wait ...

To deal successfully with global challenges of the scale we are facing requires much broader understanding of the human context than currently exists in governments and bureaucracies anywhere. Societies need time to respond. *If it is only through the careful use of informed foresight that we can create time and space to deal with such complicated and challenging issues, then the sooner school systems begin using and teaching it at every level, as appropriate, the better.* Clearly, we're not speaking here merely about a curriculum change but changes in the deep structures of our understanding of the world (Wilber, 1995).

CONCLUSION

School systems have been run, by and large, as if the future remained open and unproblematic. That was once a reasonable assumption but it no longer is. The future of humanity is currently under greater threat than most are willing to admit. Yet as the costs of not understanding the 'great transition' progressively mount, so the rationale for thinking ahead becomes increasingly obvious. School systems need to face these facts. They need a more dynamic and responsive structure, including their own environmental scanning systems that are different from, but as effective as, those routinely operated in commercial environments. They need to value and use the futures frameworks, methods and tools that have been available for some time. Beginning teachers need to be introduced to futures concepts and tools suitable for classroom use. They also need to develop their own specifically futures-oriented understanding more fully than ever before.

It is only when changes of this kind are well under way that school systems can legitimately claim that they are preparing young people appropriately for their future lives. Only then will young people begin to be properly equipped for the manifestly challenging tasks ahead. The 'bottom line' is that there is nothing inevitable about the journey of the human race from its origins in the distant past onward into the future. Equally, however, there is nothing inevitable about the current 'overshoot and collapse' trajectory, the 'fall into Dystopia', either. While schools are by no means the only, or even the most powerful, actors involved, it seems to me that they have a pivotal role to play in helping humanity decide just how to respond to the growing global dilemma that surrounds us.

ⁱ The term STEEP was developed to track 'signals of change' in relation to: Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political factors. There are, in fact, several such acronyms but all have the same underlying purpose.

ⁱⁱ Wendell Bell's opus, *The Foundations of Futures Studies*, volumes 1 and 2 (Bell, 1997, 2003), and especially volume 2: on values, objectivity and the good society, provide a valuable and informed overview of some of the 'big questions' of our time as viewed from a specifically futures viewpoint.

ⁱⁱⁱ The work in question is Donnelly's *Dumbing Down* (2007), a barely literate polemic purporting to identify a left-wing conspiracy to take over the school curriculum. Soon after

publication its thesis was convincingly rebutted by historian Stuart Macintyre (Macintyre, 2007).

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