Valuing Young People's Voices on the Future as if They Really Mattered

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Whether as a young person or as we grow older, how we see the future re-bounds on what we do in the present. This paper explores some salient questions about how well we value young people's voices on the future and the quality of our responses whether in schools or other social institutions. Some important educational and cultural implications are raised. Particular attention is given to related issues raised in Educating Beyond Violent Futures (F. Hutchinson), the second work in a thought provoking Routledge (UK) series on futures education and youth studies.

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Rethinking 'valuing'

What do we mean by 'valuing'? This two day mini-conference invites us to 'value young people's voices on the future' and to 'value young people as creators of the future'. In our constructions of 'youth' and the assumptions that we attach to this symbolic category do we value holistically or in more limited ways that fragment, stereotype and colonize? Are our ways of valuing, for example, ones that devalue young people's voices on the future? Rather than placing a high valuation on interdependencies, active participation and effective enfranchisement across the generations in building better social futures, do we attribute particular value or utility to 'fitting young people for the future' and to measuring young people's worth narrowly in terms such as commodity values and 'valued possessions'? (Mead 1970; Giddens 1991; Boulding 1995).

Tables 1 and 2 offer some illustrations of the problematic nature of 'valuing' and of its embeddedness in cultural assumptions and power relations. They also highlight the dilemmas and challenges we face as parents, teachers, youth workers, health care professionals and concerned citizens to value young people's voices on the future with wisdom, compassion and foresight. Arguably there are important educational and social policy implications if we are to take young people's voices on the future seriously:

> ...Young people must have their perpectives taken seriously. Every young person
> is entitled to the respect of others and to the recognition of their inherent worth
> and dignity as human beings. This demands that there be systematic institu-
> tional support and material resources committed to this end...(Wyn & White,
> 1997, p.148).

Young people's views of the future: Are we actively listening?

Study of young people's views of the future has been for a long time a low priority area as evidenced by the comparative dearth of published research evidence other than of a more anecdotal and often stereotypic variety in the popular media. Over the years, there has been a relative neglect of the views of both the older generation and the younger generation about personal, local and global futures, except in the narrow or short time-frame sense of opinion polling for forthcoming elections and diagnosis of the hopes and fears of 'the elusive youth market' by advertising agencies. Even among the more academic research, the quality has been distinctly uneven. With some of the latter, there

has been a lack of critical awareness of issues of gender, ageism and Western-centrism, as well as a tendency to decontextualize and psychologize young people's dilemmas about their social worlds and the future. (Hutchinson, forthcoming).

Worrying trends in adolescent male homicide rates and in youth suicide rates in late industrial societies such as the US and Australia, will not be adequately responded to, for example, by psychologizing them and 'worrying less' but by quality responses. In Australia since the 1960's, rates of suicide per 100,000 head of population show the rate of young male suicide has almost trebled. Over the same period the rate of young female suicide has doubled (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs,1997).

Whether in the US, Australia or elsewhere, the promise of 'learned optimism' for the young in meeting life's crises is an exaggerated one. It assumes a level playing field. In pursuing the goal of a psychological prophylactic, attention can be easily diverted from highly damaging scores made against educational budgets and social infrastructure, including child and youth support services. According to a recent international study of eighteen late industrial societies, the safety nets for young people are weakest in the US with Australia a disturbingly close second (UNICEF, 1996, p.45).

Researching the young: contrasting approaches

The beginnings of systematic research on young people's anticipations of the future may be traced to the early 1950s. During that period Gillespie and Allport (1955) carried out a cross-cultural study of young people from several different countries. Surveyed in the early years of the Cold War, most of the youth respondents were found to be pessimistic as to the possibility of a third world war being averted during their lifetimes.

However, with a few notable exceptions such as Elise Boulding's study during the 1970s of New Hampshire school children, it has not been until recent times that studies have occurred with an explicit interest in educational implications, and that have been more open to new ideas from areas of cross-disciplinary enquiry, such as peace research, gender studies, environmental studies and futures studies. Some of this newer research on young people's perceptions of the future has been inspired by more critical methodological approaches to researching the views of adults about the future. Important examples of the latter are the World Images 2000 Project (Ornauer et al., 1976) and the Ontario 2000 Project (Livingstone, 1983).

The more innovative of the latest studies of child and youth futures point

to possible new ways forward. With these studies, there is a highlighting of the need to explore the notion of 'futures' and associated concepts such as 'broadened social literacies,' 'resources of hope,' and 'young people's empowerment,' rather than focussing more narrowly on student attitudes via their concerns for the future. Epistemologically, there is a shift from an interest in 'predictive or forecasting values' to 'proactive or applied foresight values.'

Exemplifying the 'predictive values' style of research are time-lag studies, such as those by Kleiber et al. (1993), that replicate the pioneering work of Gillespie and Allport (1955) and seek to identify trends in young people's views of the future. Illustrating the newer style of research are studies such as Hutchinson (1993, 1996b), Hicks and Holden (1995) and Gidley (1997). With the latter, the interest is not so much in identifying whether there are trends of increased pessimism or a rising 'sense of meaningless' among young people but in challenging assumptions that trends are destiny:

> ...*Image of the future in the Western World often hinge narrowly around scientific and technological developments, sometimes seen as beneficial but more often as dystopian. It is as if science and techology have a life of their own which the ordinary citizen feels she can neither understand nor control. In the face of such fears it is increasingly important to focus on people's images of preferred futures. If they can be elaborated and envisioned more then perhaps they can provide the basis for creating a more just and sustainable future (Hicks & Holden, 1995, p.51).*

Researching the young: beyond 'predictive values'

To illuminate this proposition further, it is worthwhile briefly describing some relevant research projects. Whilst influenced by Ornauer et al. (1976) in the design of a questionnaire instrument, the 'Futures Consciousness and the School' Project received much more significant inspiration from the work of Galtung (1988) on dialogue techniques in researching and Boulding (1988) and Ziegler (1989) on 'imaging futures' workshops. The research involved 650 Australian secondary students. It entailed a stratified sample of government and Catholic systemic schools from rural and urban areas, and had a representative mix in terms of gender and socio-economic background. One in four systematic samples of students from the original sample were invited to participate in small-group dialogue sessions and futures workshops. The full text of the questionnaire is contained in Hutchinson (1993). An outline of the procedures for the small group dialogues and futures workshops is given in

Hutchinson (1993, 1996b).

The study identified a number of major themes among young people's concerns about the world and for the future. They included a depersonalized and uncaring world; a violent world, and a world divided into 'haves' and 'have nots.' Other major concerns related to a mechanised world of a largely oppressive technological change; an environmentally unsustainable world, and a politically corrupt and deceitful world.

In addition, the study was very much interested in exploring young people's preferable futures. A number of significant themes emerged from the small group dialogues and futures workshop activities. First, there was found to be a strong strand of techno-cratic dreaming in which techno-fix solutions to many life crises tend to be accepted very uncritically. Such ways of imaging the future were usually stronger among boys than girls. Secondly, there was social imaging related to a demilitarization and 'greening' of science and technology to meet genuine human needs. Girls rather than boys in their imaging capacities were found to be more responsive in this respect. Thirdly, there were images concerned with intergenerational equity, as well as with a perceived imperative for greater acceptance of our responsibilities for the needs of future generations. Fourthly, there was an important strand in imaging concerned with making peace with people and planet through reconceptualisations of both ethics and lifestyles. Finally, there was a strongly expressed need among many young people about preferred futures in education. When invited to consider whether there is any point in visualizing an improved world for the twenty-first century, a majority of the student respondents were of the opinion that better opportunities in schools to imagine preferable futures are crucial for choice and engagement. Large majorities of both male and female students indicated their support for learning proactive skill in school, such as ecological literacy and conflict resolution literacy (Hutchinson, 1996b, 1997b).

Although smaller in scope, a follow-up study by Gidley (1997) has confirmed many of Hutchinson's findings. However, Gidley's work places particular emphasis on schools as sites of authentic possibility. Her preliminary findings suggest that many young people, who have been through a Steiner system of education, are more likely to feel confident about being able to contribute in practical ways to shifting away from their feared futures toward their preferred futures. She speculates on possible lessons for more conventional forms of education.

Another illustration may be given with the 'Visions of the Future' Project conducted by Hicks and Holden (1995). Based on a study of 400 UK children aged 7 to 18, this innovative project both complements the findings of a number of earlier studies and moves beyond them in some respects. It brings out

particularly clearly variables associated with age and gender, together with raising important questions of choice and engagement by teachers, teacher educators and schools.

Some of the project's findings may be summarized as follows. First, age is a significant variable in terms of optimism and pessimism. Among the children surveyed, it was found that older children were more likely to be pessimistic in their assumptions about global futures than younger children. Secondly, in relation to feared futures a number of salient issues are likely to stand out in relation to the *global problématique*. In the case of UK children these related to violence and war in the twenty-first century, with concerns about the environment also high. Thirdly, whilst girls are generally less likely to be optimistic about the future than boys, they are also less likely to embrace uncritically technocratic dreaming or 'glamorous high-tech solutions to everything'. Finally, the project discovered that whilst some young people feel confident to act on a personal level to help create a better future, for many the social or political literacy skills are lacking. At the same time, it was found that many young people acknowledged such a need and would like more infomation, discussion and advice within schools in ways of making hope practical.

Challenges and opportunities for quality responses

A crucial aspect of a forward-thinking approach to education is the value we attach to actively listening to young people's hopes and fears for the future:

> *The images that young people have of the future will help to shape their aspirations as adult citizens in the next century. It is important, therefore, that appropriate attention be paid to their views and to the sort of education that is needed to prepare them more effectively for the future. This is a timely task for educators as we approach the new millennium- a time of transition which can be used to prompt deeper reflection on beginnings and endings, directions and purposes (Hicks, 1996, p.143).*

If we are to enhance the prospects of moving in the twenty-first century towards more peaceful cultures and more sustainable ways of living, it is important to encourage forsight and to actively listen to our young people's voices on the future. In too many cases our young people's hopes and fears are put at a severe discount, with a failure to address their concerns responsibly and in empowering ways. Their hopes and dreams may be marginalized and the need

for an explicit futures dimension in the curriculum may remain forgotten.

Relatedly, if our young people's images of the future are discounted, this probably tells quite a lot about ourselves, our schools, our societies and our expectations and aspirations not only for the younger generation but for un-born generations. Whether in relation to our schools or other social institutions, the challenges for quality responses to young people's voices on the future are great. There are, however, significant opportunities for choice and engagement in taking young people's voices much more seriously than at present. (Eckersley, 1997; Hutchinson, 1996a,b, 1997a,b).

Table 1

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES ON THE FUTURE: HOW WELL DO WE VALUE WHAT THEY SAY?

Some Conventional Reactions	Example Value Assumptions
1. DOLLAR CALCULATING	"Youth market"
2. DUMPING	'Moral panics' by older generation
3. DECONTEXTUALISING	Leaving invisible power relations (e.g. social class, gender)
4. DELIVERANCE-SEEKING TECHNOLOGIES	Technofixes (e.g. v-chip, 'computers in the classroom'
5. DOCTORING	Medicalizing 'youth problem'
6. DEMONIZING	Criminalizing 'youth problem'
7. DENYING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND ACTIVE HOPE	Passive citizenship

Table 2

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES ON THE FUTURE: HOW WELL DO WE VALUE WHAT THEY SAY?

Some Alternative Responses	Example Value Preferences
1.RESISTING COMMODIFICATION	Critical consumer literacy
2.RESPONDING COMPASSIONATELY	Active listening
3.RETHINKING CONTEXTS	Partnership rather than paternalism
4.REAPRAISING 'TECHNICAL FIXES'	More holistic approaches, multi-media literacies
5.REFUTING MEDICALISATION	Participation
6.REAFFIRMING SHARED HUMANITY	Building non-violent futures
7.RESPECTING THE RIGHTS AND NEEDS OF PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS	Active citizenship

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