Latvian primary school teachers' views: Contemporary learner and future society

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Abstract

The paper presents a study of focus groups conducted in schools of Latvia involving teachers of grades 1–6 (*n* = 76). The data and outcomes of this study are based on the outcomes of focus group discussions and the analysis of the experience in other papers. According to the acquired outcomes of the study, contemporary learners on the one hand are braver, ready for an active action, they use various opportunities, they are aware of their worth, on the other hand, they accept diversity, spend much time watching TV, using the global network, that does not facilitate social communication. **Conclusion**: For the process of learning to meet the needs of the future, learners must be given an opportunity to construct such knowledge, skills and attitudes that make it possible to view processes holistically, grasping the mutual interaction of different aspects.

Keywords: Contemporary *learner*, contemporary teacher, future society, sustainability perspective.

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1. Introduction

The field of contemporary education is significant not only from the present-day but also from the future perspective. Present-day learners are the would-be active society members and decision makers, thus, this is important for the education to be based on the needs of contemporary society as well as with a vision of a sustainable development in mind.

The relation between education and sustainable development has been initially defined in the action program for the 21st century, chapter 36 (UN, 1992) emphasising that this is necessary to harmonise the existing education programs and curricula with the goals of sustainable development. This idea is developed further by indicating that education has a decisive role in the implementation of the notion of sustainable development and in the context of sustainable development 'education helps to reach the changes of values and behaviour also by being a source of information and an opportunity in activating the participation of the community in the decision making processes' (UNESD, 2004: 2).

As this is stated in both, local and international discussions of educationalists and researchers (Hicks, 2010) one of the problems that are insufficiently discussed in the process of leaning is learning for present, with the emphasis on present, not thinking about the future. Not only learners but also teachers too often ignore the question, *what the learner will be like upon leaving the school, what skills she/he needs in order to be an active citizen of the future, one's readiness for the labour market and everyday life.* The data acquired at the first stage of the research prove that present-day learners are secure, they are aware of their EGO, they are ready for active behaviour and they are ready to accept diversity, they use various opportunities offered that are accessible in everyday life, at the same time there is too little '*face to face*' communication with peers and other people, focusing mostly on the use of IT and global networking opportunities, too much time is spent by learners by the computer and television that impedes social communication.

In learning and thinking about the future, a significant role is attributed to the teachers who have been selected as the participants of the present study. According to the analysis of similar research and sources (Salite, 2006), the topic of defining the goal of education and future education is urgent. The present paper offers a vision of Latvian teachers on the qualities of the present-day learners and their future society. The aim of the article is to explore the opinion of Latvian teachers about a contemporary learner and a future society defining what changes are necessary for shifting the learning environment towards a sustainable development. Proceeding from the future visions developed during discussions in focus groups, this was discovered what solutions are necessary in the field of contemporary education in order to reach the set goals.

2. Research methodology

The research was carried out in several stages but the present article reflects upon data gained in the second research stage and its analysis. The research participants are teachers of grades 1–6 (*n* = 76), selected casually, they represent various regions and schools of Latvia.

Focus groups were used as a qualitative method of data collection in the present research. Focus groups method was considered as the 'form of group interviews' (Pipere, 2011: 177) with several participants and a particularly defined topic (Clavin & Lewis, 2005; Hughes & Dumont 1993; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007), or a set of particular questions (Jupp, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2000) with the emphasis of interaction and common meaningful idea construction (Alasuutari, Bickman & Brannen, 2008).

Focus groups were formed to study the issues from the point of view of the participants of the research; unlike an interview (Jupp, 2006), this method provides learning data that arise not only in the interaction between a researcher and a participant but also among the group members. As noted by several authors (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Jup, 2006; Miller & Brewer, 2003; Schwandt, 2007), the results of focus groups are successfully applied to testing ideas, chosen methods, understanding people's opinions about the choice of a certain conduct. However, when using this method, there are several problems that may appear (Jupp, 2006; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007): the formation of the group opinion may impede the expression of individual beliefs, someone may dominate in the discussions, when interpreting data the words of participants may be misrepresented, there is a possibility of conscious or unconscious manipulation with participants' replies. Focus groups are not used for statistical prediction.

During the research, focus groups as a method of data acquisition were used by involving several groups (*n* = 12), each group consisting of 4–6 members who meet only once. At the first stage teachers discussed *what a contemporary learner is like*, in order to take into account everybody's opinion, each research participant initially drew a contemporary learner as imagined by him/her, afterwards in focus groups participants discussed the most characteristic features of learners, their values, attitude, conduct as well as problems that occur in the everyday learning environment. During the second stage, teachers in focus groups discussed the questions *what the future* society will be like, what knowledge, skills and competences, values and attitudes will be needed by the contemporary learners in 10–15 years when they are grow-up, what must be changed in teachers' work for the process of learning to match the future needs to secure education for sustainable development.

3. Primary school teachers' views: data analyses

In focus groups (*n* = 12) comprizing 4–6 primary education teachers of grades 1–4, the following replies were gained:

3.1. Future society

The responses to question 1. 'What does the society may be like when the present-day first former has left the school?' areshown in Figure 1.
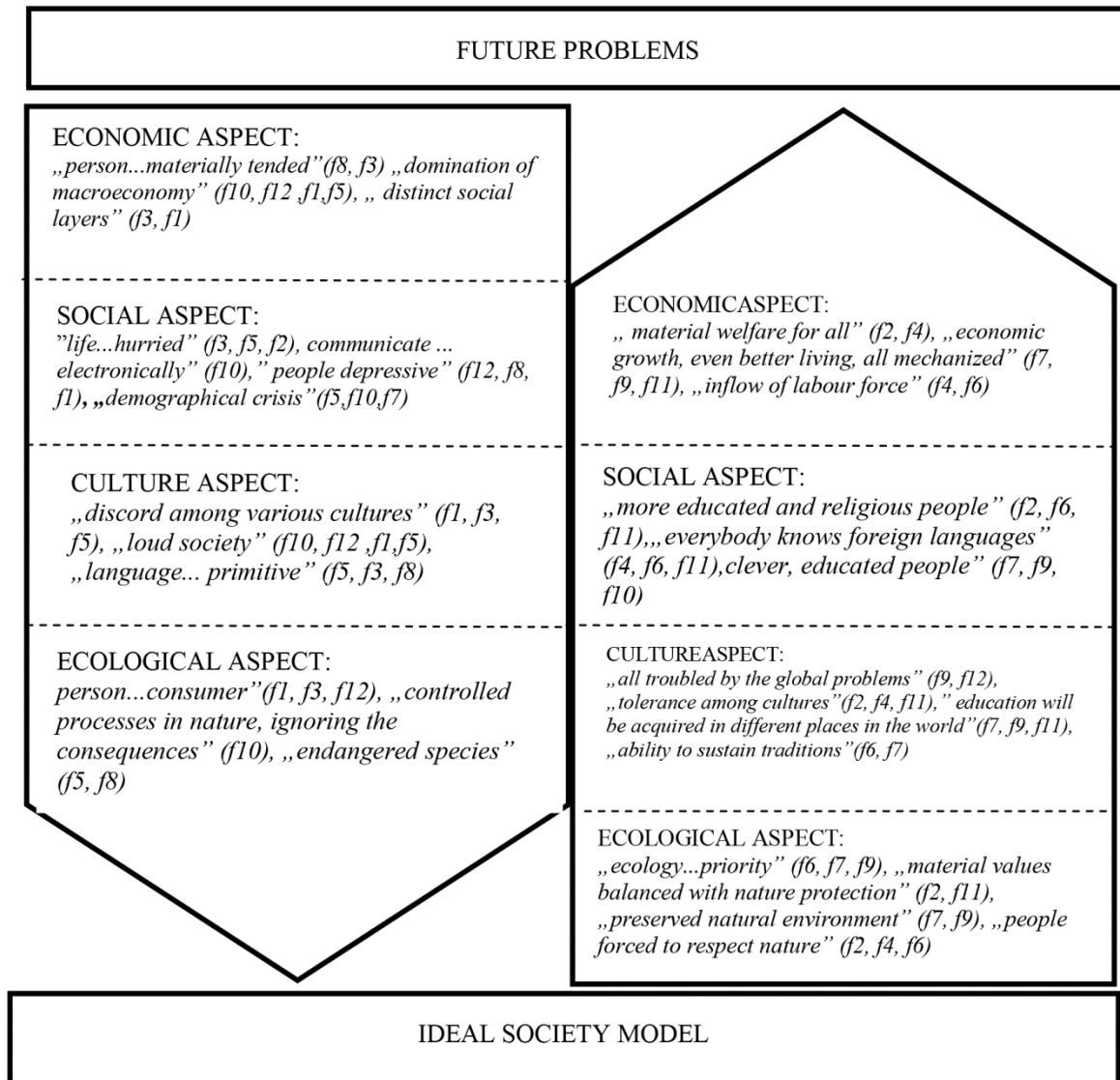
FUTURE PROBLEMS

ECONOMIC ASPECT:
„person...materially tended"(f8, f3) „domination of macroeconomy" (f10, f12 ,f1,f5), „ distinct social layers" (f3, f1)

SOCIAL ASPECT:
"life...hurried" (f3, f5, f2), communicate ... electronically" (f10)," people depressive" (f12, f8, f1), *„demographical crisis"(f5,f10,f7)*

CULTURE ASPECT:
„discord among various cultures" (f1, f3, f5), „loud society" (f10, f12 ,f1,f5), „language... primitive" (f5, f3, f8)

ECOLOGICAL ASPECT:
person...consumer"(f1, f3, f12), „controlled processes in nature, ignoring the consequences" (f10), „endangered species" (f5, f8)

ECONOMICASPECT:
„ material welfare for all" (f2, f4), „economic growth, even better living, all mechanized" (f7, f9, f11), „inflow of labour force" (f4, f6)

SOCIAL ASPECT:
„more educated and religious people" (f2, f6, f11),„everybody knows foreign languages" (f4, f6, f11),clever, educated people" (f7, f9, f10)

CULTUREASPECT:
„all troubled by the global problems" (f9, f12), „tolerance among cultures"(f2, f4, f11)," education will be acquired in different places in the world"(f7, f9, f11), „ability to sustain traditions"(f6, f7)

ECOLOGICAL ASPECT:
„ecology...priority" (f6, f7, f9), „material values balanced with nature protection" (f2, f11), „preserved natural environment" (f7, f9), „people forced to respect nature" (f2, f4, f6)

IDEAL SOCIETY MODEL

Figure 1. Summary of the conversations in focus groups

Though the formulation of the question does not emphasise sustainability or particular aspects of sustainability, all focus groups arrived at these issues. Participants (*f10, f12, f1, f5, f3* and *f8*) admitted that *at present everybody is concerned with the world's economic crisis and the related social insecurity*; therefore, they were willing to discuss these issues first. Hence, focus group participants regarded the future through the perspective of the admitted global errors that had facilitated the development of the unpleasant and dramatic vision of the future. Only, then the groups considered the changes that are needed today in order not to allow such a situation in the future.

The rest of the focus groups (*f2, f4, f11, f6, f7* and *f9*) at the very beginning admitted the possibility that the changes necessary for sustainable development had already taken place and discussed them. Hence, discussing about the future, the responsibility and attitude to the environment were emphasised along with balancing the needs of the people with the conditions of the existence of the Universe.

On the whole group participants manifested themselves as globally thinking citizens who see their culture and social values and their attitude towards ecology, the opportunities of their country in economy. Their opinions were dominated by the belief that this country is just a small part of the world and that the ecological, culture, social and economic welfare and security are related to the sense of honour and goodwill of each citizen of the world.

3.2. Future knowledge, skills and competences, values and attitudes, experience

The second question discussed by the groups: What knowledge, skills and competences, values and attitudes, what experience will be needed for the contemporary learner in 10–15 years when they are grown-ups? Teachers emphasised the knowledge, skills, competences, values and attitudes needed by the learners in the future. The summary of responses is seen in Figure 2.
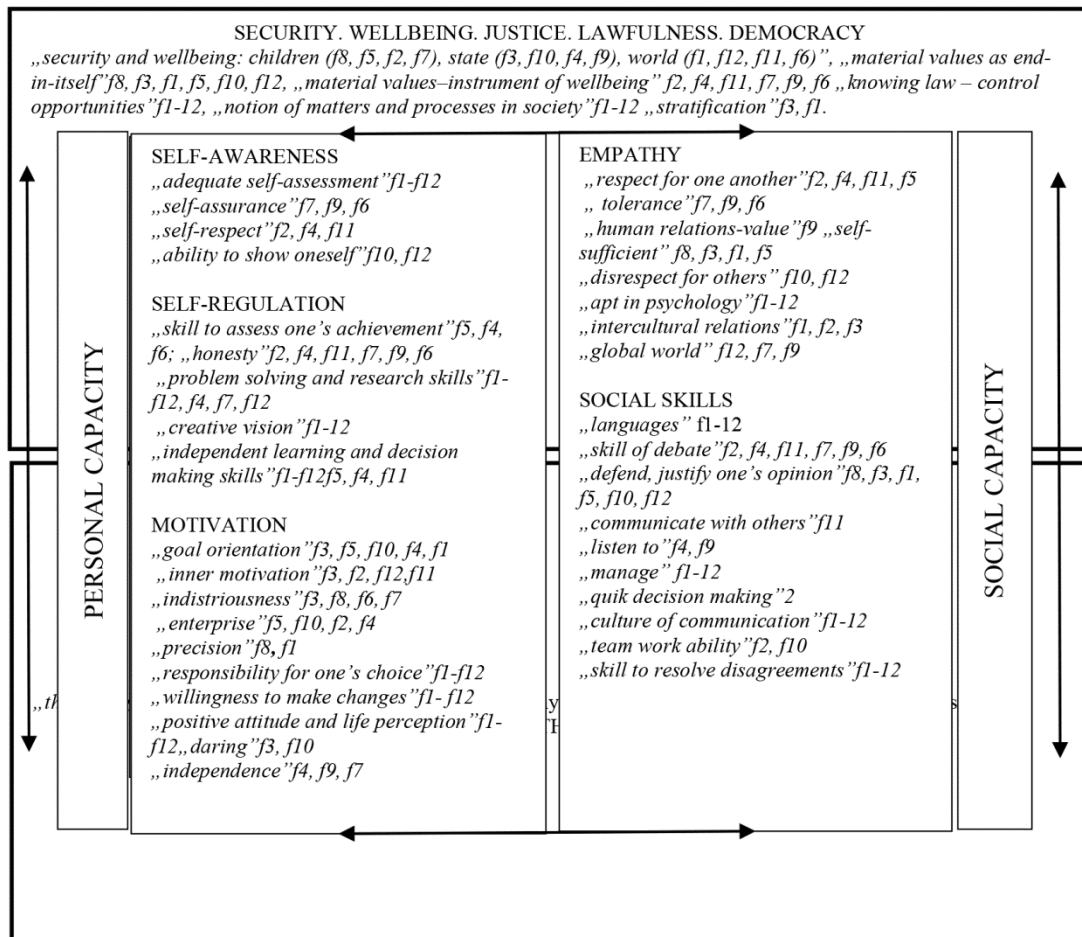


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SECURITY. WELLBEING. JUSTICE. LAWFULNESS. DEMOCRACY
„security and wellbeing: children (f8, f5, f2, f7), state (f3, f10, f4, f9), world (f1, f12, f11, f6)", „material values as end-
in-itself"f8, f3, f1, f5, f10, f12, „material values–instrument of wellbeing" f2, f4, f11, f7, f9, f6 „knowing law – control
opportunities"f1-12, „notion of matters and processes in society"f1-12 „stratification"f3, f1.
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PERSONAL CAPACITY

SELF-AWARENESS
„adequate self-assessment"f1-f12
„self-assurance"f7, f9, f6
„self-respect"f2, f4, f11
„ability to show oneself"f10, f12

SELF-REGULATION
„skill to assess one's achievement"f5, f4, f6; „honesty"f2, f4, f11, f7, f9, f6
„problem solving and research skills"f1-f12, f4, f7, f12
„creative vision"f1-12
„independent learning and decision making skills"f1-f12f5, f4, f11

MOTIVATION
„goal orientation"f3, f5, f10, f4, f1
„inner motivation"f3, f2, f12f11
„indistriousness"f3, f8, f6, f7
„enterprise"f5, f10, f2, f4
„precision"f8, f1
„responsibility for one's choice"f1-f12
„willingness to make changes"f1- f12
„positive attitude and life perception"f1-f12„daring"f3, f10
„independence"f4, f9, f7

EMPATHY
„respect for one another"f2, f4, f11, f5
„tolerance"f7, f9, f6
„human relations-value"f9 „self-sufficient" f8, f3, f1, f5
„disrespect for others" f10, f12
„apt in psychology"f1-12
„intercultural relations"f1, f2, f3
„global world" f12, f7, f9

SOCIAL SKILLS
„languages" f1-12
„skill of debate"f2, f4, f11, f7, f9, f6
„defend, justify one's opinion"f8, f3, f1, f5, f10, f12
„communicate with others"f11
„listen to"f4, f9
„manage" f1-12
„quik decision making"2
„culture of communication"f1-12
„team work ability"f2, f10
„skill to resolve disagreements"f1-12

SOCIAL CAPACITY

Figure 2. Teachers' responses about the future skills, competences, knowledge, and attitudes

All opinions may be analysed from the point of view of personal and social opportunities, foregrounding either security, wellbeing, justice, lawfulness, democracy, or biotism, health or spirituality as the major ones.

Teachers express hope that contemporary learners will be able to provide security and wellbeing for their families in future. Their opinions differed upon the way the contemporary learners would

choose to reach well-being. Some teachers held that *'acquisition of material values will be an end-in-itself* (*f8, f3, f1, f5, f10* and *f12*),* while others thought that it would be *"an instrument for wellbeing"* (*f2, f4, f11, f7, f9* and *f6*).* In all focus groups an idea was expressed that present-day learners in future would make use of the knowledge in legal matters, to be able to *'control lawfulness by knowing law'* (*f1-12*), *'notion of the matters and processes in society'* (*f1-12*).* The only point of disagreement in focus groups was democracy or stratification (*f3* and *f1*) as people were divided into those who have to observe law and those for whom no law is an obstacle.

The analysis of the opinions acquired in focus groups leads to the conclusion that living an independent life, one of the significant traits that will be needed by the present-day learners is empathy—awareness of other persons' feelings, needs and interests: 'respect for each other'(*f2, f4, f11* and *f5*), 'human relations as a value' (*f9*) 'tolerance' (*f7, f9* and *f6*).* In all groups an idea was expressed that, for them to be able to see opportunities in diversity and use them, they must be 'apt in psychology' (*f1-12*), informed 'about intercultural relations'(*f1, f2* and *f3*), and 'the global world' (*f12, f7* and *f9*).

Present-day learners will find as significant also those skills that are related to facilitating in others the conduct preferable for oneself. All unanimously agreed that for the development and the use of efficient tactics in future one will need 'languages' *(f1-12)*, 'ability of discussion' (*f2, f4, f11, f7, f9* and *f6*), the significance of cooperation 'ability to work in team' (*f2* and *f10*) and that the ability to 'communicate with others' (*f11, f4* and *f9*) will grow. In all focus groups, the participants emphasised that in future everybody will need 'adequate self-assessment' (*f1-f12*)—the awareness of one's strong and weak points. One will also need 'self-assurance' (*f7, f9* and *f6*) and 'self-respect' (*f2, f4* and *f11*). One of the most important traits as mentioned by the focus group participants is 'honesty' (*f2, f4, f11, f7, f9* and *f6*),* yet some teachers emphasised that honesty will be an obstacle in competition-based society. All focus groups stressed that for successful living one will need 'green thinking' (*f1-12*), 'time and money for sustaining one's physical health' (*f1-12*),* as well as 'respecting the generally accepted values' (*f1-12*).*

3.3. Analyses of the process of learning with the future needs in focus

The third question discussed in groups: What should teachers change in their work to provide education for sustainable development? The summary of responses is reflected in Figure 3.
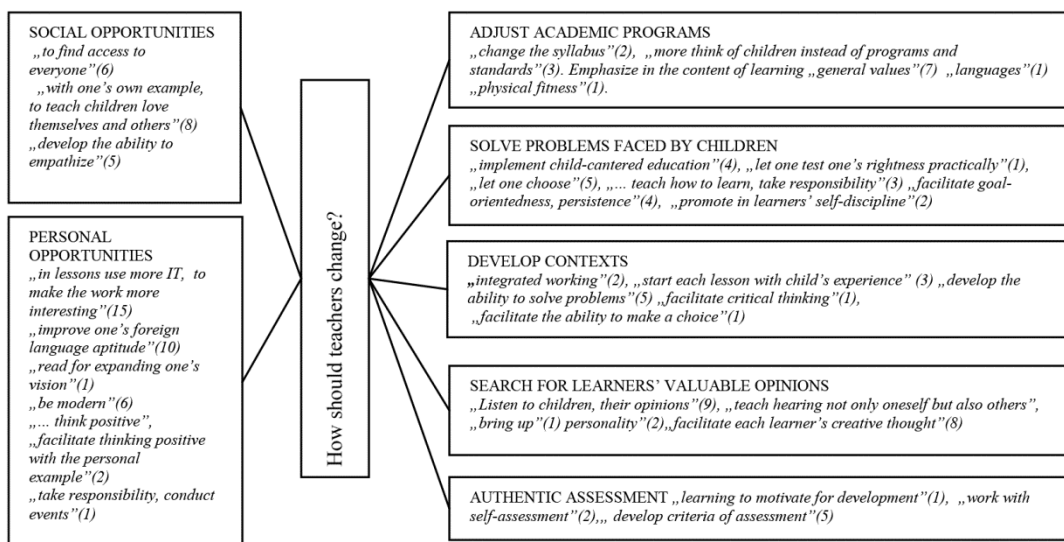

Figure 3. Teachers' opinions about the changes needed in the contemporary education (number of opinions)

Two significant components were distinguished when analysing teacher focus group opinions: personal capacity and social capacity or opportunities. According to data, on the one hand teachers would like to expand their vision, improve foreign language aptitude (*n* = 10) and IT skills (*n* = 15), improve their social and personal capacity.

They are ready to change teachers' attitudes, values that are manifested in conduct. Teachers ask themselves a question: '*Does my way of teaching match the standard?*' Teachers are certain that it is necessary to develop a constructive learning process for their learners: '*to find an approach to everyone*' (*n* = 6), '*with one's example to teach children to love themselves and others*' (*n* = 8), '*to develop ability to empathise*' (*n* = 5). According to many authors (Miller, 1995), personal capacity determines the person's ability to cope with oneself and it affects: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation and (3) motivation. Hence, people are aware of their inner state, are able to assess their resources and can manage them as well as determine and develop their emotional setting towards certain achievements and goal attainment.

Social capacity determines the person's conduct in relation to others and is manifested as (1) empathy—being aware of other people's feelings, needs and interests and (2) social skills for facilitating others' preferable conduct towards oneself. Thus, person becomes more aware and understanding of others and if needed can provide help and support as well as opportunities of communication, management and promoting changes.

4. Discussions

Similar ideas reflected in various research works, definitions of the goal of education (Salite, 2002, 2006, 2008) and of future education (O'Sullivan, 1999) emerged as an important topic among others. They characterise that the philosophy of teacher education determine the contemporary education environment and its components. This educational environment is certainly affected also by the teachers' personal systems of reference (Grabovska, 2006; Gedzune & Gedzune, 2011) that characterise teachers' vision of various matters.

Similar to what is demonstrated by the research results, there is a discussion of conflicts between two existing world views—thinking green or ecological world view and consumer society or economic development oriented vision (O'Sullivan, 1999; Ryland, 2000; Webster & Johnson, 2010).

Processes in economy, society and education environment proceed both in a linear and circular manner (Posch & Steiner 2006; Webster & Johnson 2010). Many authors discuss the opportunities of using the surrounding environment and thus contributing to the process of learning (Brundiers, Wiek & Redman 2010; British Department of Education and Skills, 2007; Grabovska, 2011) emphasise that there is a need for new solutions to provide for the sustainability of society and economy. Innovation is necessary in the situations when standard solutions are not appropriate but a creative approach is needed. Thoresen (2004) suggests her vision of an individual sustainability that involves five skills related to a facilitation of individual responsibility: those of communication, decision making, problem solving, creativity and change management. Her main idea is that by using individual understanding and conduct, learners become responsible citizens who help to reach global sustainability.

Brooks and Brooks (1999) bring together five principles to help teachers to implement the ideas of constructivism in class: first, using learners' everyday life problems; second, organise constructing of knowledge in contexts; third, search for learners' valuable opinions; fourth, adjust academic programs to particular learners; fifth, authentic assessment. As shown by the achievement of applying the method of focus groups, the personal ideas of participants, their beliefs and understanding develop and grow in a meaningful group discussion (Pipere, 2011). Thus, new systems of reference are

constructed and improved that help to assess the current situation and introduce respective changes if needed to form the learning environment based on the needs of the present and future.

According to the analysis of the acquired research data and theoretical sources, for the process of learning to meet the needs of the future, learners must be offered such learning strategies and situations that would provide an opportunity to construct knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes that would help reaching a holistic vision of the world as well as notice the mutual interaction of various aspects.

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