Preparing for futures unknown
Sally Burns considers which qualities we need to encourage in young learners

‘Knowledge is changing so fast that we cannot give young people what they will need to know because we do not know what it will be’ (Guy Claxton)

This well-known quote in many ways sums up the challenges faced by education today. From a personal point of view, it is what inspired us to rework and relaunch Values and Visions. At the October 2019 conference of the Alliance for International Education (AIE) hosted by the International School of Geneva, Dr. Simona Popa of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education talked of ‘preparation for the unknowns’, the ‘fast-changing context’ and ‘an unknown future’ or, as UNESCO says, ‘futures’. Dr. Conrad Hughes considers such issues in more depth in his most recent book, where he speaks of ‘international organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF grappling with challenges and problems at an international scale’ (Hughes, 2018).

Attempts have been made to address these challenges. The twenty-first century competencies are a case in point, summarised as the four Cs: collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity. In another initiative, in partnership with UNESCO, the International School of Geneva’s La Grande Boissière campus has devised the Universal Learning Programme (https://sites.google.com/ecolint.ch/ulp/home) which highlights seven competencies: lifelong learning, self-agency, interacting with others, interactively using diverse tools and resources, interacting with the world, multi-literateness and trans-disciplinarity. They advocate teaching for deep understanding, assessing competencies and creating social impact, as noted in Dr Hughes’ keynote address to the AIE conference.

In my opinion the clearly-defined competencies and the above approach are a major step in the right direction, and should definitely be at the heart of the curriculum, although they are not enough. We at Values & Visions (V&V) believe young people need inner strength to help them find meaning and purpose in the volatile world in which we live and into which they will step when they leave school. Let me elaborate on this.

Using a V&V activity called ‘Today’s World is…’ I have asked a number of educators to brainstorm words to describe today’s world. Some of the words that have come up are shown in Figure 1.

I then go on to ask: ‘If you could give your child one gift or quality to engage actively with this world, what would it be?’ Countless teachers, governors and parents have been asked this over the years. Some of their responses are shown in Figure 2.

In one whole-school workshop on globalmindedness, we clustered the qualities that emerged and came up with nine which we then prioritised, with ‘empathy’ coming out on top to become the focus of the semester’s work, threaded through curricular and extra-curricular activities. What we are coming back to here are values. But whose values? In his AIE keynote address, Conrad Hughes discussed at length the values behind the curriculums; those of the companies supplying the software and hardware now indispensable for schools, for example. He stressed the need for educators to be aware of these and their implications for learning. Fazal Rizvi, in his own AIE keynote address, echoed this when he differentiated between commercial and ethical values, asking how we teach the difference and how we talk to kids about values. He alluded to ‘public values’. These have emerged in the UK in the form of ‘British values’: a set of values which schools must instil in their students (GOV.UK, 2014).

We at V&V argue that values cannot be instilled, cannot be taught. A group of trainee teachers from the ITEps (International Teacher Education for primary schools) programme at Stenden University expressed the problem...
This brings me back to the Values and Visions philosophy. As can be seen from Figure 3, values lie at the core of our Dynamic Learning Cycle. ‘Whether consciously or unconsciously, nearly everything we do, nearly everything we think and feel is coloured by what we believe matters, what we give value to’ (Burns & Lamont, 2019:2). In response to Rizvi’s question, we do not talk to kids about values, we set up situations where they can share what is important to them, what they believe: their values.

We do this with teachers too. How? Well one way is shown in Figure 1: Today’s World is … (Burns & Lamont, 2019). Another way is to go into stillness and project yourself into the future, when you are eighty-five years old (a long way off for school students, though maybe not so far for some of us educators!). From this perspective, reflect on your life, what you have achieved, what has been important to you. Finally focus on the three qualities that have most influenced your life; in other words, your values.

When we do this in a group with young people or with educators, we have everyone share their three qualities and we usually find there is a lot of overlap in the values, as in the ‘gift question’ above. What we are doing is enabling them to come up with a list of shared values, identifying what is important to them as a class, group or team. The difference between this and, for example, ‘British Values’ is that these are the individuals’ own core values. They are not imposed. It may be that some of them are the same, but the process is what counts here and there is a sense of ownership in the group. A student reflecting on this activity at the Takatuf Scholars summer residential enrichment programme wrote ’I chose integrity, perseverance and being humble … because those are characteristics my grandfather had, and I aspire to be like him.’ He found he was not the only one who held those values dear. Another student at the same residential programme wrote ‘It was a good process because it squeezed our minds to choose the most important and relative values or qualities for us.’

Another of Rizvi’s questions was ‘How do you talk about public values?’ With V&V there is no set of public values. We don’t know what the values of the people we work with will be. Having used this activity many times in different cultural settings, my own assumptions were challenged in a Muslim context where the students almost all highlighted ‘religion’ as a core value and went on to explore what it would look like in practice. This was not a value that had come up for me before.

Faced with unprecedented global challenges and inconceivable futures, the identified competencies are certainly an important part of what our students need. Sets of prescribed values are not what they need. Young people need inner strength which comes from living by what they believe in: their values. This is what we believe will prepare young people for the hitherto unknown global transformations they will face.

References
Conrad Hughes: Rethinking education: the Universal Learning Programme
ITEps Student panel
Simona Popa: Opening remarks
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