

Executive Summary

An MSB White Paper, produced in partnership with Dr Patrick Alexander

This document offers international school leaders a provocation to think differently about the future of education and their role in the creation of this future.

This is an opportunity to continue thinking seriously and deeply about the legacy that school leaders leave behind through concerted action in the present. To frame this provocation, we have brought together the latest research and thinking about futures-focused leadership, alongside insights from interviews with leaders from across the international school sector.

Overview

This is not a prescriptive guide to 'what works' for futures-focused leadership. Instead, this is a conceptual toolkit that you can use to best suit the challenges and opportunities of your own setting and context. We begin by establishing the essential human qualities of leadership and futures-thinking. Next, we explore the provocation that existing education systems are failing to keep up with rapid societal change. While there is plenty of excellent evidence that demonstrates innovation and forward-thinking practice across international school, the challenge remains for us to be even bolder in how we imagine education differently for the future. To engage with this provocation, you will be presented with the concept of futures literacy, which offers the means to develop new capacities for thinking about the future as a domain of action. This will lead to a very specific three-part approach to futures-focused questioning that can be applied with staff at all levels in a school, followed by a further set of inquiry questions that offer pragmatic steps towards future-focused practices in schools. The next part of the paper outlines four principal domains in which futures literacy can be applied, as follows: ecology, political economy, education (knowledge, pedagogy, assessment, and curriculum), and technology. These domains were sense-checked with a diversity of leaders in the international school landscape, who confirmed the importance of these themes. It is important, however, to emphasise that this approach is designed to capture and enhance already existing practices that are helping to change the possible futures of education, while also offering a space to think in new and creatively disruptive ways.

Key Ideas

Futures Literacy:

Understanding of the relationship between past and present

Futures-focused leadership requires Futures Literacy, which is a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between past and present where the future is authored rather than encountered.

New competencies

The Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambivalent (VUCA) conditions of the present suggest that new competencies are required to effect sustained, positive change in our education systems.

Time; Space; Activity; Resource

In practice this requires the following cycle of inquiry: What is possible? What is probable? What is preferable? Individuals and teams can work through this cycle by considering the following factors required to enact preferable futures, namely: 1) time; 2) space; 3) activity; 4) resource. This is a recursive practice that can be repeated regularly to ensure that teams are on track to achieve their shared intention for educational change.

Practice architectures

Moving through this cycle (especially when thinking about the probable) can be enhanced by thinking about "practice architectures", or the conditions that hold existing practice in place. This also helps us to understand our 'anticipatory assumptions', or the constraints in our thinking about possible futures.

Regenerative practice

Regenerative Practice: Adopting a futures-focused approach to leadership also encourages regenerative practice because it offers an opportunity for education communities to slow down, reconnect, and reflect on the nature of their practice. This in turn leads to a constructively critical approach to dialogue, where all participants are seen and heard in the process of future-imagining applied in a consistent way, in specific domains of practice, within a given setting.

Process, flexibility, and adaptability

Strategy: This also has implications for strategy, because it encourages an adhocratic approach focused on process, flexibility, and adaptability, rather than on predictive, bureaucratic outcomes.

Domains of Futures-Focused Leadership

1 The Ecological Domain

Exploring questions of environment and sustainability, but also attending to questions of healthy education ecologies, within and beyond individual schools. Considering how to nurture future education ecosystems that encourage collective and individual wellbeing and support regenerative practices.

2 The Domain of Political Economy

Focusing on the future of the political and economic conditions that shape practice in schools. Starting with wider social context, this domain encourages futures thinking about ethical and responsible practice, about social justice, cultural identity and cultural complexity, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and decolonisation discourses. Exploring 'history in context' is one way for leaders to imagine future practice where these big and controversial issues are made manageable at the level of a specific school or organisational setting. These are questions of particular importance for diverse and complex cultural settings like international schools.

3 Educational Domains: Knowledge, Pedagogy, Assessment, and Curriculum

It goes without saying that leaders must consider the future of the key educational domains of knowledge, assessment, pedagogy, and curriculum. Much good practice already exists in schools for developing 21st Century competencies, supported by research from organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO. The challenge for future-focused leadership is to go even further in thinking about the possible, probable, and preferable futures of these domains of education.

4 The Technological Domain

Recent technological changes, including the proliferation of generative AI in education, suggest that critical digital literacies will be essential for a future-focused approach to leadership. Understanding and exploring the future of technological change also involves thinking about key areas of the educational domain, specifically assessment and its relationship to knowledge production, or how we represent what can be measured about learning. There are also significant opportunities and challenges for thinking about teacher training, retention, and supply, as well as the space-time of schooling.

Key questions

What is **possible, probable, and preferable** for the future of education?

What **processes** will allow educators, colleagues, students and parents to enact this preferable future?

What **futures-focused practices** already exist in your setting, and how can they be enhanced?

What does this look like at the **manageable** scale of your setting or organisation?

What **time, space, activities, and resources** are required to make preferable futures of education a reality?