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# Global Learning in a Changing and Unpredictable World

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**ABSTRACT** This article asserts that the changing nature of present-day society has significant implications for education. However, it questions the extent to which the current educational 'diet' provided to the majority of young learners is fit for purpose, i.e. how far it is preparing them to survive and thrive in, and contribute to, an increasingly globalised society. The article explores some of the features of a fit for purpose education and the possibility that the domination of the curriculum by core subject areas or core skills and the resulting marginalisation of other essential elements may not be meeting the educational needs of young people who, after all, will be living in a society that many of us can barely envisage. Future citizens will require, and have a right to, Global Learning – an educational experience that is fit for purpose.

## Changing Contexts

I wish to begin from a number of premises; firstly, that learning should prepare the learner to survive and thrive in, and contribute to, society; and secondly, that it appears that increasingly the desired societal structure is democratic in one form or another. If we begin from such a starting point, we can move forward to consider what education could or should be like.

However, before that I wish to introduce a third premise and that is that society is becoming increasingly global. I am aware that this is a contested issue, but I find support in the work of a wide range of commentators; for example, Olssen et al (2004), who, for me, provide a clear account of economic, cultural and political globalisation and a 'new world order'; Hartley (2000), who also considers post-Fordism; and Reid & O'Donoghue's (2004) consideration of what they refer to as 'a post-industrial age and a globalising world' (p. 560).

If one accepts that changes of context are occurring, for example, modifications from what Meighan & Harber (2007, p. 240) refer to as 'shallow' towards 'deep' democracy, as well as trends of increasing globalisation, or as

Jickling & Wals (2008, p. 1) argue, 'many of the world's people live in what may be described as a corporatist society with soft pretensions to democracy', then one must question the extent to which the learning experienced by the majority of our young people is fit for purpose in 2007 – let alone 2057. Reid & O'Donoghue (2004, p. 565) posit that recent changes in young people's capacity to manage, process and interpret information alone demands a reassessment of the nature of education and refer to Kress's call for 'education for instability' in an 'age of uncertainty' in which:

education for the stabilities of well-defined citizenship or participation in stable economies must be replaced by education for creativity, innovativeness, adaptability, ease with difference and comfortableness with change.  
(Kress, cited in Reid & O'Donoghue, 2004, p. 560)

I wish to conclude these opening comments about the implications of current developments by referring to an unpublished paper by Scott Sinclair (2007) who offers an interesting and useful framework within which to consider factors that might influence the design of a curriculum that is fit for purpose. Sinclair argues that what is required is a structure that provides both learners and teachers with the *coherence* and *confidence* to explore key *concepts* relating to the *complexity* of *change*. Further, he argues that both learners and teachers need to understand the nature of *commonality* that exists between individuals and groups in different locations and situations, and that they also need to be honest about their (our) uncertainty, even *confusion*, about what they are learning and teaching about. These are Sinclair's Seven Cs and resonate very much with Kress's comments above, and the challenge we face as educators is summed up by the Department for International Development (DfID) (as quoted in TIDE's [Teachers in Development Education] Report to the annual general meeting, May 2007).

For the next sixty, seventy or eighty years young people in UK schools will influence and be influenced by the way in which their local societies and globalised world are organised ... a world that is likely to be very different.

### **An Educational Experience (Curriculum?) that's Fit for Purpose**

Before proceeding I wish to clarify the term 'fit for purpose'. By 'fit for purpose' I mean that such an educational experience will support learners so that they are able to survive and thrive in, as well as contribute to, their society. The use of the term 'learning experience' is useful here in that it allows one to accept fully Dewey's argument that not all experiences are 'genuinely or equally educative' (1938, p. 25). The key questions are *what sort of 'learning experience' is fit for purpose?* and in the current context, *what should a Global Learning experience entail?*

The basic skills for surviving and thriving in, whilst contributing to, society (specifically those relating to literacy, numeracy and information technology [IT]) may appear rather prosaic. However, they must not be undervalued. These, together with those that may be termed social skills, are essential if one is to survive, thrive and contribute. It is clear that for some, such competences hold the key to being a successful individual in a successful society in a successful economy. This knowledge, be it based on facts or skill competence, may be regarded as the 'majority curriculum'; the curriculum that the majority of our children learn for the majority of their time in the educational system, and is recognised as being 'what education should cover' by the majority of members of society. However, there is a very real danger that these essential elements of Global Learning will come to dominate (or may even already be dominating) the learning experienced by the majority of learners in our schools.

So it is important to focus on other essential elements of Global Learning that may be in danger of being overlooked – what may be termed the 'minority curriculum'; that experienced by the minority of our children for the minority of their time in the educational system and appreciated as being of value by the minority of our society's members.

Firstly, all elements of a fit for purpose curriculum must have a global dimension, i.e. what learners learn about is informed by global and international matters, and learners are supported to link local and global issues. For example, they are able to see how events in their local area are influenced by global processes. In learning about the changing industrial base of the West Midlands, for instance, learners should come to understand how Olssen et al's (2004) economic and political globalisation brought about the closure of Rover's Longbridge plant in Birmingham and its 'movement' to Shanghai. Further, they should develop an understanding of how the choices they make impact on other people's 'local'; for example, how the rapid increase in palm oil production for, say, the learners' everyday household goods is affecting drastically farming practices in Borneo.

*Developing the Global Dimension in the School Curriculum* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005, p. 1) outlines how the global dimension 'can enrich much of what already happens in schools, improving standards and increasing teachers', children's and young people's motivation'. However, whilst supporting this and recognising the importance of the eight concepts [1] that the document identifies as underlying the global dimension, I cannot help but see in this statement an element of 'what the global dimension' adds to what is otherwise the basic, 'OK' curriculum. As stated above, the global dimension is, for me, not a bolt on, but an essential input to a fit for purpose learning experience. If the global dimension is missing, then the learning experienced will not be 'OK'.

The contribution of the global dimension in reflecting the major ideas and challenges that face society is recognised, to some extent, by the whole curriculum dimensions outlined in the 'big picture' of the revised Key Stage 3

curriculum to be introduced in September 2008. Further, the recent publication *The Global Dimension in Action* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2007) provides further evidence of official recognition of its significance for individuals and society. However, here the QCA seems to see the global dimension as being synonymous with Global Learning, as the two terms are used as if they are interchangeable.

Before moving on, it must be acknowledged that such official sponsorship of the importance of the global dimension, together with other elements of the 'minority curriculum', may only be seen as extending as far as they complement New Labour's 'primacy of neo-liberalism' (Huckle, 2008, p. 69) and could offer little to move education from its transmissive mode to a more transformative function (Jickling & Wals, 2008).

In a results-driven, target-centred environment it is worth considering what the outcomes of a fit for purpose learning experience would be. More precise outcomes are identified below, but in general I will consider two.

1. The learner will have a global perspective; that is, they will appreciate that issues, events, trends, etc. must be viewed from a wide range of different viewpoints (Hicks, 2003). Such viewpoints reflect an individual's culture, religion, social (local and global) status, wealth, past life experiences, future hopes and aspirations, current employment status, etc. A global perspective affords one the advantages of recognising and appreciating, for example, the possible responses of a member of the Dalit caste compared to those of the Tata Chairman, Ratan Tata, to the rapid developments of the Indian economy.

2. The learner will appreciate that they have some responsibility to others – be the others residing in their local community or another community on a different continent; that they also have an obligation to tackle injustice and inequality; and that they have the desire and ability to work actively to address such injustice and inequality. This is what some may see as global citizenship (Oxfam, 2002), perhaps pithily summed up as 'the relationship between people and the structures that govern them, at whatever scale' (TIDE, 2002).

### **Are These the Core Ideas or Principles of a Fit for Purpose Learning Experience?**

In planning to provide experiences that enable learners to survive, thrive and contribute, I would offer a series of core ideas or principles that might be borne in mind. Learners should be encouraged to enjoy and value diversity and to appreciate that 'everyone, everywhere is of equal worth'. I would argue that this can only be achieved if the learners have a positive sense of personal identity and are confident in their own social and cultural context. This is a prerequisite of being able and willing to express their own feelings and values on a wide range of issues, including those relating to justice and equality.

Learners should understand that people everywhere have similar needs, but that they may meet those needs in different ways; further they will

understand that there is inter-connectedness of people and environments, both local and global. Finally, learners should understand that human relationships and how we negotiate them are of central significance and that there are inappropriate and appropriate actions and behaviours for individual and group interactions – be those interactions face-to-face or mediated by a third party, such as a commercial organisation, a community group or a government.

### **A Fit for Purpose Learning Experience Entitles Learners to ...**

Working on such core ideas or principles would result in an experience that would enable learners to survive, thrive and contribute. This would mean a curriculum entitlement for learners much more appropriate for life in England in 2007 and beyond than what is provided currently for many of our children and young people. Obviously at present schools are operating in a climate of change as they respond to a lengthy agenda of 'initiatives' including The Children's Plan, Every Child Matters, the National Primary Strategy, QCA's Key Stage 3 Review, the Race Relations Amendment Act, Inclusion and the 14-19 Diploma – to name, but a few. However, the entitlement outlined below is not offered as an alternative to what schools are currently working towards. I would argue that there is no conflict between, say, focusing on the Standards agenda and working to improve Standard Assessment Task scores and providing a fit for purpose learning experience. Global Learning, as suggested below, has an integral and valuable part to play in developing learners' basic competences, as well as in contributing to policies and practices designed to address specific priorities of an individual school.

Global Learning means that children and young people are entitled to:

- have a sense of their connections to the wider world;
- be encouraged to be open-minded and have a questioning approach to the world around them;
- be confident in themselves and their right to speak out for justice, equality and the dignity of all others;
- develop as individuals, with their own identities, languages, cultures and life-styles;
- learn from others and value alternative viewpoints and perspectives;

Be able to employ the skills of:

- communicating – listening, discussing, expressing their ideas and opinions;
- critical reasoning, thinking and using/evaluating evidence;
- identifying prejudice, bias and discrimination;
- recognising their own values and what influences them;
- taking responsibility for their actions and the consequences;
- evaluating the actions of others;
- empathising with others;

Know about:

- the centrality of human relationships;
- common human experiences, needs and rights to dignity, justice and life;
- disparities in human living conditions;
- the importance of change – technological, economic, social, political and environmental;
- concepts of democracy, governance and citizenship;
- cultural and social identities, conflict and conciliation;
- sustainable development and conservation;
- rules, rights and responsibilities;
- their own worth and the worth of other people.

### **Conclusion**

In this discussion I have focused on those elements of Global Learning that may not have featured as highly in discussions as others – but that is not to devalue or ignore those that may have had more airtime. This is merely an attempt to highlight some that are in danger of falling into the background – although that implies that they were once in the foreground.

Although writing about teacher education institutions in the USA, Delandshere & Petrosky's comments are equally applicable to many schools in that they 'run the risk of becoming a repository for static collections of knowledge ... (prescribing) how students should be taught and what the outcomes of this teaching should be, no matter what the contexts might be' (2004, p. 138). Global Learning offers a fit for purpose experience in terms of identity skills, opinions/values/dispositions and understanding that may stop schools suffering a similar fate. By building on the core values and dispositions associated with Global Learning it is possible for educational establishments to respond to the changes that are shaping their learners' lives, and to ensure that learners engage in the ideas and understanding, skills and capacities which underpin lifelong learning. Learners will be involved in experiences that motivate enquiry, stimulate creativity and provide a context for meaningful and appropriate action. Such a path will move us away from the notion of using the education system to 'manufacture' pre-determined attitudes (Development Education Commission, 1999) and into an educational system which is much more dynamic, more inclusive and fit for purpose. Global Learning provides a very real opportunity for learners to survive, thrive and contribute. Global Learning is about meeting the educational needs of children and young people growing up in an increasingly globalised society; for example, helping them to see themselves as global citizens, helping them to have a deeper knowledge and understanding of interdependence and to have opportunities to participate in their education – such as shaping the curriculum they experience and the world they live in. This is vital if the educational experience of our children and young learners is to be fit for purpose in the context in which 'our long term future

will depend less on our compliance in being trained to do the “right” thing now, and more on our capability to analyse, to question alternatives and to make our decisions when we need to’ (Scott, 2007, p. 5).

### Note

- [1] The eight concepts suggested are Global citizenship; Conflict resolution; Social justice; Values and perceptions; Sustainable development; Interdependence; Human rights; and Diversity (DfES, 2005, pp. 12-13).

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