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Learning for Well-being: Closing the Gap Between Aspiration and Practice

By Graham Leicester, Director, International Futures Forum.

1. Introduction

In April 2018 Jean Gordon and Mihaela Ionescu produced a comprehensive discussion paper for the Learning for Well-being Foundation: 'Towards systems competent for nurturing children's holistic development from birth through school: coherence and continuity'.

The paper adopts a 'competent systems' framework to explore progress towards education and other public systems adopting a holistic, 'whole person' approach to the development of children. A 'competent' system is both effective and coherent in terms of knowledge, practice and values across the four dimensions of individual actors in the system, institutions and teams, inter-institutional collaboration and overall governance.

This is a revealing set of lenses and a useful one. Not least because it acknowledges the truth that children develop in a context and that child and context must therefore develop in parallel. Gordon and Ionescu echo Winnicott's classic view of child development – a natural process of maturation in a facilitating environment – when they write that 'individual competences cannot thrive in a system that is not, itself, competent, i.e. a system that does not provide the enabling conditions for individuals to be fully nurtured.'

My reading of the report suggests that our systems are *not* competent in at least one critical aspect: the capacity to grow, develop and change over time in response to a changing world and our deeper aspirations for the future. There is a persistent gap 'between inspiring policy orientations and the reality on the ground' which echoes like a drumbeat throughout the report. It concludes: 'It is clear from our brief review that the Learning for Well-being principles are not represented fully in the policies and implementation in either ECEC or school education. In some cases, we see alignment with some of the principles but there

are significant gaps between what is espoused and what happens in reality. A major issue seems to stem from our collective view of what is possible.'

In what follows I offer the Three Horizons framework and the practice of transformative innovation or 'systems transition' as a complement to the competent systems approach to help address this aspiration/practice gap. (Leicester, 2016)

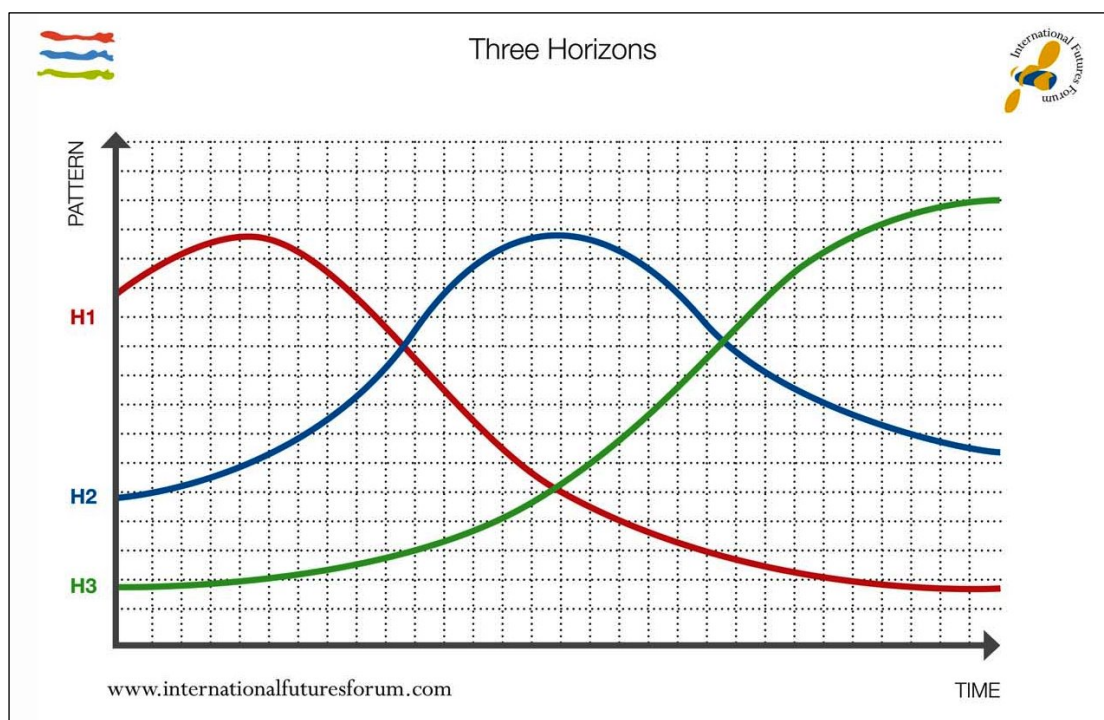
2. Three Horizons: a framework for systems transition

Three Horizons is a deceptively simple framework for thinking about social change over time (Sharpe, 2013). At first sight, it looks like the short-, medium- and long-term perspectives that we all bring to strategic planning. The reality is much more complex – and revealing. We are all, in fact, always navigating the established (and essential) patterns of the first horizon, new patterns envisioned in the third horizon, and the transition activity of the second horizon.

The first horizon (H1) is the dominant system at present. It represents 'business as usual'. We rely on these systems being stable and reliable – like our statutory care services. But as the world changes, so aspects of business as usual begin to feel out of place or no longer fit for purpose. Eventually 'business as usual' will always be superseded by new ways of doing things.

The third horizon (H3) emerges as the long-term successor to business as usual. It grows from fringe activity in the present that introduces completely new ways of doing things which turn out to be much better fitted to the world that is emerging than the dominant H1 pattern. There are always pockets of the future in the present.

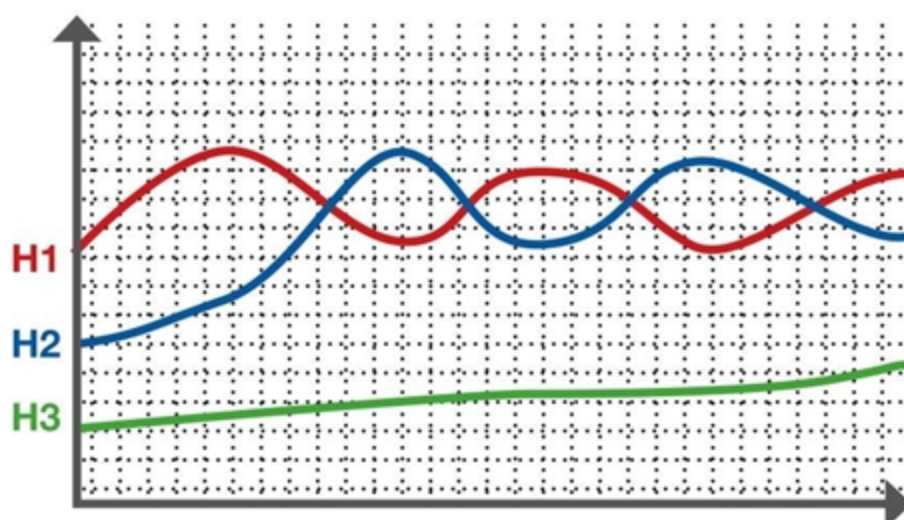
The second horizon (H2) is a pattern of transition activities and innovations, people trying things out in response to the ways in which the landscape is changing. Some of these innovations will be absorbed into the H1 systems to prolong their life (IFF calls this 'H2 minus: H2-') while some will pave the way for the emergence of the radically different H3 systems (IFF calls this 'H2 plus: H2+').



As the framework with its three lines suggests, all three horizons are always present. Aspects of H1 will persist in any new 'business as usual'. The importance of safety, for example, or child protection. Aspects of H3 are always evident, if not obvious, in current discourse and argument and in all kinds of activity on the fringes of the dominant system – we can all point to inspirational projects in our field. And H2, like a moving border between past and future, is all around us in examples of innovative alternative practice.

But the first horizon's commitment is to survival. The dominant system can maintain its dominance even in a changing world either by crushing second and third horizon innovation, or by co-opting it to support the old system. These behaviours lead to variants on the smooth transition depicted above – notably the common 'capture and extension' scenario in which innovations in H2 are 'mainstreamed' in order to prolong the life of the existing system against the grain of a changing world.

Variant: Capture and extension



This framework gives a quick and intuitive feel for three critically useful concepts to help close the aspiration/practice gap:

2.1) *Transition*: the framework clearly indicates a process of systems transition over time. The old slowly gives way to the new. In practice we observe that in order to start out on the journey to a transformative third horizon vision the first horizon must just not say no. But in order to realize that vision in practice sooner or later the first horizon system will have to say 'yes' – transferring resources sunk in the old pattern into the new. The late California senator John Vasconcellos suggested that this kind of social transition involves a twin task: 'we must be hospice workers for the dying culture and midwives for the new' (Leicester and O'Hara, 2009). It takes time and patience, but also an ongoing subtle reading of the dynamics of change across the system. Different parts of the pattern may well change at different rates (for example, it may be easier to eliminate corporal punishment in the school system than centralised written examinations) – such that our vision is consolidated only over time, just as the existing dominant system has been. The transition can also be seen as a values transition. Values that were present but difficult to realise in first horizon structures become central in third horizon structures specifically designed to honour them (the shift from a siloed, bureaucratic structure, for example, to a more ecosystemic structure based on life and relationship).

2.2) *Transformative Innovation*: distinguishing between H2- and H2+ innovation is critical to systems transition. H2- is sustaining of the old pattern. H2+ is transformative, helping to grow a radically new pattern. The distinction is not a property of the innovation itself but of the intention and values of the innovators. The introduction of tablet computers for all students, for example, is an innovation. It can either feed the dominant pattern (e.g. monitoring student participation and progress, delivering the central curriculum more efficiently, automating continuous assessment etc) or it could feed the shift towards something very different (e.g. enabling self-directed learning, including outside the institution). Innovation in the first horizon is for efficiency, innovation in the third is about the embodying of a new vision. If we do not hold to our visionary intentions, then our innovation will inevitably either lose support or 'succeed' by being absorbed into the mainstream status quo.

2.3) *Project to Pattern*: in order to shift a culture, you have to start by doing something counter-cultural (H3 in the present). But such innovation can only be sustained if it is absorbed into a wider pattern of self-reinforcing activities. It cannot survive for long on its own. Just as children live in a pattern of relationships, so do projects. Any new project, any new pocket of innovation, needs to combine with other innovations, other projects, other activities and structures in order to become established as part of a new H3 pattern that has the internal coherence to maintain itself over time. The veteran scholar of evaluation Michael Quinn Patton puts it well when he observes that social innovations that 'succeed' have usually found some protected space outside the dominant system where they can be assessed on their own terms, while those that fail have usually been judged by mainstream standards and found wanting. In either case, Patton points out, we must draw the same

conclusion: projects do not change systems.¹ This confirms my own experience. It is patterns that change systems. Successful systems transition means moving from project to pattern.

3. Value tensions and dilemmas

Seeing the landscape in Three Horizons will reveal tensions between the present dominant system and our vision of something radically different. Often these are value tensions. The systems transition we envisage is difficult in practice because we do not want to give up what we value in the first horizon pattern even if it is in tension with our aspirations for the third. For example, universal provision and equity might be in tension with personalisation; a foundational national core curriculum might be in tension with teacher and learner autonomy. These are not choices but dilemmas, in which we want to preserve if possible the best of both worlds.

Some tensions of this sort are highlighted in the Gordon and Ionescu paper: between timely and responsive democratic politics and the need for longer term, reflective, systems transition; between doing things right (first horizon) and doing the right thing (third horizon); between effective, well-managed individual services and the needs of whole persons; between the need for quality assurance and for innovation and experiment; between accountability and autonomy for professionals working in the system; between delivery and development. Even if none of these is present, we can always find the core dilemma in any system: between the needs of the part and the needs of the whole – 'being me and also us'.

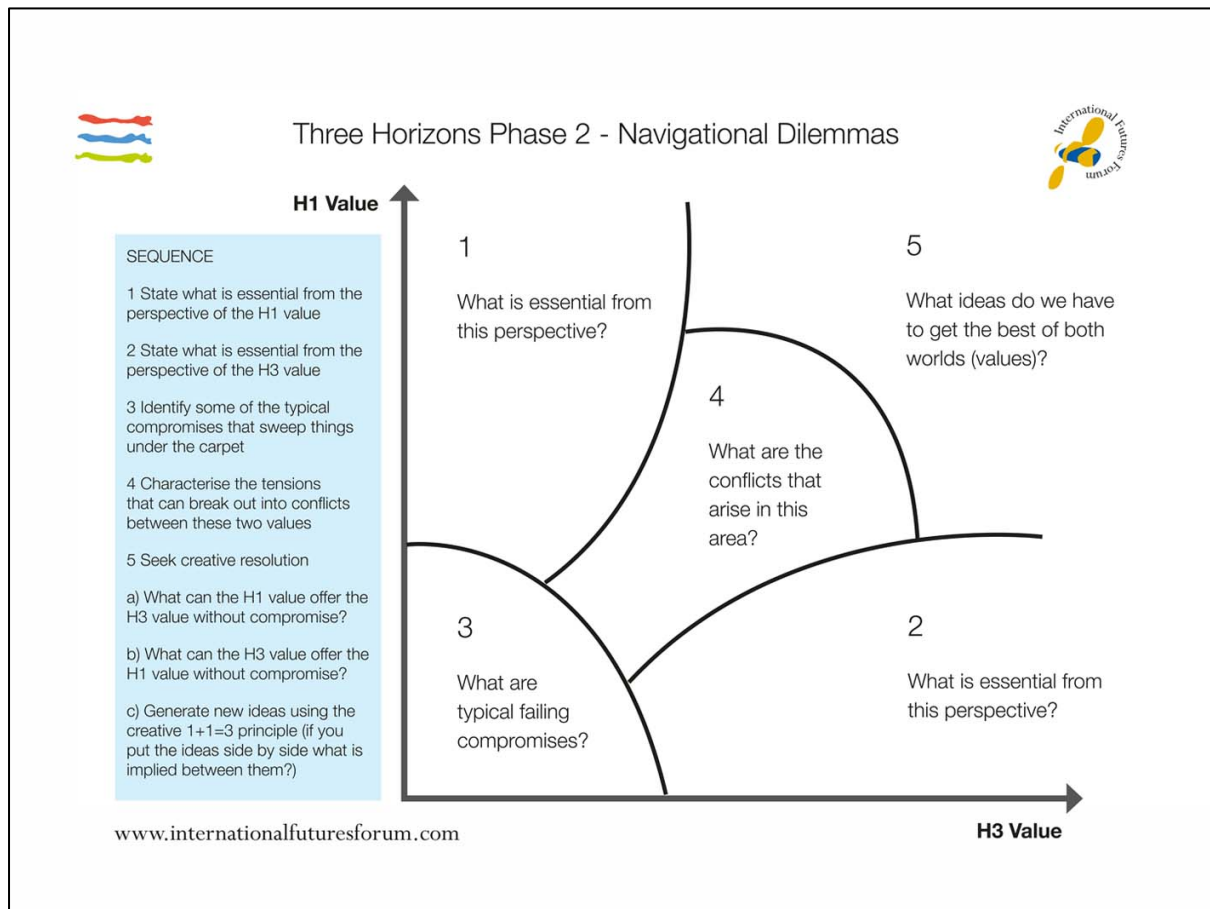
So long as these tensions are treated as choices, they will remain intractable. But if treated as dilemmas we can find a way forward. There will always be a vigorous and often heated debate, even conflict, between the two 'horns' of the dilemma. Typically, it is resolved in one of three ways: one or other side wins the argument, or they will find a compromise that satisfies neither side but at least ends the conflict.

It is in the nature of a dilemma that if we favour either 'horn' at the expense of the other, the other will inevitably reassert itself in time. If we favour accountability, for example, there will sooner or later be an autonomous revolt for freedom. If we favour local autonomy there will sooner or later be a move to reassert central control to restore some degree of consistency and order. And if we settle for a little of both, a typical compromise, we gain the true benefits of neither.

Treating these tensions as dilemmas rather than choices opens up a fourth option – the best of both worlds. We can ask what the first horizon value might offer the third horizon value with no loss of integrity. And vice versa. We can look for the $1 + 1 = 3$ resolution – and use that as a navigational beacon for the journey of systems transition. Sometimes we will need to steer towards the first horizon system for political reasons, perhaps, or to maintain resourcing and credibility. But then we will need to steer back towards the third horizon

¹ See video presentation at <https://youtu.be/7reYSwXVwNA> (accessed 9/11/2018).

vision to avoid absorption into the first horizon pattern and to maintain the integrity of our vision.



Template for working with the dilemmas inherent in systems transition: from the International Futures Forum Three Horizons Kit (see <http://www.iffpraxis.com/three-horizons>).

4. Vision and hope

Finally, the Three Horizons framework offers practical grounds for hope. The Gordon and Ionescu report, whilst largely about systems, also highlights the role of individual actors. 'What can I do', they ask, 'as a professional, to embody the Learning for Well-being principles into my family, my organization, and my community, in order to contribute to the mindshift necessary for a new vision for children?'

In my experience the place to look for answers is the third horizon in the present. Once we have a vision, we can look to see where features of that vision are already present in practice, even if only at small scale. We can then add our own efforts to the nascent new pattern. The practice of transformative innovation is not about planning for the future we desire, but about embodying it in the present and working to grow the scale and scope of our new pattern over time.

The report is right to insist that our vision, the future we envisage, matters. It questions whether there is a coherent 'image' of childhood across different services and whether we

have a shared 'collective view of what is possible.' The paper itself reveals this ambivalence, sometimes using the image of an ecosystem or a living system of care and development with the whole child at the centre, other times using the more conventional language of restructuring to bring together care and education and other sectors, 'shared understanding' of quality across services, 'policy coherence' and so on.

My recent experience supporting the government in Scotland with the development of a refresh of their 'Getting It Right for Every Child' strategy revealed this same tension. GIRFEC is conceived in a frame that puts 'the whole child' at the centre of a pattern of relationships with family and professionals in an ever-changing landscape of the outside world.

But in practice, when we come to design policy and deliver services, we are always in danger of falling back to a simpler picture of the child as an individual rather than living in a pattern of relationships. And we tend to define the individual's progress largely in relation to the institutions of society ("pre-school", "not in education, employment or training", "on the waiting list for mental health services") rather than as a process of human development and growth. This makes it easier to assign policy responsibility across departments and to measure progress. Our vision becomes compromised in order to fit existing patterns of delivery.

In my experience in refreshing GIRFEC people across the landscape were asking for a more holistic framework to configure their contribution and make sense of how it might relate to the whole. They are asking that this framework should be explicitly relational – seeing the child as living in a pattern of relationships. That it should be developmental - seeing the child in terms of its social and psychological development not just as passing through a series of preordained ages and stages. And that it should be this model and thinking, rather than a government organogram, that really guides and shapes policy and practice.

If it is this vision of healthy, holistic development that characterizes our Third Horizon then we will find plentiful encouragement in the present. The Learning for Well-being examples that have inspired IFF over the years have more likely grown from a public health perspective than an educational one, perhaps reflecting the natural tendency to think in terms of whole persons living in patterns of relationship and health as an outcome from a complex system of living. I would point to the All Children Thrive movement in the US, for example, which takes a place-based approach to whole child development.² The city (not just its government and services) as competent system. The Radical Childcare project in Birmingham has likewise taken a broad-based view of the child as living in a place, in a pattern of relationships – both of which will yield to artful design.³

² See <https://www.allchildrenthrive.org/> (accessed 9/11/2018).

³ See <https://birmingham.impacthub.net/mission/radical-childcare/the-movement/> (accessed 9/11/2018).

Both can draw lessons from the famous Peckham Experiment from the 1930s in which two pioneering doctors in a deprived part of South London sought to provide the enabling conditions for health for children and families in the area rather than only treatment for illness. They discovered that 'health is as infectious as disease' and that it is impossible to be healthy alone – critical insights for system design which are largely ignored in our traditional services. The Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham reopened by popular demand after the war but was closed down later as incompatible with the new National Health Service.⁴

In short, if we can add the Three Horizons perspective and the practice of transformative innovation or systems transition to our competent systems approach then we will start to see, and more importantly experience, the aspiration/practice gap close.

Author

Graham Leicester is Director of International Futures Forum. IFF is an international network headquartered in Scotland, a non-profit organization that supports people, organizations and communities to take effective and responsible action in powerful times. Graham previously ran Scotland's leading think tank, the Scottish Council Foundation, founded in 1997. From 1984-1995 he served as a diplomat in HM Diplomatic Service, specialising in China (he speaks Mandarin Chinese) and the EU. Between 1995 and 1997 he was senior research fellow with the Constitution Unit at University College London. He has also worked as a freelance professional cellist, including with the BBC Concert Orchestra. His most recent publications include *Transformative Innovation in Education: a playbook for pragmatic visionaries*, *Dancing at the Edge: competence, culture and organization in the 21st century* (with Maureen O'Hara) and *Transformative Innovation: a guide to practice and policy*.

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⁴ See <http://thephf.org/> (accessed 09/11/2018).