

# PART V

## Futures thinking in action

### *Some practices and lessons learnt*

**People we've worked with are starting to think outside the box they traditionally think in, extending their own networks and working alongside others to think about how to get the best for students.**

New Zealand,  
November 2004

*Schooling for Tomorrow* has in recent years been applying *futures thinking in action* in collaboration with different country-based initiatives: during Phase Two in one each in the U.K., the Netherlands and New Zealand and two in Canada. These countries have developed and applied *futures thinking* to address challenges arising in their own systems and have thereby in fresh ways injected long-term thinking into their educational agendas. Although not formally part of Phase Two of *Schooling for Tomorrow*, Victoria (Australia) has also set up a valuable project that is presented in this chapter.

Their experiences suggest the diversity of contexts where *futures thinking* can be successfully applied, ranging from engaging a wide range of stakeholders to reflect on long-term education futures, to targeted capacity-building for school heads. The experiences also testify to the flexibility of the *Schooling for Tomorrow* tools and resources, which were adapted to the needs and purposes of each initiative.

While there is no single best way to engage in *futures thinking*, the country-based initiatives share certain characteristics concerning challenges, processes and benefits. These elements provide a practical angle on implementing *futures thinking*. The lessons learned will be of interest for those joining the *Schooling for Tomorrow* Project and for those considering the relevance of futures studies to develop their educational systems.

This Part presents the experiences of five country-based initiatives and explains, in a thematic format, why the countries made the choices they did. It begins with an overview of the *futures thinking* initiatives (Sheet V.2), followed by: explanations of how the initiatives got started (Sheet V.3), what the processes were (Sheet V.4), what benefits were gained (Sheet V.5). The section ends with the essential lessons learnt from the processes (Sheet V. 6).



## **Part V: Futures thinking in action**

*Some practices and lessons learnt*

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## The outset

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The six initiatives have developed interesting projects by combining their own agendas with the *Schooling for Tomorrow* Project and have thereby produced valuable insights for the international project. *Futures thinking* is a broad concept and the very diverse projects do not easily combine into a systematic pattern. They are different not just in context and content, but also in the variation of participants and intended audiences.

### → Shared characteristics

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All five initiatives share key characteristics; the *Schooling for Tomorrow* criteria for educational futures thinking in action are:

<b>Educational</b>	Each initiative had the aim of informing decision-making in learning and education, either inside or outside the formal school system. The initiatives included participation of authorities, practitioners, as well as persons formally outside education, but with a direct interest in it.
<b>Futures thinking</b>	Each initiative adopted a deliberate futures-oriented methodology as an essential aspect of reaching its goals. The timescale for all the projects were medium to long-term, incorporating time-horizons of at least a 10-15 year time horizon or further into the future.
<b>In action</b>	Each initiative was part of a political agenda or broader development framework of action, rather than being an academic exercise of researchers. The initiatives built strategic capacity or futures-oriented dialogue with a focus on sustainability.

Each project began with the six *Schooling for Tomorrow* scenarios, using them to various degrees and adapting them to specific, local needs and contexts.

## PART V: FUTURES THINKING IN ACTION – THE OUTSET

 Diversity

The following provides an overview of the context, challenges and goals of each country-based initiative.

<p><b>The U.K</b></p> <p>“FutureSight”</p>	<p>As the devolved national education system moves away from “one-size-fits-all” solutions, school leadership becomes crucially important. <i>FutureSight</i> was launched to address the issue of leadership in schools, from “leading edge” schools to those with serious challenges. The goal was to develop practical applications of <i>futures thinking</i> which school leaders could use to help them shape, not just guess at, the future and thereby help them act as key agents of change.</p>
<p><b>New Zealand</b></p> <p>“Secondary Futures”</p>	<p>The “Secondary Futures” project was launched in 2002 to generate system-wide structured dialogue among the Ministry of Education, the schooling sector and communities, on the purpose and direction of secondary schooling and how it will be in 20 years. At the same time, there was a general desire to initiate a professional debate around the issues of quality teaching, student outcomes and diversity.</p>
<p><b>The Netherlands</b></p> <p>“Building School Leadership”</p>	<p>Decentralisation is a key feature of national policy for primary and secondary education, giving more autonomy to schools and more influence to parents, students and the local community. It also creates a need for long-term thinking and leadership at the local levels. “Building School Leadership” is a bottom-up approach introducing <i>futures thinking</i> in the initial training of leaders in primary education, based on the principle that the schools themselves should shape innovation.</p>
<p><b>Ontario, Canada</b></p> <p>“Vision 2020”</p> <p>&amp;</p> <p>“Teaching as a Profession”</p>	<p>The province of Ontario, whose educational system is divided between French- and English-language schools, launched two initiatives:</p> <p>In the context of the francophone community’s concerns about linguistic and cultural assimilation, and three years after the establishment of French-language school boards, “Vision 2020” was started in 2002 as a means to foster dialogue among education partners and the community and to develop a shared vision of the future of French language education in a minority setting.</p> <p>“Teaching as a Profession” was launched to determine the appropriate roles of teachers and teaching in a changing society, with advances in information technology, shifting job markets and socioeconomic disparities. It began after a period when consensus had been difficult and a central goal therefore was to overcome the barriers to dialogue.</p>
<p><b>Victoria</b></p> <p>“Focus on the Future”</p>	<p>The Department of Education &amp; Training of the State of Victoria initiated a programme to engage education leaders in conversations about global and local trends and their preferred futures for schooling. The programme utilises trends and scenarios thinking together with materials based on “FutureSight” (developed in the UK) to assist different levels of the State’s education system (schools, regions, central government) to build preferred futures and to inform further development of the State’s reform agenda initiatives.</p>

## Getting started

A prerequisite for successful *futures thinking* is that the context and framework within which it takes place provide enough freedom for innovative processes to unfold. Success depends also on the scope and nature of participation and in how participants are put into situations that demand their respective contributions and interaction.

### → Participation – From top-down to bottom-up

**If you could speak to an Oracle about 2020, what would you ask?**

*FutureSight Toolkit  
U.K. Report 2005*

Policy for change cannot be successfully imposed top-down. If an initiative is to go beyond the conventional wisdom about the future, it must be inclusive, involving both educators within the system and active members of civil society and the broader environment.

While the *Schooling for Tomorrow* initiatives began as primarily top-down efforts, as they progressed they gained increasing participation from broad cross-sections of stakeholders, with a mix of interests and professional backgrounds.

#### The core

All of the projects were initiated by ministries of education and associated institutions, always in partnership with other levels of the education system. In the U.K., the core participants were school heads from a range of socio-economic environments. The New Zealand team's "*touchstone group*" of NGOs functioned as a conduit to key organisations in the education sector.

#### The external

*Futures thinking* involves creativity, this can be brought into the process through external facilitators, experts and role-playing. For example, the New Zealand group appointed "*guardians*", four independent, respected figures in their fields, whose role was to protect the integrity of the process, create a space for dialogue and instil confidence. Their participation greatly enhanced the project's engagement with civil society and the business community.

#### The unusual

Including stakeholders who are not usually consulted in policy processes, but who are directly affected by their implementation, ensures greater relevance and credibility of the initiative's results. Thus, students and the "new generation" of parents, teachers and school principals were core participants in the Canadian initiative to develop a shared vision for French-language schools. Similarly, the British initiative included students from years 9 and 12, to get their views on how to redesign learning and the New Zealand initiative sought participants among ethnic groups and people with low literacy skills.

#### Widening dimensions

Most of the initiatives began with small-scale work to study, adapt and develop the tools and then expanded into inclusive, larger-scale processes. In general, the breadth of participation increased greatly as the initiatives progressed. International exchange of experiences in futures work also helped widen the dimensions and enrich individual initiatives. A very impressive case of widening participation was Victoria, where 40 principals were trained to deliver workshops, in which then 196 schools (13% of the total) participated.

## ➔ Settings and modalities

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In the *Schooling for Tomorrow* initiatives, two principles stand out for getting started: the need to nurture the participants' curiosity and commitment and the need to integrate quality assurance for the further process. The approaches and working modalities varied considerably, depending on the objectives. Here are some examples of how the initiatives began.

### **Ensuring quality**

The Canadian initiative *Teaching as a Profession* began with a core study group with backgrounds as far apart as education, law and politics. This group prepared the substantive groundwork for dialogue. To ensure quality in applying the new methods, the core group was supported by a research team with experience in futures scenarios. Later, the project presented workshops, some targeted to specific interest groups and some to a mix of organisations and sectors.

### **Adapting tools**

In the U.K., the *FutureSight* process began with a large seminar on leadership in schools, bringing together head teachers, school heads and senior officials from national training and development organisations. Afterwards, a smaller group of school leaders developed a conceptual framework for applying the *futures thinking* approach to leadership in redesigning schooling. This resulted in a toolkit that was tested and disseminated widely by school groups and local authorities. Developing tools is one possibility, using existing materials and adapting them another. Victoria scanned existing models and chose the "FutureSight" material as most appropriate for its own project. It then adapted the material to suit its own needs.

### **Collecting data**

The *Secondary Futures* project in New Zealand began with a questionnaire whereby hundreds of stakeholders helped define the key features of New Zealanders' vision for secondary education. The responses were used to develop a matrix of specific topics, focusing further dialogue on themes such as "students first", "inspiring teacher", "social effects", "community connectedness", and "the place of technology".

### **Understanding the context**

In the pilot stage of Canada's *Teaching as a Profession* initiative, case studies from the past proved instrumental in stimulating dialogue about the future. The participants reported that three case studies, which were commissioned on the social, economic and political circumstances of school-related policies, gave them a better understanding of the contexts of decision-making, which helped them address future policies more realistically. The work on futures connected thus back to the present, providing insight to current policy discussions.

## The process

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Scenario development in all of the country-based initiatives involved participatory methods for incorporating the existing *Schooling for Tomorrow* scenarios, modifying them, or using them as models for new ones. The key was to adapt the tools to local contexts and thus add value to the *futures thinking* processes. If the participants sense a return of added value, then there is a much better chance of positive outcomes and long-term benefits.

### ➔ How the scenarios were used

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Once participants understood the *Schooling for Tomorrow* scenarios, they could apply them to their contexts of interest. Here are some examples of how they proceeded.

#### **Transforming the scenarios**

The *FutureSight* project in the U.K. developed the six scenarios into a toolkit for facilitating participation in workshops, through (among other things) game boards. The *Teaching as a Profession* project in Canada, seeking to promote free discussion of teachers' roles in the future, eliminated the suggested roles that were in the original scenarios. The project in the Netherlands chose to use the Canadian scenarios and adapted them to the European and national context.

#### **Inventing new scenarios**

The Vision 2020 project in Canada used the scenarios to free participants from pressing concerns which might have prevented them from seeing preferable futures. They began by gaining familiarity with the futures approach, considered how French-language education would be affected in each scenario and the values that each scenario reflected. Finally, a seventh scenario for the French-language school of the future was developed, based on the group's individual and shared values.

#### **Simplifying the scenarios**

The *Secondary Futures* project in New Zealand adapted the *Schooling for Tomorrow* scenarios to make them easily understood by the various audiences who would be involved in workshops. While remaining faithful to the originals, the "indigenous" scenarios related more directly to the participants' lives and concerns.

#### **Eliminating scenarios**

The projects in New Zealand, Canada and the Netherlands eliminated specific scenarios that were considered counterproductive. Some seemed too futuristic to be relevant, while others were so relevant to the present situation that they interfered with the goal of setting free the participants' imaginations. In Victoria the six scenarios were condensed in three that were relevant to the Victorian context.

Participants embark on a voyage of exploration into unknown areas and beyond. Like Alice in Wonderland when she falls down the rabbit hole, you soon realise that conventional wisdom and solutions are not going to be of much help on this journey.

Hanne Shapiro in *Think Scenarios, Rethink Education*

## → Some techniques

**“Without this sort of thinking we might have got bogged down by existing realities and could well ended up simply redesigning a school which was created 30 or 40 years ago.”**

*U.K report 2005*

Scenario development can be used alone or in combination with other *futures thinking* methods (Sheet IV.5). In determining whether the process produces a good outcome, however, the most important factor is the “chemistry” within the group. Fortunately, “good chemistry” can come into play by nurturing the process with simple techniques that stimulate interaction and help people bring an open mind to the project. It is crucial, especially when scenario development involves many stakeholders with different professional and social backgrounds, to find ways to ease tension and ensure constructive collaboration. Here are some examples of the creative and participatory approaches used in the *Schooling for Tomorrow* initiatives.

### Questioning values and assumptions

A prerequisite for effective scenario development is the capacity to examine values and identify the assumptions behind them, especially one's own values. The New Zealand project used a “preference matrix” to help the participants identify a hierarchy of desirable features in schooling options. This helped them dig deeply into the reasons underlying the preferences. Participants in the *Teaching as a Profession* project in Canada voted on each scenario's ability to help them question values and assumptions. Votes were conducted before and after discussing the likely and desirable scenarios. After voting, the participants showed much more confidence in the scenarios as tools for challenging entrenched ideas and thus facilitating further discussions.

### Thinking “outside the box”

Theatre techniques are useful in framing *futures thinking* processes and helping people drop their traditional roles. In the U.K., *FutureSight* used the technique of “hot seating”: participants in small groups assumed roles such as student, parent, or professional. After first imagining a scenario and the experience of the character within it, the role player responded in character to questions from the wider group. In New Zealand, *Secondary Futures* also used role-playing: “walking in the shoes” of fictional New Zealanders gave the participants a deeper understanding of how and why one's view of a scenario may differ depending on one's social position.

### Imagining the future

The New Zealand project also created a series of “time-shift cards”, visual materials comparing today with the situation 20 years ago in social, technological, economic, environmental and political terms. This helped participants think how a current trend might evolve in the coming 20 years. As a visual resource, the cards served the project's mandate to bring a range of voices, including youth, ethnic groups and people with low levels of literacy, into the debate over education policy.

### Speaking the same language

*FutureSight* participants in the U.K. developed a specialised vocabulary to talk about the future. “Speaking the same language” greatly clarified communication when working on the scenarios and promoted understanding of the relationship between the current reality and the worlds within the scenario.



## Benefits

The participants and country project teams already report many benefits from the *Schooling for Tomorrow* initiatives. Although not all of the projects are completed and evaluated and their effects must ultimately be measured over longer time spans, feedback from the participants and project teams provides positive indications as to the momentum and direction of the initiatives.

### → Learning processes

*Futures thinking* is a multi-actor learning and visualisation process. It is wide-ranging in scope and including building futures literacy; expanding exploration of the wider environment of schooling; expressing personal values and opinions as well as developing open-mindedness to the values and opinions of others.

**“It has helped me think more broadly and at the possibility of a number of solutions, whereas in the past it has been easier to look along a single tried and trusted line.”**

*U.K. report 2005*

#### **Awareness of the wider environment**

Scenario work benefits participants by increasing their awareness of identity issues, environmental matters and technological advancements. The work encourages new perspectives on such critical topics as the shifting nature of childhood and adolescence, the development of the knowledge society, the persistent problems of social inequality and exclusion and the shifting nature of family and community life.

#### **Communication and reflection**

Exploration of scenarios builds skills in communication and reflection. Activities such as “hot-seating” and role-playing enable participants to “think outside the box”, to go beyond the boundaries of the present and explore wider possibilities in the medium and long term. After participating in scenario activities, many people reported improved abilities to identify and articulate their own values and to understand and thus respect those of others.

#### **Visionary capacity**

Scenario work is used as a vehicle for leadership learning in both the Netherlands and in the U.K. It helps build the visionary capacity of school leaders and education authorities so that they can act as agents of change at local levels in the context of system-wide change and make strategic choices that bring them closer to a preferred future. The *FutureSight* project, for example, has reached 700 stakeholders in the U.K., and trained many workshop facilitators. Its toolkit is available online, while schools, networks and partners have bought more than 1 000 copies.

#### **Knowledge building**

The matrix developed for *futures thinking* in New Zealand provides structure for ongoing conversations, investigations and analysis. It serves as a “virtual filing cabinet” for the multi-layered data gathered during *Secondary Futures* events, a reservoir of material to simulate continued rethinking and learning over the project's remaining two years.

## ➔ Policy implications

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Scenario work leads to more intentional and more fundamental discussions on education reform. It opens new avenues, helping decision-makers not to choose pre-existing solutions simply from habit. The work has built capacity for stakeholders who work closely with students to engage more effectively with policy initiatives, especially by improving awareness of the long-term implications of policy decision

### **Policy debate on new terms**

In the U.K., participants reported that they were engaged and motivated by the *FutureSight* toolkit materials and that working without a predetermined end point was a new experience. They indicated that if they had been offered final policy choices before the scenario work, they would have given “pre-programmed” responses based on past experience. The open-ended process, the confrontations, the trade-offs and conflicts among various trends and scenarios – all of these experiences gave the participants ideas on how to address difficult choices in their own school-development processes and new terms for discussions with policy-makers.

### **Legitimacy for innovation**

The concerns of groups outside government were crucial in all of these futures processes. In New Zealand, for example, a previous wave of public sector reform had left education trade unions deeply suspicious of new reform efforts. The participatory and inclusive approach of *futures thinking* helped legitimise the process and establish an environment conducive to positive change. So far 900 participants have participated in *Secondary Futures* workshops and the project is engaging with hundreds more.

### **Common ground**

Scenario work can help establish a shared vision for development. Canada's Vision 2020 team, for example, is producing a facilitation kit that helps education partners and community groups organise Vision 2020 *futures thinking* workshops with their communities and with other partners in order to apply the ideas in their decision-making and work towards a shared vision of French-language schooling.

### **Actual change**

*Futures thinking* can be the start of a change process. The Victorian project combined two streams. A first more general stream was aimed at exposing as many schools as possible to *futures thinking*. The second stream involved a small number of accredited schools that were part of an initiative to develop a “Performance and Evaluation Culture”. These schools were offered two additional modules (on top of the regular four) in which they were required to consult the school and the community before the workshop. The workshop aimed at translating this material (together with the previous *futures thinking*) into strategies for actual change. This is followed by another workshop that gives participants further tools and strategies to move their school towards a preferred future.

## Lessons learnt

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The following compiles a set of recommendations based on the lessons learnt through the country-based *Schooling for Tomorrow* initiatives. Note that these lessons are by no means exhaustive.

### ➔ The outset

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- Ensure that *futures thinking* adds value to the context in which it is applied and its framework gives sufficient freedom for innovative processes to unfold.
- Be clear about the objectives and ensure that the scenario method is chosen as a tool to achieve them and not as an end in itself.
- Ensure a time horizon of the futures work of at least 10-15 years and if possibly longer into the future. This does not prevent the initiative from connecting back to the present.
- Ensure that the initiative has a formal connection to strategic planning processes so that there is potential for scaling up outcomes.
- Ensure that the futures work is protected from everyday concerns and immediate political, financial or social controversies.
- Ensure that the initiative is not limited to reflecting on the future, but also includes conceptualising how to change current systems in specific ways.

### ➔ Getting started

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- Choose organisational arrangements which can help foster a genuine interest in the unknowable future and make scenario exercises effective.
- Ensure legitimacy of the process through the participation of a wide cross-section of stakeholders and bring into situations that demand their interaction.
- Bring external facilitators on board to provide extra impetus to the process, as well as to create a neutral ground of discussion.
- Include experts in the team to ensure that the scenarios are well grounded both in relation to societal and educational trends.
- Involve stakeholders playing a key role in the area that the scenario addresses, be it colleagues, students, parents or policy-makers.
- Skilfully deal with points of resistance that often accompanies organisational change and creative processes.

## PART V: FUTURES THINKING IN ACTION – LESSONS LEARNT

### ➔ The process

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- Build scenarios on solid trends analysis to clarify and deepen the understanding of the major forces that underpin the change of education systems.
- Ensure that scenarios development processes take into account trends of both the outer world and the nearby environment, not merely the latter.
- Use a combination of participatory approaches to help participants think “outside the box” and question their own and others’ values and assumptions.
- Take care of not moving too quickly to preferred scenarios and use also those scenarios which are less attractive, but just as likely.
- Allow time to identify and specify the values that support existing practices and structures and which appear in each of the scenarios.
- Ensure that the setting for policy-makers’ participation is conducive for them to “let go” of control and act as participants rather than as owners of the process.

### ➔ Benefits

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- Use evaluation mechanisms throughout the initiative to obtain information on both benefits and criticisms and to measure its strategic impact.
- Incorporate capacity-building mechanisms in *futures thinking* processes, even if it is not the primary objective of the initiative, to ensure longer benefits within the system.
- Ensure that *futures thinking* initiatives always show tangible results, even if this is not the primary objective of the process. This can simply be in the form of reporting and lessons learnt.
- Be clear, precise and innovative in the method of presenting findings to avoid information overload that would distract attention.
- Make the work cumulative so that lessons learnt are carried over to new initiatives and feed into decision-making processes.
- Plan how successful and innovative pilot experiences can be replicated to other similar situations and thereby build a multiplier effect of futures work.