Futures and Utopian Thinking in Education

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2.6 Futures and Utopian Thinking in Education

Futures and utopian thinking in education has, in general, paralleled the developments described above [See: *Definitions and Histories of Utopia* document, 2.2.-2.5.]. Here, we can distinguish between three influential traditions, between utopianism, 'futurology' and critical futures studies.

The idea that education, as well as other social institutions, can be transformed rationally and in ways that "enhance human wellbeing and happiness has a long and controversial history" (Wright, 1999, para. x). In one of the rare books that explicitly focus on the connection between utopias and education, Howard Ozmon's *Utopias and Education* (1969) has argued that utopian thought played an important part in influencing educational thought in the west. He points at ways in which utopian thought has influenced education in the past, and also asserts that utopians have, by and large, placed a high priority upon education (Ozmon, 1969). In addition, "most utopian writers not only have a high regard for education but are educationists themselves" (ibid., p. x). That education has always been utopian measure par excellence (Hertzler, 1965), Ozmon (1969, p. ix) explains by stating that:

> [As utopians believed] . . . that the great social problems of a society cannot be solved without changing the entire structure of the society within which these problems reside . . . they saw a twofold necessity for education, first, for the purpose of educating man to the need for great and important changes, and secondly, they saw education as a vehicle for enabling man to adjust to these changes.

However, this utopian sentiment has, in western thought, always been in 'competition' with alternative approaches towards social change that has put an emphasis on reform rather than radical transformation. These two streams are well summarised by Wright (1999):

> On the one hand, radicals of diverse stripes have argued that social arrangements inherited from the past are not immutable facts of nature, but transformable human creations. Social institutions can be designed in ways that eliminate forms of oppression that thwart human aspirations for fulfilling and meaningful lives. The central task of emancipatory politics is to create such institutions. On the other hand, conservatives have generally argued that grand designs for social reconstruction are nearly always disasters. While contemporary social institutions may be far from perfect, they are generally serviceable. At least, it is argued, they provide the minimal conditions for social order and stable interactions. These institutions have evolved through a process of slow, incremental modification as people adapt social rules and practices to changing circumstances. The process is driven by trial and error much more than by conscious design, and by and large those institutions which have endured have done so because they have enduring virtues. This does not preclude institutional change, even deliberate institutional change, but it means that such change should be piecemeal, not wholesale ruptures with existing arrangements. (para. 4)

To complicate matters further, these two approaches to social change have also always existed within a context in which education has primarily been an instrument of social control. As Foucault's work so clearly demonstrates, the structure and organisation of schooling firmly locate bodies and minds in place. By the teaching of particular knowledge and skills that is based on educational regimes of truth, a particular subject is always developed on the basis of these normalising regimes. The governed subject becomes the self-regulated subject, therefore successfully fulfilling "the practical needs of schools, businesses, and society as a whole for discipline and order" (Cromer, 1997, p. 118). As a result, "systems that had been developed by reformers to restructure society were adopted by society to maintain the social order" (ibid.).

Educational institutions, practices and discourses are therefore torn between demands to, on one hand, create and respond to social change, and on the other, maintain the status quo. Still, all these demands are informed by particular futures discourses. While this is more

obvious in the case of demands that more explicitly engage with social change, even demands and desires for *maintaining* the status quo depend on projection of the current system as a desirable vision for tomorrow. But as educational discourse in the present historical moment is "organized around a totalizing principle in a paradigm that is called 'analytic', 'rationalist', or 'scientific'" (Fendler, 1999, p. 170), utopianism is, in general, considered 'passe'. This 'scientific' and 'rationalist' approach can be traced back to modernism, as well as to Marx's invention of 'scientific socialism'. As early as 1949, Martin Buber had argued that the reputation of 'utopia' sank in value predominately because Karl Marx used it as a weapon "in the fight between Marxism and non–Marxian socialism" (in Ozmon, 1969, p. v). That his thought had all the elements of the utopian (including its dystopian down fall) is now rarely contested. But Marx:

> . . . used this concept to differentiate between his scientific socialism and what he felt were the dreamy abstractions of others. The opposing faction was thus labeled by Marx as 'utopian'. To a large extent, Buber adds, this fight between the Marxists and the non-Marxists has conditioned our understanding of the world today. (Ozmon, 1969, p. v)

Utopia was thus 'attacked' from both left and right, by radicalists and conservatives alike (though for different reasons). Both the fulfillment of some utopian dreams as well as failed utopian experiments contributed in much the same direction, towards the abandonment of utopia. But while utopia has been officially abandoned, until very recently, both Left and Right still relied on "modernist notions of progress to justify their theoretical, empirical, and political strategies" (Popkewitz, 1998, p. xiii). This has been done without reflective examination and with "almost missionary zeal" in order to obtain the 'salvation' of the masses through education (ibid., p. xiv).

As discussed earlier, the latest attack on utopianism has come out of postmodernism. The few utopian elements left in, for example, critical pedagogy, are to be abandoned and/or replaced by "philosophical negativism", which is seen as a "precondition for the development of a nonrepressive critical pedagogy" (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998, p. 463). As the recent debate between Ilan Gur-Ze'ev and Peter McLaren (1998) illustrates, the possibility of the very project of a critical pedagogy—emancipation through critical reflexivity—has been challenged (Biesta, 1998, p. 450). McLaren (1998, p. 434) therefore argues for a 'provisional utopia' aimed at counteracting the globalization of capitalism and neoliberalism that "work together to democratize suffering, obliterate hope and assassinate justice" (p. 434). He believes that critical and multicultural educators need to renew their commitment to the

struggle against exploitation on all fronts and bring a vision of critical pedagogy that is anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic, and centers around meeting the basic needs of human beings for survival and wellbeing in the struggle for a socialist democracy. In addition, critical pedagogy must articulate its politics with a profound respect for the lived experiences and standpoint epistemology of the oppressed. McLaren's vision for the future of education includes schools as sites for the production of both critical knowledge and sociopolitical action, providing students with both a language of criticism and a language of hope. These languages should then be used to prepare students to "conceptualize systematically the relationship among their private dreams and desires and the collective dreams of the larger social order" (ibid., pp. 460–461). Such schools would:

> . . . need to foster collective dreaming, a dreaming that speaks to the creation of social justice for all groups, and the eventual elimination of classism, racism, sexism, and homophobia . . . New generations of students must be capable of analyzing the social and material conditions in which dreams are given birth, and are realized, diminished, or destroyed. More importantly, students need to be able to recognize which dreams and which dreamers are dangerous to the larger society, and why this is the case. (ibid., p. 461)

McLaren's neo-Marxist revisioning of critical pedagogy is made problematic by Gur-Ze'ev (1998, p. 463), who believes that all current versions of critical pedagogy "function as part and parcel of normalizing education and its violence". For Gur-Ze'ev (ibid.) the 'positive utopianism' that still exists within current critical pedagogies that challenge the present philosophical, cultural, and social reality is their "main weakness". In his vision of counter–education, "no room exists for a positive utopia" (ibid.), and philosophical negativism is a precondition for the development of a non-repressive critical pedagogy. According to Gur-Ze'ev, at the heart of his project is the possibility and the nature of a non-repressive pedagogy. He critiques Freire (1998) because of the dangers associated with "noncritical and automatic preference for the self-evident knowledge of the oppressed over that of the oppressors" (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998, p. 469). Such self-evidence of 'the people', or any social or cultural group, has a terroristic potential, and can open the gate to totalitarianism as earthly heaven. Consequently, Gur-Ze'ev does not provide a particular vision of the future of education. He believes that instead of showing the way, the only thing a non-repressive (and non-violent) pedagogy can do is to "issue an invitation to set out on the journey" (Biesta, 1998, p. 505). Critique in this sense is "a prayer that cannot change the world, but allows

transcendence from it", concludes Gur-Ze'ev (1998, p. 486). According to him, this is the only "nonrepressive form of hope possible in such an educational project" (ibid.).

These two positions illustrate well the current state of utopianism in education. Utopianism has not completely disappeared, but it has been marginalised and is no longer a 'legitimate' discourse. On one hand, McLaren's call for 'revolution' and his reverence for 'guerilla tactics' is highly problematic. Compared to those that advocate a gentle evolution (Eleonora Masini) focusing not on the end results but on 'the Tao, the way' (Elise Boulding), McLaren's suggested strategies remain locked in masculinist/ patriarchal approaches to social change. His approach remains in the tradition of Karl Marx— who appropriated women's experience of childbirth to argue for the revolution as 'a midwife of history' as a means for bringing about the new order, for replacing the old already 'pregnant' with the new. On the other hand, McLaren's call for a 'provisional utopia' remains relevant for social groups that desire different social and educational futures. Using Lewis Mumford's (1922) typology, these 'provisional utopias' are not "utopias of escape" but predominately "utopias of reconstruction" (p. 15). Such *strategic utopianism* remains aware of the possible totalitarianism of 'positive utopias', and of the dangers associated with having a closed vision. But without some sort of future envisioning what remains is a situation in which:

> Hardly anyone talks about educational utopias anymore. We seem to be too caught up with test scores, basic skills, teacher burnout, school violence, and so-called excellence to be concerned with visions of what our schools really could be at their best. The early 1970s gave rise to exciting books like George Leonard's *Education and Ecstasy* and John Mann's *Learning to Be*, which painted fantasy pictures of futuristic schools that educated the total spectrum of human capability. In Leonard's book, children used computer–assisted technology to interact with humanity's rich collection of symbol systems. Mann's book described a utopian school where children attended "empathy classes" and simulated trips to Mars. Just 20 years later, some of these fantasies seem laughably outdated, whereas others are just now being realized. In their time, however, these books revealed a freshness of vision and an unabashed impulse to explore the heights of possibility in education. We just don't seem to do much exploring in this hardheaded era. (Armstrong, 1996, para. 2)

As some sort of "a resolution", Armstrong then proposes bringing together "the idealism of the 1970s with the materialism of the 1980s and 1990s" to produce utopian

schools “grounded in the here and now” (ibid., para. 3). This grounding is possible by both retaining “a sense of hope and optimism while yet staying present to global threats on a daily basis” (Hicks, 1998, p. 225). While the grounding may not be possible within ‘deconstructive postmodernism’ which leaves us “without any possibility for a new story” (ibid., p. 227), hope can not only be retained but has “. . . a central role to play in revisionary postmodernism, not in the shallow sense of merely hoping that things will improve but in the accessing of deep sources of inspiration” (ibid.).

It is, however, not the role of educators to “campaign on behalf of a particular interest group or scenario”, argue Beare and Slaughter (1993, p. 106). Rather, a more fundamental task needs to be attended to, “that of building perspectives about the future into everything we do” (ibid.). Thinking ahead, analysing visions and views of desirable futures, and “negotiating and exploring new and renewed understanding about our present cultural transition beyond the industrial era” (ibid., p. 105) remains central to incorporations of futures studies in education. However, while acknowledging the need to build futures perspectives into all educational practice, I argue that educators need to campaign on behalf of a future based on the principals of gender partnership, peace making, multiculturalism and ecological sustainability. I argue this partly from a value–laden ethical position, partly from a preferred future and partly because of the enormity of the civilizational crisis humanity faces. The campaign, however, is to focus on paradigmatic, epistemic change, rather than McLaren’s ‘guerilla tactics’.

As is the case with futures studies in general, futures in education take both the approach of ‘futurology’ as well as that of ‘critical futures studies’. While there are approaches that focus on educational trends and prediction (e.g., Hostrop, 1973; Withrow, Long and Marx, 1999), critical futures studies aim to engage with the future by helping “both students and teachers to develop skills of foresight, . . . the ability to anticipate and be more pro-active to change” (Hicks, 1994, p. 3). However, “pop–futurism”(Slaughter, 1993, p. 842) that focuses either on limited or ‘mega’ trends is increasingly seen as problematic. Hutchinson (1996, pp. 26–27) argues that this is because, first, predicted futures reinforce the taken–for–granted, by not challenging major currents of scientific, technological and economic determinist thought and thus “perpetuate assumptions that the most worthwhile kinds of knowledge are those derived from the models and methodologies of positivistic science” (ibid.). Secondly, “predictive or extrapolative techniques invest the future with a spurious objectivity” as places to visit with some sort of presence ‘out there’ (Gough, 1989, p. 54). And thirdly, “. . . predicted futures in education may be self-fulfilling prophecies.

They may involve colonising assumptions about pedagogical and curricular imperatives in schools and other educational institutions" (Hutchinson, 1996, p. 28).

The message communicated through education thus becomes that "all children should be taught to cope . . . with future shock [and] the pattern of change dictated by technological innovation" (Morgan, quoted in Hutchinson, 1996, p. 28). Such an approach leaves no space for either 'provisional', 'strategic', 'reconstructive' utopias, or for 'nonrepresive forms of hope'. Rather, education becomes 'part of the problem', a means by which 'colonisation of the future' is achieved.

A number of authors—such as Richard Slaughter, Headley Beare, David Hicks, Catherine Holden, Jane Page and Francis Hutchinson—argue, however, that critical futures studies remain crucial for education. The focus is not on the future "misconstrued as an 'empty space' . . . [but] . . . as an active principle in the present" (Slaughter, 1998, p. 39). The role of futures in education, therefore, is to "help develop individual and collective foresight" (ibid., p. 40) as well as to counteract the negative, uni-dimensional and gender-stereotyped images of the future promoted by popular culture (Hicks & Holden, 1995, p. 18). These negative images and descriptions draw heavily upon "conventional, often stereotypical, science fiction imagery of the future" (Page, 1996, p. 126). Both young people's and adults' images of the future "are generally based on over-simplified sterotypes acquired through the process of socialisation" (Hicks, 2001a, p. 232).

But, while one of the central roles of education is to prepare young people for the future (Hicks & Holden, 1995, p. 3), exploration of the future remains a neglected issue in education (Hicks & Holden, 1995; Beare & Slaughter, 1993; Page, 2000; Gough, 1990). Educators are "frequently told that they hold 'the future' in their hands" (Slaughter, 1996b, p. 152). During the last decades of the 20th century educators were also often told that "the young people they are dealing with are 'the citizens of the twenty-first century'" (ibid.). At the same time:

> The education system has not, to date, responded well to the challenge of applying futures issues in pre-school to secondary educational curricula. This is partly attributable to the lack of an awareness on the part of most educators of the methodologies and philosophical orientations of futures studies. This gap in the educational knowledge base means that most educators do not possess the critical frameworks necessary to analyse perceptions of the future and to convert these concerns into practical learning experiences. In order to remedy this situation, futures researchers will need to continue the long-term

> objective of disseminating information about the discipline of futures studies across educational settings. (Page, 2000, p. 42)

That is, in education, it is still the past that is "evidently of much greater interest than the future" (Slaughter, 1996b, p. 138). How futures discourse functions in education has been discussed in an excellent study by Noel Gough (1990). Gough's study is important because it has:

> . . . drawn attention to the manner in which educational researchers and policy-makers pay frequent lip service to the importance of preparing students for the future without, however, seriously addressing this as an objective in their curricula and in their methodologies. (Page, 2000, p. 42)

Gough convincingly argued that futures in Australian educational discourse are often conceived in terms of (1) tacit inferences, (2) token invocations or (3) taken for granted assumptions. For Gough (1990, p. 298), this is problematic because conceptualising futures in such ways may be "disempowering" and allows "education in Australia to be vulnerable to forces of economic and technological determinism". In addition:

> The difficulty with tacit futures is that they can represent anything from deliberate caution through timidity to outright ignorance . . . Token futures serve little more than a ritualistic function in educational discourse. Taken-for-granted futures reinforce the status quo, in many cases by attempting to use education as an agency in colonising technologically and economically deterministic futures. (ibid., p. 308)

This has been the case not only in Australia, argues Slaughter (1996b). Rather, "the vast majority of education systems throughout the world lack anything approaching a substantive futures perspective" (ibid., p. 152). Similarly to Gough, Beare and Slaughter (1993, pp. 102-105) argue that this is problematic for several reasons:

> First, wherever it lacks a futures dimension, education takes on a repressive character. That is, it elevates a concern for the maintenance of knowledge structures (and therefore power structures) over other human concerns. To render the future invisible, not worthy of discussion or study, is to strip away much of human significance in *the present* . . . Second, education for whole persons needs a futures dimension. The implicit model of personhood which we have inherited from the industrial era overlooks this and much else besides . . . And third, as they are currently constituted, educational curricula tend not to offer a critical purchase on the underlying causes of the world

problematique. They actually contribute to the problem when they unthinkingly reproduce an obsolete worldview.

I return to some of the points made by Hicks, Page, Gough, Beare and Slaughter in my concluding chapter (Chapter Six).

To summarise, this chapter presented a history of the futures and utopian discourse in order to locate my theoretical position within the long and diverse history of inquiry about the future. I have suggested that what is considered utopian and what are considered 'real futures' are in fact social, cultural and historical constructions. I have also explored the connections between futures and utopian thinking and educational discourses and argued that both utopian and futures thinking have become marginalised. I have surveyed arguments by several authors—who focus on futures education—on why is this problematic. I return to this issue in Chapter Six.

The following chapters show that futures thinking consistently underlines educational discourses. Chapter Three focuses on historical futures discourses in education. In this chapter, I explore the engagement of various futures discourses with education that has existed throughout history. I particularly focus on ways in which the western and patriarchal power to define has created particular discourses when discussing educational histories. I argue that the hegemonic view of time and the way desired futures are seen are implicit in creating particular historical educational practices and discourses. Although my thesis is about current discourses on futures of education, I first focus on educational history because the development of multiple, and alternative, educational histories is one way to approach the issue of multiple, and alternative, educational futures. The main focus of my inquiry then switches from historical to contemporary futures and educational visions and practices. Chapters Four and Five thus focus on current debates in regard to educational visions for the future.

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