
The Centre Cannot Hold: primary teachers, educational purpose and the future

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ABSTRACT As part of a wider research project, early career primary teachers were asked to rank various teacher responsibilities and characteristics in terms of importance. The participants showed a high level of attachment to the concept of ‘the future’, and struggled to perceive education as disassociated from preparedness. The future was firmly at the centre of their teaching practice. A year after conducting this research, the future was suddenly interrupted. With the arrival of COVID-19 came the cancellation of phonics screening tests and national curriculum assessments (SATs), and a realisation that the future in teaching is perhaps less predictable than previously assumed. In this article, the author listens again to the voices of the participants in order to illuminate a future orientation within the teaching community that she believes, in the light of recent events, cannot hold.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (Yeats, 1920/1996, p. 89)

It is possible that Yeats’ most famous poem was a direct response to the last severe pandemic, the Spanish flu of 1918 (Outka, 2019). This feels unsurprising somehow. As the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic started to become apparent, I kept returning to the famous line – ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’ – as everything that seemed unshakeable and central to how I lived my life suddenly started to crumble. Material aspects of daily life fell apart – everything closed or changed somehow – but most challenging was the way in which my relationship with the future suddenly shifted.

Teachers are constantly compelled to think about their pedagogical practice with reference to the future, both in terms of short-term curriculum and examination requirements and longer-term effects on students’ education.

Human capital theories, which pervade education policy in developed nations (Becker, 1994), and the shadows cast over every school year by national assessments, give the impression that the future is knowable and predictable. As a result, teachers are encouraged to place the future at the centre of their pedagogical practice and professional identity. Preparing students for the future has become one of the key ways in which teachers justify what and how they teach.

In the short term, the futures of children and their teachers have become increasingly dominated by high-stakes testing. The pedagogical effect of this is limiting, as 'curricular content is narrowed to tested subjects, subject area knowledge is fragmented into test-related pieces, and teachers increase the use of teacher-centred pedagogies' (Au, 2007, p. 258). A recurring finding of educational research is the negative effect that such testing has on teacher commitment and resilience, as teachers struggle to retain core beliefs about the holistic and creative possibilities of education, while at the same time being compelled to teach in accordance with the current accountability–performativity context (Ball, 2003; Yarker, 2019; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). As these accountability measures have become more normalised, new teachers are increasingly socialised into teaching contexts which are so completely oriented around testing and accountability policies that these measures become the primary marker through which these teachers measure their successes and construct their professional identities (Holloway & Brass, 2018). Curriculum and pedagogy in the present become dominated by future tests, which push the unique interests or talents of children and their teachers to the edge of the curriculum, or completely off the timetable.

In the longer term, political argument draws on images of the future as a rhetorical device to justify decision-making (Dunmire, 2005). Constructing education as a key determining feature of children's futures is a common rhetorical device employed by education ministers. In its most simplistic construction, politicians argue that 'doing well at school is key to a child's future life chances' (Timpson, 2015). Michael Gove (2014) claimed that his education reforms would 'secure our children's future in an ever more competitive world'. It was the government's 'mission' to 'transform a child's future' through educational reform (Morgan, 2016), and the ideal teacher was one who was engaged in 'fighting for our children's future with a passion' (Gove, 2013). These political arguments draw on the figure of the innocent child, using this idealisation as a disciplinary mechanism and encouraging teachers to behave one way or another for fear that any departure from directed activities will somehow irreparably damage their students' future. The figure of the child 'embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights "real" citizens are allowed' (Edelman, 2004, p. 11). Thus, idealised visions of the future are used by politicians as a way to constrain and control individuals in the present.

The process of schooling has become increasingly future-orientated in the globalised West as nations seek to secure future economic success by increasing the intellectual productivity of their workforce. This is achieved by preparing children to become highly skilled workers through a process of schooling – a process which has, in recent years, ‘accelerated out of control’ (Harris, 2017, p. 16). This intensification and direction of children’s learning – always justified with promises of future success and happiness – has coincided with significant increases in mental health conditions, as young people feel ‘less in control of their lives than ever before’ (Harris, 2017, p. 6). To completely orientate one’s present life towards the promise of the future is damaging to the psyche. Affective attachments to promised futures have negative effects. They constrain and limit the individual’s capacity to flourish in the present by constantly orienting thoughts towards an imagined and perfect future – a process of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011).

However, significant and catastrophic world events have a tendency to shift the focus of education, away from the future and back to the present. For example, it was in the aftermath of the Second World War that Loris Malaguzzi founded the influential Reggio Emilia schools in northern Italy – schools which focused on the creativity and independence of young children (Smidt, 2013). The pedagogy of Reggio Emilia schools leaned on the philosophy of John Dewey (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011), resisting traditional educational constructions of present experience and its relationship to the future. Rather than childhood being understood as a time of preparation for adulthood, Reggio Emilia practitioners value and nurture children’s present concerns, believing that constructing children as agential producers of knowledge in the present enables children to develop into active and engaged adult citizens. This radical view of education rejects transmission models of learning in which children are constructed as passive subjects, waiting for a future time when their school learning will become useful. Clear distinctions between present and future are resisted as the child is constructed as being in a constant process of development and change, which feeds into their development as active democratic citizens. Concepts of time and development in Dewey’s philosophy and in the Reggio Emilia schools therefore differ greatly from the dominant constructions of education as preparation and school readiness that are currently apparent in educational policy and practice in England.

My aim in this article is to share some findings from a research project that took place prior to the COVID-19 crisis and illuminated the attachment of primary teachers to the future. I was aware of this attachment from my own time as a primary-school teacher, having observed the number of hours children (particularly those in Year 6) were expected to prepare for future examinations, at the expense of learning and development opportunities in the present. Perhaps the disruption of COVID-19, with all its immediacy, might cause some teachers to think twice about the importance of preparation for the future, reorienting their practice towards the present, as a ‘process of living and not the preparation of future living’ (Dewey, 1964, p. 430).

Talking about the Future

In 2019, I collected data for a research project which focused on the professional identities of early career teachers working in primary academy schools. As part of the data collection, I conducted focus groups with teachers, in which the participants were asked to rank different roles and characteristics of teachers in terms of importance (Figure 1), with the most important to be placed in the centre circle. The aim of this ranking activity was to encourage discussion about what it means to be a teacher, and the professional values and beliefs that teachers held. Four focus groups were conducted in total, one in each of four primary academies in two multi-academy trusts.[1] In total, 12 teachers took part in the focus groups, all of whom had been teaching for fewer than six years.

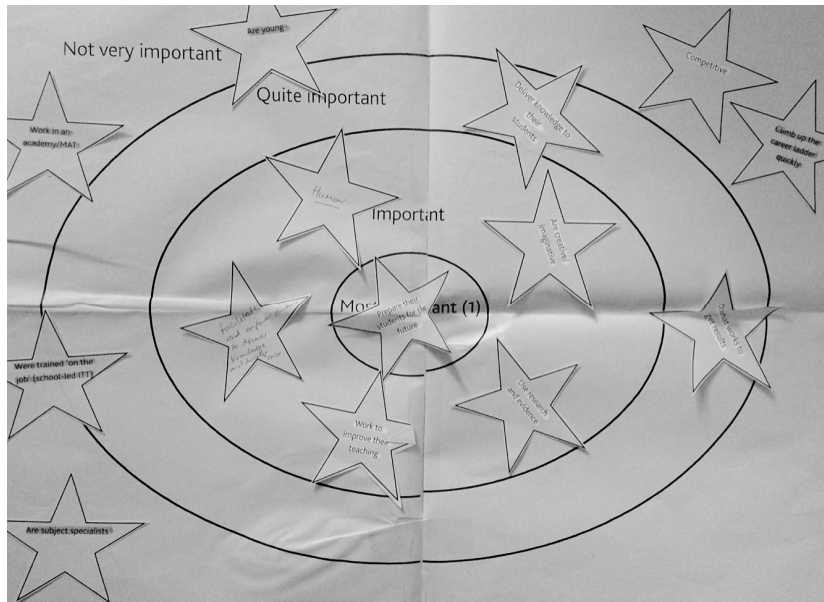


Figure 1. Example of focus-group ranking activity.

The Importance of the Future

The participating teachers were highly attached to the future as an anchor for their pedagogical practice. In a number of cases, the importance of preparing students for the future was constructed as a given, a common-sense notion that would be difficult to disagree with:

Zoe: Prepare their students for the future. I think that's very important as well.

Grace: Yes. Absolutely. (Dahlia Multi-Academy Trust, Carnation School)

Isabella: Prepare students for the future. Almost, almost tempted to smack that straight in there [*gestures to the middle*], ha ha ha.

Nicole: Yeah, that's – there's no argument there.

Isabella: Yeah.

Nicole: That's non-negotiable. (Rosemary Multi-Academy Trust, Tarragon School)

As shown in these excerpts, the participants were keen to demonstrate that they were committed to preparing their students for the future. Grace stated that this role was 'absolutely' important, agreeing with her colleague Zoe, who argued that it was 'very important'. Nicole said that preparing students for the future was 'non-negotiable'. When Isabella suggested she place this role in the centre of the board as the most important job of the teacher, Nicole agreed by saying 'there's no argument there'.

Only one participant, Julia, disagreed with the importance of preparing students for the future and tried to construct education in the present as equally or more important. Julia was a Reception teacher and her school had introduced a system of 'in-the-moment planning' in order to meet the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. But despite her stated commitment to the present, Julia's argument presupposed the importance of school readiness:

Julia: But I suppose it's not even preparing them for the future; it's preparing them for now.

Simon: Yeah.

Julia: I've got four-year-olds coming in to me and they're not ready for their day.

Researcher: Right.

Julia: And that could be to do with their home life. They're coming in, they're not ready to learn. So, we need to get down to basics. How can we get them ready for now? Not the end of the week. We're not talking about them knowing how to write their name at the end of the week. We're looking at, 'Oh, you actually formed your S correctly today'.

Researcher: Right.

Julia: 'You've held your pencil correctly today.' (Rosemary Multi-Academy Trust, Dill School)

Julia, an early years teacher, presented herself as resisting the future orientation which was such a common-sense notion to the other teachers in the study. However, her examples of education in the present were centred on the capacity of children to complete adult-directed tasks which prepared them for more formal education later in their school career. Julia constructed the aim of early years education as enabling children to form letters correctly and hold their

pencil with the correct tripod grip; this was what she understood as reflecting a readiness to learn and a focus on the present. In fact, this obsession with markers of school readiness indicated a pedagogy orientated towards the future demands which will be made of children, rather than their present interests and concerns, despite Julia's claims to be focused on the present. Julia's conflation of school readiness and 'teaching in the moment' reflects a confusion about school readiness and its relationship to the early years curriculum, which has been noted elsewhere (Brooks & Murray, 2018). Ultimately, this confusion is the result of increased policy pressure since 2010 to get young children 'school-ready', despite concerns that school readiness is a developmentally inappropriate pedagogical aim which results in a narrowed early years curriculum (TACTYC, 2017; Early Education, 2018).

Julia's pedagogical stance was very close to that of Isabella and Nicole, both teachers at Tarragon School, who constructed preparation for the future as ensuring that their students were ready for the next stage in their formal learning:

Researcher: So, how do you prepare students for the future, to begin with?

Isabella: Part of it, I would say, is, for example, I'm teaching Year 4, so making sure they're Year 5-ready, because Year 5 is their future, so that's academic. (Rosemary Multi-Academy Trust, Tarragon School)

Nicole: I would say for Reception, because they're starting Reception and then moving on. We're hitting the behaviour straight away, behaviour and rules. I'm, you know, so being able to, you know, follow rules, apply rules and understand.

Isabella: Institutionalise them! Ha ha ha.

Nicole: Yeah! We get them in there first because behaviour for learning, you know, that first, you know, the education broadly and alongside it, just getting them class-ready, which nurseries don't always do, unfortunately. So, we have to kind of start over with a lot of children who haven't had that experience. (Rosemary Multi-Academy Trust, Tarragon School)

Julia, Isabella and Nicole all shared the same future-orientated attachment to ensuring their students were school-ready. In these conversations, education in school is constructed as a sort of assembly line, with each teacher preparing the student for the next level of production. Year 4 teachers prepare students for Year 5; Reception teachers make sure students have the correct 'behaviour for learning' they need to make them 'class-ready' later on. This is preparation for the future in the most limited sense. It distracts teachers from the present achievements and interests of their pupils, placing value only on activities and dispositions which will be considered helpful for children at a later stage in their schooling.

Interrupting the Future

Most of the participants believed that preparing students for the future was one of the most important responsibilities that a teacher held. They remained attached to this view even when I, in the role of researcher, attempted to disrupt or interrupt their visions of the future.

The teachers at Daffodil School considered preparing their students for the future to be the most important role or characteristic of teachers, although there were some concerns within the group about whether or not it was possible to measure teacher success in this regard. Building on this discussion, I posited the possibility of a world-changing event which would result in this future preparation being pointless. Rather than reorienting towards the importance of education for the present, the participants chose to position themselves as bestowing transferable skills on their students, which would be useful in any given future:

Jemima: Like, we're preparing the students for the future, to be successful, in a sense. But how can you define success? I mean, how can you define whether you've prepared them or not for the future?

Bethany: Right.

Logan: We won't know.

Jemima: Right.

Emily: We won't know that's not yet.

Logan: Ultimately.

Jemima: But all those skills that we think we've taught them, I suppose, that's where they'll go and this counts and that counts.

Researcher: If you don't know – just playing devil's advocate – what's the point in doing it?

Logan: But we don't know, genuinely.

Jemima: Yeah, true. So, there's, of course, we all believe there's a point in what we do, right? So we do know.

Researcher: 'Cause if you literally don't know, like, if you think, you know, next you think perhaps next month there's going to be a full-scale communist revolution and nobody's going to be allowed to use computers anymore because they decimate the workforce or whatever, and everybody's got to go back to farming the land, if you actually believe that anything could happen, then is there any point to doing this?

Jemima: Oh wow! I see. No. There is still a point. I don't think that's gonna happen.

Researcher: Ah.

Logan: Yeah, because ...

Bethany: And I think it will still pay to be kind if that happens.

Emily: Ha ha.

Researcher: Ah, so there are skills that, so it's – so what we're getting at here is that it's not about ...

Bethany: Yeah.

Researcher: You're not talking about kind of preparing students for the economy, but preparing your students for kind of cooperative ...

Bethany: Yeah. You pinch your communist leader when he tells you to work the land. Not gonna end well, he he he. No I, I, I think that

...

Researcher: So, you're still happy with that one?

Jemima: Yeah.

Bethany: I am.

Logan: I think so. (Dahlia Multi-Academy Trust, Daffodil School)

When I introduced the world-changing scenario to the group, the first response by a participant was that of Jemima, stating: 'No. There is still a point. I don't think that's gonna happen'. This statement indicates Jemima's attachment to a specific and stable conception of the future as a guide for her pedagogical practice. Rather than consider what teaching would be like if orientated towards the present rather than the future, Jemima argued that such a catastrophic event was never going to happen. Jemima's pedagogy relied on a continuation between the past and the future, which is knowable and predictable – a continuation which, I would argue, can no longer be guaranteed after the global catastrophe of COVID-19.

Bethany's response – that certain attributes, such as kindness, will always be needed – indicated a similar attachment to the future, and presupposed a similar belief that the future is knowable and consistent with the past. Rather than construct skills such as kindness as being needed in the present, Bethany constructed these as skills which are needed in the future, regardless of what the future might hold. What is lost in this all-pervasive attachment to the future is an understanding that 'we must give students experience with these values and why they matter now' (Frank, 2019, p. 27). This inattentiveness to the value of the present was noticeable at another point in the same focus group:

Bethany: The thing is, they can kinda, you know, they can get away without some of the things now. So, I'm thinking of a particular guy who, we're just focusing on not hitting people when we say something they don't like. Ha ha ha.

Jemima: Mmmm.

Bethany: So, I mean, he can get away with that now to some extent, right? So, but I mean, he needs to, he needs to learn, he needs to learn that now because ...

Amelia: Needs to change his behaviour, yeah.

Logan: Otherwise he won't be prepared.

Bethany: Yeah! Well, he's not gonna have any friends *now* if he keeps doing that.

Amelia: Mmmm.

Bethany: So it is kinda now.

Amelia: Yeah.

Bethany: But in the future he's going to get put in jail! Yeah! (Dahlia Multi-Academy Trust, Daffodil School)

Bethany's attachment to the future becomes apparent as she foregrounds the importance of the future over the present – in the future, this child might be 'put in jail', whereas in the present he is just 'not gonna have any friends'. The relationship between the present and the future that is constructed here is one in which the present acts as a space to prepare for a more important future. The relationships which this child forms in the present are constructed simply as preparation for relationships in later life, a sort of rehearsal for the real thing. Bethany's orientation towards the future in this passage indicates an assumption that adult concerns are more pressing or more important than those of children. Children must be prepared for the difficult world of adulthood, but their own worlds as children are presumed to be easy. This assumption that childhood is free and easy, without care or trouble, is a pervasive discourse. It allows adults to position adult concerns as a greater threat, which children must be protected from through extensive preparation during childhood. But childhood is not easy – learning to navigate the social and physical world while in a state of extreme vulnerability is, of course, cognitively and emotionally challenging. Adding worries about the future onto children's present concerns accounts for the high levels of mental health issues currently suffered by young people, who are not only learning how to live in the present, but also being constantly told that the future is a threat (Harris, 2017).

This construction of childhood as a sort of rehearsal for the 'real' world of adulthood also masks the complex relationship between experiences in the present and their impact on the future. It is tempting to categorise experiences as centring either on enjoyment or on preparation, but a truly educative curriculum is one in which present experiences 'live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences' (Dewey, 1938, p. 28). Such a conception of education resists binary distinctions between present and past, preparation and enjoyment. Instead, it calls on teachers to recognise that education should be orientated towards continuous development and growth, with present enjoyment feeding future activity. In the case of Bethany's student, this would mean focusing on the pleasure gained from positive relationships in the present, knowing that the experience of these positive relationships would feed a capacity and desire to develop such relationships in the future. Developing positive relationships with others should not be about practising for a performance later in life, but instead about developing skills which, when mobilised in the present, lead to growth in the future (Frank, 2019).

During the focus group at another school, Tarragon, I chose to disrupt assumptions about the immutability of the future by challenging normative constructions of children's lives and future progression:

Researcher: So, I guess the other thing that comes out of this preparing students for the future is that sometimes it's quite difficult to know what the future can hold.

Nicole: Mmmm.

Researcher: For children.

Nicole: Yeah.

Researcher: So, I think the thing that kind of made me think about this was when I went and spoke to people who worked in, err, you know, hospital schools. So, I had a mentor in my first school who worked in a hospital school.

Nicole: Mmmm.

Researcher: So, the children that she worked with didn't, sometimes didn't have a future.

Nicole: Right.

Researcher: You know, they'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Nicole: Mmmm.

Researcher: So, that, that wasn't their future for them. So, sometimes I like to think that made me think about the – you know, how, how much that future weighs over the present, if that makes sense?

Nicole: Yeah, yeah.

Isabella: Yeah.

Researcher: And is that something you think about, the, the present, or is it very future-focused? Does that make sense?

Nicole: Yeah. I know for us it's very a future focus. Much as we're preparing them for the next stage, going into Year 1, academically, everything, behaviour, manners, it's a lifelong thing.

Isabella: Yeah.

Nicole: So, we're thinking that way.

Researcher: Mmmm.

Nicole: We want you to be good citizens, like you said, you know.

Isabella: Yeah, yeah.

Nicole: Life-prepared. Yeah, yeah.

Isabella: I think that as well, in my teaching. For society.

Nicole: Yeah, but in terms of behaviour, that you don't go the wrong way, that you've got good values instilled in you from quite early. That's where us ... so, we are very much long term.

Researcher: Mmmm.

Isabella: I feel the same. But, erm, in the case that you spoke about, children that don't have a future in a sense, that's because they're very poorly, then I would say the focus would change to ...

Nicole: That's right. Now.

Isabella: Them enjoying the moment and being creative and imaginative, so they're enjoying the life they have now.

Nicole: Yeah. That's right. Yeah, I agree.

Researcher: So, it's separate.

Nicole: Yes.

Researcher: For kind of what the needs of the children are. So, you feel the need of the children here is very much ...

Nicole: Is key. Definitely.

Isabella: Yeah.

Researcher: Based on preparing children for the future. OK.
(Rosemary Multi-Academy Trust, Tarragon School)

Both participants, Nicole and Isabella, were so attached to the idea of the future as a pedagogical beacon that they struggled to readjust their teaching values when faced with the possibility that, for some children, there is – tragically – no need to prepare them for adult life. Both Isabella and Nicole remained fixed on the importance of preparing the majority of students for adult life, with the minority of children to whom this future may not apply being allowed to enjoy the moment, ‘the life they have now’. The majority of children are therefore expected to endure formal, pedestrian learning which is primarily focused on skills for later life rather than enjoyment in the present. Although the narrowing of creative approaches to education has been a feature of education reform since the advent of the national curriculum, the 2014 curriculum has been specifically criticised for its attempt to replace ‘creative and engaged activity with rote learning and memorisation’ (Wrigley, 2014, p. 3). As a new teacher trained in England, Isabella only had experience of teaching within this very formal and limited curriculum. Her attachment to the future therefore acts as a justification for curriculum delivery, providing a rationale for the nature of teaching and schooling under present conditions, which is perhaps necessary to sustain a positive teaching identity and commitment to the profession. For children, however, this restriction on creative and imaginative activities in order to guarantee future success is miseducative, creating a ‘remorseless system’ (Reay, 2017, p. 79) in which the total focus on academic achievement overwhelms children’s enjoyment for learning. Paradoxically, the process of working towards this promised future of academic achievement makes this future less likely to appear, as children who fail to enjoy learning at an early stage in their education become more disengaged as they progress. This is a clear example of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), as the pressure in the present on children to succeed in the future damages the chances of this future coming about.

There is a stark contrast constructed by Isabella between the educational activities of children who are terminally ill, who should be allowed to enjoy life and be ‘creative and imaginative’, and the majority of children without health conditions, who, implicitly, are restricted to formal activities which prepare them for adulthood. But again, events like COVID-19 trouble such distinct divides, reminding us that tragedies can strike at the most unexpected times. Life is fragile. Is it possible to distinguish between the two groups – the children who should be preparing and the children who should be enjoying? In the midst of a global pandemic, how can such divisions be drawn up? It is interesting that the scenario presented to Isabella and Nicole did not lead them to question their attachment to the future, but only who might have access to it.

Educating in the Present

This article has attempted to illuminate the multiple attachments that primary-school teachers hold to the idea of the future. For these teachers, preparing students for the future was at the centre of their pedagogical practice, crucial to their professional identities as teachers. Promises of fulfilling relationships and job security in the future, if only children can be appropriately ‘prepared’, underpin much of the rationale for formal pedagogies and the concomitant high-stakes-testing regimes. However, the promises of bright futures for those who work hard – both teachers and children – have been unsettled by the COVID-19 event. The future no longer seems predictable, safe or understandable.

Of course, it was never possible for people to secure their future – the expected futures of individuals have always been interrupted, sometimes by illness or tragedy, but also by happy surprises. This is why an attachment to the future (to borrow a line from Foucault) is not necessarily bad but is dangerous.[2] Of course, it is not bad to want the best for children in their future lives. However, the danger of these teachers’ attachments to the future is clear. Activities which are enjoyable, creative or imaginative are sidelined in favour of more formal activities which prepare students for the next stage. Children’s present concerns and achievements are ignored or devalued as the construction of their future selves is understood to be more important. COVID-19, therefore, maybe offers an opportunity to question the normative presentations of the future as more important than the present, offering up radical opportunities to rethink the purposes of education and the role of the teacher.

Notes

- [1] The participating schools have been named Tarragon, Dill, Carnation and Daffodil, and the Multi-Academy Trusts have been named Rosemary and Dahlia, to protect their identities (British Educational Research Association, 2018).
- [2] ‘My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad’ (Foucault, 1983, p. 231).

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