

When the Present Crowds the Possible: Narrative Agency, Responsibility, and Imagining a Preferred Educational Future

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Abstract

This paper offers a hermeneutic reflection on a scenario-building exercise that invited doctoral students and practicing superintendents and senior leaders to imagine possible futures for assessment through four conditions of trust and disruption. Both groups identified high trust and high disruption as preferred futures, yet they did not narrate those futures in the same way. Drawing on Meretoja's (2023) model of narrative agency and Gordon's (2024) account of disciplinary decadence, I interpret the contrast as one between interpretive mobility and interpretive density. Students moved more readily among possibilities and perspectives; leaders' institutional responsibility brought histories, constituencies, consequences, and enactment into the imagined future at once. I argue that responsibility can both enrich and constrain narrative agency by altering the conditions of awareness, imagination, and dialogicality. Preferred futures, therefore, are not imagined from neutral ground; they become narratable within unequal conditions of consequence.

Keywords

narrative agency, narrative hermeneutics, educational leadership, preferred futures, responsibility, interpretive density

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By a sense of the possible, I mean the ability to imagine different routes to different futures and how things could be otherwise. (Meretoja, 2023, p. 298)

In educational leadership, change is often narrated as a matter of strategy, implementation, or organizational design. Yet before change can be led, defended, or sustained, it must first become imaginable. This paper begins with that premise and a contrast that emerged from a scenario-building exercise on possible futures for assessment in schools. Doctoral students from multiple national contexts, many with limited formal leadership experience, and practicing superintendents and senior system leaders working in Alberta school jurisdictions were invited to imagine assessment under four combinations of trust and disruption. Both groups identified high trust and high disruption as the preferred future. What differed was not the destination they chose, but how they were able to narrate what that destination might look like, feel like, and require.

That contrast raises a central paradox. The superintendents did not lack a preferred future; they could name it. Nor did they lack imagination in any simple sense. Rather, they entered the future carrying more of the present with them: institutional histories, competing stakeholder expectations, political sensitivities, previous failures, implementation demands, and responsibility for consequences. The very knowledge that made their judgments professionally grounded also made possibility harder to hold open before it was tested against what already existed. The present, in other words, could crowd the possible.

I approach this paradox through Hanna Meretoja's (2023) model of narrative agency. Meretoja understands narrative agency as the capacity to navigate narrative environments and differentiates it into narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. These dimensions shift the interpretive question away from who was more creative, realistic, or skilled and toward the conditions under which particular responses became possible. People do not enter future-oriented exercises as neutral observers. They encounter them through culturally and historically available models of sense-making that shape what can be noticed, what can be imagined, and which perspectives can remain open long enough to matter.

To deepen this reading, I place Meretoja's model in conversation with Gordon's (2024) account of disciplinary decadence. I use Gordon analogically rather than to suggest that educational leadership is a discipline in the narrow sense he critiques. His formulation is generative because it names a closure of intelligibility: the moment when an interpretive world begins to treat its own assumptions as sufficient and thereby narrows what can appear as plausible or possible. The concern in this paper is not that professional knowledge or responsibility produces such closure automatically, but that responsibility can increase the authority of inherited narratives precisely because leaders must act within the worlds those narratives organize.

I interpret the contrast as a difference between interpretive mobility and interpretive density. Students often moved relatively freely among positions, relationships, and imagined possibilities. Superintendents brought more histories, constituencies, consequences, and obligations into the interpretive field at once. Interpretive density is not a deficit in agency; it can deepen perspective and practical judgment even as it places greater pressure on imagination and dialogical openness.

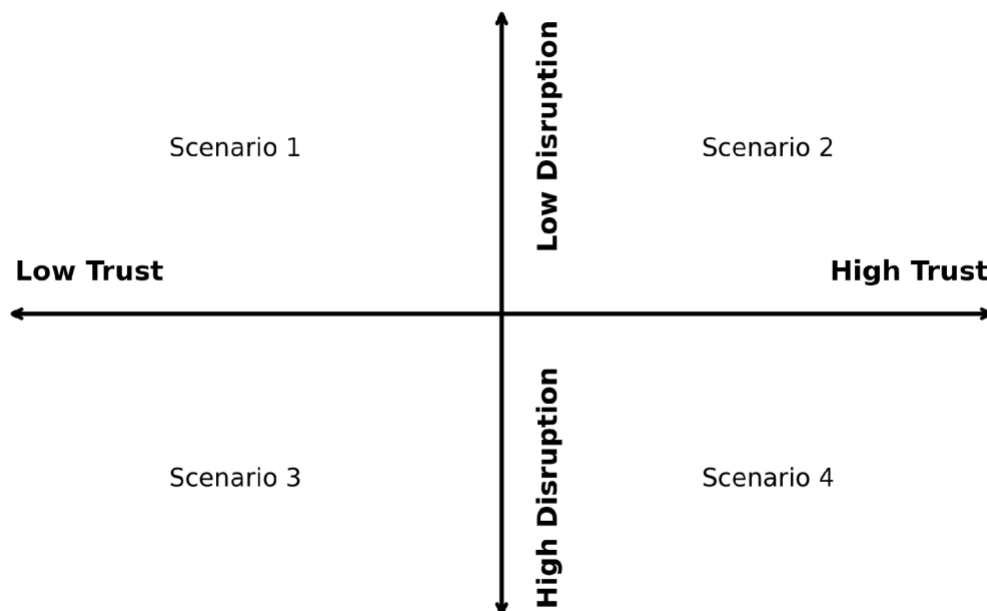
In this paper, I ask three interwoven questions: What were participants able to notice? What futures were they able to imagine? And how were they able to remain in relation with multiple perspectives without collapsing them into already familiar leadership plots?

Context of the Exercise

The reflection offered here arises from a scenario-building exercise designed to help educational leaders imagine possible futures for assessment in schools. Adapted from Rousseau's (2018) work on decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, the framework invited participants to consider four quadrants generated through the intersection of trust and disruption (see Figure 1). Trust referred to the relational and organizational confidence needed for people to exercise judgment, take risks, and interpret evidence together. Disruption referred not to disorder, but to the degree of departure from conventional assessment routines and assumptions. Participants were asked to imagine low trust/low disruption, high trust/low disruption, low trust/high disruption, and high trust/high disruption as distinct possible worlds.

Figure 1

Scenario framework for imagining assessment futures through trust and disruption



Note. Conceptual framework adapted from Rousseau (2018) and further developed by Penner (2026).

The framework was designed to provide enough structure for participants to orient themselves while leaving the quadrants open enough to require interpretive work. Participants could not simply report on their current context; they had to imagine how assessment might be experienced differently as trust and disruption shifted. In this sense, the framework did not function as a neutral

organizer of responses. It called participants into a narrative environment in which they were asked to notice, imagine, and articulate futures not yet fully formed.

In earlier uses of the framework with educational leaders, I had noticed that participants often moved first toward current realities, familiar cases, or reasons why a particular possibility would be difficult to enact. They needed time to establish shared meanings for trust and disruption and, at times, explicit permission to suspend the demand for immediate feasibility. Before more speculative work could occur, prior experiences and biases had to be named rather than allowed to function silently as the limits of the exercise.

The two groups encountered the scenario exercise in separate settings and did not participate in a shared event. The first involved 15 doctoral students participating in a narrative inquiry course, while the second involved 137 practicing superintendents and senior system leaders participating in a professional learning series. I designed and facilitated the scenario-building activity in both settings using the same trust-and-disruption framework, although the surrounding purposes and participants' responsibilities differed. The doctoral students engaged in the scenario exercise during a facilitated class session, while the leaders engaged in it during one facilitated session within the professional learning series. Materials generated through the activities included Slido responses, participant reflections, post-activity survey responses, and class discussion notes; I also recorded contemporaneous facilitator observations.

The contrast that concerns this paper became especially visible when the same exercise was used with two differently situated groups. The difference was audible in participants' own words. One doctoral student remarked, "It feels easy to see and talk about the future." A superintendent, reflecting on the same kind of work, said, "It took a lot of coaching from you to help me see the future as separate from our current reality. I was really stuck in what was happening now, and thinking I was talking about the future. This exercise was really helpful." These comments do not establish a binary between imaginative students and constrained leaders. They reveal different relations to the temporal demand of the exercise: for one participant, futurity felt readily accessible; for another, the present remained so close that it could be mistaken for the future.

In this paper, I do not present the exercise as a formal comparative study or treat the two groups as stable categories. It offers a hermeneutic reflection on a difference that became visible in practice. The interpretive work proceeds through a close reading of the narratives and utterances that emerged in relation to the question opened by the exercise, rather than through an attempt to reconstruct participants' individual stories or explain them as persons. The materials generated through the activities were not treated as a dataset for formal comparison or thematic coding; rather, they provided situated expressions through which the interpretive question explored in this paper became visible. Participant quotations are drawn from contemporaneous facilitator notes and participants' written responses and reflections and are used to return the reader to the texture of the interpretive event, not as coded evidence from which generalized claims are derived. Participants consented to the use of anonymized quotations under institutional research ethics approval. The concern throughout is what these encounters disclose about experience, meaning, authority, responsibility, and the imagination of educational futures.

Narrative Agency, Implicit Narrative, and Decadence

Narrative hermeneutics offers a necessary starting point because it refuses the idea that narrative is merely an account given after the fact. Brockmeier and Meretoja (2014) understand narrative as a culturally mediated practice of sense-making through which experience becomes intelligible. Experience does not appear first in pure form and then receive narrative expression; rather, experience is always already shaped by interpretive horizons, narrative inheritances, and culturally available ways of organizing what matters. This situatedness also resonates with Gadamer's account of historically effected understanding, in which interpreters encounter questions through horizons already shaped by history and tradition rather than from a neutral standpoint. Such horizons both condition what can initially appear as meaningful and remain open to revision through encounters with other perspectives (Larrauri Pertierra, 2022).

From this perspective, the scenario exercise at the center of this paper cannot be understood as a neutral prompt eliciting private views. It was an interpretive event in which participants from different positions encountered the same invitation through different histories, responsibilities, and inherited plots.

Meretoja's work sharpens this claim by locating agency within narrative environments rather than outside them. In *The Ethics of Storytelling*, Meretoja (2018) develops a narrative hermeneutics concerned with how narratives enlarge or diminish the spaces of possibility in which people act, interpret, and relate to others. Her later account of implicit narratives describes culturally available models of sense-making that steer patterns of experience, discourse, and interaction, often without becoming fully explicit (Meretoja, 2023). Narrative agency, in turn, names our capacity to position ourselves in relation to these models: to recognize them, to imagine beyond them, and to enter dialogically into narrative relations that need not simply reproduce what is already given.

Meretoja (2023) differentiates narrative agency into three dimensions. Narrative awareness concerns awareness of the implicit narratives that organize experience and of the perspectives through which stories are told. Narrative imagination concerns the sense of the possible: the ability to envision how things might be otherwise and to resist the closure of dominant plots. Narrative dialogicality concerns the capacity to enter narratively mediated relations with others, to hold multiple perspectives in view, and to participate in creating new narrative in-betweens without prematurely subsuming difference. The three dimensions are analytically distinct but experientially entangled. What one can imagine depends partly on what one can notice, and what one can notice is shaped by whose perspective can remain genuinely available.

This threefold model is especially useful for the present paper because it allows the contrast between the two groups to be read not as a difference in competence, but as a difference in narrative positioning. The exercise did not simply reveal divergent preferences. It made visible different conditions for noticing, imagining, and relationally inhabiting possible futures. What matters, then, is not only what each group produced, but how much of the institutional world entered the interpretive field when the exercise began.

Gordon's (2024) notion of disciplinary decadence becomes illuminating at this point. Gordon is not simply describing methodological rigidity. He names a condition in which an interpretive

world protects its own presuppositions rather than allowing reality to challenge them. The framework becomes more authoritative than what appears. Read analogically, educational leadership can develop comparable closures when settled plots of accountability, implementation, reform, public trust, and institutional responsibility become so normative that they determine in advance what a responsible reading of a situation should look like. The risk is not interpretive density itself, but the point at which inherited narratives become authoritative enough to foreclose what exceeds them.

This formulation helps clarify the apparent paradox between experience and possibility. The doctoral students, many of whom had limited formal leadership experience, were less densely situated within system-level narratives of consequence. That relative distance supported interpretive mobility: positions and possibilities could be tried without an immediate obligation to reconcile or enact them. The superintendents and senior leaders occupied a denser interpretive field. Imagined changes arrived already entangled with authorization, communication, public trust, policy, funding, staff capacity, and survivability. Formal authority did not necessarily grant narrative freedom; it increased what had to matter at once.

My argument in this paper follows from that recognition. Responsibility does not simply constrain narrative agency, and experience is not the enemy of imagination. Rather, responsibility changes the conditions under which narrative awareness, imagination, and dialogicality are exercised. The people most accountable for creating a preferred future may also be those for whom the present has the greatest interpretive density. The question is how leaders can remain answerable to what they know without allowing what they know to monopolize what can still become possible.

Narrative Awareness

The first question Meretoja's (2023) model invites is not what participants concluded, but what they were able to notice. Narrative awareness concerns awareness of the implicit narratives that organize experience and of the perspectives through which situations are interpreted. It includes recognizing that no narrative is neutral, that meaning is always selective, and that what appears self-evident is often already shaped by culturally available models of sense-making (Meretoja, 2023). Read in this way, the contrast between the two groups begins not at the level of judgment, but at the level of attention. The students and the superintendents did not simply produce different scenarios; they entered the same prompt with different fields of relevance already in view.

This matters because the scenario exercise itself was not empty. Participants entered the quadrants through implicit narratives about assessment, leadership, change, and responsibility that had already organized what seemed salient, realistic, or worthy of notice. Meretoja (2023) argues that implicit narratives steer patterns of experience, discourse, and interaction, often without becoming fully explicit. They shape not only the stories people tell afterward but also how situations become meaningful while they unfold. The task was therefore never simply to respond to a framework; it was to navigate a narrative environment already structured by prior meanings.

Students often became aware of their own standpoint as they moved through the exercise. One reflected, "I just assumed that my own perspective was the most important to the work." That recognition matters because narrative awareness is not equivalent to possessing multiple

perspectives in advance. It includes becoming conscious of the position from which one has been interpreting and recognizing that this position does not exhaust the situation. The exercise could interrupt the apparent naturalness of one's own view by requiring participants to ask how the same quadrant might be inhabited differently across roles and relationships.

The superintendents' awareness carried a different density. One said, "It is hard to stay curious and creative as the reality of my context and all the stakeholders' perspectives weigh on me." This statement complicates any reading of leaders as simply failing to see other perspectives. The problem named here is almost the reverse: context and stakeholder perspectives are intensely present, and their combined weight shapes what can remain available to attention. Narrative awareness may therefore be enriched by responsibility even as that richness makes it harder to suspend the demands of the present.

This distinction is important. The students' relative distance from institutional consequence afforded interpretive mobility: perspectives could be tried, shifted, or relinquished without immediate obligation to reconcile them. The superintendents worked within interpretive density: institutional memory, public trust, policy, staff experience, community expectations, and implementation history arrived together. Experience did not simply narrow attention; it multiplied what had to count. The hermeneutic issue is what happens when this density becomes so authoritative that some possibilities cannot remain visible long enough to be explored.

This is where decadence sharpens the analysis. If disciplinary decadence names the closure of interpretive worlds around their own assumptions, then the concern is not that leaders know too much, but that familiar leadership plots may become the warrants by which unfamiliar possibilities are dismissed. Settled narratives about what communities will accept, what teachers will resist, what boards will fund, or what systems can sustain may be grounded in real experience. They become problematic when they cease to function as interpretations and begin to function as the boundaries of intelligibility (Gordon, 2024).

Power also enters this interpretive field through the ways institutional experience becomes authorized as reality. Britzman's (2003) account of the "discourse of the real" is useful here because it complicates the assumption that professional knowledge acquired through experience is simply descriptive or politically neutral. What comes to count as realistic, workable, or responsible is already shaped by institutional expectations, cultural myths, and historically sedimented assumptions. From this perspective, interpretive density is not only an accumulation of experience and responsibility; it is also formed within relations of power that help determine which forms of knowledge are granted authority and which possibilities are rendered implausible before they can be fully explored. This does not make professional judgment suspect in itself, but it does require attention to how the "real" against which imagined futures are tested has already been narratively and institutionally constituted.

Authority enters here in an especially important way. The superintendents occupied positions of formal authority, yet authority did not simply expand or diminish narrative awareness. It altered its stakes. Leaders attend to what they may later have to explain, defend, authorize, or repair. Their attention is therefore shaped by anticipated consequence. The students had less formal authority

and greater freedom to allow a perspective to remain exploratory. In this sense, authority does not merely discipline perception; it makes perception answerable.

Meretoja (2023) argues that bringing implicit narratives into reflection can enhance narrative agency by allowing interpreters to recognize models of sense-making that would otherwise remain invisible. That claim is especially relevant here. The scenario exercise created an occasion in which participants could notice not only a possible future but the narratives governing their relation to it. For the superintendents, the challenge was not simply to become more imaginative. It was to distinguish the realities to which they were responsibly attentive from the inherited plots that were quietly defining those realities as exhaustive.

Degrees of responsibility also changed the future participants could notice. Two students independently described the high-trust/high-disruption quadrant in almost identical terms: “Students would be able to show what they know, understand, and do in the high trust/high disruption quadrant; teachers would be able to focus on learning that matters; principals would have to protect their vulnerability from outside interference.” What is significant is the movement in narrative position. The preferred future changes as the speaker moves from student to teacher to principal: the opportunity for one role becomes a responsibility, and exposure for another. Perspective on the future, then, appears to change with one’s degree of responsibility for sustaining it. That relationship leads directly to narrative imagination.

Narrative Imagination

If narrative awareness concerns what participants were able to notice, narrative imagination concerns what they were able to imagine from within those conditions of notice. For Meretoja (2023), narrative imagination is tied to the sense of the possible: the ability to envision how things might be otherwise, to imagine alternative trajectories, and to resist dominant plots that present the present as self-evident or inevitable. Narrative imagination is not fantasy detached from reality. It is the capacity to keep the possible meaningful before it is fully authorized by existing conditions.

One doctoral student did not simply name high trust and high disruption as desirable but inhabited it as a possible world: “I can see a future in the High Trust and High Disruption quadrant. That school system would value each other, different perspectives, be interested in supporting all learners, and they would have dynamic failure loops that would lead to innovation and creativity.” What matters here is the form of the response. The future is populated with relationships, values, learning, failure, innovation, and creativity. It is narrated before it is defended.

The superintendent language brought consequence into the future almost immediately. One leader said, “So when I look at these quadrants, I see that what I want is different than what our communities want. How do I create high trust when my context doesn’t value education or think we are doing what we should for their kids, and our students are telling us that they are not being prepared for the future? ... I am not sure I have a team that can help me bring the future that I want into operation.” This is not an absence of futurity. The leader can see what is wanted, but the imagined future arrives already populated by community expectations, student perspectives, trust, team capacity, and the obligation to operationalize.

These two utterances mark a more complex contrast than open versus constrained imagination. The student narrates qualities of the possible world; the superintendent narrates the relationships and conditions through which that world would have to become real. The latter is not necessarily less imaginative, but more densely accountable. Yet density changes the temporal sequence of imagination: feasibility, legitimacy, and capacity enter before possibility has had much time to elaborate itself. In this sense, responsibility can crowd the possible without eliminating it.

The distinction matters because a preferred future can be visible without being narratively available as a route. The phrase “bring the future that I want into operation” moves immediately from desire to enactment. The question becomes not merely What could be? but What could I responsibly ask others to do, and can the system sustain it? That shift is professionally necessary. The hermeneutic question is whether it occurs so quickly that present narratives become the conditions the future must satisfy before it can be imagined on its own terms.

Meretoja’s (2023) account of narrative imagination helps make sense of this difference. She argues that a sense of the possible is shaped by the relation between narrative imagination and what she calls the narrative unconscious—the reservoir of implicit narratives so taken for granted that they guide meaning-making without becoming fully visible. The more tightly dominant implicit narratives organize the present, the harder it may be to imagine alternatives that are not immediately translated back into their terms. Imagination is therefore not simply a personal trait; it is a culturally, historically, and institutionally conditioned capacity.

The notion of decadence intensifies this reading. If decadence names the closure of interpretive worlds around their own assumptions, then narrative imagination is endangered when the plots of the present become so authoritative that they foreclose alternatives before those alternatives can be fully narrated. Read this way, the issue is not personal limitation. It is the possibility that established leadership narratives can define what counts as realistic and responsible so early that imagination becomes answerable to the present before it has had a chance to disclose anything genuinely different.

Authority again complicates the picture. To imagine high trust and high disruption from a superintendent position is not simply to prefer an ideal future; it is to imagine a future that would have to be led, justified, communicated, and sustained within political and organizational realities. Authority burdens imagination with consequence. The students’ relative distance from that consequence supported mobility, while the superintendents’ responsibility produced density. Neither condition is inherently superior. They make different forms of seeing possible and impose different limits.

Meretoja (2023) links narrative imagination to undogmatism and ethical inquiry: to the capacity to resist narratives that close down questioning and to remain open to plurality and uncertainty. The superintendent responses suggest that the gap was not between aspiration and commitment. The preferred future was visible as desirable. The difficulty lay in maintaining narrative access to it while multiple conditions of enactment pressed into view. The gap, then, was between preference and narratability.

This difference matters for educational leadership because innovation depends not only on vision statements or strategic plans, but on whether leaders can maintain a sense of the possible long enough for new futures to become speakable. Scenario work may create such an interval, but this exercise suggests that it does not do so automatically. Futures-oriented leadership learning may need to help participants distinguish responsible attention to context from the premature use of context as a veto on possibility.

Narrative Dialogicality

“Whose future are we actually talking about?” The same question surfaced independently in two superintendent conversations. It unsettles the seemingly straightforward language of a preferred future. Preferred by whom—a superintendent, a board, teachers, students, families, community, or government? Narrative dialogicality becomes unavoidable here because a future is never preferred from nowhere. It is narrated from particular positions within relationships whose hopes, vulnerabilities, responsibilities, and expectations may not coincide. For Meretoja (2023), dialogicality is not merely the presence of multiple voices; it is the capacity to remain open to perspectives that are not one’s own and to participate in creating new narrative in-betweens without prematurely subsuming difference.

The students often moved among these positions with relative ease. Their scenario talk treated the perspectives of students, teachers, principals, central-office leaders, families, and communities as interpretive locations from which the same quadrant could mean something different. The student reflection quoted earlier—moving from what students might be able to show, to what teachers might be able to focus on, to what principals might need to protect—illustrates this movement. The meaning of the future changed as the narrative position changed.

Yet the superintendent responses complicate any suggestion that leaders simply foregrounded relationships less. One asked, “Each stakeholder has a different perspective. How do I honour their voice and bring them together without deciding a way forward on my own? How can I have them part of the decision?” Here, plurality is not absent; it is intensely present. The difficulty lies in sustaining that plurality while occupying a role expected to authorize action. Institutional responsibility may therefore amplify perspective-awareness while simultaneously increasing pressure toward coherence, decision, and enactment.

The language of non-subsumptive understanding is important here, and its lineage matters. Meretoja (2018) develops non-subsumptive understanding as an ethical possibility within narrative hermeneutics: an encounter with another person or experience that does not simply absorb singularity into an already familiar general category. Sumara et al. (2025) adapt this orientation in their work on close writing, asking how interpretive practices might make deferred, unnoticed, or uncounted experience available without immediately reducing it to what the interpreter already knows. Their adaptation is useful here because it gives a practice-oriented vocabulary for Meretoja’s broader ethical claim.

What appears in the exercise, then, is a difference not in whether relation is present but in what relation demands. Students could allow perspectives to widen the scene without being responsible for resolving them. Superintendents encountered other voices both as interlocutors and as people

to whom they were answerable. The hermeneutic risk begins when responsibility to act turns too quickly into subsumption—when difference is translated into categories that can be aligned, managed, or resolved before it has had the chance to unsettle the leader’s own preferred future.

Meretoja (2023) distinguishes between the fact that we are always already constituted dialogically and the ethical ideal of genuine dialogue. In the stronger sense, dialogicality requires openness to being challenged by the other, courage to let one’s preconceptions be unsettled, and a refusal to fit singular experience into familiar molds too quickly. The superintendents’ work already immerses them in multiple constituencies and competing demands. That practical embeddedness may produce considerable dialogical awareness, yet it also creates an institutional expectation to stabilize meaning: to decide, authorize, communicate, and move. The challenge is not to encounter more voices, but to remain changed by them before drawing them toward resolution.

Authority changes dialogicality by altering the consequences of openness. A student can entertain an unfamiliar perspective and leave the tension unresolved. A superintendent may know that unresolved tension will return as a decision, a board question, a staff concern, a public explanation, or an implementation problem. The pressure toward coherence is not inherently anti-dialogical; organizations eventually require action. The difficulty is temporal: whether decision arrives after plurality has done interpretive work, or before.

Narrative dialogicality also concerns the possibility of creating new narrative in-betweens. The scenario exercise can be understood as an attempt to create such a space, but the question “Whose future?” reveals that the preferred future cannot simply be selected from a quadrant. It must be negotiated dialogically. A preferred future worthy of the name is less a leader’s destination than a relational achievement—one that remains answerable to perspectives capable of changing what the destination itself means.

A Proviso: Resisting Interpretive Closure

A paper organized around contrast risks hardening differences into types. That risk is especially present here, where doctoral students and practicing superintendents could too easily be cast into familiar binaries: openness and constraint, imagination and realism, theory and practice. Such binaries would flatten what the participant quotations themselves complicate. The issue is not that one group possessed narrative agency and the other lacked it, but that the groups entered the same exercise under different conditions of responsibility and consequence.

Alcoff’s (1991) critique of speaking for others is therefore crucial. I do not claim that doctoral students are inherently more open, nor that superintendents are uniformly constrained by institutional life. The contrast described here is not a universal distinction between categories of people. It is an interpretive account of a situated encounter: differently positioned participants responding to the same scenario framework under differing relations to experience, meaning, authority, and consequence. Any reading I offer remains partial and perspectival rather than definitive or exhaustive.

This caution is also methodological. Hermeneutic inquiry does not treat participant speech as transparent data from which fixed truths can be extracted. As Moules (2002) suggested,

hermeneutic work requires attention to history, language, and the conditions through which understanding becomes possible, while Kakkori (2009) warns against reducing hermeneutic and phenomenological inquiry to procedural theme extraction. The quotations in this paper are therefore not presented as proof of stable group differences. They are situated expressions through which the interpretive event becomes available for further reading.

Tuck and Yang's (2014) language of refusal sharpens this restraint. Not all differences must be rendered fully knowable, and not every contrast should be made analytically transparent. Some dimensions of what occurred in the exercise exceed what can be cleanly named: hesitation, affect, relational pressure, singular histories, and the embodied weight of institutional life. Refusal, in this context, is not a withdrawal from interpretation but a discipline of limits. It reminds me not to resolve the contrast too neatly or to reduce participants to functions of the concepts through which I read them.

For that reason, this paper remains modest in its claims. It does not seek generalizability in the conventional sense, nor does it propose a typology of participant response. Rather, it offers a hermeneutic reflection on how differently situated participants encountered an invitation to possibility. Its purpose is not to master the meaning of that contrast, but to illuminate how narrative awareness, imagination, and dialogicality can be both enlarged and pressured by the responsibilities through which educational leadership is lived.

The quotations require the same restraint. They are situated utterances recorded within a facilitated exercise, not self-interpreting evidence of stable dispositions. Their function is to make the interpretive event audible and to invite a reading of how present, future, authority, and perspective were being negotiated in language. Participants moved, hesitated, contradicted themselves, and occupied more than one narrative position over time. The quotations illuminate moments of narrative positioning; they do not define the people who spoke them.

Discussion

The contrast becomes most useful when framed not as a question of who knew too much or too little, but as a difference between interpretive mobility and interpretive density. The students' relative distance from system-level consequence allowed them to move among possibilities and positions with less immediate pressure to reconcile them. The superintendents brought more of the institutional world into the future at once: histories, constituencies, policy, public trust, implementation experience, team capacity, and anticipated consequence. That density is a form of professional knowing, not a failure of imagination. From a Gadamerian perspective, this professional knowing can also be understood in relation to *phronesis*, or practical wisdom: situated judgment that emerges through experience and remains responsive to the particular circumstances of action rather than being reducible to predetermined rules (Leiviskä, 2015). Yet when many realities become simultaneously relevant, the present can crowd the possible before the possible has acquired enough narrative texture to challenge the present.

Neither position should be romanticized. Interpretive mobility without consequence can become naive; interpretive density without intervals of openness can become self-sealing. Educational leadership requires movement between them. Leaders need enough distance from inherited plots

to imagine otherwise and enough practical judgment to return possibility to the worlds in which it must be lived. The pedagogical challenge is therefore not to teach experienced leaders to imagine as though they had no experience, but to create conditions in which experience can be held provisionally rather than treated as destiny.

Responsibility appears, in this sense, as a contextual condition that mediates all three dimensions of narrative agency. It can enlarge narrative awareness by bringing more histories, stakeholders, and consequences into view, while also making it harder to suspend those realities. It shapes narrative imagination because possible futures are filtered through anticipated consequences before they are fully narrated. It shapes narrative dialogicality because responsibility multiplies the voices to which leaders are answerable while increasing the urgency to decide among them. Responsibility is not a fourth dimension to add to Meretoja's model. It is a pressure that can enrich and constrain awareness, imagination, and dialogicality at the same time.

The exercise also complicates the idea of a preferred future. Both groups could point to high trust and high disruption as desirable, but "Whose future are we actually talking about?" shows that preference is not a neutral endpoint. High trust may mean something different to a student, teacher, principal, superintendent, parent, or trustee; disruption may distribute vulnerability and authority unevenly across those positions. A preferred future is therefore not merely chosen. It becomes a dialogical achievement as people narrate what the future would ask of them, what it would make possible, and what they may need to relinquish for others to inhabit it.

These insights have practical implications for scenario work and other forms of futures-oriented leadership learning. Asking leaders to name a preferred future may be insufficient if the exercise immediately activates the institutional plots that make current practice appear necessary. Generative scenario work may require a deliberate sequencing of interpretive moves: first, a protected interval in which possibility is not required to pass an immediate feasibility test; second, explicit attention to the narratives organizing what counts as realistic; third, movement among perspectives capable of unsettling the leader's own preferred future; and only then a return to the practical work of judgment, design, and enactment. The purpose is not to escape reality, but to prevent reality-as-already-narrated from monopolizing the future.

Gordon's (2024) account of decadence helps name what is at stake in this sequencing. When an interpretive framework protects itself from what exceeds it, the framework ceases to be a resource for understanding and begins to police what can appear. In educational leadership, a similar danger emerges when "what we know from experience" becomes an unquestioned warrant for why an alternative cannot work. Expertise, the very quality relied upon to guide change, can then narrow change's intelligibility. Such expertise is also institutionally situated: what is recognized as practical knowledge or responsible judgment may already carry assumptions about authority, legitimacy, and what counts as "real" within the organization (Britzman, 2003). A hermeneutic orientation does not ask leaders to abandon expertise. It asks them to remain answerable to what their expertise may be preventing them from seeing.

The scenario exercise reframes leadership imagination as an ethical and relational practice rather than a creativity technique. To imagine a preferred future is to negotiate one's relationship to inherited narratives, to accept that other perspectives may unsettle the leader's view, and to permit

the not-yet-known to remain meaningful before it becomes manageable. This is why dialogicality matters to futures work. A future narrated only from formal authority risks reproducing the assumptions of that position, even when its stated goals are innovative. New narrative in-betweens become possible when responsibility is held without allowing it to subsume the perspectives through which the future might otherwise be re-seen.

The interpretation offered here extends Meretoja's model in a modest but specific direction. Her account shows how narrative awareness, imagination, and dialogicality shape our capacity to navigate narrative environments. The present analysis suggests that, in professional leadership contexts, institutional responsibility alters the conditions under which all three dimensions are exercised. Responsibility produces interpretive density: it gives narratives weight, changes the temporal stakes of imagination, multiplies what attention must hold, and increases the urgency with which plurality is drawn toward resolution. Narrative agency in leadership is therefore conditioned not only by cultural and historical narratives, but by what an interpreter is answerable for if an imagined future becomes real.

The epigram that opens this paper defines a sense of the possible through the ability to imagine different routes to different futures and how things could be otherwise (Meretoja, 2023). This reflection extends that insight by asking what happens when those routes carry unequal responsibilities and consequences. The superintendent who recognized being "stuck in what was happening now" while believing the future was being imagined, and the leaders who asked "Whose future are we actually talking about?" make visible two requirements of narrative agency in leadership: enough distance from the present for possibility to emerge, and enough dialogical openness for that possibility to be revised by others. Leaders do not need to know less of the present. They need interpretive spaces in which what they know does not monopolize what could become. A preferred future becomes leadable only after it can be held open long enough to become narratable with others.

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