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# Progress Report on FutureSight – England’s Contribution to the Toolkit

For presentation at the OECD Forum on ‘Schooling For Tomorrow’ at Toronto, Canada.

## Executive Summary

This paper describes development work undertaken in England by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Innovation Unit as part of an international project to develop tools and processes which policy-makers and school leaders can use to challenge and inform their thinking. This, in turn, builds on trends and scenarios developed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) within the ‘Schooling for Tomorrow’ initiative.

The paper describes how we have used innovative seminars to design robust tools for thinking about the future by working directly with school leaders and policy-makers. It sets out the shape, structure and potential of FutureSight – the four module learning process which has emerged from this work. In addition, it explores how school leaders and policy-makers have responded to the OECD Trends and Scenarios, offering summaries of their preferred futures.

In a further analysis, we explore the implications and potential of this work. In a national policy context which aspires to radical change, we make the case for robust futures thinking processes at local and national level and propose the concept of ‘futures literacy’ to describe the essential vocabulary, concepts and learning processes we need to look beyond the horizon of conventional planning. Finally, we explore the further challenges we face at micro level, in refining learning design and at macro level, in testing and applying the tools more widely with leaders across the public sector, with pupils and local communities.

## Introduction

This work forms part of the international ‘Schooling for Tomorrow’ project initiated by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) to develop practical applications for OECD Scenarios for the Future of Schooling (OECD/Istance, 2001). In parallel with work in the Netherlands, Canada, and New Zealand our purpose is to contribute to the international development of a toolkit of collaborative processes which policy-makers and school leaders can use to explore the scenarios and inform their thinking.

Launched in England in 2002, the toolkit project offers the potential for policy-makers and educational leaders to step outside the intractable problems of the present at school and system level to see the future of learning in new, challenging and exciting ways. The development and use of the toolkit has been primarily with school leaders and has demonstrated potential as a vehicle for professional learning. There have, however, been examples of use with other stakeholder groups, principally students and school districts (Local Education Authorities).

This paper describes our work in England so far, both in contributing to the OECD work and in developing our own toolkit for futures thinking. It offers a brief history of the project, a description of the FutureSight materials under development and an account of what we have learned. These relate to:

- powerful learning processes which appear to have considerable potential to stimulate futures thinking;
- new perspectives on the OECD ‘Schooling for Tomorrow’ trends and scenarios, and
- implications for policy-makers in this country.

We include the draft FutureSight materials as an appendix to this paper.

## Policy Context

Education policy in England in the 1990s was characterised by a sustained period of ‘school improvement’, closely allied to public accountability measures, the emergence of data rich schools and centrally directed, research-informed initiatives around teaching and learning, such as the national literacy and numeracy strategies. The early years of the twenty-first century have, however, brought a sharper focus, with the ‘improvement’ movement giving way to more radical thinking. Despite significant gains, national and international analyses of student outcomes suggest that education in England is still not serving all pupils

well. The message is clear: if we continue to do what we have always done, we will get what we have always got.

Transformation, remodelling, innovation and the use of 'pathfinders' to enable practitioners to find new ways forward are now increasingly evident as policy-makers seek to give schools the space and authority to re-invent themselves around more personalised learning. For some schools, the need is urgent, where recruitment and retention of teachers brings daily challenges. For others, it remains difficult to imagine anything other than a better form of the present and, for all, the policy context remains full of tensions. Empowerment and innovation sit uneasily alongside curriculum constraint and a government inspection agency, OFSTED, which is often perceived as punitive and inflexible.

In this context, development of robust processes of futures thinking has the potential to take us out of our own, familiar worlds to inhabit a radically different future which might help us to identify the steps we need to take to redesign learning and to understand more clearly the policy context which will enable this to happen.

## History and Development

The project in England has been characterised by:

- the support and active involvement of national agencies;
- a commitment to collaborative learning processes which bring together and challenge a range of perspectives through the involvement of senior policy makers, innovative headteachers and, most recently, students.

Led by a study group drawn from the National College for School Leadership, the DfES Innovation Unit, the independent think tank DEMOS and the OECD, 'FutureSight' has emerged through an iterative process. Through a series of seminars we have developed a conceptual framework and shared vocabulary to help us understand the relationship between our current reality, the worlds of the scenarios and the future we wish to create together. We have found simple ways of exploring the scenarios experientially, of walking around in these imagined futures and, finally, we have designed tools to enable us to use the scenarios more analytically.

In reaching this point, we have tried, tested, abandoned and adapted tools and processes following five national seminars for:

- leaders, chief executives and senior officers from national training and development organisations, alongside highly innovative headteachers (December 2002)
- leaders of schools facing challenging circumstances (July 2003)
- students from Year 9 and 12 through an event hosted by the University of the First Age (October 2003)
- leaders of the Innovation Unit Leading Edge Partnership schools (November 2003).

In May 2004, we held a further seminar to enable senior policy-makers to consider the implications and potential of this work. Following further case study work to explore how individual schools, partnerships and networks use the tools and other development work to help connect futures thinking with their current reality.

A further step in the evolution and use of the Toolkit came through Innovation Unit work on the policy agenda of Personalisation. Having gathered together a group of forward-thinking school principals to develop thinking around the practical enactment of personalised learning in England's schools, the FutureSight materials and processes were adapted to provide a 'Visualisation' tool for the group, to sharpen their thinking about what schools that achieve personalisation might look like in the future. Once again, this formed the basis of a twenty four hour residential seminar.

Following further seminar work with school leaders and local officers from an LEA, the culmination of this phase of work will be the launch of a national FutureSight publication in summer 2004, together with a facilitated process to schools, local education authorities, other groups and networks.

Materials and learning from this project will also be available in the OECD publication.

# The Shape of FutureSight

The FutureSight process sets out to:

- Introduce futures thinking tools, processes and vocabulary
- Model and demonstrate their value
- Develop the toolkit

## Learning Design

When we developed FutureSight we assumed that the process would work over a single day. In practice, it usually takes the form of a residential seminar comprising around eight hours of learning, three quarters of which is spent in the same facilitated group of eight to ten people. This is an intensive and challenging process.

FutureSight is consequently not a conference but a seminar with a learning design and a set of tools that can be used and reused in different contexts. FutureSight also does not start with a blank sheet. It is not 'content free'. It draws on the tacit knowledge and experience of the delegates but it also uses the public knowledge contained within the trends and scenarios from the OECD 'Schooling for Tomorrow' project.

## Structure

FutureSight has a structure to enable progression for the participants and the seminar process is divided into four modules to make this progression explicit. Each module has a distinct learning and knowledge orientation. The overall shape is summarised below:

| Module                       | Learning orientation          | Knowledge orientation               | Resources           | Key Tools   |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| 1 A Stone Rolling            | Exploratory                   | Public and Practitioner knowledge   | Trends              | 'A Rolling Stone' Trends exploration process        |
| 2 Making it Real             | Experiential                  | Public and co-constructed knowledge | Possible scenarios  | Hot seating   |
| 3 Towards a Preferred Future | Analytical                    | Co-constructed knowledge            | Preferred scenarios | Preferred Future Matrix                             |
| 4 Re-engaging the Present    | Reflective/action orientation | Co-constructed knowledge            | Pledges             | The Solar System or Travel Game and Learning Trends |

The first module is designed to enable participants to engage with what is already known about trends in wider society that will affect the future of schools. The first step is simply to discuss the trends at a general level. Participants are subsequently asked to share their own experiences and perceptions relating to these trends, to describe how they are manifest in different schools and are asked to suggest other trends that impact on their context.

The second module is based on the six scenarios in 'Schooling for Tomorrow'. These scenarios describe how the same trends discussed earlier could combine to produce different futures. Drawn from drama, a hotseating exercise provides opportunities for triads to think and respond to questions from the group in the roles of learner, parent/carer and educator. The purpose of this activity is to enable participants to make sense and internalise the different scenarios without making judgements about their desirability. Key ground rules are an agreement to resist talking about the present or the desirability/probability of the scenarios and to accept the challenge of the scenario by careful avoidance of stereotypes.

In the penultimate module participants co-construct a 'preferred future' based on their own beliefs and values. They use the OECD content as a starting point but are encouraged to combine it in new ways and to write their own content.

The final module is designed to enable participants to reflect on the differences between their current reality and their preferred futures and to identify the accelerators and brakes that will affect their future trajectory. They are then asked to pledge actions individually and collectively that relate both to using the FutureSight materials in their schools and to other development activity. Copies of their 'pledges' are returned to them two months later as a reminder of the commitments they made.

Further details are available in the FutureSight introduction, modules and tools included as an appendix to this paper.

## What have we learnt?

Three central areas of learning are explored below:

- learning processes
- new perspectives on the trends and scenarios, and
- implications for policy-makers

## Learning Processes

### Living with Ambiguity

When we began this work, thinking about the future felt uncomfortable, difficult and abstract. We even shared this explicitly with early seminar groups. What's more, imagining a future full of possibilities seemed to lead us nowhere at all. So, part of our early learning was just about understanding this and the discomfort we felt when resisting closure. It helped a little to know that, as highly evolved problem-solvers, our brains wanted to work out where we were heading and then get into the practical business of planning how to get there. Futures thinking, we learned, was not about that at all. Instead, it inhabited a world of 'possibility space' where scenarios would be 'a sort of anti-planning tool' (Miller).

There was evidence from the seminars that, in some instances, this had led to significant shifts in analytical processes for those involved:

'I'm a linear thinker by nature and this challenged my linear thinking...It stopped me from being the usual manager'

[Head, November workshop 1]

'I now think differently and I will look at a problem differently next time.'

[Head, July workshop]

'I'm now more open to the idea of moving the culture of the school towards one that is more questioning. I've had a shift of mindset. I'm going to go away from here thinking differently, answering people when they come to me with new ideas in different ways – not instantly looking for the blocks. Maybe that's enough.'

[Deputy Head, November workshop 1]

### Using the Familiar in New Ways

So, in the early stages, we began to learn a little more about the ways in which we could break out of our comfortable present. This is the sort of challenge envisaged by De Bono's road map:

'You have an excellent road map. Once you know the road map you can figure out how to get to most places using the existing roads. Knowledge of the existing world, and judgement to check that knowledge, allows us to use existing methods. The past millennium of recognition, judgement, discrimination allows us to use our knowledge but does not help to design new possibilities.'

'The downside of patterns is that once we have set them up we are trapped by them. In order to see a new idea there is a need to create it first in the brain as a possibility, a speculation, an hypothesis or a construct. This needs creativity, design and imagination.'<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as we progressed with this work, the techniques for generating and holding open possibilities did not seem to reside in new ways of working, but in new applications of familiar processes. Imagination, playfulness, kinaesthetic activities and routines which drew upon children's games seemed to have the greatest potential. Metaphor and narrative also had a central place, just as they do in other processes of rational thought:

'Even the most recondite scientific reasoning is an assembly of down-home mental metaphors. We pry our faculties loose from the domains they were designed to work in, and use their machinery to make sense of new domains that abstractly resemble the old ones.'<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, our learning is presented as a journey, the relationship between trends and scenarios is a stone rolling (Beare) and thinking through the opportunities and barriers on the way to our preferred future is likened to space travel. The outcome, in many ways, has consequently been perhaps no more than simple, good learning design:

'This event has been a great example of how to design a lesson – it was a carefully structured environment yet lots of opportunities for experimentation and creativity.'

[Head, November workshop 1]

## **Inhabiting the Future**

The final early part of our early thinking came from Hedley Beare, offering a much longer perspective on futures thinking:

'Merlin, the legends agree, could speak the language of trees and animals; he could communicate with birds and the creatures of the wild woods; he was a living cosmology! He also had the gift not of *foresight* but of *future-sight*. There is an enormous difference between the two. We use foresight when we look into the future and anticipate what we might encounter up ahead. *Future-sight*, however, is the result of being *already in* the future. It treats the future as familiar and known ground, as though it is already happening about you. ...

In his teaching of the young hero-king Arthur, he talks of the future with the authority of one who has already been there, and who knows the whole of which this moment is a fleeting part.'<sup>3</sup>

From such thinking we recognised that 'Making it Real' had to be a central part of the learning process and so designed a 'hotseating' tool drawn from drama to give people an opportunity to step into a future scenario, walk around in the place, explore and share how it feels from a range of different perspectives. In addition, we designed ground rules which challenged people to live in the future and to adopt naïve approaches to questioning through the idea of a veil of ignorance.

'It's good for making you think hard about who the stakeholders are – I had a few 'moments of truth' when it hit me hard. It's a sobering experience for a head.'

[Head, November workshop 1]

'I found this really useful. The veil of ignorance concept was really effective.'

[Head, November workshop 1]

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<sup>1</sup> De Bono, E. 1999. *New Thinking for the New Millennium*. Viking. P.16

<sup>2</sup> Pinker S. 1997. *How the Mind Works*. Penguin. p.369

<sup>3</sup> Beare H. 2001. *Creating the Future School*. Routledge Falmer. P 192

## **Deep Learning through Collaboration**

FutureSight also requires expert facilitation and a mutual commitment to challenge. It is likely to be much less powerful as an individual reading programme. The process works best if all participants have been given the opportunity to read the OECD content prior to the activities.

FutureSight is usually offered as a residential seminar, with around three quarters of the time spent in a facilitated group of 8-10. Given the complexity and challenge of the process, delegates remain in the same groups throughout the process. The need for multiple perspectives and a range of experience means that groups can be too small, with around 8 – 10 as an appropriate number.

The selection and training of facilitators is vital. In the project, we have worked to develop a group of facilitators who first experienced the process and were then offered support in preparing for their new role. On some occasions, an opportunity to co-facilitate with a more experienced colleague has been offered – this a highly effective but costly way of building capacity.

## **Through Complexity to Simplicity**

In our early work we generated a range of tools to choose from but, increasingly, we have simplified and selected a few of the most powerful processes. The message seems to be: don't confuse the participants by providing unnecessary choice. Keeping the modules simple benefits facilitators as much as the delegates.

## **Using Trends to Initiate the Process**

Trends provide a good entry point, move the focus through local, national to international perspectives and give the scenarios authority which makes them more than interesting speculations. Relating the trends to the lived reality of school life also enables participants to recognise the push and pull of these on their work today, to off-load current issues and to move on to more challenging thinking.

## **Providing a Conceptual Framework and Metalanguage**

Providing diagrams and illustrations at an early stage in the process is a valuable way of introducing key vocabulary and helping people to grasp and hold on to connections between trends, possible, probable and preferred futures. It's important to agree the terms you will all use to explore the scenarios to stick to these. We have also included a simple glossary of terms in our materials.

## **Trust the Process**

This is an old adage, certainly, but worth repeating. It's helpful for participants to be secure and explicitly aware of the stages of the learning journey on which they are about to embark and the ways in which these will finally connect back to their context. This enables participants to leave their reservations at the door and allow us to set 'the rules'.

## **Playfulness helps**

As we developed FutureSight we were drawn to experiential learning and processes which recognised a range of learning styles. We made use of kinaesthetic approaches such as role play, matching and sorting exercises – teachers particularly responded to these methods. We established ground rules with increasing precision and clarity to promote challenge and to prevent people reverting to the comfort of their own context. As we know from much research, laughter makes for better learning.

## **Practitioners want their voice to be heard**

Participants are often concerned that their discussions and conclusions are heard by policy-makers. Headteachers, for example, appreciated having national policy-makers working alongside them in groups and there is a need among practitioners to air their concerns relating to policy. A dedicated time for this at the end of the process prevents current personal issues or complaints from dominating the rest of the discussions:

'I felt that there was a listening ear at the other end.'  
'I was in a group with DfES officials, and it felt like a real dialogue.'

[Heads, July workshop]

### **Within-school Tools**

We have recognised that some of the tools we have developed are better used by people within the same school rather than individuals from different schools. Their power comes from comparing differing perceptions of the same organisation and therefore requires relatively equally knowledge on behalf of the participants. Tools like the direction of travel tool cannot be used in the abstract.

### **Discussing Values**

Module 3 creates a safe space to discuss differences in values and beliefs that are notoriously difficult to surface among people who don't know one another very well. Giving participants the opportunity to re-write the scenario text when creating their preferred future leads directly into a discussion about values.

'The discussion regarding the semantics of the cards was useful for exposing values – it was a way of getting to the heart of the issue.'

[Head, November workshop 1]

### **A More Inclusive Dialogue**

Finally, we have learned the value of inclusive debate which uses the voices of students to inform the future. We were delighted by the quality of their insights, their commitment to discussion, their capacity to engage with the vocabulary and concepts of futures thinking and their willingness and determination to take responsibility for their own future.

## **New Perspectives on the Trends and Scenarios**

In the course of our development work, the trends and scenarios have elicited a rich variety of responses. The global perspectives of the OECD work have been valuable and there has been considerable debate about the need to revise the materials to reflect more closely the language and experience of school leaders and policy-makers in England. One school of thought maintains that it is the process of thinking that matters most and that the distance of the scenarios from our reality and our language is valuable – so, there is little to be gained from changes at the moment. Others argue that the world has moved on a little since the scenarios were written and that revisions would make the materials both more powerful and accessible. In a student seminar we did re-title the scenarios to make them more immediately accessible with, for example, the meltdown scenario called 'teacher shortages'. This approach, however, obscured the underlying coherence of the scenarios. As a consequence we would suggest that the clear structure of Reschooling, Deschooling and Status Quo is helpful.

## **Trends**

The commentary below explores general themes which have emerged, together with participants' perspectives on the OECD Trends.

### **General Themes**

Discussion of Trends has generated important messages. School leaders after 9/11 and the consequences of the Iraq War focus particularly on location of values, the emergence of a post-material sensibility and debate about the nature of identity. It is difficult to know if these represent significant new trends or are rather the consequence of Trends identified in the OECD publication.

In general, however, participants viewed trends as powerful, disruptive and negative. Whilst one headteacher remarked that 'I'd much rather be alive now than thirty or forty years ago!' most participants found it much more difficult to recognise the positive potential and opportunities suggested by the trends in moving towards a more diverse future.

## **Values**

Discussion of the Trends often opens up debate about values and social capital. There is a feeling that the location of values has shifted from away family and religion to peer groups and media. The implications for schools in supporting and mediating values become consequently more complex and difficult.

## **Identity**

A more personalised, multi-ethnic and mobile world also brings with it a significant shift in the nature of identity, with multiple and sometimes conflicting identities reflecting birth, culture and religion.

## **Post-Materialism**

With high level of disposable income nationally, there is a growing feeling that there is more to life than material goods, with a consequent shift to concepts such as life quality responsibility, the common good, community, spirituality and religion. Such analyses were, however, balanced by leaders of schools in challenging circumstances who reported a continuing and growing preoccupation with material wealth.

## **Environmental Awareness**

In their current form, the Trends may not pay sufficient attention to climate change, the depletion of non-renewable energy sources and the longer term implication of these for behaviours, values and social organisation.

## **Technological Advancement**

There were recent examples of the socioeconomic impact of higher levels of automation and remote production such as the relocation of call centres outside Europe.

## **New Perspectives**

### **Childhood and Adolescence**

Comment focused on a 'stretched' period of extended adolescence, which appears both to begin earlier and continue longer. Participants explored tensions and contradictions such as:

- an emphasis on young people taking greater personal responsibility alongside a growing desire for adults to provide protection and keep them from the world,
- physical maturity versus emotional maturity,
- financial independence alongside longer dependency.

Related to this is a further paradox. School continues to be regarded as a discreet episode which students 'finish' or 'complete' whereas learning and socialisation processes outside the classroom have radically changed and are both continuous and lifelong.

### **Knowledge economy**

There was universal recognition of the growing importance of:

- Interpersonal skills
- Learning how to learn and how to adapt
- The paradox of isolation in a globally connected world.

There are, however, still pressures pulling back into the era of 'know-what', for example, employers, using the language of 'know-what', and specifying traditional skills, qualifications and training.

## **Inequality and Social exclusion**

School remains the only shared space amidst growing inequality and segregation and, strikingly, disadvantage endures despite the rhetoric of constant change. Headteachers of schools facing highly challenging circumstances graphically described cycles of deprivation relating to mental health, drug and alcohol abuse which further fragmented family life, reduced opportunity and increased alienation. There was endorsement of the proposition that differences are growing, in stark terms in some urban areas where visible poverty exists alongside walled and protected housing developments for the affluent.

## **Changing family and community life**

This trend was familiar; its impact was real and powerful. In this context, school for many children offers a unique common experience of stability. There was recognition of the implications of this for schools' role in emerging areas such as emotional literacy, alongside real anxieties about the capacity to extend role in this way. One headteacher described the intensity of impact of family break-up on individual children and the moral responsibility of schools to offer support. Other participants spoke of the lack of understanding between generations; discontinuities emerging from massively different experiences of community and family life for children and their parents. The developing role of school in the community was an important one, yet some spoke of their anxieties over schools' capacity to take on such a challenge.

## **Broader developments**

There was general recognition of the significance and reach of these, offering a new context for understanding the phenomenon of asylum-seekers and economic migrants in western countries. These had the further potential to create massive turbulence yet generate immense opportunities for those societies.

Communities which were more migratory and which represented a new diversity of language, culture and belief demanded no less than a reconceptualisation of what we mean by community, new understandings of schools' roles in shaping and leading its development and a new educational language to explore and understand this.

There was recognition that terms like diversity and tolerance were no longer adequate. One participant spoke of the complexity of community where diverse ideas and beliefs existed together in a series of racial and social pockets, each one insulated from the others.

## **Scenarios**

In exploring the scenarios, several key messages have emerged:

- Scenarios used together have the potential to open up possibilities.
- Scenarios are not mutually exclusive and, in most cases, have both desirable and undesirable elements.
- We are closer to de-schooling than we would have believed.
- Some schools, particularly those facing challenging circumstances recognise the meltdown scenario as close to their current reality.
- The sense that the scenarios represent the widest range of probable variations may not be right – de-schooling may, for example, be a consequence of meltdown rather than an alternative (Istance).
- Most preferred futures developed in our seminars contain elements of reschooling and deschooling.

As part of the process, FutureSight participants are given an opportunity to use the Preferred Futures matrix to reach consensus. This in turn, has led to the development of what we term 'hybrid scenarios', offering a combination of existing scenarios alongside new ideas generated by the groups.

In these hybrid scenarios, reschooling, rather than de-schooling tends to prevail, with little support for scenarios reflecting the status quo. There is a recognisable shift away from centralised, bureaucratic structures, with emphasis on leadership which is 'widely distributed' as part of a 'culture of innovation'. Such approaches require freedom of action where "Schools are expected to experiment"

This detachment from bureaucratic structures is also reflected by a feeling that flexibility of practice and structure will play an important role in this preferred future, with children exercising greater influence as to where, when and how they learn, in an environment where teachers have part-time and temporary contracts and the labour market is highly competitive. Importantly, however, the impetus towards choice and competition is tempered by a desire to harness choice and diversity for social good; schools are seen as responsible for the community as a whole, whilst the stumbling block for the inclusion of the statement that “Entrepreneurial school leaders command high salaries” was *not* that leaders should not be entrepreneurial, but that they should be acting this way in order to help their schools rather than increase their salaries.

## Implications for Policy-makers

Two recent seminars were offered to schools committed to reform as part of a national initiative to establish Leading Edge partnerships through the recently established Innovation Unit. The following comments particularly reflect their views of the policy context for transformational change.

There is a belief that schools should now be directly involved in collaborative development of policy, possibly stimulated by futures thinking. Indeed, headteachers of Leading Edge Schools are positive about ‘a more hospitable environment than twelve months ago’. They are enthusiastic about the ‘clear change of direction’ signalled by the establishment of Leading Edge schools but remain critical of other aspects of policy.

Many describe policies which pulled them in different ways, sometimes towards competition, at other times towards collaboration; sometimes towards informed prescription, other times towards innovation and informed professionalism. This lack of clarity and coherence regarding the vision for schools and the relationship between schools and the DfES is, however, a consistent theme, with references to policy-makers ‘creating all these conflicting pressures on us’ and government which has to ‘stop sending out the mixed messages’:

‘In 1997 the vision was very clear. It was easy for us to go back to our schools and sell it to our stakeholders. Now it’s not so clear – it’s more complex, perhaps more interesting... it’s difficult now, because there is no clear vision – we don’t know where policy is taking us.’

For many, there is consequently a gap between policy rhetoric and reality:

‘The rhetoric of informed professionalism is genuine, but the government doesn’t know how to behave in any way other than as a centralist bureaucracy.’

More broadly, risk and innovation exist uneasily alongside prescription, an emphasis on outcomes and inspection, all of which serve to discourage risk. There are particular paradoxes:

‘With the workload policy they’ve created a bureaucracy to get rid of a bureaucracy!’

Such tensions and contradictions force headteachers to behave, as they put it, ‘dishonestly’, finding ways to circumvent the policies. They resent having to operate in this way, ‘ducking and weaving’ through ignoring regulation and creative accountancy.

Finally, headteachers speak of the complexities of the local context. Some are dissatisfied with the performance of Local Education Authorities, especially with regard to funding. Others do not see the relevance of other local agencies, such as Connexions (involved in careers advice and support) and the Learning Skills Councils (charged with funding and oversight of educational -19). Emerging from this debate were interesting ideas around a commitment to ‘local learning solutions’ and a reversal of the current system to one where schools fund LEAs, not vice versa. This was, however, probably the area of discussion in which views were the most mixed.

The implications of such dialogue for policy-makers may be far-reaching and include:

- Constructing an open and challenging debate about the future of learning as the basis for action;
- Finding ways of communicating a more coherent vision for the future of learning and articulating more precisely a theory of how change will occur;

- Reconceptualising and radically redesigning how central government guides and intervenes in a system increasingly geared to autonomy, networked learning and rapid, unpredictable change;
- More differentiated approaches at policy level to encourage diversity and innovation but which also secures inclusion and quality learning for all;
- Greater emphasis on local solutions and simplification of complex funding streams and accountabilities.

## Evaluation and Impact

FutureSight has been very positively received. Over 200 people have participated in the seminar series and evaluations have been very overwhelmingly positive. Over 90% anticipated that their personal and professional practice would change as a result of the day. In addition, we have developed considerable capacity for facilitation and several local events have taken place. From these data we now believe that the FutureSight processes work well but are, as always capable of refinement over coming months.

During the November 2003 seminar process, participants were asked to reflect on areas of success, together with issues, questions and reservations. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Time was both an opportunity and a constraint. There was, many remarked, time to think through processes which were 'practical', 'stimulating', 'kinaesthetic', reflective of a range of learning styles, 'structured', and 'challenging'. In turn, they did not provide sufficient time for many to reach the depth of analysis they sought. There was particular recognition of the importance of multiple perspectives and 'open', 'honest' and informed debate. Tolerance of difference was particularly noted:

'We were able to explore differences of opinion without getting stuck in a fruitless argument'  
'We have shared values and been happy with difference.'

A further participant observed that it was 'a very good way of making connections between abstract analysis of trends and issues and experienced realities'. Role play was valued by most, with the process described as providing a good way of 'making rejected scenarios become possible', 'very powerful' and 'creative'. The value of the Preferred Futures matrix was widely recognised as a key part of the process.

Whilst it is probably too early to gauge impact at school, LEA and policy level, there are encouraging signs. There is growing interest in use of futures thinking tools at school and LEA level. Seminars have been held across the country and, in an interesting further development, post 16 students from Jersey were commissioned by the Island's council to participate in FutureSight and, subsequently, lead debate with policy-makers on the future of education.

A small scale evaluation with participants four to eight months later confirmed the feedback from the FutureSight evaluations. It suggests that there is a medium term impact on leaders learning, and that learning influences action. The tools are finding their way into a wider forum and are seen to have value in releasing energy and thinking about probable and preferred futures. The impact appears to be extending beyond seminar participants to schools, clusters and other stakeholders, as well as helping to extend 'futures literacy' through the system. The challenge remains to integrate present and future(s) policy agendas in a way which convinces school leaders and empowers strategic imagination.

NCSL has had considerable involvement in futures thinking, both through this project and, previously, through 'Unique Creations' (NCSL/Bentley and Miller, 2003), which offers a further series of scenarios for the future of learning. In the College's consultation on revisions to the national Headteacher Standards, 'Creating the Future', is now one of six standards. In addition, there has been considerable international interest in this work beyond the core OECD countries, notably in a paper presented by Professor Brian Caldwell to the International Principals' Conference in Edinburgh (2003).

## **Issues and Challenges**

There remain further issues and challenges at both micro and macro level.

### **The Micro-Challenge – Improving Learning Design**

In reviewing learning design we are:

- Deepening the challenge offered by the FutureSight modules
- Testing our hypothesis about the central importance of facilitation
- Exploring the implications of group composition
- Extending learning processes to connect thinking back to the present
- Evaluating the impact of FutureSight on the thinking, behaviours and actions of those involved

These are explored in more detail below.

### **Preferred Futures, not an Idealised Present**

Even with our explicit commitment to challenge and move beyond the present, we still need to develop further protocols or facilitation guidance to ensure that every participant accepts responsibility for challenge of self and others. At present, the view that 'the future is already here and taking shape in my school' is easier to espouse than a sense that massive change lies ahead. One participant called for more 'hard warnings'. Can we think of better ways of moving beyond the warm glow of an idealised present?

### **Facilitation for Innovation**

FutureSight participants have commented on the importance of quality facilitation in the learning process and, consequently, we believe that developing, preparing and supporting facilitation is important. There is, however, considerable potential for further work in extending our understanding of facilitation. Following participation in FutureSight, some local groups have also begun to replicate the learning process in their own setting, without specialist facilitator development. Further research will help us explore how this works in practice.

### **Group Composition**

We have run the FutureSight process with both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, including cross phase groups. We believe that it may be more powerful where the group represents a range of perspectives, such as headteachers, teachers, LEA officers, policy-makers but we do need to test this more fully.

### **Building a Bridge with the Present**

Over recent months we have concentrated on developing tools to think beyond the present. Now, we have to focus on helping build a bridge back to the present. Approaches such as the 'Learning Trends' tool have considerable potential by connecting thinking back to a current reality and initiating the process of changes.

One participant asked, 'Did we find anything we could change?' [Headteacher, November seminar]. How can we now connect the process powerfully back to current realities to help schools and policy-makers use the tools as a stimulus for action?

### **The Macro Challenge – System-wide Impact**

The FutureSight process appears to be robust and effective in helping school leaders and pupils see the future in new ways. The distinctiveness of the English approach to the OECD trends and scenarios has been the focus on school leaders and the development of processes to make use of the material as a vehicle for leadership learning. The focus on school leaders as agents of system change and improvement has been a prevailing political and educational theme for some years and certainly since the election of the present Government in 1997. The formation of a national body, the National College for School Leadership, in 2001, symbolised the importance attached to leadership quality and development.

Within the range of work undertaken by the College the review of the nationally prescribed 'Standards for Headteachers' (principals) has been an important step. These recognise the importance of school leaders developing, both for themselves and with their school constituents, the capacity for futures thinking. A sample from the standards illustrates the point:

*"A willingness to engage in systematic and disciplined thinking about the future is essential to effective headship. Headteachers work in the present, whilst simultaneously being aware of the future today's learners will inhabit....."*

*"Knows about:*

- *horizon scanning: local, national and global trends*
- *ways to build, communicate and implement a shared vision*
- *strategic planning processes*
- *tools for data collection and analysis*
- *strategies for communication both within and beyond the school*
- *new technologies, their use and impact*
- *change, creativity and innovation"*

*(Revised National Standards for Headteachers, NCSL, 2001 [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk) )*

Beyond the responsibility for an individual school, however, there is increasing recognition of the principal's contribution to system development. In recognising the difficulty and complexity of engaging in sustainable system-wide we accord with Michael Fullan's view the central importance of integration between the levels of the system and that the school leader's role is pivotal:

*"The system barrier is the failure to realise that the principal is vital to resolving the top-down / bottom-up dilemma. In fact, the principalship is the only role strategically placed to mediate the tensions of local and state forces in a way that gets problems solved. Thus, the solution is to acknowledge the extreme importance of the principalship, clarify the power and nature of the principal's role, and invest in developing the capacity of principals in numbers as chief operating officers."*

*(‘The Moral Imperative of School Leadership’, Fullan, M., 2003)*

To that extent, the efforts of the partners in the project represent a combining of forces to integrate and align levels within the system and equip key agents of change, namely school leaders working collaboratively, to contribute to both policy formulation and enactment.

We are now extending the application of the tools and learning designs for use in specialist policy development areas such as personalised learning and also their general use by policy-makers, other public sector leaders and community groups. The challenge is now to test whether the tools can be used at policy level to help explore what the system will look like and the steps we can take to move towards a shared preferred future.

Alongside this we wish to make further progress in developing and securing the tools, vocabulary and conceptual framework which will help to generate debate and action at organisational, network and community level. The tools are being remodelled and further developed to this end.

In the summer of 2004 we shall publish a freestanding FutureSight programme available to schools, networks, partnerships and school districts. This will extend futures literacy, the term we use to describe the essential thinking tools and processes we need to take command of the challenge that faces school leaders and school systems.

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