

## **Introduction: Future Search in Education**

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When we started Future Search Network in 1993, we had no idea that this planning process would make its way around the world. Least of all did we anticipate that network members soon would be helping school administrators to revolutionize their districts' capabilities for action and gain significant community support. The chapters in this book testify to some remarkable adaptations of future search by leaders and ordinary citizens in school systems across Canada and the United States. The cases include districts as small as North Platte, NE, with 11 schools and 3,870 students, and as massive as Toronto, ON, with 558 schools and 300,000 students.

The use of future search in schools was initially driven by amalgamation of school districts in Canada and by mandates in many states to include multiple stakeholders in strategic planning. Several districts that had used traditional planning methods discovered they could go farther, faster by involving diverse stakeholders than with expert-driven strategic planning exercises. Future search proved to be a flexible method that could be used at any level from single schools to whole districts.

In each case presented here a community faced new educational dilemmas: draconian funding cuts, school board mergers, racial and ethnic tensions, massive overhauls, school closings, and government mandates. Those who chose future search often had to confront their own and others' considerable skepticism about the wisdom of widespread community involvement in school planning. Those who acted on future search principles, involving students, parents, and diverse citizens, were rewarded with remarkable community consensus on educational goals and widely supported strategic plans.

### **FUTURE SEARCH PRINCIPLES**

The keys to success with this method are a set of principles derived from research, theory, and practice going back 65 years:

- Getting the “whole system” in the room. By whole system we mean diverse stakeholders who have the authority, resources, expertise, information, and need to act right away if they choose.
- Exploring the whole before seeking to fix any part. When people put in what they know, all will gain an understanding of the whole that none had coming in, making possible actions built on a shared frame of reference.
- Putting the future and common ground front and center. Problems and conflicts become *information* to be shared, not action items. The agenda is a search for shared goals and mutually supported plans.
- Inviting self-management and responsibility for action. Groups can do much more than what is customarily asked of them. Each time leaders or consultants do something for a group they deprive everyone else of ownership.

Over several years we created a simple meeting plan to actualize these principles that is now used in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the

Americas. We think of future search in three related dimensions, all illustrated in this book. First, future search refers to a planning meeting design based on the above principles. Second, it embodies a theory and philosophy of facilitating that might be characterized as “doing less so that participants can do more.” Finally, future search enables a whole system change strategy requiring no special training or vocabulary. It is grounded in peoples’ firsthand experiences and values of inclusion, discovery, wholeness, and hope.

## **FUTURE SEARCH ROOTS**

To enhance your appreciation of the cases, we want to tell you of this method’s origins. It derives from theory and research going back many decades. Future search is neither a fad nor a panacea. It is the result of intense, serious work on human capabilities and aspirations. In 1938, the late Ronald Lippitt arrived at the State University of Iowa to study social psychology with Kurt Lewin, a German refugee. In groundbreaking controlled experiments, they showed dramatic differences in the behavior of 10-year-old boys engaged in crafts projects under authoritarian, laissezfaire, and democratic leaders. They noted how the boys tended to exhibit task focus and mutual support or aggression and apathy in response to a leader’s behavior. The same person could lead a group to productivity or alienation, depending on whether the boys were involved in setting goals and making decisions. Lewin and Lippitt coined a term for their discovery: *group dynamics*.

They soon joined with others (including Margaret Mead) in experiments leading to the development of participative management, human relations training, group problem solving, and, in 1947, to the founding of NTL Institute in Bethel, Maine. In the 1950s Lippitt, studying strategic planning groups using methods he helped to invent, concluded that problem solving often depressed people. He began working with “images of potential,” developing a method for envisioning preferred futures that energized all who used it. In the 1970s Lippitt and Eva Schindler-Rainman, a community development consultant, teamed up to work with dozens of North American cities and towns on planning desirable futures. In each they got together a demographic cross-section of local residents to create action plans in future-oriented meetings that they called “Collaborative Communities.” From this stream of work came our principles of “whole system in the room” and future focus.

Across the Atlantic parallel developments were taking place. In 1939, for example, the late Eric Trist, a Cambridge-trained psychologist who was also a Lewin disciple, teamed up with psychiatrist Wilfred Bion to select field officers for the British Army. They put candidates into leaderless groups to solve field problems, and soon found the best leaders were those who could balance self-interest and group interest. After the war, they too devised new group dynamics methods, setting up the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, England. They integrated principles of self-management into a group planning method in which people began by studying a system’s history and external relations, discovering that this way of working greatly reduced “fight or flight.” They dubbed this new form of group planning the “Search Conference.” From their work came our principles of having everyone discover the whole and self-managing their work.

When 120 of us got together in 1993 to found the Future Search Network,

we organized around this shared legacy. From these social science pioneers we derived principles and techniques that enabled whole systems, within a few days, to do planning that many people previously had thought impossible. We called our process *future search*, honoring the future-oriented conferences of Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt and the Search Conferences invented by Emery and Trist.

## ORIENTATION TO FUTURE SEARCH

A typical future search involves 60 to 70 people, though hundreds can meet in parallel or sequential conferences. Most future searches take four half days. The agenda consists of five explorations: past, present, future, common ground, and action. In each segment, people work in small groups, present their deliberations to the whole, engage in dialogue on what they learn, and consider the implications for action. See the following for an example:

Day 1 (half day)—People explore the **PAST** from personal, global, and local (school, district, or issue) perspectives by noting milestones on long strips of paper (time lines) on the wall. They establish their history, differences, and shared values. Next, the whole group diagrams **PRESENT** external trends that are shaping their lives. This large visual map (mind map) reflects each person's observations. Before the end of the day, people affix colored dots to trends they feel passionate about.

Day 2 (full day)—Stakeholder groups review key trends and tell what they are doing now and what they want to do about them in the future. People describe what they are proudest of and sorriest about in their own efforts related to the task (prouds and sorries). Mixed groups develop scenarios of their desired **FUTURE** and enact them in creative ways. They also tell how they overcame barriers along the way (future scenarios). Before closing for the day, the whole conference notes **COMMON GROUND** among all stakeholders.

Day 3 (half day)—Common ground is confirmed by the whole group in an extended dialogue where people also note issues that are not agreed (reality dialogue). They make **ACTION PLANS** for projects and programs that will make the common ground themes live and decide how they will follow-up.

Future search enables action on many fronts at once. One common thread in the cases presented in this book is the way educational leaders used their future search outputs to create an umbrella of support for new policies and procedures. Most got a great deal more implementation of action plans from future searches than had been accomplished previously in months or years of struggle. While these are just a few of the hundreds of education future searches in systems around the world, they show the power of dialogue, discovery, and hope. We are sure you will be as enlightened and stimulated as we were in reviewing these inspiring accounts.

We hope that the stories here will enhance your appreciation of the rich educational planning legacy that can be yours if you choose to claim it.