



# Hoping for community in a technologically decelerated world - A critical utopian approach

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## ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of technological acceleration during the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper addresses *how educational practitioners' hopes articulate a critique of the present and simultaneously give voice to (im)possible futures*. Drawing on Bloch's "principle of hope" (1995), Appadurai's "traces of future" (2021) and Levitas' "utopia as method" (2013), we utilize a critical utopian approach inspired by Muñoz (2009). We interviewed educational practitioners who worked with young people during the pandemic, and identify three themes articulating our interviewees' hopes for technologically decelerated futures: 1) *young people's participation* in decision-making, which is linked to the wish for more *visibility* for young people in the future; 2) *mutual care*, which is interwoven with the wish for support in young people's lives to be more *reliable*; 3) *appreciation* for other groups, opinions and ways of life, which is linked to the wish for more future interpersonal *understanding*. These three themes point to an overarching desire for *solidarity in community* which needs time, occasions, role models and spaces of encounter. We discuss the priority of technologically decelerated hopes and conclude with implications for future research that brings together imaginations of futures, observations of practical action and designs for future artefacts.

## 1. Introduction

Each phase of accelerated growth within a society also brings with it desires for deceleration. In view of technology-driven social transformations such as digitalisation, datafication or platformisation, critical perspectives on the role of technologies in society have been gaining traction, with the desire for a more just, humane and less technology-centred degrowth society becoming more widespread (e.g. Guenot & Vetter, 2019). These perspectives interweave critique of contemporary, technology-driven social transformation, with an interest in futures and futurity (e.g. Appadurai, 2021). Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, austerity, right-wing populism and technological acceleration, there is increased uncertainty today about many things in everyday life that could previously be taken for granted: During the first waves of the pandemic, we witnessed empty shelves in shops in countries that

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otherwise live in abundance. We experienced closed institutions such as churches, doctors' surgeries, community centres and (city) offices, which are usually responsible for the physical and mental well-being of large parts of society. And we saw unsettled families who were sometimes overwhelmed and exhausted by the precarious act of balancing school, family and economic constraints.

A particularly striking example of these far-reaching changes is schooling. In many societies, the school is regarded as the place where children and young people learn on a daily basis, are taught societal values and are educated to be a part of society. When school buildings around the world were closed for months, this place of cognitive and social learning was no longer physically accessible as it had been before and could not fulfil many of its long-established social and educational functions. Thus, the unavailability of the physical location transformed the previously taken-for-granted assumptions about school as an integral part and cornerstone of established social structures into ambiguity. Where should children be accommodated, how should they be educated and emotionally and physically supported during the day? How should children experience community togetherness, engage with different opinions and ways of life, or learn to negotiate conflicts?

The rupture brought by the pandemic opened up opportunities for educational practitioners to reflect anew about their hopes and desires. This article explores the question of *how educational practitioners' hopes and desires articulate a critique of the present and simultaneously give voice to (im)possible futures*. We draw on Ernst Bloch's "principle of hope" (Bloch, 1995), Arjun Appadurai's "traces of future" (Appadurai, 2021) and Ruth Levitas' "utopia as method" (Levitas, 2013) and use a critical utopian (Muñoz, 2009) research approach. Drawing on interviews with school administrators, teachers, (school) social workers, and other educational practitioners who worked with children and adolescents in school and out-of-school settings during the pandemic, we identify social changes that they conceptualise as desirable. The interviews were explicitly framed as interested in technology. Yet the interviewees, although describing their use of technology during the pandemic, foreground other concerns when they look to the future, i.e., a contemporary lack of (i) participatory decision-making, (ii) care and (iii) appreciation. They articulate hopes outwith technological solutionism. Instead, they hope for future social togetherness characterised by (i) greater visibility of young people's needs and desires, (ii) more stable dependability of the adults in young people's lives, and (iii) increased interpersonal understanding. The paper suggests that these grassroots descriptions of the present and hopes for the future articulate a central yearning for *solidarity in community*. This may seem like well-trodden ground, but it is absolutely radical for many living in high-paced, market- and efficiency-oriented, industrialised parts of the world today, especially, we suggest here, when this desire is articulated in a context explicitly framed by the role of technology. The paper discusses this yearning in relation to research on convivial technologies in degrowth societies, debates on (technological) acceleration and deceleration in the educational context and contemporary thinking about tiny revolutions and everyday radical acts. Our aim is to illustrate hopes and desires for more socially just, in part utopian, futures using concrete, contemporary examples from reflections on educational practice. The contribution also aims to stimulate thoughts for educational practice and educational research interested in futurity.

## 2. Studying hopes as traces into futures

The future is not yet here. This is to say, we can only try to assume, imagine or hope that something will, might, should or should not happen (e.g. Leahy et al., 2019; Sardar, 2010). Against the background of an uncertain contemporary present, academic interest in futures has accelerated in the past years – across many research fields, including education (e.g. Houlden & Veletsianos, 2023; Macgilchrist et al., 2020; Selwyn, 2021). This research, sometimes based in empirical studies, other times as social science fiction, critically reflects on the impact of technological change on society, creating both utopias and dystopias. Many of these include a "historical retrospective" (Zierer, 2021, p. 13 f) to formulate visions of future schools, reflecting on futures against the background of technological change.

Drawing on the past to shape the future can, however, also restrict thought and practice. In the pandemic, this became apparent for educational practice, for example, when key stakeholders took recourse to long-cherished concepts for how schooling should be transformed, rather than going beyond the already-known and well-rehearsed arguments for, e.g., more personalisation, better technology in schools or more effective leadership (Burgos et al., 2021; Maaz & Becker-Mrotzek, 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Zepeda & Lanoue, 2021). Levitas refers to this as "political pragmatism" that "prioritises short-term fixes for problems within the current system" while placing "questions of the viability or justice of that system itself, and certainly radical alternatives [...] outside legitimate political debate" (Levitas, 2013, p. 132). Indeed, drawing on concepts and approaches that have been evaluated can inadvertently render the future smaller and less possible, rather than expanding future possibilities. More specifically, if we (as scholars or educational practitioners) draw on past experiences to create space for *technology-centred* futures, we often unintentionally reduce the space for *technology-light* social utopias. Or as Appadurai argues, the more we think of technological futures, the less space is there for non-technological futures (Appadurai, 2021).

Against this background, three findings of previous future studies in education (e.g. Danaher, 2021; Leahy et al., 2019; Facer & Sandford, 2010) frame the following analysis: First, future studies (in education) do not aim to describe one future, but to make statements about diverse possible futures. This research is interested in discovering, inventing, examining, evaluating and proposing "possible, probable and preferable futures" (Bell, 1997, p. 73). Secondly, future studies have to face the key challenge that they usually consider "ill-defined complex problems" for which there is no logical short-term fix. One example in education is "the difficulty in 'preparing' educators, learners and other stakeholders for engagement in types of future learning spaces or experiences that may be dramatically different to what exists or what is practiced today" (Leahy et al., 2019, p. 1). Third, future studies often look to the past or present for their analyses (Leahy et al., 2019; Sardar, 2010). With the aim of predicting the future by analysing what has already taken place, these studies have been less interested in imagining impossible, "not-yet" or utopian futures.

Building on this, the following analysis draws on interviewees' descriptions of the present and their hopes for the future. Our

interviewees' situated articulations of hopes for alternative futures are the central springboard for the paper. With Bloch (1995) and Appadurai (2013), we thus aim to study hopes as traces into futures. At the centre of Bloch's philosophies lies "hope" whose content is represented in ideas and in imagination, which in turn should not be confused with fantasizing or remembering. In Bloch's understanding, a person unites in themselves both the already realized possibilities of all that history has made of them and those possibilities that they can still achieve in the future. Hope is, among other things, a human reaction to the external world, to suffering and misery. Appadurai also draws on Bloch's ideas of hope as imagination and entangles them with his thoughts on traces of future. He assumes that human longings, desires, and dreams are given their form by the imagination (Appadurai, 2021): "those ways of thinking, feeling and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce greater equity in what I have called the capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2013, p. 295).

### 3. Researching the "not yet" and the "not ever" with a critical utopian approach

Three types of study have traditionally dominated futures research: forecasting studies that use expert interviews to predict future scenarios, research that observes current actions shaping the future, and studies that use future workshops to create and reflect on tangible artefacts for potential futures (e.g. Candy & Kornet, 2019; Textor, 1995; Vrasidas & Theodoridou, 2018). Our critical-utopian approach entangles these three approaches to *thinking about*, *observing* and *reflecting on* "the future" in a threefold way: We are interested in how practitioners articulate their thoughts and critique of the present (*thinking*). Our approach is interested in the observation of "what is going on" (*observing*). And we aim to identify key elements from our interview partners' reflections on their utopian hopes as artefacts 'from' their futures (*reflecting*). We thus shift the focus of previous empirical approaches, which explicitly ask about future scenarios, actions and artefacts (e.g. Hänninen et al., 2022; Candy & Kornet, 2019; Riedy & Waddock, 2022; Sools et al., 2022; Textor, 1995; Vrasidas & Theodoridou, 2018), to a critical-utopian reflection on the hopes and desires of our interview partners. Instead of predicting futures for education, we understand our approach "as an exercise in informed speculation" (Danaher, 2021, p. 10), i.e., as a critical reflection on hopes for possible futures informed by our interviewees' articulations. Our interest is thus also not in elaborating a *singular* probable or desirable vision of the future, but in identifying *plural* unusual, critical and (im)possible futures.

Specifically, the "utopian moment" of our research comes into play in three ways: First, in our theoretical-methodological perspective on hope (Bloch, 1995). In the hope for a positive, better future (the "not-yet" in Bloch's sense (Bloch, 1995, p. 6; see also 'not-yetness' Ross, 2017)), there are always interwoven fears about what should not be (the not-ever, so to speak) or what should be prevented in the future. We addressed this by asking our interviewees what they would like to see in the future and what they hope for, but also by attending to silences during analysis, i.e., what the interview partners do not mention.

Secondly, from a methodological point of view, we draw on "utopia as method" or "utopia as a description of the present" (Levitas, 2013). Here, utopia is not seen as a description of a best possible, ideal, future society. We assume instead that utopia is a driving force that is inherent in human beings as well as in matter; utopia turns against what is not finished and unsafe, against what is unjust and unworthy of human beings (following Bloch, 1995; also Muñoz, 2009). We first asked our interviewees about their current experiences with technological solutions and approaches to providing distance learning and educational care-work when school buildings were closed. We then asked what the interviewees hope for and would like to see in the future. Our interviewees' descriptions of the present served as an anchor from which to think about (im)possible futures.

The third way that the utopian moment comes into play in this study is through its critical-utopian approach (Muñoz, 2009). We ground hopes, utopias and traces of the future in critique of contemporary (unjust and inequitable) configurations related to technologies in educational settings. We understand the utopian as an impulse that can be found in everyday life and that becomes tangible as a moment of hopeful-transformative potentiality.

In total, we spoke with 65 school social workers, teachers, school administrators, education policy makers, youth workers and other people from institutions that provide formal and informal education for children and young adults in different regions of Germany. We conducted the open-ended, semi-structured interviews during and after the full and partial school closures from May 2020 to April 2022. To reflect the priorities and approach noted above, our interview guide comprised three sections. In the first section, we were interested in the interviewees' experiences of technology use and social inequality when school buildings were off-limits to the majority of students. In the second section, we invited interviewees to describe how they met the challenges they experienced during the pandemic lockdown, asking specifically about their use of digital technologies. Which experiences left them hopeful, what surprised them? In the third section, we were interested in how the future could be imagined otherwise. The interviewees were asked to describe which aspects of the present they would like to change, what bothered them or where they saw a need for future intervention. Here, we asked our interview partners to describe which adversities would have to be abolished today in order for the hopeful future they described to become (more) possible. What would society look like if it were in a "utopian enclave" (Jameson, 2007) where these previously described technologically framed ills had vanished?

The conversations, which lasted roughly one hour, were transcribed and then analysed in three steps. First, we drew on an ethnographic sensibility to "rich points", i.e., moments that use the interviewer as a research instrument and follow the traces of what seems confusing, unclear, unusual or otherwise requiring explanation and in-depth exploration (Agar, 2006). In this sense, an

epistemology of attending to situated meaning-making guided our initial thick reading of the transcripts in light of the theories noted above. The aim was to tease out issues which seemed key to these educational practitioners, issues they articulated with attention or concern, especially where they searched for words, paused or were agitated or emphatic.<sup>1</sup> In particular, we were looking for moments in which we – the research team – were surprised. Initially, we were not very surprised. The themes discussed in this paper are not new. Yet, we became intrigued by the rupture between the responses to the first two interview sections and the third section. While in the first two sections our interviewees reflected on technology as an enabler or inhibitor of distance learning and educational care work, technology was noticeably absent in the third part of the interviews. In a second step, we thus thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2020) the interview responses to the third section of the interview, i.e., the questions about futures and hopes for society in an utopian enclave, which also included reflections on problems in today's society. In a third step, we reflected on these specific themes, and identified an overarching 'yearning' connecting them, which provides, we suggest, traces of (im-)possible futures.

#### 4. Hope through the looking glass – insights from our interviews

Three themes articulate interviewees' problematisation of contemporary issues with hopes for futures otherwise: 1) *young people's participation* in decision-making, which is linked to the wish for more *visibility* for children and young people in the future; 2) *mutual care*, which is interwoven with the wish for the resources and adults in the young people's lives to be more *reliable in the future*; 3) *appreciation* for other groups, opinions and ways of life, which is linked to the wish for more interpersonal *understanding* in the future. Together they point to the desire for solidarity in community, which needs time, but also occasions, role models and spaces of encounter to be made possible in the future.

##### 4.1. Participatory decision-making → visibility

Participatory decision-making is the first theme that we see in the interviews, i.e., the problematisation of how infrequently young people today participate in decisions that affect their lives. This is entangled with the wish for more visibility of young people and their needs in the future. One of our conversation partners, an education policy officer and former teacher, would like children and young people to be "taken more seriously" (AB\_41). A foundation employee wishes for children to be "listened to" (AB\_33) and "valued". A school social worker considers young people to be "experts for their situation" (AB\_08), who should be invited to speak for themselves.

A staff member of a church organisation who is responsible for afternoon and leisure activities for children and adolescents told us: "I would like to see children and young people seen more and involved more in decision-making processes [...]" (AB\_23). For her, "relationship work" is a very decisive component of cooperation with children and adolescents. For the young people with whom she works, she would like to have persons who are "fixed figures in politics, in society, in families, in the environment, in the circle of friends" (AB\_23), who stand by the young people when they have questions and in uncertain phases of their lives. These figures would be able to listen, give support and advice.

Other interviewees hope for more political will, a "lobby for children and young people" (AB\_26), but also opportunities for them to exert influence. "You [children] have the right to have a say in what happens in your environment," says a school social worker (AB\_08). A district youth worker (AB\_14), who is part of a network of state-organised institutions, including youth care and development, and who describes the contemporary world as a classist dystopia, wants children and young people to learn more "decision-making competence". Young people should learn "as much responsibility for their own lives as possible" in good time and help to shape the world in which they live in an informed way, so that they do not become the "useful cattle" of a social elite. An employee of a foundation (AB\_33), which includes mentoring programmes for young people, would like to see "[...] more say for children and young people from the very beginning. So already in the kindergarten and also in school". (AB\_33). She gives an example of the current situation, which she describes as lacking possibilities for children and young people to participate in decision-making, and imagines how she would like to see a different kind of participation, where young people are involved in fundamental, rather than superficial decisions:

"There are federal states where a wall can be built in the schoolyard and the participation is basically that the children and young people have a say in how it is painted. And not whether a wall should be built and whether it makes sense to build it, but what colour it should be. And there, too, only as a suggestion. Stories like that. So, simply nationwide in the day-care centres and schools, children and young people should be shown, at least now for the next coming generations, that your voice, your opinion is important to us, therefore everything that concerns your education and your educational space, we'll decide that together in a group". (AB\_33)

A social worker (AB\_08), who works in an urban youth club would like "to simply actually ask again: What do you need? And that we listen." (AB\_08). The young people in his organisation are mainly from families that receive some form of benefits from the social welfare system and "can basically be described as having barriers to education" (AB\_08). The social worker says: [...] I have been at the institution for just under ten years. I have not yet experienced [anyone receiving] a high school diploma [*Abitur*]. I have experienced

<sup>1</sup> For this reason, in this paper we do not delineate differences between interviewees along identity, age, professional, biographical or other categories. While this could be interesting, in particular differences between state-employed teachers and youth workers often employed in the third sector (e.g., independent, not-for-profit charities), in this paper, we engage with each speaker as a unique character articulating situated hopes, rather than exploring structural differences (see Ahmed (2021) for a methodology that inspired us).

two attempted high-school diplomas, yes, high-school diploma attempts really. And apart from that, we currently have an attendance rate of about 70 per cent of the children who receive welfare benefits [ALG II]."

For him, the pandemic revealed a shift in focus, with politics and the media paying less attention to children and young adults as young humans and more to them in their social function as "pupils, students, trainees". "And in fact, it was decisions were usually made ABOUT children and youths, and rarely WITH them." This "very important phase of adolescence, in the sense of drawing your own boundaries, being socialised in your peer group, developing your own points of view, where our kids already have difficulties", hardly took place. He still sees strong effects, for instance, when the youth centre tries to set participatory process in motion so that the young people can organise youth camps themselves:

"If you now ask: What do YOU want? How do you want to shape things? What do you expect from us? They just shrug their shoulders. And we often hear again what we had a few years ago, what we had actually overcome: 'YOU decide. YOU do it. I don't know.' In fact, I think that many people, especially here in the neighbourhood, have had a learning experience over the past one and a half years, where there are often patriarchal family systems and the kids don't have much say in what happens anyway, where the parents simply don't have the time to discuss things at length. They really have to relearn how to experience the self-efficacy that they actually have and to take their right to speak up." (AB\_08)

In response to our questions about what it would take to realise the desire for more visibility through more fundamental participation or why these desires had not already been achieved, some partners emphasised the lack of time. An employee of a foundation that supports educational projects for children and young people worldwide (AB\_35), for instance, describes the wish to "put someone at the side of every child who needs support, who just supports them and really deals with the child [...], who simply takes time to look closely: Where are your talents? Where are your interests, your abilities? What job would you like to do later?" The lack of (time) resources is one of the "biggest challenges" (AB\_35), rendering this support scarce. She sees a failure "to deal with each individual person individually" and "to really take time for each individual pupil and to really look at the person" (AB\_35).

#### 4.2. Mutual care → dependability

The lack of mutual care is the second theme that we see problematised in the interviews, expressed together with a desire for more material and social dependability: The employee of the foundation for educational sponsorships wishes for more dependable relations and support for young people, i.e., that young people are able to say something like, "[Hey, I can] rely on the fact that my society does not want to disadvantage me in any way" (AB\_33). A district youth development worker (AB\_26) wishes for "a world with more community and care for others", where individual groups do "not keep to themselves" and are therefore able to appreciate or understand other viewpoints or cultures.

Some of our interviewees talk about the self-centred egoism they perceived during the lockdowns, which they contrast with an altruistic we-centredness. A special educational needs educator (AB\_06) tells us about his experiences during the pandemic. He took over the emergency care and homework help in a school that stopped face-to-face teaching during the lockdowns. It was precisely the social collaboration, the "in-between", the extra effort, that "disappeared" during this period: "everyone just did their job by the book and then wondered at the end why things were not running smoothly" (AB\_06, pos. 189). A social worker in a church aid organisation (AB\_20) who offers mobile participatory theatre and games for children in parks and other public spaces describes the change she perceives:

"So, when it used to be, 'Yes, I have a bag of jelly beans, come eat with me', now they sit there and eat them all by themselves, and everyone else watches. That's really (laughs) the whole thing. And many of them are simply not allowed to [share] (.) right? They are taught: 'This is yours', right? So, yes, I really think that they don't really grow up with all these important values any more, you know? What was normal for us no longer exists. (.) (AB\_20, pos. 267–269)

This sense of loss is echoed by her colleague who works for the same church aid organisation as a family assistant (AB\_22), and would like people "not to be so greedy or stingy" and ask less "what I get", but "also SHARE with each other. [...] YES, to understand that (.) there are also other people who are important just like me" (AB\_22, pos. 189–193). The regional manager of a national charity (AB\_02), which usually provides after-school care for children and young people and which distributed food bags to families during the pandemic, describes an example of communal care that particularly surprised him and made him hopeful for future action:

Because I have to say that, because maybe at the beginning they were utopian ideas, or (.) [and we thought] oh, it won't work and now afterwards it's almost established. For one thing, the city quickly said, the municipality quickly said, we are going to intervene, these are our people, our children and teenagers here and we will make sure, no matter how costly, that they get lunch at home. That was absolutely (laughing) 'wow' at first. (.) Well, and that was/ has all the caterers and all the drivers involved again, has also created work for these companies. And it worked. It really has worked. Until very recently, parents could still apply for this and still get a meal delivered to their home. That in itself is something very utopian, I think, for many a municipality to imagine. And that worked and it always needs individuals who say, yes, we/ we don't think in/ in borders and fences now, but we look, look we have problem X right now and we need some sort of a/ a solution. (AB\_02, pos. 133)

Our condensed synthesis of the interview excerpts on mutual care suggests that relying on each other, caring for each other and building the sense of trust that the community will stand up for each other, even if not everyone is always pursuing the same goals or has equal resources, are basic conditions of community togetherness. In addition, there needs to be occasions and opportunities to show children positive examples of what caring for each other can look like. A specialist who supports teachers in two primary schools

points to the power of role models for future social coexistence. She says, "what we live, we also reproduce" (aba\_05) and wishes for more "time, understanding, attention, mindfulness from us" for the young people. "And if we don't offer them that, then (.) they won't learn that and then we don't need to somehow expect that this generation will treat us (.) wonderfully well, mindfully and otherwise." (aba\_05, item 51).

#### 4.3. *Appreciation → understanding*

The third theme, the appreciation of other groups, opinions and ways of life, includes, for example, the interviewees' expressed desire for "more understanding for each other", "for different points of view" (AB\_33). It is important to "find a common language that everyone can understand and deal with" (AB\_33). Our conversation partners speak of "a sense of justice" (AB\_26) or "less social injustice" (AB\_36). For the foundation employee, this is interwoven with "finding understanding, empathy for each other, and appreciation of other people as well" (AB\_33). In addition, she wishes for "simply this basic understanding for other life worlds, I think we would simply become more open" (AB\_33).

People working with children and young people should "sit together around the table more often" (AB\_33) to find compromises. An education policy officer and former teacher (AB\_41) asks, "How can children, youth and adults and seniors from different cultures live together and with various limitations, disabilities?" A youth worker, who is also part of a network of state-organised institutions, including youth care and activities, emphasises "if we really want to achieve holistic support and help for (.) children, for young people, for young adults, for families", then we need mutual "understanding" and "of course it also needs people who always breathe life into this approach" (AB\_34). The youth worker points out that cooperation among the institutions in the network has developed over a long period of time:

That is something I am very, very proud of, because I experience that (.) different perspectives come together, who of course are all dependent on their own institution, but who despite everything (.) have developed an understanding that you also have to represent and communicate the shared interest, even if it is perhaps not always your own, to your own institution's decision-makers. (AB\_34)

In his view, developing this strong, cooperative network required not only time but also "courage", which the city and the district mustered. "And it took a long time, there was a lot of discussion" until all those involved supported the process and the mission statement and continued to communicate, even if they did not always agree with everyone in the group (AB\_34, pos. 85–87). The youth worker hopes to "bring different groups" of people within our society "into conversation", because he believes "that there could be a stronger understanding for each other and also stronger solidarity for each other in society again." (AB\_34):

[W]e have a bit of a tendency that in society, uh, the different strata of society keep to themselves. So, the (...) the rich always stay with the rich, the poor stay among themselves, the uh (...)/ we/ we sort our children according to educational qualifications. This then continues later in training, or at university. (.) And these different social classes have few points where they meet. [...] they no longer encounter one another, they no longer talk to each other, they (...) experience the other as something foreign and so you try to keep it away from yourself. (AB\_34, pos. 119–121)

Reflecting on social classes, this extract articulates a desire for conversations across economic cleavages. Spaces for encounter are needed in order to initiate change. The "space should first be created, so that children and young people, above all, are not only listened to but also actually heard and taken seriously" (AB\_33). One interview partner sees a lot of "explosive potential" in the lack of togetherness, the "lack of intercultural understanding" for "people who (.) have a different way of life" or "perhaps have some form of disability" (AB\_34). His account reflects, among other things, a desire for opportunities to meet and for places where social togetherness is enabled across cultural and individual differences.

If you could bring all these groups together and [...] develop and work out an understanding for this (.) with each other, with the children and young people, that society is simply very, very diverse and very, very colourful and simply bringing different levels into conversation with each other, to have them encounter one another, to share experiences, I think that would mitigate many reservations that also exist in society. Maybe in the best/ over many years also uh (.) yes, make obsolete. (AB\_34)

This emphasises the encounters between different groups and their points of view, and highlights the temporal dimension associated with them. It takes time – maybe years – to develop an understanding for others and their perspectives.

#### 4.4. *Tensions in the hopes for more solidarity in community*

These descriptions of today's lack of participation, care, and appreciation, and the interwoven hopes for future social togetherness characterized by greater visibility, dependability, and understanding, reflect a central desire for solidarity and community. This echoes a core issue circulating in contemporary society, linked to radical acts of everyday revolution. We will return to this below. Yet these themes are not without tensions.

First, there are frictions in relation to the desire for future visibility of young people and the opportunities for participation in decision-making currently awarded to children and adolescents. An example of this is the foundation employee (AB\_33), who emphasises how "completely overwhelmed" (AB\_33) the young persons in her care are "by life in general". It is "difficult to inspire" the children and teenagers with whom she works to "take initiative themselves". Even though her colleagues at the facility try to involve the young people in, for example, the planning of activities such as leisure trips or day trips, it is "sometimes so difficult, because they

don't know what they want, they don't know what they actually like to do." On the one hand, they are encouraged to become more involved and to help shape the world in which they live. On the other hand, there is little time and few opportunities or institutional structures that support participatory decision-making. In addition, during the pandemic, many established institutions such as schools, but also community centres, youth groups and other voluntary organizations that work with children and young people, were closed. Their participatory structures were thus severely challenged.

Second, we see a tension in the desire for dependability and mutual care. Thus, during the pandemic, there were increasing calls for a community of solidarity, but the challenges of such communities also became (more) visible. The employee of the church agency (AB\_23), for example, refers to today's socioeconomic differences and the effective power of established labels such as "socially disadvantaged":

I would really wish that they would no longer describe themselves as socially disadvantaged or that we would no longer have to do that, but that we could say, okay, everyone has the same prerequisites and there is no longer this problem that, if some pandemic or something were to arrive, that the big race would then start and everyone would want to be the first and the best and yes, I would get further and the rest would not. I really would kind of like that. (AB\_23)

The desire for mutual care always includes a hierarchy between those who have resources and abilities. Who can care for whom in the first place? In what way? Who has learned to care? Who has the cognitive, affective and material resources to do so? Whose care is visible, and whose is rendered invisible? As our conversation partners unanimously confirm, the pandemic made this tension particularly evident, which is reflected, among other things, in our analysis of the desire for solidarity in community.

Third, we perceive a tension between the descriptions of today's lack of appreciation for others and the desire for more understanding. The interviews foreground that showing and experiencing appreciation requires not only time and courage, but also meeting places and "spaces" in order to build long-term understanding for one another. During the pandemic, however, such physical meeting places – such as schools, but also child and youth care facilities or sports and youth clubs – were rendered inaccessible for long stretches of time. Being enclosed in a small "bubble" was "a great challenge" (AB\_33). Especially when it comes to creating opportunities and meeting places for children and young people to encounter different ways of life and perspectives.

## 5. Discussion: yearning for solidarity as a radical act

Overall, these tensions support the complexity of the hopes for futures in which solidarity and community are centred that we identified across the interviews. In these indeterminate, yet clearly outlined futures, children and young people and their needs become more visible through opportunities for their active participation in decision-making; members of society can rely on one another through dependable mutual care; and greater understanding for one another is created through the appreciation of others. These hopes for more future solidarity and togetherness within a society are not new. Readers may recognise them from previous research and activism on participatory and community economics, democracy education, student-centred school reforms, degrowth activism, codesign movements, and feminist, decolonial, Indigenous, anti-racist, anti-capitalist thought.

For us, the key insight generated through this analysis of our interviews is how widespread these themes of solidarity are. We did not speak with individuals who claim to be at the 'cutting edge' of critical theory. We spoke with practitioners, embedded in the daily work of engaging with young people. Working mostly outwith activist circles, these practitioners do not foreground tactics for collective organising for more solidarity, but instead articulate an affective yearning for solidarity in community. This yearning is firmly grounded in a critique of the hyperindividualism and acceleration of the present, which they see as offering little time and few opportunities to enact solidarity and community on a daily basis. It leaves traces of possible or impossible futures in which life would be organised otherwise. These traces seem like instances of what Ruha Benjamin has called "viral justice".

Viral justice is an admission: I am, *we are*, exhausted, discouraged, grieving, and, sometimes, even too exhausted to grieve. It is a recognition that even the most resolute and hopeful among us worry that our efforts are futile, and we need encouragement to see another day. In its attention to everyday insurrections and *beautiful experiments*—"radical designs for living ... seeking, venturing, testing, trying, speculating, discovering, exploring new avenues, breaking with traditions, defying law, and making it"—viral justice expresses a deep longing that animates Black life. (Benjamin, 2022, p. 19)

Activists' collective organising, and the public sharing of anger and discontent with the exhausting injustices in the world today, are spreading—virally—to many other spaces in social life, including, we suggest here, to the everyday working lives of educational practitioners, who articulate similar concerns and also similar beautiful experiments and a similar longing (for a solidarity in community that enacts justice). These are tiny "radical acts", in situated encounters with young people and their families, yet precisely these apparently minoritarian radical acts spread viral justice. In the context of education and technology, Marie K. Heath has reflected on the potential of Benjamin's understanding of local care communities, and small situated actions, to inspire "more radical, loving, caring change" in educational spaces (Heath et al., 2024, p. 373; see also Hayes et al., 2023).

Acceleration and exhaustion are also at the heart of Eva von Redecker's (2021) thinking about the "revolution for life" that she observes today. She understands the acts of regenerating, sharing and caring, which she observes across diverse activist practices and other niches today, as revolutionary acts. They contest contemporary capitalism, which is 'against' rather than 'for' life. As Bayo Akomolafe has said, "The times are urgent, let us slow down" (Akomolafe, 2019). The interviews reported in this paper rarely explicitly critique capitalism, yet their hopes for deceleration and solidarity in community resonate strongly with the anti-capitalist critique of much contemporary social theory (e.g. Redecker, 2021; Schmelzer et al., 2022; Wright, 2019; Zuboff, 2019), despite warnings that "oppositional politics does not fall easily into utopian plans for solidarity" (Tsing, 2021, p. 134).

If “[m]odernity is about the acceleration of time” (Conrad, 1999), then acceleration is often associated with the cultural change that is entangled with technological transformations (Rosa, 2017), from the steam engines powering industrialisation to today’s “generative AI”. Interestingly, our interview partners spoke more about technology when reflecting back on their work during the pandemic, and less when asked about their hopes for the future. The absence of “high tech” (Selwyn et al., 2018) in their responses was particularly striking for us for three reasons. First, we had framed the interviews in the context of a project entitled “Education, technology and inequality after corona: A critical utopian approach” (ETIC), which gives “technology” a central space. Second, technologies are widely discussed as solutions for each of the issues raised above, e.g., online tools to increase participatory decision-making, smartphones to make mutual care more dependable and always-on, networked media to gain access to alternative opinions. Third, at the time of the interviews - and at the time of writing - much of education policy in Germany, Europe and at the supranational level of the OECD, UNESCO, etc. remains focused on *technological* progress and the accompanying acceleration.

The lack of high tech in the third segment of our interviews, in which we asked about hopes for the future, can, we suggest, be interpreted as an expression of desires for (technological) deceleration and a reclaiming of social priorities (time, support, listening, care) over technical concerns. If the non-thematization of high tech surprised us, it gives us hope for futures by illustrating a grassroots resistance to Appadurai’s concern noted above that “the more we think of technologically driven futures, the less space is there for non-technological futures” (Appadurai, 2021). These interviews give high priority to non-technological futures. What would happen if educational policy-makers—at local, regional, national and supranational levels—paid attention?

## 6. Concluding thoughts

Against the backdrop of technological acceleration and the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper addressed the question of *how educational practitioners’ hopes and desires articulate a critique of the present and simultaneously give voice to (im)possible futures*. Based on interviews with school administrators, teachers, (school) social workers, and other educational practitioners who worked with children and adolescents during the pandemic in school and out-of-school settings, we utilised a critical utopian approach to identify themes critiquing the contemporary world, and illustrated how these themes are interwoven with hopes and desires for future social togetherness. The three themes of participatory decision-making, care, and appreciation, as well as the future desires for more visibility, dependability, and understanding, together articulate futures of a decelerated society as solidarity in community. We elaborated tensions that became increasingly evident during the rupture of lockdown as institutions for children and young adults were closed or unavailable. These future hopes are well-known from activism and critical theory, yet they arguably articulate radical acts in educational practice that constitute tiny revolutions in contemporary (Global North) societies.

While educational policy throughout the pandemic and in the post-pandemic ‘new normal’ has continued to prioritise modernist technological acceleration, grassroots practitioners articulate a longing for deceleration. They create visions of the future without a focus on high tech use. If we take a broad educational perspective seriously and assume that educational research needs to move “beyond the school to the community, home and workplace” (Facer & Sandford, 2010, p. 74) then future research and interventions need to emerge that bring together actors from all these educationally relevant domains to shape futures otherwise that may or may not elaborate further on enacting solidarity in community. Our critical-utopian methodological approach may provide means to do this. Our goal was to collect narratives about experiences, critiques of the contemporary and hopes for the future. While we, perhaps naïvely, expected more technologically focused future visions, we now suspect it was the slowing down of the interviews and their framing in a critique of the present that invited or enabled the interview partners to articulate their longing for a future otherwise that prioritised social concerns rather than technological.

We thus join Stuart Candy’s and Kelly Kornet’s call to develop “new and compelling ways of turning foresight inside out” in order to “escape our tempocentrism, come to better understand each other, and navigate change together” (Candy & Kornet, 2019, p. 17). Against the background of previous methodological future studies approaches and the findings from this critical utopian approach, further research may benefit from a stronger interweaving of methods that link spoken imaginations of the future with the observation of practical action and the design of future artefacts (Riedy & Waddock, 2022). Research projects should design ways to enable the slow sharing of narratives, yet also bring diverse educational stakeholders into conversation with each other. A careful curation may enable them to enact one desire voiced by our research participants: to acknowledge, care about and understand other perspectives through a collaborative concern for the elaboration of shared utopias.

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Annekatriin Bock:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Felicitas Macgilchrist:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Kerstin Rabenstein:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration,

Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Nadine Wagener-Böck**: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used deepL to translate German parts of the paper (e.g. interview snippets) to English. After using this service, the authors (one of them a native speaker) reviewed and thoroughly edited the content. We take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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