

The Phoenix of Futures: Navigating the Productive Paradox of Futures Methods in Neoliberal Education

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Abstract

This hybrid autoethnographic narrative evaluates the emancipatory potential of Futures methods within an education system dominated by neoliberal “Dark Arts.” Employing a mixed-methods framework, the research explores whether these methodologies disrupt or reinforce systemic constraints and how this shapes practitioner agency. Findings unearthed a “productive paradox”: Futures methods are not inherently liberatory but amplify existing intentions. When utilised uncritically, they produce “old wine in new bottles,” (Milojevic & Inayatullah, 2015) merely reinforcing metrics. However, critical and reflexive application allows for “*architecting resistance*” against performative norms. As the research unfolded, one image repeatedly surfaced in my reflections. Initially appearing as a symbol of hope amidst uncertainty, the Phoenix gradually evolved into a conceptual companion for the inquiry itself. It came to represent both Futures methodologies and the human capacity for hope and agency. Like Futures methods, the Phoenix carries transformative potential but no guarantee of transformation. It can illuminate possibilities, but it can also be caged. In this sense, the Phoenix became not merely a literary device but an organising metaphor through which to explore the relationship between imagination, power, hope, and agency. Following its trail would lead me into a labyrinth of scholarship, reflection, and discovery.

Keywords: futures methods, neoliberalism, disruption, agency, hope

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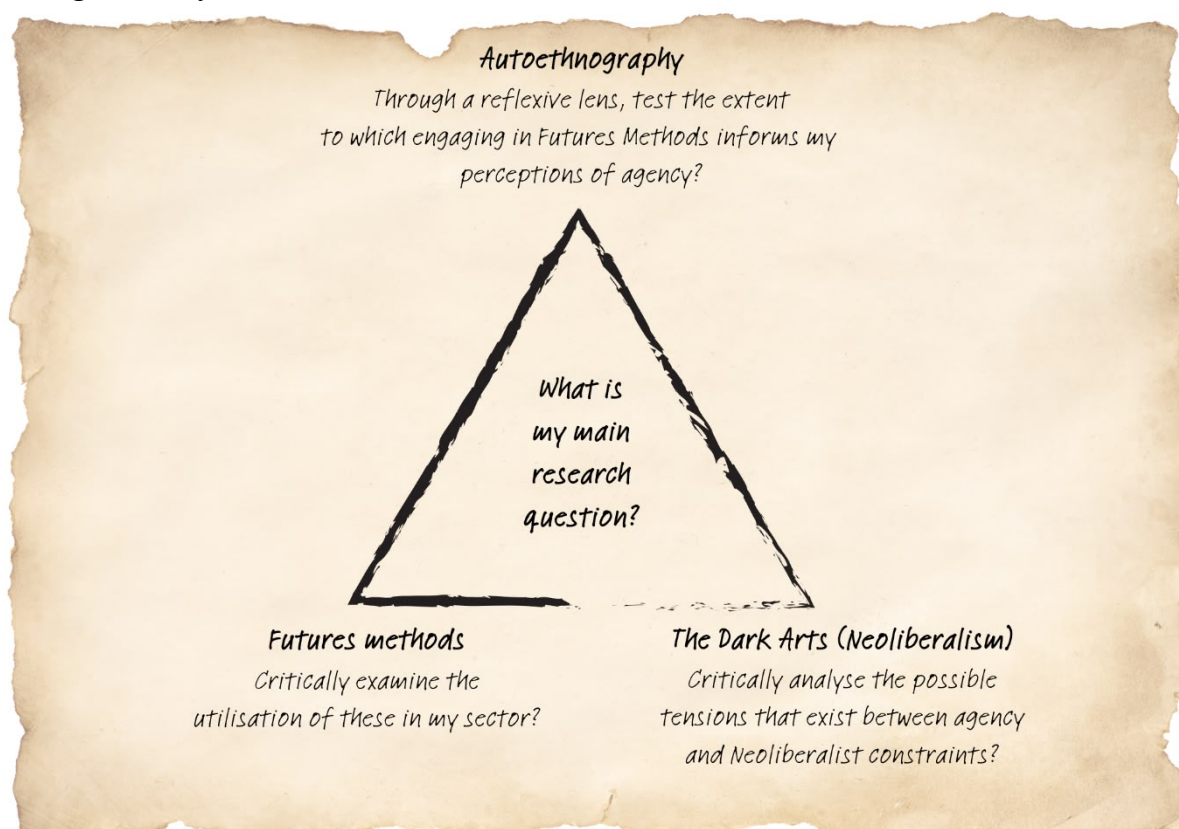
Introduction: The “Thwack of Realisation”

It began with a storm; a sudden “*thwack of realization*” in early 2023 as I encountered critical scholarship on Neoliberalism (Ball, 2016; Barth & Rieckmann, 2012; Colla et al., 2022; Lehtonen et al., 2022; Weaver, 1993) concepts such as performativity and accountability cultures that ceased to be abstract theories and became recognisable features of the educational landscape I had inhabited for almost two decades. What had previously appeared to be isolated frustrations, tensions, and contradictions within Scottish Further Education suddenly formed a coherent picture. This realisation was profoundly uncomfortable. Throughout my career I had worked in roles intended to foster innovation, imagination, and change. Recently, I had facilitated workshops that encouraged educators to think differently and generate new ideas, yet I found myself questioning whether such activities genuinely challenged dominant structures or merely helped organisations achieve existing targets more efficiently. If innovation is pursued primarily in service of performance indicators or institutional metrics, can it truly be transformative? Or does it simply become another expression of neoliberal performativity?

At the same time as the storm was gathering, I was encountering Futures methodologies. While critical educational scholarship was helping me understand the present, Futures Studies seemed to offer a language for possibility. These methods promised opportunities to surface hidden narratives and imagine alternative futures however the more I engaged with them, the more I encountered a troubling paradox. Futures methodologies are frequently presented as emancipatory, capable of fostering hope, agency, and transformative thinking. Equally, Futures scholars (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015; Chappell et al., 2024; Dunne & Raby, 2013; Meretoja, 2023; Miller et al., 2019; Milojevic & Inayatullah, 2015) caution that these same methods can be reduced to technocratic exercises, utilised in ways that reinforce existing power structures rather than disrupt them. What happens then, when people are invited to imagine futures, they may not have the power to create? And what then is the impact on their hope and agency when they are led into this paradox?

To explore this question, I adopted an analytical Autoethnographic approach (Adkins & Hughes, 2020; Keleş 2022; Mao et al, 2024; Mason, 2011; Stutchbury, 2022) positioning my own experiences as both practitioner and researcher as a legitimate site of inquiry. Through early iterations of the study, it became apparent that this approach, narrowing the scope as opposed to widening it, would not only fit the time constraint but had greater potential of informing developments in my professional practice.

Figure 1
Triangulation of Curiosities



Triangulating these elements (Fig. 1), Neoliberalism, Futures Methods and Autoethnography led to the emergence of my main research question: To what extent do Futures methodologies disrupt or reinforce dominant narratives within an education system driven by metrics and neoliberal ideology, and how does this shape my sense of agency as a practitioner within that system?

As I gazed entranced at the image appearing before my eyes, a whispering voice filled the air:

*'To meet me, you must first consult those who have been before,
The Messrs and Ministers who have sought and knocked on the door,
Who have left paths and footprints, relics and clues,
So that those who come next can walk in their shoes...'*

Literature Review: Consulting the "Messrs and Ministers"

Tumbling into a deserted library, piles of crimson feathers piqued my curiosity. As the thunderstorm raged on outside, and bolts of lightning illuminated paths through an abundance of literature, I found myself drawn repeatedly towards a central tension. Futures methodologies are frequently presented as tools for transformation, imagination, and empowerment. Yet the environments in which they are often deployed (institutions shaped by metrics, accountability mechanisms, and neoliberal assumptions) can constrain the very possibilities these methods seek to create. The further I explored, the more curious I became as to whether Futures methodologies act as catalysts for disruption, or whether they

sometimes become absorbed into existing systems, reproducing the dominant narratives they are intended to challenge.

Flight Paths and False Starts: The Utilisation of Futures Methods

The first revealed a substantial body of literature positioning Futures methodologies as tools for expanding imagination, challenging assumptions, and cultivating anticipatory capacity. Scholars such as Inayatullah (1998, 2008), Hicks (2012), Miller (2018), and Karaïskou (2024) argue that Futures work is less concerned with prediction than with enabling individuals and organisations to think critically about the forces shaping tomorrow. Methods including Causal Layered Analysis, Futures Literacy, and speculative approaches create opportunities to explore alternatives to dominant trajectories and encourage engagement with uncertainty. Much of this literature is optimistic: Futures methods are often associated with increased creativity, reflexivity, confidence, and hope, helping participants develop more active relationships with the future. Futures Literacy has been linked to enhanced anticipatory capabilities and the ability to rethink assumptions about what is possible (Mangnus et al., 2021; Miller, 2018). Yet alongside the advocacy for Futures methods sat a recurring critique; while these approaches may broaden horizons, evidence of lasting transformation remains limited. Futures interventions often increased awareness, reflection, and imagination, but whether they resulted in meaningful change is less clear (Damhof & Gulmans, 2023; Van Lente & Peters, 2022). Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) caution against what they describe as “old wine in new bottles,” where innovative methods become vehicles for existing agendas rather than catalysts for transformation.

A second bolt illuminated a large birdcage suspended in the distance, as a bundle of feathers settled softly around the periphery.

Caged Wings? Futures Methods as Disruptive or Reproductive

The image proved unexpectedly apt. Futures methodologies are frequently portrayed as disruptive practices capable of challenging dominant assumptions and creating space for alternative futures. Their emphasis on plurality, imagination, and reflexivity appears fundamentally at odds with systems driven by certainty, measurement, and control. Scholars such as Ross (2022), Mangnus et al. (2021), and Damhof and Gulmans (2023) argue that Futures work can expose hidden assumptions and challenge dominant narratives through acts of imagination and critical reflection. However, a competing story emerged within the literature. Methods do not operate independently of context. Organisational cultures, political priorities, and existing power structures shape how methods are interpreted and enacted. As a result, Futures approaches can become incorporated into institutional systems rather than disrupting them. Organisations may adopt the language of futures thinking, creativity, and innovation while leaving deeper assumptions entirely intact. The metaphor of the cage became increasingly compelling. Like the unseen presence whose crimson feathers had appeared throughout my investigation, the capacity for transformation can be celebrated while simultaneously constrained. Imagination may be encouraged, yet carefully managed. Participation may be invited yet bound by organisational priorities.

As the storm intensified, a third flash of lightning illuminated something larger moving in the shadows.

Shadows of the Slouching Beast: False Agency in Neoliberal Systems

Here the narrative shifted from methods to agency. Ball (2016), Biesta (2017), Bonal (2003) and De Lissovoy (2018) describe neoliberalism not simply as an economic doctrine but as a mode of governing behaviour. Through metrics, accountability systems, audits, and performance indicators, individuals are encouraged to become entrepreneurs of themselves, responsible for navigating increasingly complex challenges. Within such systems, agency becomes complicated. Several authors raised concerns regarding the emergence of what might be termed as *false agency*; the notion that individuals may be invited to contribute ideas, imagine alternatives, and participate in innovation initiatives, while lacking meaningful influence over the structures shaping their environment. In this situation, empowerment becomes symbolic rather than substantive. Participation is offered, but transformation remains elusive. This resonated strongly with my own experience and I recognised organisational contexts where educators were encouraged to innovate but only within carefully defined boundaries. Creativity in these contexts appeared welcome provided it aligned with institutional priorities, and Imagination valued when it improved metrics. The implications for Futures methods then were significant: if participants are invited to imagine futures and do not possess the power to implement these imaginings, are these methods generating agency or merely the appearance of it?

With the final flash of lightning, rather than illuminating a path ahead, it revealed footprints left by those who had travelled before.

Footprints in the Ashes: Autoethnography and Futures Practice

As I explored existing studies in this field, I discovered that comparatively little research had examined the relationship between Futures methods, practitioner agency, and neoliberal educational systems through lived experience. Much of the literature evaluated participant outcomes, workshop impacts, or organisational interventions. Far fewer studies explored how individuals experience the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of Futures practice whilst simultaneously inhabiting systems shaped by performativity and measurement. This absence revealed an opportunity.

Autoethnography therefore offered a way to position lived experience at the centre of my inquiry. Rather than studying Futures methods from a distance, I could place myself directly within their operation, examining how my own assumptions, perceptions, hopes, and sense of agency shifted throughout engagement with the methods. Analytical autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes & Pennington, 2017) provided a means of connecting personal narrative to wider cultural and organisational concerns, allowing exploration of the spaces where Futures methodologies, neoliberal systems, and practitioner identities intersect.

At this stage, the crimson feathers no longer felt accidental. The Phoenix had not yet appeared, but its presence was growing. As the last rumble of thunder echoed across the horizon, the trail led to a door, its emerald surface outlined in gold. Beyond it, lay the Ministry of Methods, and there, for the first time, I encountered the Phoenix.

Methodology: The Ministry of Methods

The trail led to a room lined with glowing orbs. In the centre stood a Phoenix, majestic and mysterious. Its polished perch reflected the deep crimson colour of its plumage, and the room

radiated from the glow of its mighty presence. Timidly I edged into the room, bowing my head as it turned to greet me.

‘Jo, I am the Phoenix of Futures. Watching your journey these past two years has been fascinating. It's now a pleasure to guide you into the next stage of your quest.’

‘You've been with me this entire time? I feel I've learnt so much, but at the same time I don't feel I know enough about Futures yet...’

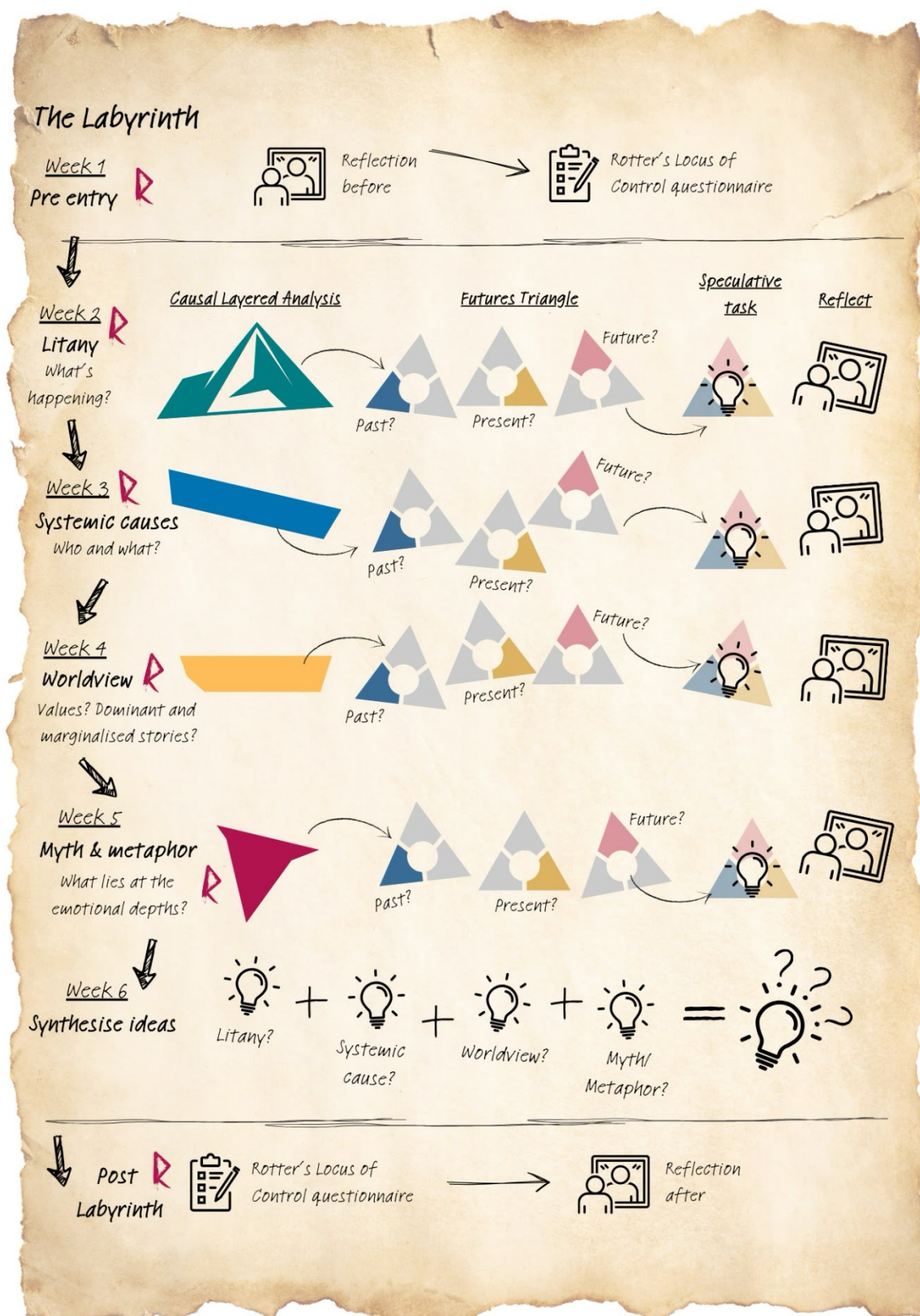
‘Fear not, your curiosity is strong; it brought you to me and I will be by your side for the rest of your journey. Now I know why you are here, but what is your gut feeling regarding the shape of the journey that you would like to go on?’

‘I need entanglement, no isolated methods. A spliced approach creating complementary practice with ebb and flow, facilitating reflexive creativity. I want methods that help navigate tensions between hope and constraints (Baumeister & Alquist, 2023), and resist cultures of measurement as Biesta (2017) encourages. Which Futures methods might allow me to do this?’

As the Phoenix listened, random orbs lit up around the room. Some remained ignited, others faded until three permanently glowed with warm mustard hues. The orbs then floated down and hovered between us.

“These three methods will intertwine to form your study, your Labyrinth (Fig. 2). I've chosen Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), The Futures Triangle, and Speculative analysis.”

Figure 2
Map of the Labyrinth



Excavating Beneath the Surface: Causal Layered Analysis

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 1998; 2004) became the primary excavation tool within the study. The method examines issues across four interconnected layers: Litany, Systemic Causes, Worldview, and Myth/Metaphor. Rather than accepting problems at face value, CLA seeks to uncover the deeper narratives, assumptions, and cultural stories through which realities are produced. This was particularly relevant to the core of the study. If neoliberalism operates not only through policies and structures but also through taken-for-granted assumptions about success, accountability, performance and value (Ball, 2016; Biesta, 2017), then a methodology capable of moving beneath surface manifestations was essential. CLA offered a way of systematically examining my experiences within Scottish Further Education whilst revealing the deeper narratives sustaining them.

Mapping Pressures and Possibilities: The Futures Triangle

Next, the iceberg dissolved and was replaced by a glowing triangle suspended in mid-air. The Futures Triangle (FT) (Inayatullah, 2023) provided a complementary lens through which to explore the forces shaping perceptions of change. The method examines the interaction between three dimensions: the weight of history, the push of present conditions, and the pull of future possibilities. Where CLA helped reveal the architecture of existing narratives, the FT enabled exploration of why some futures felt imaginable and others remained difficult to envision. The model offered a means of examining the tensions between inherited assumptions, contemporary systemic constraints, and aspirational alternative futures. For a study concerned with agency, this was particularly important. Agency does not emerge in isolation and the FT provided a way of situating hope and possibility within broader systemic contexts whilst exploring the extent to which dominant narratives shape future imaginaries.

Imagining and Envisioning: Speculative Practice

Finally, a lightbulb flickered on. The Phoenix explained “analysis alone will not be enough.” Speculative practice (Candy & Dunagan, 2017; Dunne & Raby, 2013; Springgay & Truman, 2018) was selected as the creative bridge between reflection and action. Building upon insights generated through CLA and the Futures Triangle, speculative exercises encouraged the construction of alternative narratives, artefacts, and future possibilities. While CLA excavates and the Futures Triangle analyses, speculative practice imagines. Its inclusion was particularly important given the study's interest in hope and agency. If participants are to move beyond critique toward possibility, there must also be opportunities to explore what alternatives might look and feel like in practice. Speculative artefacts therefore served not as predictions but as provocations; tangible expressions of possible futures against which current assumptions could be examined.

The Pool of Theoretical Lenses

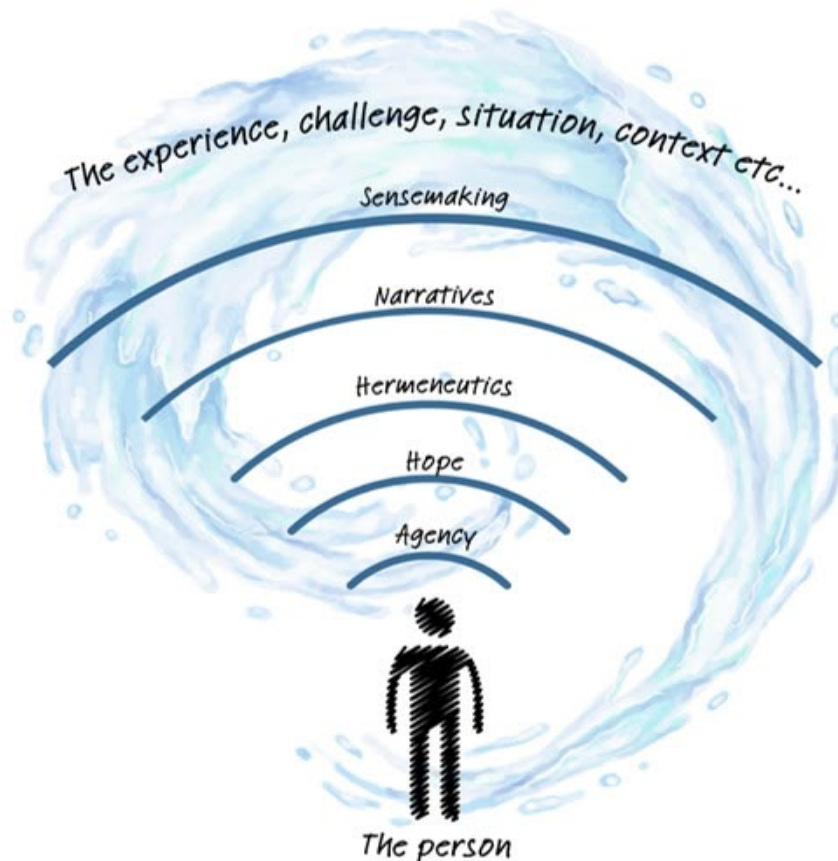
We came to a stop at a large pool with crystal-clear water reflecting bottles and vials around its edge. The Phoenix dipped its beak into the water, creating gentle ripples that lifted five small bottles into the air that drifted across the surface.

“While having data is useful, you need theoretical frameworks for analysis. These five theories will correlate to support your post Labyrinth analysis and feed into your research

themes, namely the key concepts for individuals in Neoliberalist structures.” A diagram appeared on the water's surface depicting the relationality the Phoenix described. (Fig. 3)

Figure 3

Theories as Lenses



The first revealed shifting patterns and fragments of meaning. Sensemaking Theory (Manolchev, 2020; Weick et al., 2005) offered a framework for understanding how experiences become organised into coherent interpretations. The second reflection appeared as a tapestry of interconnected stories. Narrative Theory highlighted the role narratives play in shaping identities, actions, and perceptions of possibility (Bruner, 1998; Frank, 2002). A third image shimmered beneath the surface before dissolving and reforming. Hermeneutics emphasised the interpretive nature of understanding itself, recognising that meaning is continually negotiated rather than simply discovered (Barrett et al., 2011; Geanellos, 2000; Ricoeur, 1981). The fourth reflection appeared as pathways branching toward distant horizons. Hope Theory (Snyder, 2002) provided a way of understanding how individuals identify routes toward desired futures and sustain motivation to pursue them. Finally, the water revealed a figure standing before a series of closed gates. Agency Theory (Bandura, 2005) offered a lens through which to examine the relationship between individual action and structural constraint. Together, these theories became interpretive companions for the journey ahead.

Data Collection: Gathering the Runes

The research adopted an analytical autoethnographic approach (Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes & Pennington, 2017), positioning my experiences as practitioner and researcher as legitimate

sites of inquiry. To strengthen reflexivity and provide multiple perspectives on the phenomenon, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected throughout the Labyrinth within a structured Labyrinth journal, which captured responses to prompts, reflections, observations, and creative activities undertaken at each stage of the journey. These entries documented moments of uncertainty, insight, frustration, imagination, and discovery. Alongside these reflections, quantitative measures were collected at regular intervals. Self-assessment scales were used to track fluctuations in hope and agency throughout the process. Rotter's Locus of Control questionnaire was completed prior to and following the Labyrinth to identify shifts in perceptions regarding personal influence and control. To synthesise these experiences, each stage of the Labyrinth was represented by a symbolic "rune." These runes functioned as reflective artefacts, capturing significant moments, insights, and tensions encountered throughout the inquiry. While primarily narrative devices, they also served as analytical anchors that enabled connections to be drawn between qualitative reflections, quantitative measures, and theoretical interpretation.

The storm had revealed the question. The literature had revealed the tensions. The Ministry of Methods had revealed the tools. All that remained was to enter the maze itself and discover what would emerge when Futures methodologies encountered the realities of a measured educational system.

Results: Reading the Runes

Emerging from the Labyrinth, I found myself standing once more beneath an open sky. The storm that had accompanied much of the journey had begun to break, although clouds still gathered on distant horizons. Beside me sat the Phoenix, quieter now than when we first met. There was something different about it. Wisps of smoke drifted from its feathers and, although I could not yet explain why, I sensed our time together was nearing an end. Spread across the ground before me were the runes collected during my six weeks within the Labyrinth. Each represented a stage of the journey and together, they offered a means of revisiting the experiences, reflections, and quantitative shifts in hope and agency that had emerged throughout the inquiry. As I examined them, a pattern began to reveal itself. Engagement with Futures methodologies did not produce a straightforward increase in either hope or agency. Instead, both fluctuated, often independently, revealing a far more complex relationship between seeing possibilities and believing they can be realised.

First Rune: Entering the Labyrinth

The first rune bore the number eleven, representing my initial Locus of Control score and indicating a strongly internal orientation. Before entering the Labyrinth, I already believed that my actions could influence outcomes, yet this sense of agency existed alongside considerable frustration. My reflections revealed growing awareness of neoliberal narratives shaping Scottish Further Education: measurement, performance, accountability, and continual pressures to do more with less. I could identify opportunities for change, but I remained uncertain whether meaningful change was possible. Hope was therefore comparatively fragile despite a relatively strong sense of personal agency. Looking back, the first rune already contained the seeds of the study's central tension. I felt capable of acting, but doubtful that systems would respond.

The Phoenix watched silently.

Second Rune: Seeing the Surface (Litany)

As I revisited my reflections, familiar organisational phrases emerged repeatedly: *“The funding council needs us to...”* *“If it's not in the strategy, we can't do it...”* *“We're not allowed...”* These statements reflected a culture where legitimacy appeared strongly connected to compliance, targets, and measurable outcomes. Through CLA, I was no longer simply observing these narratives; I was explicitly naming them. Doing so, however, produced an unexpected effect. While my agency remained relatively stable, my hope declined noticeably. This was one of the first major surprises within the data. Futures methodologies expanded my capacity to imagine alternatives, but they simultaneously exposed the scale of the challenge. The gap between what could be and what currently was became more visible. Rather than producing optimism, the Litany stage initially made Futures thinking feel somewhat depressing. Possibility had increased, but confidence in systemic transformation had diminished.

The Phoenix shifted beside me, a faint wisp of smoke escaping from its wings.

Third Rune: Understanding the Machinery (Systemic Causes)

Moving beneath surface symptoms, I began identifying structural forces underpinning the narratives encountered during Litany: performance indicators, organisational habits, accountability systems, funding structures, and assumptions about whose ideas matter. Curiously, this was where hope began to rise again. Initially this seemed counter-intuitive; why would deeper examination of constraints increase optimism? The answer appeared to lie in visibility. Once nebulous frustrations became identifiable systems, they felt less immovable. Instead of confronting an abstract and omnipresent force, I could point to specific assumptions, practices, and narratives. Future possibilities emerged around redefining success, protecting creativity, creating space for experimentation, and valuing learning rather than only outcomes. Agency remained consistently high throughout this stage, but hope showed its first significant recovery. For the first time, constraints appeared navigable.

The Phoenix smiled.

Fourth Rune: Confronting the Paradox (Worldview)

Here, attention shifted from systems to beliefs. Questions emerged regarding my own complicity within the structures I was critiquing. How far could I push boundaries whilst remaining within the system? Was I genuinely challenging dominant narratives or merely adapting to them more creatively? Where was the distinction between resistance and compliance?

This stage produced another fluctuation. Both hope and agency declined when considering present realities. Future possibilities remained compelling, but immediate constraints felt more tangible. The paradox at the heart of the study became increasingly visible: I felt capable of imagining alternatives whilst simultaneously recognising the limitations surrounding their implementation. Yet amidst this tension one of the study's most important findings emerged. The notion of creating protected creative space, building Futures capabilities, and cultivating a “manifesto for realistic cultural resistance” emerged directly from this stage of analysis. Interestingly, I felt highly agentic regarding my ability to create

such a programme, but much less hopeful regarding whether institutions would embrace it. Agency and hope were clearly not the same phenomenon.

The Phoenix's outline was beginning to blur.

Fifth Rune: A Shift in Identity (Myth and Metaphor)

Here the focus moved beyond structures and beliefs to the stories underpinning them. Two metaphors proved particularly revealing: *“All it takes is one person to start rocking the boat.”* *“Rules and frameworks give a skeleton, but like bones they can be broken.”*

This stage produced the highest levels of agency recorded during the Labyrinth. Importantly, this was not because constraints had disappeared. Rather, my relationship with them had changed. Earlier reflections positioned me as someone constrained by systems. By this stage, I increasingly saw myself as someone capable of influencing, navigating, and occasionally disrupting those systems. Hope also increased, though less dramatically than agency. The playful metaphor of becoming the “Mary Poppins of non-conformity, disruption and rebellion” may appear humorous, but it represented an important shift in professional identity. Futures methodologies were no longer simply helping me analyse educational systems; they were reshaping how I understood my role within them.

As I finished examining the rune, smoke drifted steadily from the Phoenix.

Final Rune: After the Labyrinth

The final rune again bore the number eleven. My Locus of Control score remained unchanged. The Labyrinth had not altered my fundamental orientation towards personal responsibility and action. I entered and exited the process with the same internal locus of control. Yet something *had* clearly changed. The qualitative data suggested that agency had evolved rather than increased. I no longer framed agency primarily as overcoming barriers. Instead, I began viewing it as the ability to acknowledge constraints, work creatively within them, and identify opportunities for strategic intervention. Constraints became contextual realities rather than absolute obstacles. Hope, meanwhile, remained more fragile.

Looking up from the final rune, I noticed that the Phoenix was now almost translucent.

The Salient Finding: Hope and Agency are not the Same

As the Phoenix entered its final transformation, the central finding of the study came into focus.

The Labyrinth did not leave me convinced that systemic change was inevitable. If anything, it deepened my awareness of how embedded neoliberal assumptions are within educational structures. What changed was my belief that action remained possible despite that reality. Futures methodologies strengthened my confidence in acting without necessarily increasing confidence that systems would change. Across every stage of the adventure, hope and agency behaved differently. Sometimes agency increased while hope declined. Sometimes hope recovered while agency remained stable. Their relationship was dynamic rather than linear.

The study therefore suggests that engagement with Futures methodologies does not necessarily make participants more hopeful. Instead, it makes constraints more visible. However, this visibility can also strengthen agency by helping participants identify where intervention, imagination, and action remain possible. In other words, Futures methodologies did not remove the storm. They taught me how to navigate within it.

As the last traces of smoke dispersed and the Phoenix vanished from view, I found myself alone with the runes gathered throughout the Labyrinth. The storm had passed overhead, although dark clouds still lingered on distant horizons. Scattered between the stones were crimson feathers, remnants of a companion who had guided me through the inquiry, but whose departure now seemed significant. The Phoenix had never been the source of agency. Rather, it had represented the possibility of agency, the transformative promise frequently attributed to Futures methodologies themselves. Its disappearance invited a different task: not the collection of further insights, but critical reflection upon what had already emerged.

Discussion and Recommendations

Returning to the research question (Fig.1) I found myself revisiting both the literature and the data simultaneously. Rather than producing a single answer, the inquiry generated a collection of overlapping themes, tensions, and images which together revealed a more nuanced picture of Futures practice within Scottish Further Education.

The Storm Was Real: Constraints, Neoliberal Narratives, and False Agency

My experiences during the CLA process repeatedly highlighted the influence of accountability cultures, performativity, resource constraints, and measurement-driven decision-making. Phrases encountered during the Litany and Systemic Causes stages echoed the concerns raised by Ball (2016), Biesta (2017), Brown (2021), and De Lissovoy (2018): that organisational narratives often positioned success as compliance with targets and performance indicators rather than pursuits of educational purpose. Importantly, the findings aligned with existing critiques suggesting that neoliberalism operates not only through formal structures but through assumptions that become normalised and internalised. My own data revealed how frequently ideas became constrained before implementation through narratives such as “that's above my pay grade” or “if it's not in the strategy, we can't do it.” These findings support literature suggesting that organisational narratives actively shape perceptions of what is possible, permissible, and worthwhile. Yet the findings also extend this scholarship. The CLA process demonstrated that naming these narratives matters. While identifying systemic constraints initially reduced my sense of hope, it simultaneously enabled deeper understanding of where those constraints resided. The storm became less mysterious once its source could be located.

Caged Wings: Futures Methods as Both Liberatory and Reproductive

Literature suggested that Futures methodologies contain significant emancipatory potential whilst simultaneously carrying the risk of co-option (Damhof & Gulmans, 2023; Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015; Ross, 2022). My findings strongly support this tension, for throughout the Labyrinth, Futures methods certainly expanded imagination, encouraged reflexivity, and surfaced dominant assumptions. However, they did not automatically generate transformation, though there were moments where engagement with Futures methodologies heightened awareness of limitations without offering immediate solutions.

The caged bird that appeared symbolically throughout the journey therefore became a useful metaphor for understanding the findings. Just as a Phoenix can be admired while remaining imprisoned, Futures methodologies can be celebrated while being subsumed into existing organisational logics. Innovation can become another performance measure. Creativity can become another target. Futures thinking can become another strategic planning exercise. The data repeatedly pointed toward the same conclusion reached by several authors in the literature: methods themselves are not inherently disruptive. Rather, their impact depends on the intentions, values, and contexts surrounding their use. This finding ultimately led to what I describe as the study's central contribution: the productive paradox.

From Navigating Constraints to Architecting Resistance

One of the most surprising findings was that my measured Locus of Control remained unchanged. Despite six weeks of structured engagement with Futures methodologies, I entered and exited the study with the same internal orientation. At first glance, this might suggest that little changed. However, the qualitative findings tell a different story. What evolved was not whether I believed I could act, but how I understood action itself. At the beginning of the study, much of my reflection centred upon navigating constraints. By the end, my language increasingly focused upon experimentation, strategic action, and what I came to term *architecting resistance*. The distinction is important. Rather than viewing agency as overcoming systems, I began to see it as identifying opportunities to act creatively and purposefully within them. This finding aligns with theorists such as Bandura (2005) and Lehtonen et al. (2022), who argue that agency emerges through interactions with social structures rather than independently of them. The metaphor of the rune proved useful here. Individually, each stone represented only a fragment of the experience. Together, however, they formed a pathway. Similarly, no single act of resistance appeared sufficient to transform educational systems. Yet small actions, habits, and interventions created possibilities for cumulative change.

Hope Is Not the Same as Agency

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns the relationship between hope and agency. Prior to this study, I had largely assumed that the two moved together however the findings challenge that assumption. Throughout the CLA process, there were moments where understanding systemic constraints reduced hope whilst simultaneously increasing agency. There were other moments where hopeful possibilities emerged without corresponding increases in confidence that those possibilities would be realised. Hope and agency fluctuated independently. This observation resonates with contemporary scholarship suggesting that hope operates as a dynamic and relational phenomenon rather than a simple emotional state (Colla et al., 2022; Ringel, 2021; Snyder, 2002). Futures methodologies did not leave me feeling more optimistic in any simplistic sense. Instead, they enabled a more grounded and critical form of hope; one capable of acknowledging constraints whilst still imagining alternatives. In retrospect, the Phoenix itself was a manifestation of this distinction. It represented hope throughout the journey, yet its disappearance coincided with stronger expressions of agency. Hope illuminated the path, but agency required walking it.

Recommendations: Creating Space for Responsible Resistance

The findings suggest several implications for Futures practice within Scottish Further Education. First, Futures methodologies should explicitly acknowledge organisational

constraints rather than avoiding them. Naming dominant narratives, power dynamics, and experiences of false agency appears essential if Futures work is to avoid becoming another performative activity.

Second, creativity, experimentation, and protected reflective time should be treated as essential organisational capabilities rather than optional luxuries. Across the study, imagination emerged repeatedly as a precursor to agency, yet many of the narratives encountered positioned creativity as secondary to measurable outputs.

Third, there appears to be value in developing structured opportunities for staff to build Futures capabilities. The proposed “What If?” training module emerged repeatedly throughout the inquiry as a possible vehicle for cultivating futures literacy, narrative awareness, creative confidence, and practical strategies for navigating organisational constraints. Such an intervention would need to avoid promising empowerment whilst ignoring systemic realities. Instead, it could focus upon what I have termed a “*Manifesto for Responsible Resistance*”: an approach that encourages experimentation, reflexivity, imagination, and collective action whilst acknowledging the realities of operating within measured systems.

Conclusion: Looking Beyond the Storm

Viewed collectively, the findings from this study suggest that Futures methodologies are neither the heroic solution imagined by their advocates nor merely another instrument of performativity as feared by their critics. Instead, they amplify assumptions, narratives, intentions, hopes, frustrations, and possibilities. They illuminate the storms people inhabit without necessarily dispersing them. They reveal cages and, at the same time, remind us that wings are still possible. The feathers scattered throughout this inquiry ultimately pointed toward a conclusion that is both hopeful and cautionary. Futures methodologies possess emancipatory potential, but that potential is contingent rather than guaranteed. Transformation does not reside within the methods themselves. It emerges through the ways they are enacted, interpreted, and connected to practice.

The storm remains.

The difference is that we can now see more clearly how it is formed, where it gathers strength, and where there may still be opportunities to fly.

Author’s Note

This report adopts a reflexive autoethnographic approach utilising artistic license. Some narrative concepts may bear a likeness to those in a well-known fictional series, however these have been utilised purely as tools, devices, and as vehicles for scholarly concepts within the narrative structure of this paper.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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