

Shaping Desirable Futures: Participatory Tools for Inclusive Education Policy

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Abstract

Participatory tools play a crucial role in scenario building by engaging stakeholders in envisioning plausible and desirable futures. In education, participatory futures methods have been increasingly utilised to reimagine systems, ranging from pedagogy to governance. This study explores the application of the Future Headlines method, a participatory foresight tool designed to stimulate creative thinking by encouraging different stakeholders to imagine future news headlines representing desired outcomes. By fostering collaborative engagement, this method aligns collective aspirations with actionable pathways towards sustainable and inclusive educational systems. Despite the increasing interest in such methods, their application to specific contexts such as education governance remains underexplored, particularly in complex policy environments involving diverse perspectives.

This paper presents findings from two workshops employing the Future Headlines methodology, conducted with a total of 20 participants divided equally between sessions. Participants included teacher educators and policymakers, with workshops held at an educational conference and a policy initiative. The workshops generated rich insights into inclusive governance and sustainable education systems, illustrating the potential of participatory methods to address the complexities of governance in education.

The results offer a four-layered answer to the research question: 'How can the Future Headlines method, as a participatory tool, contribute to inclusive and forward-looking governance in education?' The Future Headlines method provides this by 1) engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders, enhancing inclusive co-creative decision-making, 2) contributing to developing forward-looking governance by conceptualising desired and undesired future outcomes, 3) promoting sustainability and equity, and 4) bridging diverse perspectives from micro-, meso- and macro-level in order to create actionable solutions that enable policymakers to capture the complexities of inclusive governance.

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Concluding, effective policies to address polarisation and inclusion should focus on promoting equality, acknowledging cultural pluralism, and encouraging exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby fostering inclusive environments and reducing ideological divides in hybrid learning contexts.

Keywords

Participatory tools, Future Headlines method, multi-level approach, governance, education

Introduction

Participatory tools or research methods can facilitate scenario building by encouraging stakeholders to imagine plausible and desirable futures. These methods allow different voices to influence policy decisions, promoting ownership and resilience. Participatory tools or research methods address governance deficits by involving underserved or under-represented groups in decision-making processes. For example, a participatory foresight initiative in Marcoussis, France, involved 600 residents from different socioeconomic strata in jointly drafting local policy agendas (Gouache, 2022). Participatory education initiatives, such as those studied in India and Brazil, have also shown that underserved or under-represented populations can influence governance when given the necessary tools and spaces (Fischer, 2012).

Participatory tools lean heavily on theoretical foundations that emphasise inclusive and future-oriented governance. Scharmer's 'Theory U' (2016) emphasises the importance of collective sensing and co-creation in envisioning and implementing future states. Grenni et al. (2020) highlight participatory foresight as a mechanism to integrate inputs from different stakeholders to create shared visions of the future. Pearson et al. (2018) further explore how such participatory methods democratise policy-making, making governance more responsive to public needs.

Research suggests that effective policies to combat polarisation and foster inclusion should

not only promote equality but also acknowledge the importance of cultural pluralism and encourage exposure to diverse perspectives (Axelrod et al., 2021; Brannon et al., 2018; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Schachner et al., 2016; Winter, 2023). By addressing these aspects, policies can create more inclusive environments, reduce ideological divides, and ultimately enhance social cohesion and outcomes across educational contexts. In education, participatory futures methods have been used to re-imagine systems, from pedagogy and societal issues to governance. The Near Future School project demonstrated how participatory design fiction enabled young people to explore alternative educational futures and governance models (Duggan et al., 2017). Similarly, Király et al. (2016) used backcasting to engage Hungarian teachers and students to co-create a vision of the future of higher education (Király et al., 2016). Another example is participatory budgeting in US schools, where students were empowered to allocate institutional resources, which not only increased citizen engagement but also improved institutional efficiency (Gavrilova & Schugurensky, 2021). This practice is scalable in both urban and rural contexts and promotes adaptive learning and resource management. Furthermore, participatory future methods also interface with sustainability, especially in education's response to environmental challenges. Oteros-Rozas et al. (2015) highlight that participatory scenario development promotes sustainable practices by aligning individual actions with collective environmental goals. For example, participatory processes in the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve showed how

involving stakeholders from different sectors can lead to consensus on sustainable management strategies (Monge-Ganuzas et al., 2023). The Future Headlines method, an example of a participatory foresight tool or research method, is designed to stimulate creative thinking by encouraging stakeholders to imagine future news headlines representing desired outcomes. By engaging participants in this way, the method provides an inclusive, structured yet flexible approach to exploring possible futures and perspectives, aligning collective aspirations with actionable steps.

This study investigates how the Future Headlines method can contribute to inclusive and forward-looking governance in education, since there is still an urge and need to improve and strengthen policy-making in education. First, despite the growing interest in participatory future methods, the application of these methods to specific contexts, such as education governance, remains underexplored. Secondly, questions remain about their practical effectiveness in integrating diverse perspectives in complex policy environments, particularly in education systems. Finally, their actual efficacy in integrating multiple viewpoints in complex policy frameworks, notably education systems, remains unclear. Participatory foresight approaches such as those by Grenni et al. (2020) and Pearson et al. (2018) can combine multiple viewpoints, but their practical success in complex policy domains is context-dependent. Such strategies struggle to operationalise shared visions in systems with competing interests and agendas, according to Grenni et al. (2020). Pearson et al. (2018) note that participatory techniques often fail to promote true inclusivity, especially in urban planning and education. Király et al. (2016) show that while backcasting and other methods may help people co-create futures for education, it is challenging to turn these ideas into real policies because people don't like change and there aren't

enough resources. Hence, a novel policymaking approach is required that enables governments to more effectively predict and engage with the future. This necessitates that governments cultivate new competencies to manage innovation, allowing policymakers to proactively address unanticipated events and technological advancements in real-time, rather than merely responding post-factum (Tönurist, 2020).

Methods

Research design

This study uses a qualitative research design (Coe et al., 2017) that focuses on the Future Headlines method as a participatory tool. The Future Headlines method was chosen for its ability to facilitate creative and forward-looking discussions, enabling participants to envision desirable futures and articulate actionable steps to achieve them. This aligns with the study's focus on integrating diverse perspectives and addressing governance challenges in education. The method was applied in a series of educational research workshops conducted in 2022-2023 to generate insights on inclusive governance and sustainable education systems. The design is based on the principles of participatory foresight, as described by Grenni et al. (2020). It focuses on engaging a wide range of stakeholders, from policymakers to community members, including underserved or under-represented groups, who typically have less influence in decision-making.

Participants

A total of 20 participants attended the workshops, divided over 2 similar workshops with each 10 participants, including teacher educators and policymakers from education. The workshops took place in two different contexts, namely an educational conference as well as a workshop at a policy initiative. The participant profiles varied across the sessions, integrating

diverse perspectives from practice and policy without pre-determined group assignments. This diversity enriched discussions and facilitated a deeper exploration of concepts related to inclusive and sustainable education governance. Although detailed demographic data on participants were not collected, the workshops were attended by a diverse range of teacher educators and policy makers working in education or education policy. This study emphasises the collective insights of participatory foresight methods, making demographic details of participants peripheral to the research objectives. The Future Headlines method prioritises the collaborative development of visions for inclusive governance over the impact of individual characteristics.

Procedure

The workshops consisted of a series of sequential steps aimed at maximising participation, reflection, and scenario development, following the methodology systematically as can be seen in Figure 1. During the introduction and conceptualisation phase, participants learnt about the Future Headlines method, after which they carried it out in practice. This participatory strategy encouraged them to "time travel", imagining future headlines 5–10 years out. As a result, the discussion and visualisation of desired or likely educational and governance possibilities started. First, participants individually created these futuristic headlines during scenario development, representing governance and educational system goals. Then, each group chose a headline that

best reflected their vision, and created a thorough roadmap or timeline to achieve this future. Furthermore, groups presented their headlines and roadmaps or timelines in a plenary presentation and reflection. This forum encouraged rich conversations about the situations' patterns, commonalities, and wider ramifications. This phase promoted critical thinking and a greater understanding of governance, diversity, and sustainability. The final stage involved documentation by the research team. During the workshops, the focus was consistently placed on open exploration, and it was repeatedly emphasised that there were no right or more desirable answers. The facilitators encouraged critical reflection and asked probing questions to help participants think beyond obvious or socially desirable answers.

This study followed ethical research principles for a research workshop. Given the participatory nature of the research, facilitators emphasised voluntary engagement, openness and respectful dialogue throughout the process. Participants were assured that their contributions would be anonymised at the reporting stage to encourage open discussion.

Researchers thoroughly observed, photographed, and documented all workshop events, adding extensive notes. The collected data included written headlines, group discussions, and follow-up reflections. To produce a comprehensive dataset for research and reporting, flip charts and timelines from workshops were also collected.

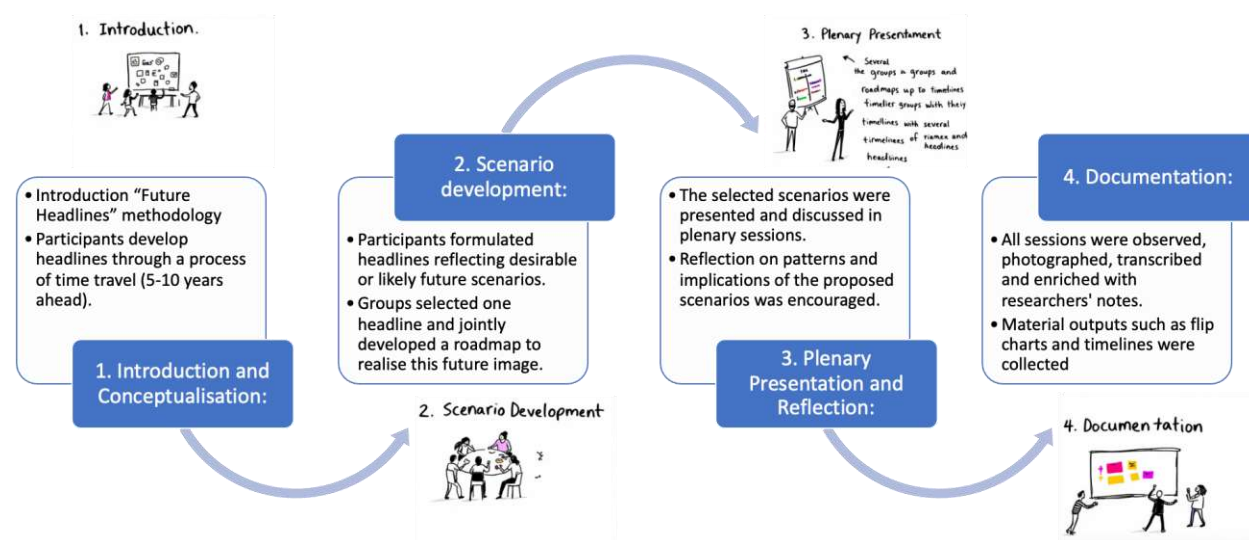


Figure 1: roadmap of the Future Headlines methodology

Data Analysis

The collected data (transcripts of the workshops, group outputs, reflections, and observations) were analysed using a multi-level framework based on the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1980). In addition, the Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2012) was applied to examine the interactions between stakeholders, physical infrastructures, and governance systems. The combination of these frameworks provided an integrated understanding of how participatory tools such as the Future Headlines method contribute to inclusive governance.

To increase the validity of our findings during and after the analysis, we used several strategies. First, data were triangulated by analysing multiple sources, including written summaries, group discussions and reflections. Second, facilitator field notes and observations were integrated to capture both explicit statements and underlying dynamics. Third, to reduce potential bias, the analysis was conducted collaboratively by multiple researchers, ensuring that interpretations were cross-validated. These steps strengthen the authenticity of the findings

presented and are in line with best practice in qualitative research.

Results

The workshops based on the Future Headlines methodology generated multiple insights on inclusive governance and sustainable education systems. They offered a layered answer to the research question. The results are presented according to the thematic analysis by clustering the various concepts. Quotes from the participants are presented verbatim. These were translated by DeepL to stay as close as possible to the original wording.

Polarisation and Democracy as a Field of Tension

The workshops revealed a clear tension between democratic values and inclusive governance. Participants mentioned how democracy creates opportunities for diversity and self-expression, but can simultaneously lead to polarisation and pigeonholing. One participant from workshop 1 noted:

'Democracy chafes. It opens doors, but also creates gaps.'

This tension was visible at all levels (micro, meso and macro). At the micro-level, participants noticed the impact on individuals, such as the creation of elite schools and private education. At the meso-level, this polarisation was reflected in group dynamics and discussions on education policy. At the macro-level, the issue was linked to broader political and social trends. These statements underscored the need for governance that actively bridges these gaps, ensuring that the opportunities democracy offers are not undermined by exclusionary practices.

During workshop 2, polarisation was also linked to societal perceptions of the teaching profession. Individual reflections on prejudices such as "working 50 minutes instead of an hour" and "lots of leave/vacation" showed how these contribute to negative framing of the profession (micro-level). At the same time, the group emphasised the need for mildness as a collective value to reduce polarisation:

'Mildness is the cure for polarisation.'

These insights linked personal attitudes, group norms (meso-level), and broader societal trends (macro-level), demonstrating how systemic change is required to challenge stereotypes and foster a culture of mutual respect within the profession.

Dream versus Doom scenarios

A powerful pattern that emerged was the use of doom scenarios to flesh out dream images. In the 'The New Pillars' scenario, participants reflected on a dystopian future in which social segregation increases. This allowed them, in workshop 1, to

design counterparts, such as a dream scenario that focuses on cooperation and inclusion:

'We just have to do the opposite.'

This process highlighted the importance of forward-looking thinking and helped participants formulate practical steps towards a more inclusive society (meso-level).

Scenarios such as 'Multidisciplinary teams, raising parents' in workshop 2 highlighted the power of humour and relatability in the group process (meso-level):

'Achievable, it can't be that hard after all.'

The interplay between disaster scenarios and hopeful visions in both workshops not only stimulated critical reflection, but also created a shared understanding of how policies can contribute to both social cohesion and innovation (macro-level).

Inclusion and Diversity as Key Issues

Inclusion and diversity were identified as key issues by all groups. The scenario "PISA 2030: no more significant differences based on the socioeconomic status (SES) and migration background" illustrated the desire to improve social equality in education. The discussion around teacher training in workshop 1, highlighted that diversity in the teaching team is necessary to ensure inclusive teaching practices:

'Talent-based teaching for students requires diverse talents among teachers.'

Proposed solutions, such as creating less strict entry requirements and creating interdisciplinary teams, reflect a broader desire of systemic change within education.

Workshop 2 focused on the concept of a "teacher's room as a mirror of society" (meso-level).

Participants suggested practical solutions such as reducing barriers in teacher education, and involving various profiles such as teaching assistants. Reflections such as *"talking about teachers with mildness"* emphasised that personal and cultural values are crucial to achieve inclusive practices (micro-level and macro-level).

This holistic approach to inclusion ties personal attitudes, group dynamics, and broader cultural shifts into a cohesive framework for policy development.

Reflection on Gender Roles

In both workshops, statements were made that highlighted the importance of addressing systemic gender bias in a way that balances innovation with social acceptance. It shows how inclusive governance can challenge outdated norms while promoting authenticity and relativity. The scenario *"Boys compulsory in cooking class and girls in engineering class"* led to both humour and politically charged discussion in workshop 1. Participants argued that such measures are controversial but can be politically attractive to generate attention. At the same time, the discussion offered opportunities to critically examine and rethink "traditional" gender roles.

Gender roles emerged less explicitly in workshop 2, but authenticity was highlighted as a more important value than ethnicity:

'Authenticity is more important than ethnicity.'

This shows how personal authenticity plays a role in inclusive representations, with implications for individual perceptions (micro-level) and broader cultural norms (macro-level).

Patterns of Collaboration and Clash

Participants in workshop 1 recognised a common framework in which cooperation is considered essential, but a potential 'clash' was also predicted in the event of failure to find shared values:

'Either we come closer together, or we burst apart.'

During workshop 2, solidarity was linked to crisis situations. Participants reflected that disaster scenarios are often the catalyst for collective action (meso-level):

'Solidarity is often only recognised from a disaster scenario.'

These insights highlight the need to proactively promote solidarity and collaboration, rather than waiting for crises to force change (macro-level). Inclusive governance must create structures that preemptively build social cohesion.

Positive Dynamics and Inspiration

Both workshops were characterised by a positive atmosphere in which participants were actively involved. The methodology used was perceived as approachable and effective:

'It is a safe way to discover what colleagues are thinking.'

Combining creative techniques and joint reflection encouraged open and constructive dialogues and provided concrete and directly applicable insights for future policy.

Passion and authenticity were identified as keys to positive change (workshop 2), both in the teaching profession and in wider social interactions:

'Passion for a teacher's profession provokes positive feelings.'

This participatory approach not only fostered dialogue but also provided a model for actionable, inclusive governance by integrating diverse perspectives into forward-looking educational policies. These insights show how personal and professional motivation are crucial to foster an inclusive and inspiring teaching culture (micro-level).

Discussion

This study validates the potential of the Future Headlines methods to enhance collaborative governance by incorporating multiple viewpoints and fostering common visions for sustainable educational development through the encouragement of participatory (democratic) discussions.

In summary, the results of this study offer direct answers to the research question: How can the Future Headlines method, as a participatory tool, contribute to inclusive and forward-looking governance in education? The results provide a four-layered answer. Namely, first, there is a clear contribution to inclusive decision-making. The workshops showed that the Future Headlines method is effective in engaging diverse stakeholders, including underserved or underrepresented groups. This contributes to inclusive decision-making by integrating different perspectives into the policy-making process. The shared reflections and scenarios highlighted how this participatory approach can create a common framework, even in a divisive context. The identification of disaster scenarios as a catalyst for change shows how the process supports not only inclusive but also urgency-conscious decision-making.

Second, it contributes to developing forward-looking governance. By using future scenarios, such as “PISA 2030” and “The New Pillars”, the method helped participants conceptualise both

desired and undesired futures. This process not only stimulated creative policy solutions but also suggested practical steps that can support forward-looking governance. Scenarios such as “*Teacher's room as a mirror of society*” illustrate how this method offers practical steps for developing inclusive systems that respond to real needs.

Third, it ensures the promotion of sustainability and equity. The results underline the method's strength in connecting governance with sustainability and justice. Scenarios such as “*Teacher Education for All*” show how the method provides space for designing systems that are not only inclusive but also resilient and sustainable. Discussions on the economic impact of low-skilled labour and social costs highlighted the importance of proactive investment in sustainable educational practices.

Finally, the Futures Headlines method is not merely a fun exercise; it accurately depicts reality with its associated constraints and challenges on micro-, meso- and macro-level. It enables policymakers to bridge diverse perspectives, creating actionable solutions that capture the complexities of inclusive governance. In addition to fostering dialogue, this participatory approach catalyses innovation, assisting stakeholders to co-create actionable pathways toward inclusivity. The method provided important insights for future application by identifying tensions between democratic freedom and inclusive governance. Additionally, it provides a roadmap or timeline for sustainable education systems that prioritise equity and innovation and a framework to discuss and resolve tensions within policy and education systems. This multi-level approach (micro, meso, macro) further enriched the methodology by providing insights into how personal reflections, group interactions, and policy trends influence each

other and converge into inclusive governance processes.

Participatory methods, like the Future Headlines method, can be integrated into real-world decision-making to move from these insights to actionable governance strategies.

Policymakers can embed the Future Headlines method into national and regional education policy consultations to scale stakeholder engagement and incorporate participatory foresight into long-term strategic planning. Additionally, pilot programmes can be implemented in selected educational institutions to test the effectiveness of this method in shaping governance policies.

To ensure real-world applicability, governance bodies should establish cross-sector collaborations, bringing together educators, policy makers, and researchers in exercises utilising the Futures Headlines method. This could be institutionalised through periodic policy foresight workshops where Futures Headlines outputs directly inform educational reforms. Linking insights from these participatory sessions to tangible policy adjustments—such as inclusive hiring practices, interdisciplinary collaboration incentives, and curriculum reforms that reflect diverse perspectives—can ensure that the method drives real systemic change rather than remaining a theoretical exercise.

Limitations

The current study provided valuable insights into the added value of Future Headlines methods to enhance collaborative governance. Nevertheless, some limitations can be addressed. First, the number of participants was relatively low, which may reduce the generalisability and representativeness of the study's findings. Nonetheless, it is a qualitative study where the objective is not to scale up, but to cultivate profound experiences and

transformative processes, which holds greater significance in influencing education policy formulation.

Secondly, and related to the low number of participants, there may be an underexposure of some of the participant's opinions. Due to possible 'dominant' perspectives of some participants, certain viewpoints may be underrepresented, which may lead to limited understanding of insights. To address this, participants were asked to first individually think about a headline prior to group talks, and facilitators promoted an open dialogue to reduce the influence of socially desirable responses. If systematically repeated and applied to a specific problem inside a broader project, it would indeed allow for comprehensive application and enable the inclusion of all stakeholders' perspectives. Yet also, while this study applied the Future Headlines methodology in a relatively small workshop setting, the approach is inherently scalable to larger policy contexts. Its structured yet flexible framework allows for adaptation to more diverse participant groups, including stakeholders from different levels of education and policy domains. By incorporating digital facilitation tools or multi-stage deliberation processes, the method could be effectively applied in broader governance settings to integrate diverse perspectives and foster inclusive policy co-creation. This paper and exploratory study solely aim to demonstrate the efficacy of the methodology for multifaceted and intricate challenges.

Future research should focus on adapting participatory tools such as the Future Headlines method to different cultural and institutional contexts. This includes integrating local knowledge systems, using digital platforms for broader inclusion, and ensuring ongoing capacity building for educators and policymakers.

Frameworks for anticipatory governance, which merge participatory foresight with decision-making, provide a robust model for future educational governance (Lehoux et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The results show that the Future Headlines method not only offers an innovative approach to educational governance but also provides concrete tools to promote inclusive, equitable, and sustainable systems. This makes the method particularly valuable for answering both academic and practical questions about governance and education.

As shown in our studies, this method's findings can be translated into policy recommendations or next steps. For instance, creating inclusive guidelines (e.g., promoting gender inclusive education), involving more stakeholders in policy development, promoting cooperation and interdisciplinary teams at all levels, contributing to a more positive framing of the teacher profession and promoting more diversity in the influx, encouraging solidarity and reflection through scenario-based policy making, or empowering teachers with professional development programmes.

Institutions should prioritise the development of inclusive guidelines and create more collaborative platforms where diverse voices can constructively engage at every level of decision-making. To further this approach, it is critical to empower teachers through professional development programmes that foster interdisciplinary cooperation and reflective practices.

Our findings underscore the need for governance that actively bridges these gaps, ensuring that the opportunities democracy offers are not undermined by exclusionary practices. Inclusive governance must address polarisation

by creating platforms where diverse voices can constructively engage at every level.

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