



**Thinkpiece**

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# The Future School

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UCL Centre for  
**Educational Leadership**



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# Introduction

**This thinkpiece arises out of the opportunity offered to me by the Australian Learning Lecture<sup>1</sup>, to explore the nature of The Future School. The work was completed just before COVID19 struck. Subsequently it has been published in extended form as FutureSchool (Hannon with Temperley, 2022).**

In 2020, 'school' as we knew it was interrupted by the Covid19 pandemic. 195 nations in lockdown. School closures impacting 99.9% of the world's school population, affecting an estimated 1.725 billion children. COVID interrupted 'normality' for everyone on earth. Some people became understandably desperate to get their old lives back, to snap back to things as they were. Others saw this as an extraordinary opportunity to step back, and to ask some long-overdue fundamental questions. One such question is the suitability of the dominant model of schooling for the conditions of the future.

One outcome of the COVID catastrophe has been a resurgence of the view (Illich, 1970) that 'the school' as an institution has had its day, and that the long-delayed promise of edtech is about to be fulfilled. Soon we won't need schools anymore and edtech will do to the institution of school what Amazon has done to shopping. There are reasons to think this is a possibility. The 2020 shock of the removal of the custodial aspects of schooling might yet give rise to more extensive experiments that do not revolve around the existing features: a legally-mandated containment of a fixed number of students within a single set of physical boundaries; and a pre-specified portion of the day and week.

But I hope we will reject the suggestion that the face-to-face institution of school can be made redundant. The social institution of school is a vital component in thriving communities; and in fostering the well-being of young people – if the institution is redesigned. And that redesign is even more imperative if we want our schools to drive towards equity, as opposed to entrenching existing inequalities.

The pandemic shutdown revealed many things: some pragmatic, some profound. Amongst them was the realisation that the custodial function, rather than being consigned to

redundancy was actually critical. Even with parents working from home – likely to be a continuing practice across many industries – the safe, nurturing care of children by other adults is essential both to the functioning of economies and to meeting parents' own needs. This is so even if their children's cognitive learning could be advanced by digital means.

But the more profound reason to configure schools into our preferred future is not just pragmatic. Schools must be retained in the mix: not as the only vehicles and modes for supporting 'becoming' in our young, but as a critical and desirable element. We are essentially social animals. The felt need for real in-person human contact throughout the pandemic became acute – especially perhaps for young people. The relational dimension of schools was deeply missed.

Unless it is conceived as the narrow transmission of knowledge or skill acquisition, learning is a fundamentally social process. This is an insight as old as Aristotle, who said that humans are above all else social animals; and that vital energy arises from gatherings - in public squares, theatres, sports stadiums. This insight has been deepened and developed through both research, initially started by Vygotsky (1962), and practice<sup>2</sup>. We diminish this dimension at our peril.

As social spaces like the high street diminish, schools could become the site of various community-oriented services and facilities. In the face of social fragmentation and diversity, and the decline of various other traditional institutions playing a similar role, schools could help generate local 'social capital'. It is also the ground where more vibrant forms of democracy might take root.



# 1 Futures thinking to support The Future School

How then to go about exploring the nature of the future school? If this is to be more than a matter of opinion or speculation, what basis can you start from? I took the view that the place to start was from authoritative thinking about the nature of the future itself. So I began with the work of organisations that systematically engage in futures thinking (not prediction), and then looked at what they had to say about schools as a result.

My research showed that out of the work of such organisations you can distil sets of design principles for creating schools fit for the future. So the second step was identifying those principles. This research then looked at schools across the world using these principles in their work – with some remarkably encouraging outcomes. A database of around 50 schools was then compiled in diverse settings (including England) to explore the thinking that has led to their establishment, the practical new models that have resulted, and consider what they might have to teach us about what a new ‘normal’ might look like; one focused on

creating the future the next generation need. Some very interesting patterns emerged. I have called them ‘archetypes’.

So, the beginning of this research journey was to review the global organisations that intentionally employ forms of futures thinking as tools to support policy. We can’t assume steady-state continuity with the past. There are discernible trends and disruptions that profoundly impact the nature of life on earth. And schools need to shape up to that reality. Futures thinking looks at trends, possible discontinuities, probable and plausible possibilities across all aspects of life: our relationship with the environment, social and political life; technology; and human development.

We identified 23 organisations or programs which intentionally utilised some aspects of thinking about the nature of the future into their work on learning (no doubt there are more). Clearly, they are diverse, ranging from intergovernmental research agencies, to challenge-prize sponsors to think-tanks.

## The research scan looked at 23 future-focused organisations...

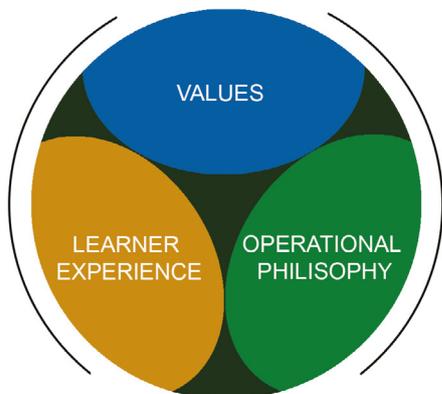
- The Coalition of Essential School
- Big Picture Learning
- Expeditionary Learning
- Education Re-Imagined
- Learning Frontiers
- OECD Innovative Learning Environments 7 Principles
- OECD Education 2030 Learning Framework
- Yidan Prize
- Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative
- XQ Institute
- Next Gen Learning
- The High Tec High Group
- Deep Learning
- Re-school Colorado
- LEAP Innovations
- Remake Learning
- Transcend Education
- First Peoples Principles of Learning (Canada)
- Deans for Impact
- Institute of Applied Neuroscience
- Lego Foundation
- Carnegie Mellon Eberly
- Knowledge Works

# 2 The design principles

In looking at the initiatives in our dataset we found the following design principles:

- **Purpose driven:** Future schools should focus on the purpose of both individual and collective thriving, and on helping their learners to acquire personal purpose: building their 'why?'
- **Equity-focused:** such schools should work to address inequities and social justice, and help young people to do so
- **Promoting identity:** each learner's social and cultural identity must be nurtured, cultivating a sense of belonging and value
- **Strength-based:** the school must build from each (and every) individual's existing assets
- **Relevant:** learning should be relevant to the local and global community; 'work that matters' should be an important feature

CLUSTER OF DESIGN PRINCIPLES



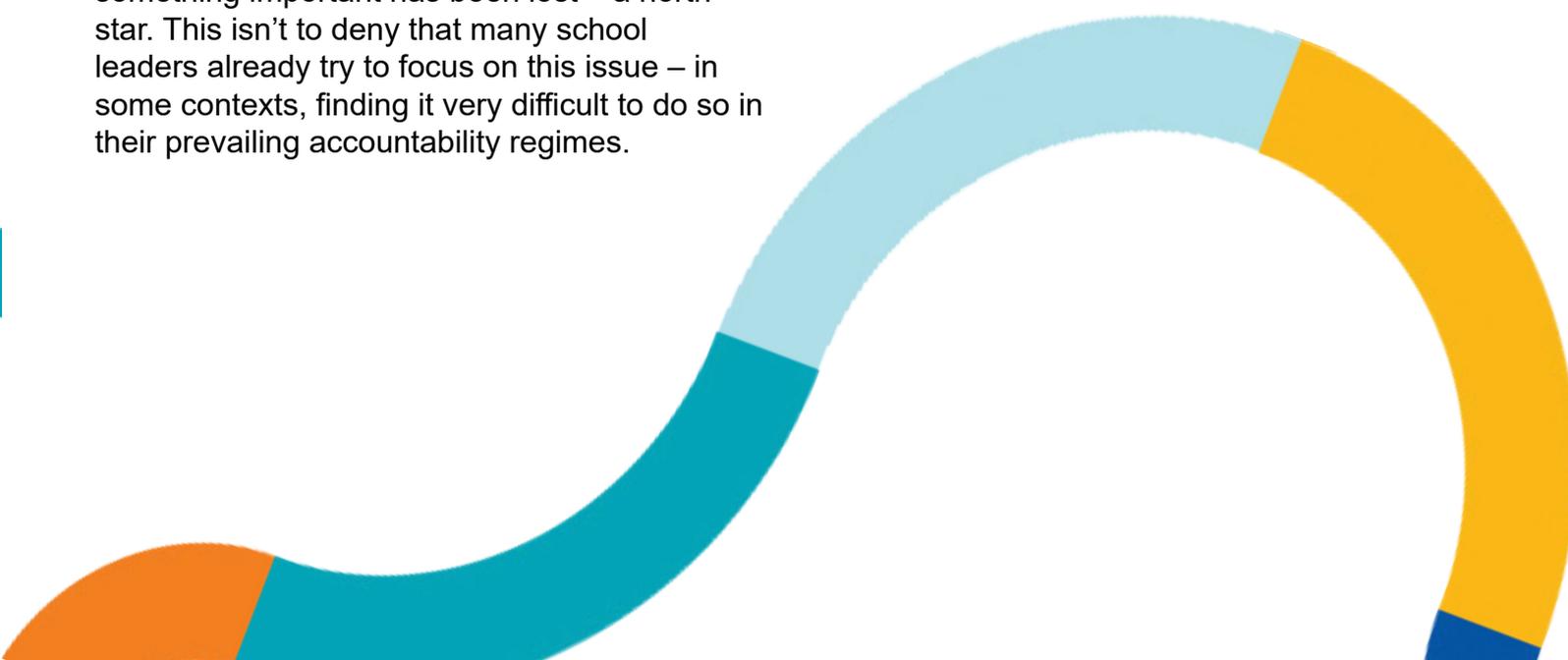
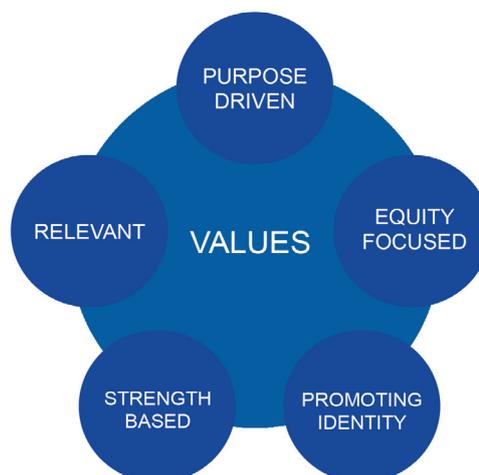
CLUSTER OF DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The design principles of future-focused schools that were held in common (though sometimes expressed in different language) form the heart of our findings and are the key practical takeaway for educators and leaders.

They fall into three clusters. We found design principles that focus on:

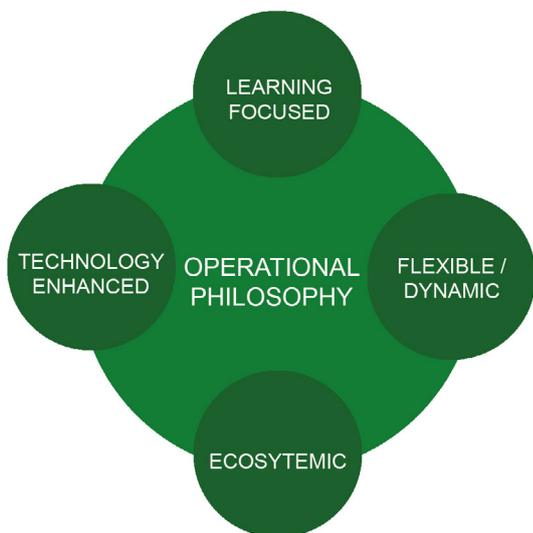
- values that future schools should manifest;
- the operational philosophy that demonstrate those values in practice; and
- the learners' experience of all that.

First then, **VALUES**: our surveyed organisations all privileged some key values for future schools in their work. Perhaps this reflects the fact that something important has been lost – a north star. This isn't to deny that many school leaders already try to focus on this issue – in some contexts, finding it very difficult to do so in their prevailing accountability regimes.



The second set of principles focuses on OPERATIONAL PHILOSOPHY. Values mean nothing if their force is not felt in translation to practice. So the organisations we looked at had assembled clear principles in this domain. They were:

- **Learning focused:** understanding how learning happens, drawing from the very best in learning sciences and research should be at the heart of choices around pedagogy.
- **Flexible/dynamic:** the school should design and iterate different modes of teaching and learning to meet the evolving needs of learners and the wider world. In an age of rapid change and disruption this is an imperative.
- **Technology enhanced:** future schools should use technology extensively and responsibly to liberate learning, amplify effective and diverse modalities, and to enable both personalisation and collaboration.
- **Ecosystemic:** schools should be seriously porous, with many active partners in organising learning. It should be deeply connected to its local community (and to the global community through technology) to provide richer learning experiences and diverse pathways for learners.



And the third cluster focuses on how learners experience all of the previous principles, for that of course is crucial. What is it like to be on the receiving end? We found a strong awareness of this issue in many of the organisations we surveyed, reflected in the following principles:

- **Personalised:** the learner’s experience should relate to her personal needs, passions, development, and purposes.

These are at the centre: not the institution, the teacher, or external bodies of knowledge.

- **Integrated:** the learner should experience meaning through learning that transcends siloes, building connections within and between disciplines. This is about utilising many forms: disciplinary; intra-disciplinary; cross-disciplinary.
- **Inclusive:** the culture should be experienced as respectful and welcoming.
- **Relational:** individuals should be known, good relationships are the basis for deep learning. Collaboration is the norm.
- **Empowering:** future schools should build and leverage learner agency (or self-direction), providing opportunities for learners to take increasing responsibility and ownership over their learning.



Many of these design principles sound familiar. But how often are they genuinely used as the basis on which decisions about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are based? How often do they determine the way that schools actually work?

Conventionally, schools considering change have approached the question by starting with the issues of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Our research has found that schools which are intentionally focused on being future-fit take a step back. They are asking more fundamental questions than the usual ‘what is the knowledge we should be instilling?’ and ‘how should we test that learners have learned it?’ Through conscious adoption of design principles that speak to the conditions of the future, and the nature of human learning, they come to different kinds of solutions.



# 3 Some emerging archetypes: schools to shape the future?

The 14 principles give the co-ordinates of new models. They aren't a recipe: they are the ingredients. It is inspiring to see how schools across the world are combining and emphasising them differently, according to context and to overall mission.

As the database of schools utilising these principles grew<sup>3</sup> another pattern began to emerge.

Many of these schools were also addressing some of the key challenges and opportunities of our time. The mission of course was always for the benefit of their young people: but they also had big global issues in mind.

We found 6 areas where schools had explicitly and intentionally determined to make a difference to the world, and were employing the design principles to help them do it. It may be helpful to conceive of them as archetypes. We should stress that no school is about just one thing. But here are the 6 archetypes that emerged, with some international examples from our database:

## 6 archetypes for the future?



### 1. Schools devoted to growing ethical leadership

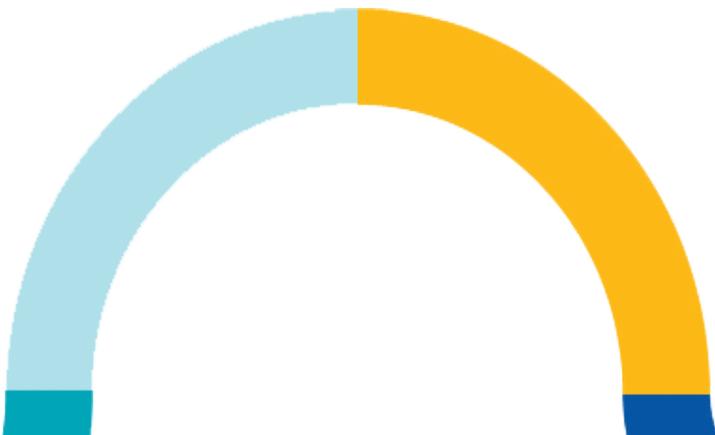
The Liger Leadership Academy in Phnom Penh<sup>4</sup> is archetypal of schools giving primacy to the notion that the future demands new kinds of leadership: ethical, democratized. It is a school shaped to create the leaders the future badly needs. This is especially true in a country ravaged by a traumatic past, but arguable across the whole world too. Leadership based not on class or wealth or entitlement but by competence and values. Jeff Holte is the Director of Education for the LLA. He points to the centrality of the design principles of 'purpose', and 'empowering'.

*"We take very seriously our goals. What is a good leader? A combination of what we call leadership competencies: vision and influencing; networking and problem-solving; communication and joining the dots. But also their whole value system: integrity and honesty; do they care? This is the basis for our whole curriculum that we think will take them into the future and create a better country. For the first time in my career I have seen what it looks like when students are totally engaged in their learning."*<sup>5</sup>

The principle of being ecosystemic is also fundamental:

*"Our real-world projects - for example, reviving the coastline of Cambodia - have forced us to ask: who is a teacher? When you realise that the whole world has opened up, and the world is a classroom, then the answer can be - everyone. Because teachers just can't know everything."*<sup>6</sup>

From those principles they derive their curriculum and pedagogy. This archetype can now be seen in many sites across the world. There seems to be a felt need to address the leadership deficit in this world of ours.



## **2. Schools focused on building our technological future.**

In the Kosen Schools in Japan and schools such as Chung Nam Samsung Academy (Korea), Wooranna Park in Australia, and many others, we found schools that take as a guiding mission the idea that we need to create young people who are not just consumers, victims or objects of technology; but rather combine technological confidence and competence with the value frame that serves humanity.

The Kosen Schools have set out to find a meaningful way to prepare students not just for the digitally automated workplace, complemented by AI, but also to develop the entrepreneurial and problem solving competencies to shape the technologies of the future towards humanistic and planetary flourishing. The evolution of this type of school may be a fundamental part of our overall quest to thrive. At Kosen Schools, in order to realise their ambition to be learner-centred, the conventional role of teacher has evolved: here, they are mainly coaches, mentors, facilitators and evaluators. Naturally, design principles of 'technology enhanced' and 'learning focused', amongst others are pre-eminent.

## **3. Schools emphasising our environmental thriving.**

The Green School in Indonesia (and now also in Mexico and New Zealand) is representative of schools giving primacy to the idea that we have no future unless every child becomes environmentally literate, passionate and active. The school educates for sustainability, through community-integrated, entrepreneurial learning. They believe that future generations need a wider set of tools to equip learners for an unknown new world and provide them with an understanding of sustainable living practices. This is a fast expanding category: worldwide examples include the Academy for Global Citizenship in the US; Spark Lynedoch, South Africa; The Muse School, California; Forest Schools; and many others. At the Green School, the curriculum design is derived from its key principles of relevance, purpose, relational and integrated. The curriculum integrates subjects and skills to more accurately reflect how things

work in the real world, and is taught in 6 week modules that introduce all students to an expansive range of ideas and learning opportunities. Students learn English and Maths in discrete lessons characterised by high quality teaching.

## **4. Schools committed to enabling their learners to navigate the fast-changing world of work and employment.**

These schools particularly focus on the idea that the future labour market will be disrupted and volatile; and that to ensure their future prosperity, learners need to become career navigators. Tri-County Early College in N Carolina in the US models one way to go about this.

To create the mindset that TCEC believes is essential to navigate success in the world of work, a strengths-based approach is vital. One way the school manifests this in its approach to assessment. It changed the conventional grading system to a competency-based model flexible enough to allow each student to master the knowledge and skills they need when they are ready. Students meet on a bi-weekly basis with their Learning Guide Adviser to ensure they are making the necessary progress on their projects and their mastery of competencies. This is also a time of structured reflection, analysis, and synthesis of academic skills with TCEC's 'survival skills'.

Internships are an important dimension of a learner's experience, a practice that realises a number of the design principles. Schools in the Big Picture family across the world make internships a central part of their offer to introduce their learners to multiple models of a working life.



## 5. Schools that grow entrepreneurs and changemakers.

LearnLife, Barcelona is representative of the numerous schools now addressing the challenge of growing the world's capacity to create and manage change and innovation. A start-up devised from first principles by social entrepreneur Christopher Pommerening with veteran Australian educator Stephen Harris, LearnLife is consciously modelling a new paradigm. It groups its learners into:

- Explorers - 11 to 14 year olds;
- Creators - 14 to 16;
- Changemakers 16+.

This rapidly growing field of entrepreneurship-focused schools is becoming increasingly studied. It includes schools like the Riverside School (Gujarat) and the Nuvu Studio in the US. Such schools are explicitly drawing upon design principles for learning that develops the entrepreneurial competencies, and the value frame that drives motivation to make change for the common good.

The practical impact of those design principles is directly felt: in the case of LearnLife for example, in a different way of using time, structuring the working week. Here is the framework for the use of time in the life of learner:



## 6. Schools that give particular emphasis to nurturing a sense of identity

Nga Tupuwae, in Auckland New Zealand is archetypal of schools whose foremost mission is to help young people develop and discover their human identity. An all-through school educating from kindergarten to y13, the school's ethos is that students need a strong and embedded understanding of themselves as Maori, as "a proud and productive people pre- and post-colonisation". Arihia Stirling, the much-honoured principal of the school says:

*"We need to ensure that our children inhabit a space where they can feel safe about their identity. Understanding who they are, where they are, where they come from - that's what improves their self-efficacy. As Maori, we come from quite a broken space. Our children need to know that they don't need to stay there: they need to understand how important their Maori-ness is. Their language. Their connections. If you have a nurturing cultural environment at school, then the children understand that learning resides in their identity, not in an institution."*<sup>7</sup>

The school combines design principles to achieve this outcome.

Schools of which Nga Tupuwae is archetypal believe that in order to create successful futures, young people need to discover who they are, together with a sense of belonging. And this is vital for humanity's future, in the light of the legacies of racial injustice and oppression; migrations; mixed race heritage; and in some cultures, the dangerous loss of coherent narrative about identity for the white working class, especially males. As Francis Fukuyama (2018) shows in his book Identity, demand for recognition of one's identity is a master concept that explains much of what is going on in world politics today. As for the future: think gender fluidity/reassignment; and virtual identities in digital space. This profoundly important and complex area is deserving of much deeper exploration in both practice and theory.

## Reflections and conclusion

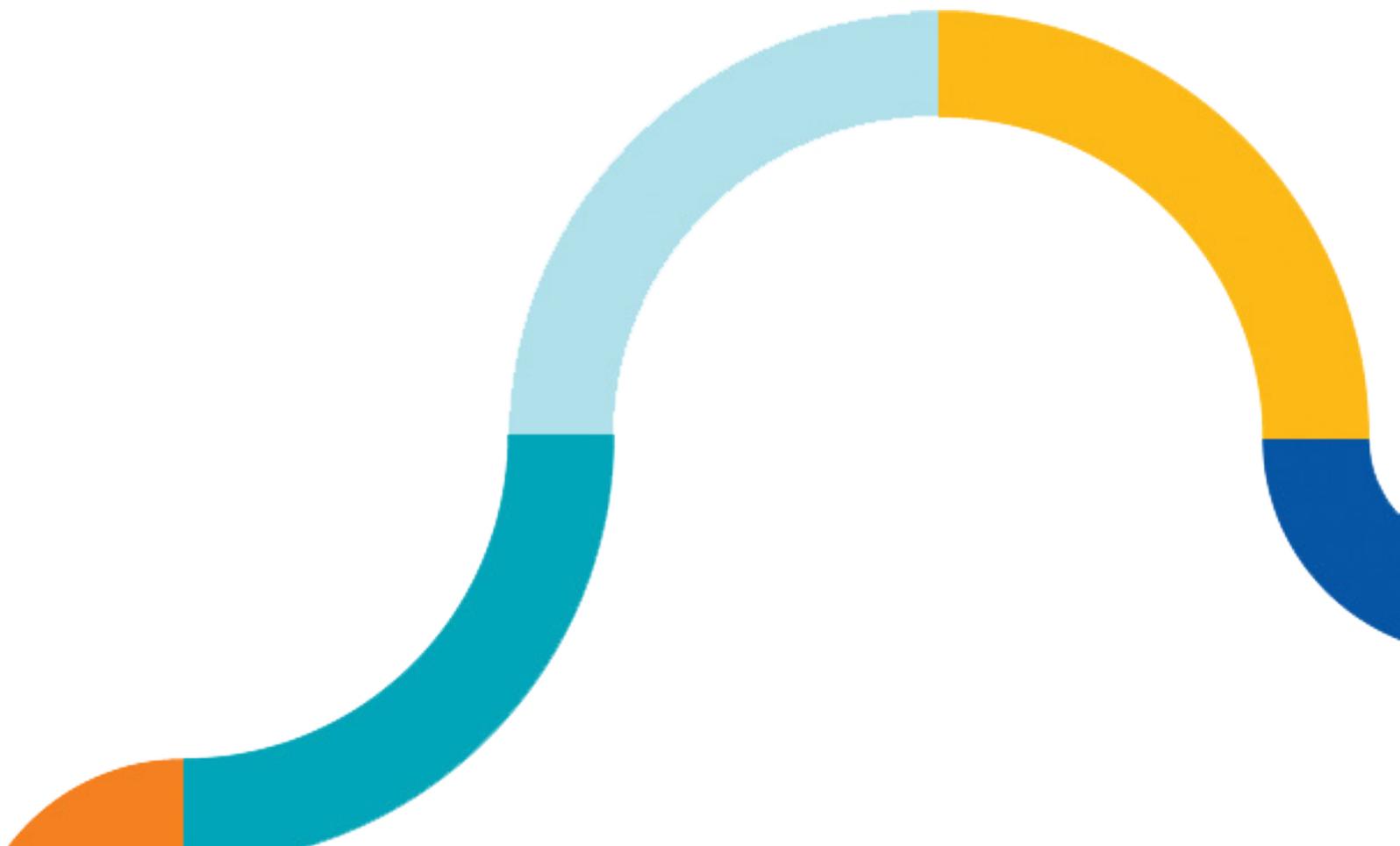
Many – though by no means all – of the examples of schools we have found that are intentionally working to be future-fit are operating outside of publicly funded systems. Across the world numerous start-ups are appearing. School chains, utilising configurations of the design principles described earlier are multiplying: from the United World Colleges, micro-schools such as Agile Learning Centres, Quantum Camp, Acton Academy; Round Square; Whittle Schools & Studios; and many more.

Since so many of these schools are fee-paying or independent, they are available to elites: discerning parents who can see what is needed and afford to pay for or pursue it. A serious concern is that the advantaged will access future-facing schools whilst many schools in the public sector remain constrained by the old paradigm: partly because the public will has not yet been built to effect a shift; and partly because teachers are not trusted sufficiently to reorient in these directions. There are schools in England utilising the design principles, even in highly disadvantaged areas. As one says: *“It’s hard. It’s complicated. It’s scary . . . . But it is a choice”*<sup>8</sup>. But too many schools are stuck

in the slow lane. We have to ask how schools in the state sector can benefit from and be a part of the movement for rethinking the schooling paradigm. This may be the leadership challenge for our generation:<sup>9</sup>

The need is for leaders who can undertake ‘cathedral thinking’: a far-reaching vision, a well-thought-out blueprint, and a shared commitment to long-term implementation.

An environmental revolution that saves our habitat and our existence upon it; a transformed approach to other species; genuinely democratic, equitable societies; personal well-being – none of this is achievable unless we develop institutions that are explicitly aimed at bigger objectives than heretofore. It is about the development of new humans. In short, it is about how we are to thrive at the global, societal, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels (Hannon and Peterson, 2021). I believe that transformed schools are key to achieving this vision for our futures.



# Questions for reflection and conversations to lead learning

- Q In the school(s) you lead, teach in or are connected to, how similar or different are your design principles (values, operational philosophy and learner experience) to those distilled from future-focused organisations in this thinkpiece? What do you take from the comparison?
- Q Which of the six archetypes of schools to shape the future most resonate with your own educational values? How far are any reflected in the setting or system that work in? How might the 'ingredients' be best combined to serve pupils in your context?
- Q Who are the other potential partners in your ecosystem and what kind of relationships do you need to develop with them to enable thriving at all levels?
- Q What leadership challenges emerge for you from the thinkpiece? How might you go about addressing these?
- Q What do you see as the professional learning demands for teachers and leaders in the school(s) you lead, teach in or are connected to, in creating the future the next generation need?
- Q How might your school(s) benefit from and be a part of the movement for rethinking the schooling paradigm?

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### Endnotes

1. <https://www.all-learning.org.au/>

2. See, for example practitioner research such as <https://npjscilearncommunity.nature.com/users/328634-charlotte-wilson/posts/56629-learning-should-be-a-social-activity>

3. Described in more detail in FutureSchool *ibid*

4. <http://www.ligeracademy.org/>

5. Jeff Holte, *interview with author, 2019*

6. *ibid*

7. *Interview with author, 21/10/2019*

8. See FutureSchool *ibid*, p80

9. See FutureSchool *ibid*, p78

## About the author

Valerie Hannon is a global thought leader, inspiring systems to re-think what 'success' will mean in the twenty-first century and the implications for education. Valerie is a radical voice for change, whilst grounded in a deep understanding of how education systems currently work. A former Director of Education, and adviser to the Department of Education, she is a consultant to the OECD on its major future-focused education initiatives.



## About this thinkpiece

In this thinkpiece, Valerie Hannon argues that creating schools fit for the future can benefit from drawing on sets of design principles used by organisations that systematically engage in futures thinking. Drawing on her research into such organisations, she outlines these principles and describes six new models – 'archetypes' – resulting from schools internationally in diverse settings that apply the principles. Her conclusion raises questions about the leadership paradigm shift needed to enable such transformations in schools.



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