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Scripting solutions for the future: the OECD's advocacy of happiness and well-being

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the OECD has gradually shifted its governing mechanism from promoting 'best practices' based on comparative data on pupils' cognitive skills to actively advocating for individual and collective well-being as an *alternative* and *ideal future*. This article focuses on the OECD's use of 'techno-scientific fictive scripts' as a strategy to promote happiness and well-being as solutions to anticipated crises, despite their conceptual ambiguity and token usage. It analyses how the OECD's recent 'Future of Education' projects have sought to steer its audience towards shared concerns and expectations of the future, while simultaneously asserting its technical expertise in future studies methodologies. It argues that by returning from endorsing data-driven policies to making futuristic claims using future studies methodologies, the OECD endeavours to redefine itself as both a pathfinder and a problem solver, simultaneously blending its human capital imperatives with technological inevitability in its vision of the future.

KEYWORDS

OECD; future of education; global governance; happiness; well-being; scenarios; fictive scripts

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable shift towards forward-looking policy thinking, which, instead of perceiving the *future* as a singular progression of time, suggests the possibility of multiple potential *futures*, a perspective that has become integral to both global and national education agendas (Mertanen and Brunila 2022). Central to the shift are global policy actors, particularly international organisations (IOs), which have played a pivotal role in shaping and steering the discourse through what has been described as 'anticipatory governance' (Guston 2010; 2014). This concept foregrounds governing *through* 'foresights' by providing 'multiple, plausible futures as objects for deliberation' (Guston 2010, 434). Global policy actors have actively put forth 'solutions' aimed at mitigating and averting the predicaments that an 'uncertain' and unpredictable future may present, while also envisioning both techno-utopian and dystopian futures (Auld and Morris 2023; Mertanen and Brunila 2022; Robertson 2022).

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One aspect often overlooked in the literature is that the narratives used for anticipatory governance – referred to in this article as 'fictive script(s)' – are fundamentally imagined and deliberately developed to draw public attention and justify intervention. In this article, I focus on the OECD's newfound commitment to happiness and well-being, exploring how these concepts are embedded into the organisation's recent initatives as humanitarian policy signifiers. I also examine how this commitment has prompted an evolution in the organisation's anticipatory governance strategies in more recent years. The past three decades have seen the rise of 'governing by numbers', with indicators and empirical data emerging as 'epistemic devices' with assumed objectivity (Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinski 2019). The OECD's expertise-building, achieved through the production and dissemination of data in the field of education policy and an increasing coverage of regions, countries, and student population, particularly through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and its subvariants, has long been the main source of legitimacy in driving global education agendas. The ways in which 'governance by number' operates – or the overarching use of numbers by IOs – is, however, rapidly evolving, particularly due to a growing fatigue over rankings and the datafication of everything (Jerrim 2023; Sorensen, Ydesen, and Robertson 2021). It has also become apparent that student outcomes have not improved in the two decades since the advent of PISA (Gomendio 2023). In other words, the production and dissemination of numbers are no longer a sustainable source of legitimacy – rather, they have now become tools for these organisations to navigate the new potential future 'market' (Grek 2024).

This is not to suggest that the OECD has shifted away from governance by numbers; the political and economic values embedded in the empirical data produced through PISA and, more recently, the Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) remain stronger than ever. Instead, while the OECD seemingly presents evidence-based, *objective* future projections by 'building subsidiary capacities in *foresight, engagement*, and *integration*' (Guston 2014, 219), the endeavours to redefine its organisational legitimacy as a prophet and problem solver of *possible* future crises have shifted their focus from endorsing data-driven policies to making futuristic claims. These futuristic claims integrate three distinct aspects of legitimacy: 'pragmatic', as the OECD makes a grand return to employing future studies methodologies to offer solutions to its member-states to circumvent *undesirable futures*; 'moral', as it advocates for individual and collective well-being over other instrumental outcomes supported by established measurement frameworks; and 'cognitive', referencing past and ongoing crises (e.g. war, COVID-19) that have instilled a sense of urgency and future uncertainties in the minds of the audience (Li and Morris 2022; Suchman 1995).

By analysing official reports, working papers, transcripts of webinars, and entries from the OECD's official blog regarding what I describe as the 'Futures of Education' (FoE) projects, implemented by the OECD from 2015 onwards, I explore how the OECD effectively steers its audience towards shared concerns and expectations, thereby bestowing legitimacy upon its forward-looking agenda, particularly its sociotechnical vision of the knowledge, skills, and capabilities individuals need in the future. Expanding upon De Laat's (2016) concept of 'fictive script', I argue that the OECD's development and presentation of future scenarios in its recent FoE projects are both sustained by and also in turn

legitimise the expansion of governance by numbers – a new approach that I characterise as 'techno-scientific fictive scripts'.

This article is organised into three sections. First, I explore the concept of 'fictive scripts', particularly focusing on the techno-scientific role they play in the IOs' anticipatory governance. Secondly, I trace the OECD's evolution in promoting happiness and well-being, contextualising it within the broader international political economy, and detailing the OECD's endeavours to establish its role and authority in measuring these concepts. Third, I examine how the OECD's adoption of techno-scientific fictive scripts aligns with their efforts to redefine and shape the futures of education by actively, and even assertively, emphasising the importance of happiness and well-being in future societies, despite the ambiguity in defining such terms (see also Rappleye et al. 2023).

Anticipatory global governance strategies and future-making

In recent decades, IOs have actively integrated 'soft' mechanisms into their governance of education, such as employing soft laws or governance by numbers to enable the exercise of governance at a distance (Ball 2018; Grek 2009; Ozga 2008). Central to these soft mechanisms has been the recognition of the IOs' technocratic expertise and their role as *knowledge producers* (for OECD, see Bloem 2015; for World Bank, see Zapp 2017). In more recent years, however, Grek (2020, 191) stressed that OECD has gone beyond their earlier role as a 'technocratic power' with technical expertise and has rather embraced a role as a *knowledge broker* that not only provides forums where both policy actors and scientific experts can interact and exchange but also actively translate and interpret the knowledge it produces followed by a series of policy recommendations (Baek and Steiner-Khamsi 2024; Elfert and Ydesen 2023).

What underlies the evolving nature of the global governance landscape in education futures is the endeavour to collectively identify, manage, and address common problems at the international level (Chidozie and Oluwatobi 2017). Particularly in light of the waning national interest in international large-scale assessments (Jerrim 2023), which Sorensen, Ydesen, and Robertson (2021) have characterised as 'PISA-fatigue', it is probable that the idea of 'governing by numbers' is gradually losing its legitimacy as a means for IOs to drive global education agendas. Instead, developing a set of plausible 'scripts' of possible futures – infused not only with promissory connotations but also with pessimistic ones – are now favoured by global actors for shaping education governance, particularly in the post-COVID pandemic era. Against this backdrop, it is imperative to explore and understand the role these scripts play and the potential implications they have upon IOs' governance over the futures of education.

This new phenomenon has broadly been defined as the rise of 'anticipatory global governance' (Berten and Kranke 2022), illustrating how the uncertainty of the future serves as a foundation upon which global actors, including IOs, delineate and identify political problems and propose potential remedies. This concept comprises an array of anticipatory practices that can generate distinct visions of desirable, less desirable, and even undesirable futures, heavily relying on the development and utilisation of 'fictive scripts' (De Laat, 2016). A fictive script is built upon the 'hypotheses on the socio-technical environment it has to be inserted in, and which are not given by traditional tools and methods' (De Laat,

2016, 176), and is understood as a potent bottom-up methodology that engages participants in reflective inquiries, such as their perspectives on future technologies, innovation, and the prerequisites they believe to be essential for successful innovation (see also den Boer, Rip, and Speller 2009). The assumption is that the ways in which the future is written and read are fundamentally contingent upon the reader's interpretation of the past and present, as well as the sociomaterial assemblages influencing their interpretation. For example, in a corporate setting, these scripts contain not only the assumptions used by producers to formulate and develop a particular technological object but also their non-material imaginings of alternative futures and 'worlds'. The concept also resonates with what Oomen, Hoffman, and Hajer (2022) described as an act of 'futuring', which they define as 'the identification, creation and dissemination of images of the future shaping the possibility space for action, thus enacting relationships between past, present and future' (253–254).

Fictive scripts, therefore, should be understood as cognitive speculations arising from one's situated experience of present realities – or at least some partial realities of the present; that is, some scripts may be more realistic and path-dependent with bounded aspirations for the future, while others may be more critical and pessimistic. They are inherently constructivist in nature, tied to the reader's conscious construction of certain aspects of reality in a manner that involves selection (e.g. inclusion and exclusion), interpretation and representation (Entman 1993), much like a 'window frame' where the intended message recipients are presented with a delimited picture of reality (Hallahan 1999, 207). A plausible 'causal story', constructed within fictive scripts and supported by empirical evidence, offers strong leverage for proposing a thorough diagnosis and exploring various alternative futures (Alaily-Mattar, Thierstein, and Förster 2014; Verger 2012). While both promissory and pessimistic narratives of IOs have been explored by scholars to date, there has been a serious lack of literature, with the exceptions of Robertson and Beech (2023), Campbell-Verduyn and Hütten (2022), and Robertson (2022), that examines the performative effects of anticipation-oriented 'fictive' scripts on education policymaking that are integrated with evidence-based and seemingly objective projection methods and techniques – notably strategic foresight tools, superforecasting, and scenarios. In this article, I propose the term 'techno-scientific fictive scripts' to describe these new forms of fictive scripts.

What also legitimises techno-scientific fictive scripts is the prevailing use of 'floating signifiers' (Laclau, 1996). The current political climate has embraced abstract concepts in global discourses such as quality (Pechmann and Haase 2022; Unterhalter 2019) and 'happiness' (Kim 2023), constructing them as ideal futures to be pursued by all even if they operate without a universally accepted definition. While, at the surface level, these concepts seem to be open to a multiplicity of interpretations, it is often the case that the concepts, in reality, are narrowly employed, or even worse, distorted as they are (re)aligned with the broader agenda driven by the 'globalisation project' of both IOs and national policy actors and their extant measurement schemes (see Kim 2023; Unterhalter 2019).

As demonstrated in the following sections, the OECD's incorporation of humanitarian policy signifiers – such as happiness, well-being, and social and emotional skills – into its policy discourses paved the way for the organisation to expand its measurement

schemes, thereby legitimising its vision of a 'future-proof education' with both existing and new empirical data.

The OECD's humanitarian turn towards promoting happiness and well-being

The late 2000s saw the rise of 'post-GDP' discourses and a call for a more comprehensive understanding and measurement of development. Both political awareness and active international- and national-level efforts to redress the negative consequences of growth and limitations of the GDP began in earnest when then French President Nicolas Sarkozy's voiced concerns towards the *problematiques* of traditional economic measures as the primary yardstick of development. The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, also known as the 'Sarkozy Commission', was formed in February 2008 with two Nobel laureates, Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, and a French economist Jean-Paul Fitoussi as organisers. The following year, the Sarkozy Commission published its final report, which, in short, firmly argued: (i) the limits of GDP as a measure of economic performance and social progress; and (ii) the importance of recognising well-being as a multidimensional construct, which cannot be fully captured by relying on 'objective' standard-of-living indicators (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009). The suggestion, therefore, was to incorporate 'subjective' indicators of well-being that could comprehensively capture how individuals experience the betterment of life.

Soon after the release of the 2009 Sarkozy Commission report, increasing political awareness of the negative consequences of growth and limitations of GDP was evident across IOs, entailing a substantial shift in both the OECD's revision of its Vision Statement and the introduction of a new initiative that measures well-being and progress. The OECD's 'well-being turn' unfolded through two major initiatives. First, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2011, the OECD replaced the old slogan '*Building Partnerships for Progress*' with the now-well known '*Better Policies for Better Lives*'. In the same year, the organisation launched the *Better Life Initiative*, through which it suggested that the focus on well-being should go beyond the discussion or measurement of 'current' well-being and capture how well-being can be sustained over time (Durand 2015). The key focus of the Better Life Initiative revolved around building a better evidence base and measures of people's well-being by capturing various aspects that matter the most to people in the shaping of their lives, which would, in turn, facilitate national policymaking (Durand 2015; OECD 2011). Under this initiative, the OECD developed the '*Better Life Index*' in 2011 which, using 11 specific dimensions that constitute the measurement of both 'current' and 'over-time' well-being, rank countries according to their overall performance with an equal weighting to each dimension.

Second, the OECD offered to host the *second* Sarkozy Commission, leading to the creation of the High-Level Expert Group on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (HLEG) in 2013. The HLEG was co-chaired by two of the three original commission chairs, Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, and the OECD's Chief Statistician and Director of Statistics and Data, Martine Durand. The core objective of the HLEG was to go beyond relying solely on GDP as a metric for a country's performance and broaden the measurement to encompass different factors, such as trust and economic

insecurity, that directly influence people's quality of life. The OECD, however, envisaged a more ambitious goal – to consolidate its role and authority in global policymaking by situating itself at 'the forefront of measurement' (Gurría 2015).

The prime example of this shift was the OECD's newfound commitment to understanding and promoting student happiness. This commitment was evident through the introduction of relevant measurement indicators in its PISA 2012 survey, where students were asked to evaluate their happiness at school ('I feel happy at school') and satisfaction with their school ('I am satisfied with my school'). This focus on student well-being gradually expanded from PISA 2015 onwards from student happiness to student well-being, initially involving the introduction of a single instrument, the Cantril Ladder, to measure life satisfaction (see also Rappleye et al. 2020). Later, in PISA 2018, the OECD extended its measurement of students' affective and emotional well-being by incorporating references to 'eudaimonic and hedonic well-being', 'flourishing', and dimensions beyond the school environment (i.e. self and out-of-school environment) (OECD 2019a).

Advocating happiness and well-being as an 'alternative future'

After the OECD extended its measurement framework from the early 2010s to include student happiness, well-being, and life satisfaction, its Education Policy Committee launched *The Future of Education and Skills 2030* (hereinafter, Education 2030) project in 2015. Aiming at preparing students for the unprecedented social, environmental, and economic challenges, the project began by revisiting the relevance of the competence framework identified in the OECD's earlier project *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (DeSeCo) in 1997. While the framework provided the theoretical basis of PISA's earlier conceptualisation of what knowledge, attitudes, and values are important for students (OECD 2009), Dominique Rychen, the former director of the DeSeCo project, argued that although some of the key competencies remain relevant 'the DeSeCo competence framework needs to be taken forward and refined' (OECD 2016a, 2). The Education 2030 project, therefore, aimed to build on the DeSeCo framework and to identify the types of competencies today's students need to contribute to, and be successful in, the 'future society' (OECD 2019b).

The DeSeCo and Education 2030 projects were not the OECD's initial forays into forward-looking policy thinking; rather, this trajectory can be traced back to the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1975, the OECD launched the three-year 'INTERFUTURES' research project, with the objective to provide member states with a future-oriented analysis of various long-term global economic development scenarios and relations between the developed and developing countries (Andersson 2019; OECD 1979). Later in the 1990s, its policy interest extended into the realm of education, as the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) initiated a debate on the future of schools in preparation for the twenty-first century. In particular, it problematised how forward-looking policy thinking is 'surprisingly … relatively little developed in education compared with other policy sectors, despite education's fundamental characteristic of yielding benefits over very long time spans' (OECD 2001, 77).

The focus of the debate initially revolved around the role of schools and schooling, particularly with the formal initiation of the 'Schooling for Tomorrow' project in Hiroshima in 1997. By offering six different scenarios – ranging from the worst-case *undesirable*

scenarios of de-schooling, the status quo extrapolated scenarios, to presumably the best *desirable* scenarios where schools become either core social centres or focused learning organisations – the OECD (2001) sought to envision possible *futures*, whilst simultaneously implicitly associating the best scenarios with its organisational mission to assist member-states to achieve lifelong learning. By the early 2010s, however, the CERI discontinued the publications of 'Schooling for Tomorrow' project, and along with the project, attention to future studies methodologies has been diminishing until very recently.

The introduction of the Education 2030 project, therefore, signifies the OECD's endeavour to expand its expertise beyond fostering future-proof schools and schooling to encompassing future-proof education systems, as a means to prepare for both real and imagined crises. At the heart of the OECD's rationale for revising the competency framework is the narration of an 'imagined' crisis, centred on speculations about what *will* happen in the absence of proper interventions (Auld and Morris 2021). Describing the present as 'an increasingly volatile, uncertain, and ambiguous world' (OECD 2018, 2), the Education 2030 project conveys a warning message that, unless the education system makes radical changes to its curriculum, it risks people being 'defeated' by the unprecedented challenges posed by *uncertainties* – much like the well-known apocalyptic report titled 'A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform', published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) in the United States. The discursive power behind these crisis and uncertainty narratives is further strengthened by presenting the audience with various examples that construct a 'problematic present' characterised by *ill-being* and *unhappiness*. These examples include threats of terrorism and war, exacerbation of socioeconomic inequalities, and cybersecurity and privacy concerns, all of which are evident across the project documents:

> [1] In the face of an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, education can make the difference as to whether people embrace the challenges they are confronted with or whether they are defeated by them. (OECD 2018, 3)

> [2] … with a growing wave of "fake news" and digital technologies transforming traditional news media, there are growing demands for schools to develop students' media literacy … With the explosion of "start-up" culture, and the corresponding disruption to traditional workforce models and professional pathways, there are growing calls for students to develop their entrepreneurial skills. And in a world increasingly scarred by terror attacks and threats to civilian life and peace, the need for students to develop global competencies, including empathy, tolerance and respect for others, is urgent. (OECD 2019b, 52)

These narratives are soon supported by a clear vision of an 'alternative future' scenario – *individual and collective well-being* – that the OECD believes can be achieved through *correct* interventions, ultimately creating a storyline where collective efforts and solidarity are crucial:

> [3] The OECD is committed to redefine the growth narrative to put the "well-being" at the centre of our efforts … How can education systems help to develop competencies towards both better future both for themselves and for our common goods? (OECD 2016b, 4)

> [4] [The Education 2030 project] supports the wider goals of education and provides points of orientation towards the future we want: individual and collective well-being. (OECD 2019b, 20)

> [5] Even though there may be many different visions of the future we want, the well-being of society is a shared destination. (OECD 2019b, 129)

Two points are worth highlighting. First, the documents exude confidence in knowing and pinpointing the exact future 'we' want, with the OECD offering 'points of orientation' toward that very future; for example, as illustrated in the fourth excerpt, this can be achieved through the development of students' entrepreneurial skills and global competencies, such as empathy, tolerance, and respect for others. In other words, the OECD justifies the points of orientation – or policy prescriptions – it offers through the Education 2030 project by claiming they respond to the 'demands' of the future society; in so doing, the OECD discursively merges the real and the imaginary (Krzyżanowski 2019).

Second, the OECD delineates 'individual and collective well-being' as an alternative 'shared' vision of the future, but without providing a straightforward definition of well-being. Notably, this vision of 'individual and collective well-being' is framed in terms of the OECD's commitment ('to redefine the growth narrative'), collective demand ('the future we want', 'a shared destination'), and the idea of the 'common good'. The latter requires particular attention. In 2015, UNESCO published the report, *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?*, through which it emphasised the importance of moving beyond focusing on traditional competencies, such as literacy and numeracy, towards embracing a humanist vision that considers knowledge and education as 'global common goods' (UNESCO 2015). What is emphasised in this humanist vision is a sense of 'collective solidarity' and 'responsibility' that exist among the members of a society. As such, the report calls for a 'rethinking of citizenship education in a diverse and interconnected world' (UNESCO 2015, 65).

A similar narrative can be found in the OECD's Education 2030 project, indicating that both the OECD's and UNESCO's discursive turns are contingent upon the sociomaterial assemblages in which these organisations are situated. The OECD proposes three 'transformative competencies' that are essential for students to thrive in 2030: (i) creating new value; (ii) reconciling tensions and dilemmas; and (iii) taking responsibility. While OECD (2019b) argues that these competencies are important both for the sake of individuals' own education and life and for the sake of well-being of others, the 'economic importance' of the competencies also occupies a central position across the project documents, often articulated through the terms like 'creativity', 'innovation', and 'entrepreneurship'. The following extract is representative:

> Jobs that require creative intelligence are less likely to be automated in the next couple of decades. Reconciling tensions and dilemmas requires reading and understanding complex and ambiguous contexts – a skill that, to date, cannot be easily programmed into an algorithm. Similarly AI does not (yet) have a will of its own, nor a sense of ethics, and so cannot make the kinds of ethical decisions responsible citizens do. Students will need to be able to use their ability to consider the moral and ethical implications of their actions to, among many other things, ensure that the great and growing power of artificial intelligence is used to the benefit of all people. (OECD 2019b, 62).

Then, in order to drive the future education agenda and appeal to national governments, policymakers, and other audiences, the OECD frames these competencies as the means by which societies can prepare for and mitigate the 'imagined crises' in an unpredictable future, fostering individual and collective well-being. Throughout the excerpts,

anticipatory narratives prevail. The notion of 'anticipation' has not only become central to the OECD's learning framework, known as the 'Learning Compass 2030', emphasising the importance of an iterative learning process involving the 'Anticipation-Action-Reflection' cycle, but the extract also illustrates the OECD's experimentation with making futuristic claims to guide their course of action. The OECD is currently working on its subsequent project, the 'Teaching Compass', which is designed to build on the conceptual mapping of the Learning Compass. To what extent this Teaching Compass will articulate teacher competencies as a means to mitigate an imagined crisis is something we should anticipate in the next couple of years.

The revival of future scenarios: 'techno-scientific fictive scripting'

After the first phase of the Education 2030 project (2015–2019), the OECD continued to expand its governance strategies, moving beyond reliance on anticipation-oriented narratives focused on uncertainty and imagined crises. One significant development was the revival of future studies methodologies, namely strategic foresighting and scenario methods.

Building upon the six futures thinking scenarios introduced in the 2001 'Schooling for Tomorrow' project report, in 2020, the OECD reintroduced these future studies methodologies into its approach to shaping the futures of education until 2040. A notable example is the OECD's 2020 Scenarios for Schooling report, in which the organisation defined 'scenarios' as 'fictional sets of alternative futures' (OECD 2020a, 7), emphasising that these scenarios 'never contain predictions nor recommendations' (OECD 2020a, 16). Instead, by presenting multiple scenarios, the OECD contends that it acknowledges the existence of various potential paths to the future, rather than a single pathway, and illustrates the benefits of strategic foresight in policy decision-making, such as stress-testing scenarios to mitigate unexpected shocks for future-proofing purpose and fostering collective understanding and visions of the future to drive policy innovation in the present (OECD 2020a, 16). This serves as a classic example of what Auld and Morris (2014, 145) referred to as a 'covert insurance policy', whereby more pessimistic, albeit less realistic, scenarios can be embraced without having to confront future repercussions.

Moreover, whilst the OECD's Education 2030 report primarily focuses on identifying new competencies for students to navigate uncertain futures, the 2020 Scenarios for Schooling report, as well as the recent *Building the Future of Education* report (OECD 2022a), propose scenario-building as an effective means to stimulate forward-thinking 'dialogue' among key stakeholders at various levels. This departs from more traditional positivist methods in forecasting and scenario-building, which prioritise the creation of highly accurate, quantified, and stable future predictions based on data (De Laat, 2016). In a corporate context, these stabilised predictions enable actors to develop risk-mitigating business strategies by identifying potential uncertainties that could disrupt commodity prices and supply chains. Instead, what is evident in the excerpts below is the OECD's constructivist approach to scenario-building:

> [1] In the almost two decades since, future thinking in education has become more popular but it has tended to coalesce around aspirational visions and roadmaps of desirable futures. These aspirational visions have been used to set agendas and spark dialogue among diverse

> groups of stakeholders about the curriculum, pedagogy and system delivery that would be needed to make these visions a reality. (OECD 2020a, 11)

> [2] Although powerful, by focusing on the delivery of a desired future, those approaches do not prepare systems for unexpected shocks. They do not take into account that the future likes to surprise us. Being future-fit in a challenging and uncertain context requires identifying a number of different plausible future scenarios, exploring what impacts they could have and identifying potential implications for policies. This volume aims to do this, using as its starting point the 2001 Schooling for Tomorrow Scenarios. (OECD 2020a, 11)

> [3] The word 'user' occurs frequently in strategic foresight practice. This is because, unlike prediction and forecasting, which attempt to identify one correct future that is the same for everyone, strategic foresight explores multiple versions of the future that help someone in particular. (OECD 2020a, 14)

Embedded in these excerpts are not only the relevance and justification of the importance of scenario-building for future-proof education decision-making, but also how fictional expectations of the future are often *subjective* to the 'user' of strategic foresight practice. In turn, this positions the OECD as a pathfinder, leveraging its claimed expertise in 'generating, testing, and reframing ideas about what might happen' (OECD 2020a, 11) to strategically avoid potential blame attribution. Analysing the fictive scripts of a particular actor, according to De Laat (2016), reveals 'the future scenarios the agency *de facto* [is] constructing, as well as the ones it did not pay attention to' (196). What is shared across the Education 2030 project, the 2020 *Scenarios for Schooling* report, and the 2022 *Building the Future of Education* report, is that the future uncertainties brought by the volatile world 'transform businesses and markets, the nature of work and the demand for skills, as well as the ways in which people participate in physical or virtual communities and engage in personal relationships' (OECD 2022a, 3). Scripts such as these offer not only similar problem definitions but also similar technical solutions to overcome the 'imagined crisis' by equipping individuals with new competencies that are tailored to changing market needs.

What distinguishes the OECD's fictive scripts from De Laat's (2016) definition is that once the scripts are developed and proposed (i.e. Education 2030 report), the seemingly 'fictive' aspect of these scripts – primarily the imaginary around the most *desirable* future – are quickly substantiated with self-produced 'techno-scientific' evidence. A notable example is the OECD's justification of one of the three 'skills for 2030' identified by the Education 2030 project's Learning Compass 2030: social and emotional skills. Soon after the Education 2030 report was published, in September 2021, Microsoft hosted an international launching event of the first results from the OECD *Survey on Social and Emotional Skills* (SSES). The event began with a welcome message from OECD's Deputy Secretary General Ulrik Vestergaard Knudsen, who explained why the OECD has taken the time to collect the social and emotional skills data and praised the timeliness of the SSES:

> The Covid-19 Pandemic has stressed every part of our societies, including – or perhaps especially – education system. Testimonials from students all over the world tell us that the emotional strain was enormous, and many felt overwhelmed, and **perhaps underprepared to face these challenges**. The crisis has underscored that traditional cognitive skills **are not enough** to thrive in a complex world. **Students need support to develop their social and emotional capacity, particularly as the world we live in does become more**

> **and more complicated**. This is the driving reason why the OECD undertook this study. (Knudsen 2021, my emphasis)

Despite the fact that the SSES project was initiated prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the pandemic was mentioned several times not only during the webinar, but also in the main report and the OECD blog posts (Feldmárová 2022; OECD 2021). The recurring argument emerging from these, as well as the Education 2030 project, highlights the role that social and emotional skills play not only in determining students' *present* psychological well-being and life satisfaction but also in shaping their *future* well-being. In so doing, the OECD (2019b, 92) argues that social and emotional skills can be 'equally – and in some cases even more –important than cognitive skills in becoming a responsible citizen'. These skills are then presented as the defining characteristics that differentiate 'first-class humans' from 'second-class robots', particularly in the context of the increasing influence of AI technologies and the prospect of jobs being replaced by automation (OECD 2019c, 3).

The implications drawn from these scripts, partly supported by empirical evidence as presented by the SSES, contribute to legitimising the OECD's envisioned future role of schooling. Amidst the various future scenarios, a consistent theme conveyed by the OECD is the imperative need for specific competencies, most notably: non-routine cognitive skills, including social and emotional skills, critical thinking skills, and creativity (OECD 2019b). Such efforts to 'future-proof' education have unfolded in various forms and initiatives in the OECD. In 2017, the PISA Governing Board agreed on the relevance of 'creative thinking' as an innovative domain to be first assessed in PISA 2022 (for the history of OECD's measurement of creativity, see Grey and Morris 2022). Praising the initiative as a 'novel assessment', Andreas Schleicher recently argued in the PISA 2022 Creative Thinking brochure that:

> [PISA 2022 Creative Thinking] represents a natural progression for PISA – the global yardstick for educational success – which has always focused on measuring young people's ability to apply their knowledge to novel situations (OECD 2022b, 3)

Such descriptions of the OECD's measurement of creativity as a 'natural progression' and PISA, in general, as a wholehearted assessment in which the focus has always been on measuring how well students 'apply their knowledge to novel situations' (OECD 2022b, 3) support my earlier argument concerning the OECD's repositioning of its role in the face of declining national interest in PISA. Whether the launch of the PISA 2022 Creative Thinking results in 2024 will reignite interest in the OECD remains unclear. As Jerrim (2023, 16) recently argued, while 'the OECD tends to release results from its 'innovative domains' (e.g. financial literacy, global competency) after the main study results … these do not seem to garner the same amount of attention'.

The assumption embedded within the SSES project also mirrors how the OECD promoted the measurement of creativity and creative thinking; namely, it was primarily economic in nature (Grey and Morris 2022; Kim 2023). The urgency of the development of students' social and emotional skills is then extended beyond the immediate crisis brought by the pandemic to the changes in the labour market. For example, the SSES report illustrates at length how students' social and emotional skills are linked to their educational and occupational expectations, and that its empirical data on social and emotional skills supports the connection between aspects of these skills

and students' aspirations for particular occupations, e.g. students aspiring to pursue careers in the arts or sports tend to present themselves as being more oriented towards creativity while demonstrating less curiosity compared to their peers. Both Knudsen and the Education Director, Andreas Schleicher, repeatedly emphasised throughout the SSES launch event how much these social and emotional skills are 'valued' by employers:

> [1] We looked at self-management, stress resistance, optimism, open-mindedness, curiosity, creativity, and social skills. We also looked at the related outcomes such as achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy. **We know that employers greatly value such skills.** (Schleicher 2021, my emphasis)

> [2] It is the social and emotional skills that will be essential to helping young people respond more ably to the 21st century. Employers in highly competitive companies have long been aware of the potential of these skills to make a difference … Jobs that require creativity and [social and emotional] skills that are perhaps more difficult to replicate. These will become essential as automation continues to revolutionise the workplace. Or look at resilience or optimism. Neither are traditional skills taught in school, but both make it easier to cope with difficulties, such as social immobility or job insecurities. (Knudsen 2021, my emphasis)

The excerpts underscore how the empirical data produced by the OECD not only substantiate but also lend credence to its confident assertions regarding the validity of their 'techno-scientific fictive scripts'. These scripts not only remain unchallenged due to the token use of humanitarian floating signifiers, such as happiness and well-being, as central to the solution to the 'problematic present' and imagined crises, but also reinforce this token usage in return. Whilst the use of such humanitarian floating signifiers in the scripts may, to some extent, limit the criticisms directed towards the OECD for its narrow focus on human capital development, it is also evident that they function as 'stepping stones' for the OECD to expand and consolidate its role and authority in the field of education policy, positioning itself as the pathfinder of, or even, as Robertson (2022) describes, the guardian over an uncertain future.

Discussion and conclusion

Throughout the OECD's FoE initiatives, a prominent theme surfaces: the assertion of the organisation's claimed expertise and capacity in strategic forecasting, scenario-building, and the production of empirical data to inform and shape the trajectory of education's future. This articles demonstrates how, within the OECD's FoE project reports and the embedded fictive scripts, the initial narrow view of the education and learning crisis, primarily centred on students' learning gaps in core academic domains such as literacy, science, and numeracy, has evolved into advocating a more comprehensive focus, especially by employing humanitarian policy signifiers like students' happiness, quality of life, and well-being.

This evolution in measurement requires attention, both in terms of its occurrence and the factors that facilitated it. Over the past two decades, the central governance mechanism of the OECD developed *through* numbers, often diversified and expanded through new scopes of *what* gets measured (e.g. happiness, well-being, global competence) or *who* gets measured, (e.g. the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study,

also known as the 'Baby-PISA', and the PISA for Development) (see also Sellar and Lingard 2014). While these measurements were effective in identifying who is performing better in the present and assessing what is currently important, their sustainability was constantly jeopardised by the gradual loss of interest from their 'users' (e.g. national governments, media, and the public), as well as ongoing events like COVID-19, terrorism, and wars, which continuously reshape the vision of what future-proof education should look like.

Especially with the introduction of the Education 2030 project and, more recently, the 2020 *Scenarios for Schooling* report and the 2022 *Building the Future of Education* report, we have witnessed a return to the future studies methodologies of the late twentieth century, specifically strategic foresights and scenario-building, in the name of forward-looking policy thinking that would mitigate challenges posed by global emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and demographic changes. The fictive scripts embedded within them effectively pinpointed and directed attention towards areas that the OECD *should* measure but have not yet measured. This was achieved by strategically constructing both more and less positive future scenarios into a storyline substantiated by empirical data – hence, the 'techno-scientific fictive script'. For example, the conflation of the broader educational outcome of 'individual and collective well-being' with equipping 'globally competent' individuals has so far validated the OECD's narrow conception and measurement of student happiness in PISA 2012, well-being across PISA 2015 and 2018, global competency in PISA 2018, 'social and emotional skills' via 2021 SSES, as well as the measurement of 'creative thinking' in PISA 2022 – all without encountering significant opposition. The upcoming PISA 2022 'Happy Life Dashboard', which pledges to create a user-friendly interface compiling the OECD's existing evidence of PISA-participating countries' performance across various dimensions of student well-being, represents a novel addition (OECD 2024).

One thing that should not be overlooked are the implications of such techno-scientific fictive scripts. These scripts are effective in delineating a stark contrast between foreseeable crises and an *alternative* and *ideal* future, through which the OECD strategically avoids potential blame attribution and justifies the newfound necessity and significance of new knowledge and skills as essential means towards realising the latter. The organisation also facilitates the promotion of supposedly humanistic outcomes of learning, such as well-being, as competencies that will drive the future economy, complementing both cognitive skills and literacies (Rahm 2023). Also, it exacerbates the 'educationalisation' of social problems (e.g. threats of job replacement) brought about by rapid technological development (Smeyers and Depaepe 2008). Central to the scripts and excerpts provided in previous sections is guidance on what schools and teachers need to do to prepare students for the future; in other words, the responsibility for resolving these problems is now transferred onto the shoulders of schools and teachers.

Hence, while its advocacy for a more comprehensive focus on educational outcomes undoubtedly marks the evolution of the OECD's 'humanitarian turn' in its approach to education, considering the shifting global landscape such as the post-2015 agenda (Li and Auld 2020), the OECD's emphasis, now supported by anticipatory governance mechanisms and future studies methodologies, remains entrenched within its sociotechnical vision, prioritising knowledge, skills, and capabilities deemed crucial for the future labour market, notably social and emotional skills, creativity, global and digital

competencies (see also Grey and Morris 2022; Kim 2023). Similar patterns can be observed across other IOs, exemplified by the United Nation's new vision titled 'UN 2.0', which advocates for an organisational-wide transformation centred on a forward-thinking culture and the cultivation of modern skills, referred to as the 'Quinet of Change' – 'a powerful combination of data, innovation, digital solutions, foresight, and behavioural science solutions' (UN 2023, para 4). Delving into the new global networks surrounding the discourse formation of 'Futures of Education' and examining how these IOs employ different strategies to assert their expertise (e.g. the OECD's fusion of fictive scripts and empirical data to craft forward-looking policymaking) would be an important avenue for further research. Such endeavours are indicative of a broader competition among IOs in the quest for leadership and influence in shaping the education futures.

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