

## Book review:

# Education for the 21st century

Headley Beare and Richard Slaughter, Routledge, UK. Reviewed by Laele Pepper

EDUCATORS who are in touch with students must be disturbed frequently by the fears, gloom and pessimism expressed by many young people about the future. They must ask themselves what can be done through schools and the curriculum, to reconstruct these views into more positive attitudes and to rekindle the enthusiasm of young people for living?

In the book, *Education for the Twenty-First Century*, by Hedley Beare and Richard Slaughter, the authors offer a theoretical and practical guide for educators who wish to tackle these concerns as they prepare young people for life in the 21st century.

These writers do not subscribe to a quick-fix, technologically driven solution to the malaise of the present generation. Indeed, computers and nanotechnology are mentioned only in passing, as tools of the future, not fundamental elements in the changes needed.

Rather, Beare and Slaughter concern themselves with a more profound mind shift. Their key argument is that schools must stop looking backwards and grounding their practices and rationales in outmoded ways of thinking and doing, and start to look forward, using a futures perspective to inform everything that takes place in schools.

They offer an outline of a number of well tried futures tools and concepts to assist educators in the task of shifting the focus of curriculum and teaching to the future. A busy teacher who did not wish to follow the detailed discussion of how and why the need for a profound mindshift has arisen in the late twentieth century could turn to chapters 7 and 8 and find a clearly explained compendium of strategies to use in their classes the very next day.

But the book is not merely a technical handbook. The authors deal in their early chapters with three major shifts in which Western societies are currently immersed. While not oversimplifying the complexity of these developments, they expound them with admirable lucidity, placing them in a context of philosophical and theoretical writings.

The first of these is the decline of industrialism as a basis for massive

employment, and the beginning of the shift towards a knowledge-based economy where the manipulation of information will be the principal way that people will earn their living.

The second major shift relates to global consciousness, the one-world view. The view that humans inhabit a small, fragile planet dominated by natural systems of climate, geography and vegetation stems from the earth photos taken by the lunar missions of the mid 1960s. But this view has come into sharp focus as we have begun to understand the stresses being imposed upon the earth by unrestrained, and often unethical human activity, and tried to modify the consequences.

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Beare and Slaughter point out that the problem is not attributable only to greed or exploitation, but reflects an incomplete understanding of the complex interconnection of all of earth's systems. This situation has come about as a result of 300 years of reductionist thinking, which has encouraged specialisation and focus upon narrow fields of research but in general, has not supported attempts to synthesise an overview of knowledge.

Therefore the third shift is the well documented change in understanding about modern science and what constitutes knowledge. The fragmentation of knowledge into guarded fields of specialisation is being challenged by those who see the inconsistencies and inequities this generates. At the level of scientific theorising, new attempts are being made to integrate previously disparate fields of study. Within schools this change will affect the way specialisations are taught, and some educators are reworking the concept of integrated studies.

The most important and urgent task for educators to take on is to make a conscious shift from a past-

orientation to a futures-orientation in every aspect of their work. There is a sense of urgency, which arises from the breakdown of old meanings and values, social dislocation and the destruction of past securities. This is compounded by the realisation that humans may have passed a point of no return in the way they have treated the planet.

Regretful reflection upon past experiences can be tempered by the powerful understanding that people can affect the future by the choices they make. The past is not a closed book — all change must proceed from what has gone before; but neither is the future predetermined by the forward projection of past errors and practices. The future is open very wide; a huge range of possible, probable and preferable futures can be brought into being by the choices made now. Responsible decisions can be made after people become informed, using techniques such as futures scanning and critical foresight, then choose to act in certain ways.

If a rationale for futures studies is sought, almost all human action is predicated upon the existence of the future. The future drives our present plans, purposes, goals, intentions and meanings ... and curricula. Further, since humans have the unique capacity to range in imagination through past, present and multiple futures, there is no need for humans to experience catastrophe before taking steps to counteract it. These are the fundamental realisations which educators need to bring to young people, urgently.

Beare and Slaughter, respected educators and futurists, have written this book from the perspective of Western worldviews and education systems, and it is immediately applicable in the Australian context. However, it is a book deserving wider circulation, as its message has relevance in a global context. Its argument is disturbing to the complacent; its challenge is profound to those uneasy with the present; and its proffered solutions are helpful, relevant and empowering.

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