International Electronic Journal of Environmental Education
Vol.3, Issue 1, 2013, 1-16
RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Envisioning the Future – A Question of Distances

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*Received: March, 2012; Accepted: October, 2012*

***Abstract***

In this paper we will examine how children view their future. Intergenerational relations are at the core of sustainable development. These concern a human's moral responsibility to the coming generations. But, can we take for granted that future generations will have the same requirements and preferences as we do? Discussions of the future often take off from an adult perspective, but what would the visions of the future be, if children were asked? Theoretically the study is based on the life-world phenomenology. Our study was conducted in northern Sweden in 2011. Altogether, 22 children aged 11 to 12 years participated. They were asked to make a drawing to answer a question 'what does the future look like when you are grown up?' During the analysis, four themes emerged; *technology, career, apocalypse and sameness*. According to our results, we consider that there is an aspect of *distance* imbedded within the visions.

***Keywords*****:** children's visions, future, education for sustainable development, intergenerational relations, phenomenology

## Introduction

What are the visions of the future that children have today? This paper provides a perspective on how young people imagine their future based on their lived experiences. Our aim is to illuminate and discuss the future from a child's perspective in the framework of education for sustainable development (ESD). School is one of the places where visions of the future are formed and challenged. Education plays a key role in societies striving for long-term sustainability. The general goal of sustainable development (SD) is "to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", as stated in the Brundtland Commission's report *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987, p. 43). Through a study among children at grade 6 in an ordinary elementary school in northern Sweden, we will examine how children view their future. This study is based on children's drawings and their oral and written comments in relation to these drawings.

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ISSN: 2146-0329

In environmental politics in general, *The Limits to Growth* from the Club of Rome in 1972 was the start of taking into account future generations (see Meadows, Randers & Meadows, 2005), but it was the Brundtland Commission's report (WCED, 1987) that made a breakthrough with new temporal ideas in environmental education. The report introduced a new aspect in the debate on environmental education – the time perspective. As a consequence, the demand for ethical responsibility towards the coming generations was made explicit.

Sometimes it is said that teaching has changed from what used to be called environmental education (EE) to what is now called education for sustainable development (ESD). When such a distinction is made, ESD offers a more holistic approach, where ecological, economic and social aspects should be integrated with each other. Issues of SD pose important questions for the future of human society as well as for those who wish to teach for a just and sustainable future (Fien, 1995; Breiting & Wickenberg, 2010). There is criticism that EE and ESD have both been, and still are, focused too much on problems and pessimistic views of the future. There is a danger that this will reduce children's confidence in being able to make a difference (Lidstone & Stoltman, 2007; Jonsson, Sarri & Alerby 2012). On the other hand, Ojala (2007) claims that young people's worries concerning the environment can have a positive impact, such as motivation to act in a pro-environmental fashion (see also Persson, Lundegård & Wickman, 2011).

Our point of view is that aspects of the future within ESD need to be discussed more thoroughly than it has been done so far. In previous studies in ESD, for example, Hicks and Holden (2007) argue that the temporal dimension is of paramount importance in ESD. They emphasize that ESD is implicitly involved with probable and preferable futures. They also argue that young people need guidance to think more, rather than less, critically and creatively about the future, whether from a personal, local or global perspective. Also, Hutchinson (1997) emphasizes the future dimension in education, suggesting that environmental educators need to listen actively to what children say about the environment and the future, and to deal with their concerns with honesty and care. The emphasis has too often been on the past and present, and rarely from a child's perspective. The importance of listening to children thus needs to be highlighted. The most obvious reason for is that all teaching should begin from the learners' pre-understanding. In other words, it should start in the life-world of children (Jonsson, Sarri & Alerby, 2012; Hertting & Alerby, 2009; Alerby, 1998).

Visions of the future have been studied in the school context in different ways. Gidley (1998) looks at Years 10–12 students' sense of empowerment with regard to their view of the future. Eckersley (1999) suggests that the gap between the ideal and real futures of young people is getting wider. Further, he says that pessimism about the future reflects real concerns, but also the failure of people's vision of the future as a source of inspiration for both individuals and society. Tsevreni (2011) has studied children's perspectives on the future in relation to their action competences. Connell et al. (1999) looked at the hopes and fears about the future among Australian young people and found that they were concerned primarily with personal futures – personal relationships, careers, academic success and enjoyment. Jonsson, Alerby and Sarri (2012) studied Sámi children's vision of future from a cultural perspective. They discuss the tension between the Sámi culture and that of western modernity and how different themes, such as the economy and environmental change, will have an impact on their culture and way of living in future.

Intergenerational relations are at the core of SD (Barry, 1999). These concern a human's moral responsibilities to the coming generations with regard to attitudes about and behaviour towards the environment (Tuncay, Yilmaz-Tuzun & Tuncer-Teksoz, 2011). Looking

at intergenerational relations towards the future at a deeper level, we find that some problems are embedded in the task. For instance, can we take for granted that future generations will have the same requirements and preferences as we do? Let's take an example: if SD had been on the agenda 2000 years ago, we would probably not have been allowed to cut down the beech forest that covered southern Europe, or be able to enjoy a glass of wine under the olive trees. As Karlsson (2005) points out, the present demand for a good life – in terms of food, possessions and services – looks totally different from what someone in a pre-modern context would have expected. He argues that science changes our demands and, more importantly, it changes what is possible to think. We may have a common idea of the challenges and threats we face, but we are not as agreed about what we want the future to be. Overall, SD is a quest for values on a specific time-horizon (see Lundegård, 2007, 14)

Intergenerational relations have been a focus in several studies. Almers (2009), for example, seeks to tackle the question of intergenerational responsibility with regard to the distance moral approach. This explains moral responsibility in relation to people whom one does not have direct contact with because, for example, one does not live at the same time as them (Almers & Wickenberg, 2008). They assume that it is the distance moral dimension in action both spatially, but above all temporally, that is the specific political novelty in the fundamental value of SD. Prout (2011) suggests that it is important to keep the generational relations open-ended, which means that multiple generational ordering would be possible. This means that instead of taking for granted what the intergenerational relations are and what they mean; we should explore the values and complexity embedded in these relations.

Intergenerational relations can be understood through the concept of temporality. Temporality can be seen as a description of different qualities of time (see Adam, 1998; Held, 2001). Adam states that the industrial way of living is influenced by an invisible rhythmicity and pace of ecosystems. 'Invisibility' in this context refers to features of living that we are unable to see, hear, taste, touch or smell. SD is an inherently temporal concept, thus Held argues that it needs temporal diversity to be taken as its starting point. We improve our understanding of SD if we explicitly start from a temporal perspective.

**Theoretical and methodological framework**

Our study of children's views of the future relies on the phenomenological philosophy of the life-world, which was originally an attempt to understand how humans relate to and interact with the world. It is a philosophy of experiences that is characterized by openness, sensitivity and flexibility towards things (Husserl, 1970). A phenomenological understanding of 'being-in-the-world' is the point of departure in our study. As we look at the temporality of children's visions, we relate to Merleau-Ponty's claim (1962, 279) that the body takes possession of time – it brings the past and the future to the present. He argues that "the life of consciousness – cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round our past, our future, our human settings, our physical, ideological and moral situations, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects" (ibid, 136). In addition, he describes that one acts in the world through the body, and that space and time are indeterminate horizons that the body inhabits.

Studying experiences always requires interpretation at several levels. van Manen (1990) argues that reflection on lived experiences is always recollected – it is a reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through. In the same way, when children formulate their visions of the future, they do so based on their lived experiences. In other words, children's future expectations are bound to the life-world that they live in. According to van Manen, basic things about our life-world, such as our experience of lived time, lived

space, lived body and lived human relations are preverbal and are therefore hard to describe. Orientation to the temporality is to consider experience of lived time in a more explicit way. The richness of our visions emanate from the richness of our experience of the life-world. Thereby visions need to be described as they exist.

*Sample*

Our study was conducted in northern Sweden in the spring of 2011. Altogether, 22 children aged 11 to 12 years participated. They were asked to make a drawing to answer the question 'What does the future look like when you are grown up?' The data was collected during one lesson including time for drawing and discussions with each child. We emphasized that it was not a task to determine how skilful they were in drawing; instead, we wanted to know what kind of visions, images, thoughts and feelings they had about the future. We asked them to reflect on the question individually and to make a drawing of their reflections. When they had finished, the children were asked, one by one, to comment briefly on their drawing. This happened in the end of the lessons in the separate room to secure privacy for reflections. We posed questions that related to the meaning or purpose of the drawing. For example: 'What were you thinking when you were doing this drawing?´ All 22 children made both drawings and talked with us about those. Some children even wrote comments on the drawing at the same time as they were doing it. According to Einarsdottir et al. (2009), asking children to reflect on their experiences is an activity that demonstrates children's competence as communicators and as people capable of reflection on what is meaningful to them. She also points out that the combination of drawing and telling enables reflection on several aspects of phenomenon in question, e.g. future visions (see also Alerby, 2000; Alerby, 2003).

*Method*

Children's drawings have been used before as a method to get closer to their life experiences (see also Alerby, 1998; Hertting & Alerby, 2009; Fleer, 2002; Jonsson, Alerby, & Svonni, 2012). According to Dewey (1991), language includes much more than oral and written speech – for example, paintings and other pictures. As he expresses, "anything consciously employed as a *sign* is, logically, language" (p. 170). Alerby (1998; 2000; 2003) also suggests that drawings are comparable with any other form of communication and notes that an understanding of a drawing requires interaction between the person who has made the picture and the one interpreting it. Furthermore, she argues that using drawings opens up the possibility of explaining associations more openly than is possible with other forms of expression.

*The analysis*

Alerby (1998) and Dahlberg et al. (2008) claim that attempts to 'see the invisible' are part of the analysis. It is not enough to describe what is in a drawing: the phenomenon that it is expressing needs to be understood. In a phenomenological study, the result can be captured and described as in terms of different themes. During our analysis, drawings and a transcription of oral comments were viewed as a unit, and qualitative similarities and differences were noted. Differences in expression and meaning helped us to determine the themes that we would use. It is important to note, however, that the themes are not intended to be clearly distinct categories (van Manen, 1990), nor are they quantifiable features – different themes can overlap and connect to each other. Essentially, the themes are analytical tools to describe parts of people's experiences regarding the phenomenon that is under investigation. In the analysis, we tried to reach the meaning embedded in the drawings and sometimes it was the children's oral or written comments that made the difference.

## Results

After viewing all of the empirical material together, we were able to identify some similarities and differences at a thematic level. Four themes were crystallized: *technology for the future, making a career and envisioning a working life, when the world goes under – apocalypse* and *it will be good anyway – sameness*. We will now look more closely at each of these themes.

*Technology for the future*

Characteristic of the theme of technology was to describe some change in a society based on a technological innovation that does not yet fully exist – for example, "the new generation's cars" and portable houses. Technological objects were situated mostly in public places, like cities or in traffic. In some sense, this theme is an optimistic vision of solving the risks and threats of the future using advanced technological innovations.

These visions may be answers to the question 'What will it be like in society in the future?' Some of the technological solutions were motivated by environmental arguments. For example, one child argued: "We are going to have electric cars instead of gasoline cars. Perhaps it is going to be some new invention like a flowing car that is not so bad for the environment" (Figure 1). Another drawing (Figure 2) expressed a society built on the moon. This child explained that he believes that people will be able to live on the moon in the same way as they do on the earth. The moon will just be an alternative environment to live in –he didn't believe that the society or culture would be any different. He said: "People go to the moon just because it is possible. I wouldn't want to live there but perhaps I could visit it." He also explained that the person in his drawing is not him but another child playing football.


*Figure 1*. Flowing cars, portable houses and possibilities for teleportation. Translation of the text in a drawing: Flowing cars and houses that can be moved. There is a tent and a footpath as well as flowing shoes. Teleportation is very expensive.

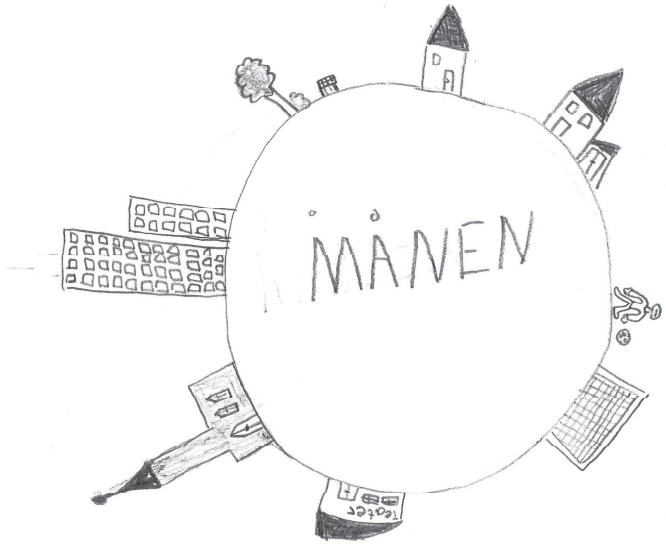


*Figure 2*. A similar society built on the moon. Translation: Månen = the moon

Within the theme of technology, the children expressed a spatial and/or temporal distance from the things they draw. They explained that the situation in a particular drawing would happen to other people in some other place. Their visions also expressed a moral distance between humans and nature, which could appear to be indicating a control over nature by humans (Figure 2). Signs of familiar socio-cultural structures – such as theatres and churches – as in the drawing of the moon, highlighted the link between children's lived experiences and their visions. Within this theme, the children envisioned a future that would look different from the present as a result of human scientific and technological innovations, as well as our need to develop and expand our living space. A more individual or personal approach to the future can be found in the next theme.

*Making a career and envisioning a working life*

This theme is characterized by an individual framework in which children could be answering the question 'What is going to happen to me in the future?' (Rather than 'What is going to happen around me in the future?' as in the previous theme). Work and hobbies played a central role and personal success very often featured. Most drawings presented just one person and individual activities were placed the centre. In one drawing, a child drew himself as a critic and explained: "I want to become a critic and I want to read what other people have written. I will work at home with my computer" (Figure 3). However, some of the children saw themselves as part of a wider, global context (Figure 4). For example, one child explained: "I want to work in the hospital, in the X-ray department. I want to find a new cure to diseases." This hope for scientific solutions to the threats of diseases is similar to the theme of technology. However, in contrast, here a child often featured in their own drawing to illustrate their career and working life. The visions were often close to the children's life experiences such as where a boy drew himself sitting and reading in his own room (Figure 4). This is an expression of the narrow spatial and temporal distance that he has

experienced. The next theme illuminates visions that have little personal or individual framework. It expresses an apocalypse of the world and has a framework of long distance in all respect: spatial, temporal and moral.


*Figure 3*. A nurse on the way to work at a hospital. Translation: Sjukhus = a hospital, Akut = Emergency room

*Figure 4*. Home as a workplace.

*When the world goes under – apocalypse*

Sometimes, children's visions of the future expressed concerns about environmental catastrophes and war. Their drawings could be an answer to the question "What is the worst thing that can happen to the world in the future?" The degree of distance in these visions was wide-ranging with regard to the moral, temporal and spatial dimension. One child believes that people are going to cut down all trees, which will cause environmental disasters and finally the end of the mankind (Figure 5). Others expressed visions of terror, war and overwhelming industrial pollution (Figures 6 & 7). One child explained: "It is going to get worse. There are wars of oil. The only thing people can do is to close the factories. There is nothing that I can do. It is just the big companies that can do something. The situation is getting worse all the time and there will be a lack of clean water as well." When children focused on all of these threats, they expressed very pessimistic views and described the apocalypse. For example, one child (Figure 7) draws a polluting industry, destroyed forests and war. This drawing is set far into the future, in the year 3049, and the child has written on it that afterwards the world is going to end.

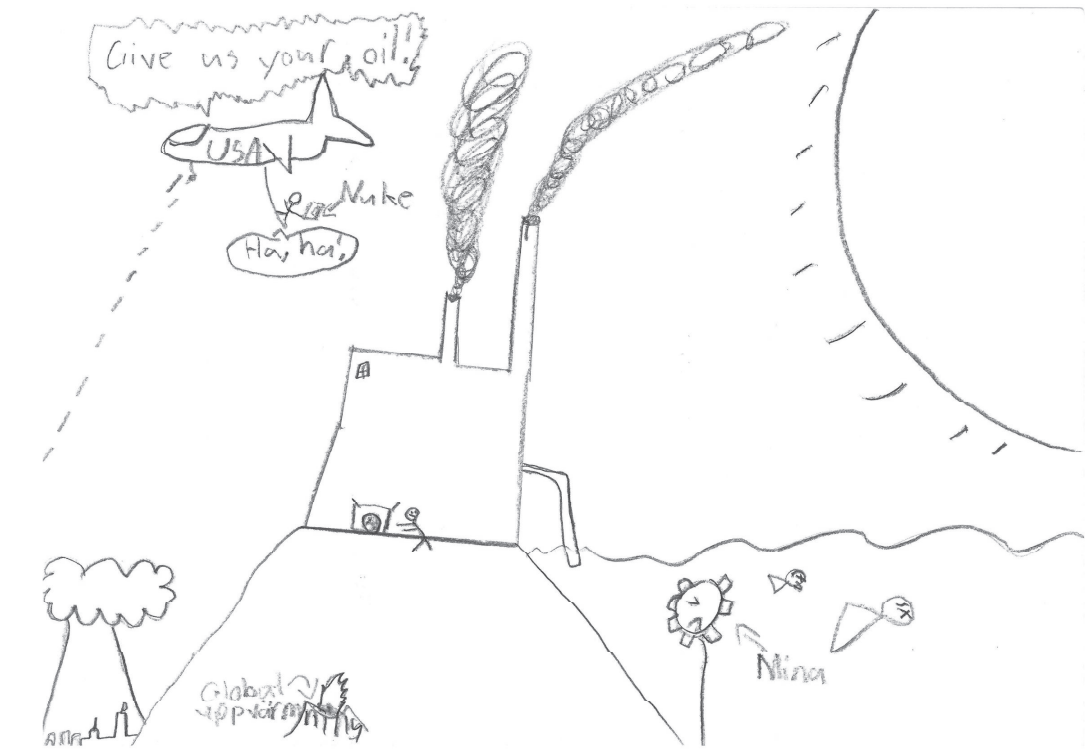


*Figure 5*. War of oil, industrial pollution, nuclear power and mines causing trouble. Translations: Global uppvärmning = global warming, Mina = a mine

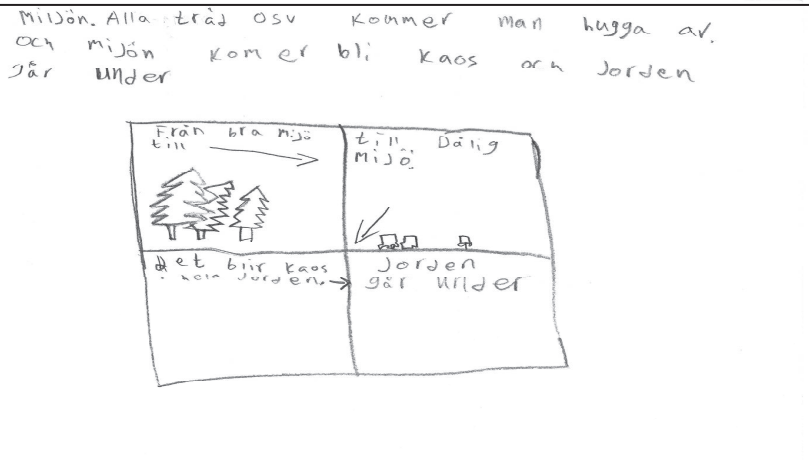


*Figure 6*. From good environment to bad environment, chaos and the end of the world. Translation: Environment. All the trees will be cut down and it will be chaos in the environment and finally the world goes under.


*Figure 7*. The year 3049 and the world is heading towards its end. Translation: år = yaer, Senare jorden går under = Later the world goes under.

The underlying threats seen to be leading to the apocalypse are both social and environmental. The catastrophe may depend on conflicts between humans or between us and nature (forest, water and air). In Figure 6 the child describes a war of oil and has written: "Give us your oil!" This shows an issue of conflicting human interests concerning natural resources. The framework of these drawings is global because the development of various problems is leading to the total disaster of the earth instead of just some part of it. In

contrast with the theme of technology, scientific and technological development would not rescue humans in the visions of an apocalypse.

We can reflect on what ways these visions relate to the life-world of these children. The children's cultural knowledge is probably the key issue here. Myths of apocalypse have been a part of western culture that goes way back in history and are still a part of many cultural forms, such as literature, music, film and games (see Hansson, 2010). According to Håkansson (2010), there is even a risk that schools are contributing to apocalyptical visions of the future. He claims that education of the climate change can in the worst case result with the negative visions of the future and low political engagement. Another approach to the future is to emphasise stillness or sameness – a world that will not change, as follows.

*It will be good anyway – sameness*

Sometimes children didn't express any differences in ways of living or in the surrounding world compared with the present situation. Uncertainty about the future is obvious within this theme. Children's capability to reflect the future is weak when they don`t express any moral, spatial or temporal distance. One child wrote on the back of a drawing: "I think that my future will be easy. I mean not mentally, that will be hard. But to live in an ordinary apartment, working in a boring ordinary job, have kids. But I don't know if I want it to be that way. I want to live in a house, work with something that I like, travel a lot and have kids. All in all, it will be good anyway☺" (Figure 8). According to this, the idea of becoming a grown-up can feel confusing. Even though it is not clear what will happen in the future, this child is optimistic that things will turn out fine.

Children's visions of the future were sometimes emotional. Due to this they found it hard to describe them through activities or objects, as in previous themes. Feelings of anticipation about the future may focus on the psychosocial elements of life, which are hard to describe either visually or verbally. One child, however, drew apartment blocks that reminded him of the buildings beside the school (Figure 9). He explained that the future would 'look like the usual". The sameness of his versions of the present and the future might be an expression of the difficulty he found in expressing temporal distances.

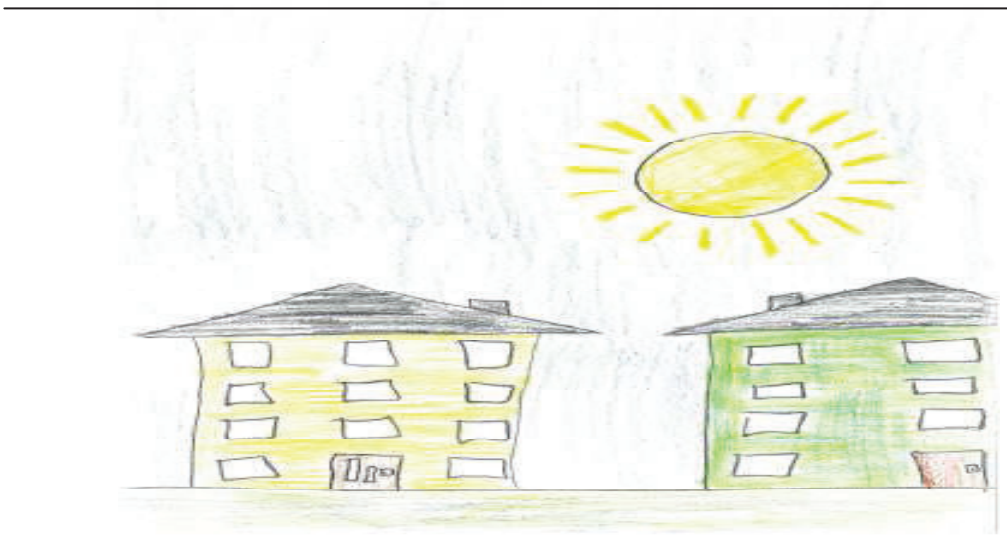

*Figure 8*. Two apartment houses and a sunny day.

*Figure 9*. A person walking on the street and an airplane has just taken off.

**Discussion and conclusion**

What do children's visions of the future tell us? By studying individual visions of the future, we increase the understanding of what issues children consider worth taking care of. By illuminating the richness of children's visions it is made clear that their experiences are both unique and part of the shared life-world. Based on the results of our study, we consider that within the four themes there is an embedded aspect of distance. By 'distance' we mean flexible dimensions of both space and time. In addition, distance has a moral dimension, which refers to a sense of responsibility towards other people and nature. The distance expresses whether an individual's focus is close or far away. For example, their visions of the apocalypse are far away from the children in terms of the time, space and moral dimensions.

When the children considered the technology theme, the distance could be expressed in terms of space – for example, from the home town to the moon. Technology in this sense is changing our visions in relation to the dimension of space. The more technology we have, the more opportunities we have to expand the world. Through technology we extend our reach, even to the moon. Technological visions were also evident in the research of Alerby (1998), Hicks & Holden (2007) and Fleer (2002), which addressed children's and young peoples' thoughts about the environment. Alerby refers to the children's "technological" thinking as a 'pragmatic view' of the environment.

Distance in both space and time was apparent in the career theme, as in the example where the child wanted to find cures for diseases. This can be seen as an expression of global concern and willingness to take personal responsibility, as well as to care for other people. In other words, it is an expression of moral closeness – care for people with whom someone has no experience of contact. In contrast, the child who sees himself working at home shows

an aspect of distance with a different meaning. Here, the distance in space is quite small but it does not say anything about the moral distance involved in this scenario. Working at home is made possible by the technology, which in this theme is viewed from the personal point of view, not from the society's point of view.

The theme of apocalypse expands the concept of distance, particularly with regard to the dimension of time. To children it seems that conflicts happen far away in the future, as in the drawing that is placed in the year 3049. The issue of environmental destruction is also found in Alerby's (2000) study of children's and young people's thoughts about the environment. She labelled children's drawings about the death or devastation of the forests as thoughts of the bad world. According to Beck (1994), focusing on risks and catastrophes makes people incapable of action. We, like Beck, can see that when the world is heading towards a catastrophe, human responsibilities are placed in an institutional context (like the child who felt that factories, rather than individuals, had the power to do something), instead of in the context of everyday life, where children are more easily able to retain a sense of responsibility.

The theme of sameness highlights important features of future visions. Although things might look the same in the drawings, some changes might be embedded in children's visions. It is taken for granted, for example, that people get older, probably get a job and might have a family. Other changes are harder to put into words. Children might worry that life in their future will be hard or boring. This theme therefore raises the issue of their emotional relationship with the future. At first sight, some visions seemed to lack a feeling of distance from the present. However, while studying children's comments relating to their pictures, we found temporal distances indicating an awareness of different time periods in life, e.g. adulthood. Also, this lack of distance might in some cases reflect a child's lack of appreciation of the pace of some changes, believing that environmental or other world events won't occur in their own lifetime.

We have been discussing distance from the children's perspective, using their experiences as a point of departure. In our study, we have seen how a group of children envision the future through varying distances. Distance has at least three dimensions – moral, spatial and temporal – and these have in common their relation to life experiences. No matter how far away on the moral, temporal and spatial scale someone's visions of the future are, the other end of the scale is firmly fixed in the life-world of that person.

We want to stress that through temporality it is possible to reflect intergenerational relations at a deeper level. This can be exemplified by Hicks and Holden's (2007) study among 11-year-old children. They found them to have a clear desire for a better quality of life in their local community but, when it came to environmental matters, two-thirds of the children expected more problems in the future. Especially in relation of global problems, children were generally negative. The notion that local prospects are more positive than global prospects was also found in our study. We consider this to be a question of distance, which we argue is one quality of temporality. In other words, distance helps us to understand temporality in a more nuanced way. Envisioning the future takes different expressions, depending on the chosen viewpoint between moral, spatial and temporal distances.

Temporality enables us to understand time as something more than just measurable "clock-time". Most of all, it provides a framework for discussing values in relation to the time, which from our point of view is especially needed in ESD. Almers (2009) discusses temporality in a distance moralistic framework. She underlines the importance for young people to have the opportunity to take a stand and develop action competence for the future. In addition,

Gidley (1998) claims that where conscious imagination is not cultivated, tacit images will creep in anyway. She explains this further by saying that if young people receive negative images of the future, it is not surprising if they end up feeling disempowered.

We consider ESD as a context in which it is relevant to deal with what we want the future to be, and in which children's visions of the future should be the obvious starting point. Our study shows how children interpreted open questions about their future mainly in four different ways: What is going to happen in the society in the future? What is going to happen to me in the future? What is the worst thing that can happen to the world in the future? How does it feel to become a grown-up?

We refer to the words of Gough (2006) in recognizing that we are engaged with a somewhat erratic process of learning our way into an uncertain future. To focus attention on the distances embedded in alternative visions could be one way for a teacher to open up discussions about preferred visions of the future. This means that when SD and the temporality in it are treated as something ultimately changing and open for criticism, it is easier to understand the effects of children's visions. SD has a moral and intergenerational aim. Addressing the issue of achieving a "better future" is therefore an on-going process in ESD. If we consider SD to be a process instead of fixed goal, we can agree that the target of SD is flexible. We stress that by looking into the different distances of future visions, we can find a meaningful and interesting access into ESD. All we can know is what we leave to the next generation, but we can't say anything of the later generations. All in all, each generation leaves its own legacy.

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International Electronic Journal of Environmental Education
Vol.3, Issue 1, 2013, 1-16
RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Geleceği Öngörmek – Zaman, Mekân ve Ahlak Konusu

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*Alındı: Mart 2012; Kabul Edildi: Ekim, 2012*

***Özet***

Bu makalede çocukların gelecek hakkındaki öngörüleri incelenecektir. Sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın özünü kuşaklararası ilişki oluşturmaktadır. Bu durum, bir insanın gelecek kuşaklara olan ahlaki sorumluluğu ile ilişkilidir. Ancak, bizler gelecek kuşakların bizimle aynı ihtiyaçlara ve tercihlere sahip olmalarını sağlayabilecek miyiz? Gelecek tartışmaları genellikle yetişkinlerin bakış açısıyla belirlenmektedir. Eğer çocuklara gelecekle ilgili görüşlerini sorulsaydı nasıl bir sonuç elde edilirdi? Teorik olarak bu çalışma canlı-dünya fenomenolojisine dayanmaktadır. Çalışma, 2011 yılında Kuzey İsveç'te gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışmaya, 11 ile 12 yaşlarında toplamda 22 çocuk katılmıştır. Çocuklara, "Büyüdüğünde gelecek neye benzeyecek?' sorusu sorulmuş ve çocuklardan soruyu çizim yaparak yanıtlamaları istenmiştir. Çalışmadan elde edilen verilerin analizlerinde dört tema ortaya çıkmıştır; *teknoloji, kariyer, kıyamet ve aynılık*. Çalışmadan elde edilen sonuçlara göre zaman, mekân ve ahlakî konuların çocukların öngörüleri ile iç içe olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** Çocuk görüşleri, gelecek, sürdürülebilir kalkınma için eğitim, kuşaklararası ilişki, fenomenoloji.

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ISSN: 2146-0329