# Re-imagining futures, education and learning relations

Esther Priyadharshini

School of Education and Lifelong Learning,

University of East Anglia, UK

UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy & Learning for Social Transformation

This piece reflects on recent developments that hold implications for how education might transform itself from meeting the challenges of the future, to participating in co-creating it. It is presented in three parts. The first focuses on the idea of ‘futures’ itself. The second reflects on ideas related to the mission of educating for the future. The third and final part focuses on how intergenerational relations may be shifting, with implications for changes to traditional teaching and learning roles.

How we understand ‘futures’ matters as it shapes education’s capacity to envision and plan. The words ‘future’ or ‘futures’ now usually come prefixed by qualifiers such as ‘precarious’ or ‘uncertain.’ They conjure associations of intangibility, nebulousness and contingency, posing challenges for all involved in education – be they policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, teachers or learners.

### **Conceptualising futures requires expertise in ‘not knowing’**

Perhaps, in recognition of the need to better conceptualise the notion of ‘futures’, there is now an emerging body of literature across social science disciplines that focuses on understanding futures as a live subject of research (Adam and Groves, 2007; Appadurai, 2013; Anderson, 2010; Colebrook, 2014; Poli, 2011), and the related methodological innovations required for such study (Salazar et al., 2017; Wilkie et al., 2017; Coleman and Tutton, 2017).

These emerging orientations ask us to develop abilities to look *at* the future, rather than just *into* it. They reject the idea of the future as something to be predicted or conquered, or even as an extension of the present. If older unsatisfactory paradigms – that may contribute to human inequality or ecocide for instance – are to be replaced, they require a step change in how the idea of the future is understood. In particular, they require going beyond traditional predictive logics/rationalities that aim for a ‘programmable tomorrow’, to more critical anticipatory practices that are open to the unknowable yet seek to create radical new futures that are not tied to capitalist or modernist teleologies. All of this requires researchers and scholars, rather paradoxically, to become ‘experts in not knowing’ while still seeking opportunities for interventive practices (Pink and Salazar, 2017). This shift in thinking calls for new research habits, different practices of paying attention, intervention and experimentation. Without a conscious commitment to a radically different idea of futures, these futures are likely to be more of the same or worse.

### **Re-orienting education to co-create futures**

Education can tend to remain stymied the past, serving as a ‘machine of reproduction.’ If the purpose of education is too preoccupied with addressing today’s issues, we may miss the opportunity for it to play a vital role in making more promising futures. For instance, if we repeat the discourse surrounding ‘globally competitive nation states’ into whose service education is often pressed, then there is less room for imagining education in the service of a collaborative world centred around ecological well-being, low-growth and zero-carbon futures. Similarly, an emphasis on just increasing the flexibility/resilience of the population to prepare them for precariousness, ignores the educational opportunity involved in creating agency and opening the future to radical new possibilities. Thus, some of the most stringent criticisms levelled against the practice of education are when it defines its ‘telos’ (i.e. its desired endpoint) too narrowly.

Current ‘anticipatory regimes’ in formal education (Amsler and Facer, 2017) position it more as a device that feeds into a programmable future, rather than as a live, unpredictable process that can enable different futures. Educational practices in such regimes can over-value the pre-plannable and predictive, confining the mission of education to pragmatic or instrumental uses, often ignoring or not responding to the learning already happening outside of formal contexts. Scholars have therefore called for a more explicit re-orientation of education as a creative, interventive co-creator of futures than as a fear-induced insurance or as a ‘corrective’ for uncertain futures (Facer, 2016; Facer et al., 2011). This requires education to be taken as a global endeavour and for us to face up to bold questions regarding what kinds of old habits need to be lost; what narratives and actions ought to replace them; and for what purpose.

An education with this new orientation can be imagined, for instance, as an explicit experiment that is committed to lifelong learning – one that sees everyone (including teachers) as learners, and one which encourages all learners to speculate about and anticipate desired change. This can include opportunities for learners to articulate both desired and undesirable or feared futures, and then learn to plan and bring into existence preferred scenarios over undesirable ones. This requires curriculum to be more immediately responsive to the needs of learners and a pedagogy that is interventive, that is open to creating positive change. It also requires us to acknowledge that roles such as teachers/instructors/educators or learners/students are open to swapping within an educational context. This leads to the final set of reflections on the dynamics of teaching and learning relationships that may be relevant for the future.

### **Intergenerational dynamics or, teaching and learning relationships**

The many conceptualisations of young people – as students/learners, as beings that are becoming or as ‘thought tools’ – are constantly changing in response to developments in social theory and practice. In relation to the future, young people can be narrowly imagined as ‘fragments of the future’ (Lee, 2011), as beings asked to imagine/project a sense of their future selves, even to defer gratification for some future prize (Adams and Groves, 2007).

These models of youth/childhood are problematic as they can be used to service nostalgic adult agendas (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004) that can override young people’s narratives for the future (Bateman, 2014). Notwithstanding the practices of participatory approaches to reduce power imbalances, or sensory and art-based interventions that may be more inclusive and hold more appeal for the young, there is no denying that the ethical and political stakes of intergenerational relations have escalated (Lyon and Carabelli, 2016; Coleman, 2017; Ivinson and Renold, 2013; Springgay and Truman, 2019).

Currently, youth demand much more – better, more truthful and more reciprocal interaction – from adults on a range of matters. The young speak of the burden of ‘truth-telling’ and other forms of ‘debt’ that they are inheriting (Thunberg, 2019). School climate strikers around the globe have explicitly made the argument that learning in school is meaningless if there is no meaningful future to look forward to. These societal shifts signal a need to re-think how we conceptualise acts of teaching and learning across generations and lifespans. It raises critical questions on how we build systems for collaborative learning for a variety of actors across their lifespans. If we are to deal with the ‘burden’ narrative that can pit old against young, then the challenge of influencing and transforming all actors through learning encounters must be grasped.

How do different kinds of learning encounters (methods/activities/formats/modes) mediate improved relations between young people and adults, learners and educators? This is a different question to one concerning the right curriculum or the right pedagogy to pursue. It involves understanding education itself as an ecological unit in which all elements – human and non-human – are interdependent. In this sense, a post-humanist perspective is also vital. This suggests that continuing to retain humans at the centre of all action, seeing them as initiators or beneficiaries of action, and relegating non-human and material elements as subservient to the human cause is no longer sufficient. This does not mean that inequalities between humans are neglected, but that it may be pursued as a problem that is in fact, tied to a humanistic perspective that has ignored the place of humans as just one element in an interdependent planet. In sum, the politics of intergenerational relations is being shaken up, posing challenges to how we understand adult-child/youth, learner-teacher, human-non-human roles. Education can be conceptualised to approach these changing dynamics as an opportunity to be re-imagined. How this will then enhance or unsettle concepts of reciprocity, voice and power in educational relations will remain to be established.

Approaching this triumvirate – futures, education and learning relationships – and its intersections and challenges in fresh ways demands bold innovation in theory, research and practice. Interventionist approaches encourage critical anticipatory stances, which move away from a descriptive or reactionary position to the future, to articulating imaginative propositions that actively create desirable future landscapes. They seek to encourage agency in the midst of uncertainty and precariousness (Facer et al., 2011). These future landscapes may require us to re-think how roles of learner-teacher, adult-child/youth are interchangeable and how a post-humanist perspective may help us in this re-imagining.

**References**

Amsler, S. and Facer, K. (2017). Contesting anticipatory regimes in education: exploring alternative educational orientations to the future. *Futures*, No. 94, pp. 6-14.

Appadurai, A. (2013) *The future as cultural fact: Essays on the global condition*. New York: Verso.

Anderson, B. 2010. Preemption, Precaution, Preparedness: Anticipatory Action and Future Geographies. *Progress in Human Geography*, No. 34, pp. 777-798.

Bateman, D. 2014. Untangling teachers’ images of their futures through their responses to the futures narratives of children, *Journal of Futures Studies*, No. 18, Vol. 3, pp. 41-56.

Bruhm, S. and Hurley, N. 2004. *Curiouser: On the queerness of children*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.

Colebrook, C. 2014. *Death of the post-human: Essays on extinction*. Vol 1. Michigan: Open Humanities Press. <http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Colebrook_2014_Death-of-the-PostHuman.pdf>

Coleman, R. and Tutton, R. 2017 Introduction to Special Issue of *Sociological Review* on ‘Futures in Question: Theories, Methods, Practices’. *Sociological Review*, Vol. 65, No. 3, pp. 440-447.

Facer, K. 2016. Using the future in education: Creating space for openness, hope and novelty. In H. E. Lees & N. Noddings (eds.). In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education*, pp. 52-67. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Facer, K., Craft, A., Jewitt, C., Mauger, S., Sandford, R. and Sharples, M. 2011. *Building*

*Agency in the Face of Uncertainty: A thinking tool for educators and education leaders*. [http://richardsandford.net/edfutures/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Building-Agency-in-the-Face-of- Uncertainty-Thinking-Tool.pdf](http://richardsandford.net/edfutures/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Building-Agency-in-the-Face-of-%20Uncertainty-Thinking-Tool.pdf)

Ivinson, G. and Renold, E. 2013. Subjectivity, affect and place: Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari’s Body without Organs to explore a young girl’s becomings in a post-industrial locale. *Subjectivity*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 369-390.

Lee, N. 2011. *Childhood and Biopolitics: Climate Change, Bio-science and Human Futures*. London: Palgrave Macmillian.

Lyon, D. and Carabelli, G. 2016. Researching young people’s orientations to the future: the methodological challenges of using arts practice. *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 430-445.

Pink, S. and Salazar, J. 2017. Anthropologies and futures: Setting the agenda. In J. Salazar, S. Pink, A. Irving, & J. Sjoberg (eds). *Anthropologies and futures: Researching emerging and uncertain worlds*, pp. 3-22. London & New York: Bloomsbury.

Poli, R. 2011. Steps towards an explicit ontology of the future. *Futures*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 67-78.

Salazar, J., Pink, S., Irving, A & Sjoberg, J. (eds.). 2017. *Anthropologies and futures: Researching emerging and uncertain worlds*. London & New York: Bloomsbury.

Springgay S. and Truman, S. 2019. Counterfuturisms and speculative temporalities: walking research-creation in school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol. 32, No. 6, pp. 547-559.

Thunberg, G. 2019. *No one is too small to make a difference*. London: Penguin.

Wilkie, A., Savransky, M. and Rosengarten, M. 2017. *Speculative Research: The Lure of Possible Futures*. London & New York: Routledge.