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Engaging and Cultivating Imagination in Equity-Focused School Leadership

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Abstract

Research on equity-focused school leadership reveals how it is relational, emotional, and activist. This paper adds *imaginative* to this set of leadership qualities. First, imagination is conceptualized as *soil*. Thinking of imagination in this grounded, ecological way can help address misconceptions around what imagination is and does in the context of school leadership. The next section outlines some of the relational, emotional, and activist features of equity-focused school leadership that are rooted in imagination. Imaginative Education is introduced as a theoretical framework that offers a practical set of (cognitive) tools that leaders may employ to cultivate imagination in pursuit of equity in their schools. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: imagination, Imaginative Education, equity, empathy, cognitive tools

Equity-focused school leadership is relational, emotional, and activist (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lopez, 2020; Radd et al., 2021). It is *relational* work because it requires leaders to form meaningful connections with and in communities in which schools reside (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). Knowledge gained through community-based interactions—among staff, educators, administrators, learners, parents, grandparents, and other community members—is essential for shaping policies, processes and practices that support all learners in schools (Khalifa, 2018). Equity-focused leadership work is *emotional* work because it is inseparable from a practice of care (Sheppard, 2010). Caring involves a commitment to understanding the experiences of others, honouring those experiences, and working together to create and sustain conditions in which minoritized people may flourish (Sheppard, 2010). Leadership for equity is also emotional because it requires deep, critical learning. As Egan (1997) contends, all meaningful learning

engages emotion and imagination; it *affects* us. The widespread beliefs and worldviews currently shaping educational policies, pedagogies, and processes reflect colonialism; they privilege what is White, Western, male, and able-bodied (Lopez, 2020; Velez & Tuana, 2020). Lopez (2020) suggests that leaders dedicated to disrupting the dominant ideologies that inform and reproduce inequity in schools must engage in the ongoing, cyclical, self-reflective, and dialogical process of unlearning, relearning, rereading, and reframing (Lopez, 2020). This critical reflective and expansive learning can take an emotional toll (Radd et al., 2021). Thirdly, equity-focused school leadership is *activist*; leaders work with and for communities as advocates, or as Love (2019) calls *co-conspirators*, to create and sustain real-world change (Khalifa, 2018; Radd et al., 2021). If leaders do not engage in advocacy for learners and the communities they serve, they will contribute to the ongoing marginalization of learners in their schools (Khalifa, 2018; Lopez, 2020).

My qualitative content analysis of research in the field of leadership and educational leadership also revealed that equity-focused leadership work is *imaginative*. It requires leadership that engages with *the possible*. A range of scholars identifies imagination as required for transforming schools into places that exemplify equity, diversity, and inclusion (e.g., Battiste, 2013; Chenier, 2020; Khalifa, 2018; Lopez, 2020; Sheppard, 2010; Smith, 1999). Calls for imagination indicate a shared belief that imagination is required to *get to* (conceptualize) the uncharted terrain of a truly equitable education system. In talking about *inclusive equality*, for example, Sheppard (2010) contends: “Our willingness and capacity to re-imagine and re-invent relationships, institutional cultures, and social governance practices will be central to whether, how, and when inclusive equality emerges” (Sheppard, 2010, pp. 4-5). Sheppard’s work indicates that equity can only be achieved if we put imagination to create *new* structures; modifying existing structures will not lead to equity for all (Chenier, 2020).

Currently, the role of imagination in equity-focused leadership has been the subject of little systematic research (Judson, 2020). In the leadership field, the word imagination (or a derivative) is generally mentioned far more often than it is explored theoretically or practically (Judson, 2020). Widespread misunderstanding about imagination has contributed to few taking it seriously in leadership research (Judson, 2020, 2021). Given this penury of knowledge, calls for imagination are not supported with theoretical or practical understandings of how imagination will support leadership in *getting to* or *getting through* the unfamiliar terrain of creating and sustaining equitable schools.

This paper introduces imagination as a new area of leadership research. I first conceptualize imagination as *soil*. Conceiving imagination in this grounded, ecological way helps to address misunderstandings around what imagination is and does in the context of school leadership. The next section outlines some of the *relational*, *emotional*, and *activist* features of equity-focused school leadership rooted in imagination. Imaginative education (Egan, 1997, 2005; Egan & Judson, 2015) is then introduced as a theoretical framework that offers a practical set of tools that leaders may employ to cultivate imagination in pursuit of equity in their schools. Table 1 provides some examples of how a few cognitive tools might be employed to engage and grow leadership imagination in support of equity. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

A New Metaphor: Imagination as *Soil*

For some people, the word *imagination* makes them think of childhood fantasy, arts, and fictional storytelling (Judson, 2021, 2020). It evokes the realm of the *imaginary* rather than anything connected to the daily practices of leadership (Judson, 2020, 2021). Re-conceptualizing imagination as soil helps address misconceptions by bringing them down to earth. Understanding

imagination as soil reveals how *it comes first*—it is the source out of which creativity and innovation bloom; how *it is contextual*—it is shaped by our beliefs, values, and knowledge; how *it generates meaning through story*—imagination is evoked through individual, and collective stories; how *it becomes more fertile with cultivation*—imagination can be educated and grows when it is used with a diverse range of knowledges, in collaboration, and in contexts that encourage exploration of the possible (Judson, 2021). Leadership research identifies the following practices as rooted in the soil of imagination: understanding *what is* and *what could be*, creating equitable communities through empathy, and engaging all stakeholders in meaningful learning (Judson, 2021). The next section briefly introduces how the roots of inclusive and socially just communities lie in imagination—first, in the ability to *understand* the self/system and the perspective of the other; second, guided by a commitment to equity, to engage in collective imagining and action to make decisions that support all; third, to meaningfully communicate ideas and learn new ways of being (for a detailed description of this metaphor and some information about imagination’s roles in leadership, see Judson, 2021).

Leadership Practices Rooted in Imagination

Stephenson (2009) outlines how imagination allows us to understand the self, other, and context. He argues that imagination is essential for self-reflection, empathy, and systemic understanding. Equity-focused school leaders require a deep and critical understanding of *what is* in order to transform schools (Khalifa, 2018, Lopez, 2020). This critical reflection must apply to the self, system, curriculum, policies, practices, and community needs of the school (Khalifa, 2018). For Lopez (2020), this critical understanding of self and context is a necessary precursor to *unlearning* and decolonizing the mind required of all leaders.

Imagination also enables us to *empathize* (Greene, 1995; Guare, 1999). As Greene (1995) famously says: “One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” (p. 3). With empathy, we may gain another perspective; we may share the human emotion within the experience of the other. Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (1999) describe empathy as necessary to achieve deep understanding: “We have found that practitioners of every art, science, and humanistic profession use empathy as a primary tool, for it permits a kind of understanding that is not attainable by any other means” (1999, p. 187). In the context of equity-focused leadership, *empathy* alone is not enough.

Boler (1997) points to the dangers of empathy. She states that the ultimate risk of empathy is integrating the other’s experience into one’s own framework without taking action (Boler, 1997). This “passive empathy” is narrow, “flat” in terms of historical knowledge, and lacks action (p. 255). Passive empathy involves an “easy identification” with the other, a subsuming of the other’s experience, and an abdication of a sense of responsibility for the inequitable situation (p. 255). Passive empathy is not paired with critical thinking about one’s own positionality, power, or privilege, and does not involve critical reflection of the nature of inequitable relationships in particular contexts. Equity-focused leaders must understand empathy as an action word to avoid the risk of passive empathy. Imagination fuels the action required to turn passive empathy to advocacy. Egan (1997) describes a *sense of agency* as a powerful feature of the imagination—indeed, one of the cognitive tools of imagination described in the next section. When a sense of agency is engaged, we understand how we can have an impact in the world, and can influence the historical, social, and cultural communities of which we are part (Egan, 1997). So, *active* empathy is rooted in imagination; agency and empathy together enable leaders to be co-conspirators (Love,

2019) in the work of creating equitable school communities.

Imagination—the ability to conceive of the possible that fuels creativity and innovation—allows us to envision *what could be*, to bring into ideational space new directions for schools (Asma, 2017; Egan, 1997, 2005; Egan & Judson, 2015). Imagination gives school leaders the flexibility to deal with complex contexts that are constantly in flux. Asma (2017) says it is imagination that enables us to deal with a world of what-ifs and possibilities. Imagination supports decision-making (Cranston & Kusanovich, 2014) and problem-solving (Millward, 1998).

Imagination is also required to *engage* others and to create meaning. For equity-focused leaders, this is centrally important for learning about and connecting with communities and being instructional leaders in schools to support the creation of equity-focused curricula and pedagogies. Story is one of the most profound tools we have for learning and connecting with others (Asma, 2017; Egan 1997, 2005; Guajardo, Oliver, Rodríguez, Valadez, Cantú, & Guajardo, 2011; Pink, 2005). Imagination lives in our individual and collective stories. In short, equity-focused school leaders require imagination to be story-listeners (for learning, for forming relationships, for advocacy) and to be storytellers (to engage others' imaginations in the work of equity, to make communication meaningful, and memorable in the school community).

Imaginative Education: A Theoretical Framework and Practice for School Leaders

Imaginative Education (IE) is a socio-cultural theory of education that offers both a rigorous theoretical framework for understanding imagination's role in intellectual development and sets of practical tools for engaging and growing imagination (Egan, 1997, 2005; Egan & Judson, 2015). Egan (1997) describes how, as members of cultures who employ different forms of language, we internalize different *cultural* tools associated with language (such as storytelling, vivid mental

imagery, metaphor, a sense of wonder, humanization of meaning) that help us to think and understand. As we employ these cultural tools in our sense-making, we internalize them; they become *cognitive tools*. Cognitive tools, in Egan's formulation, are tripartite in nature, connecting the epistemological, the psychological, and the emotional (Egan, 1997). That is, not only are cognitive tools connected to particular knowledge and central to our psychological development, but they also engage our emotions and imaginations. By using a cognitive tool, we can learn knowledge, and we engage our emotions in the process; they engage our bodies, intellects, and emotions together. Of particular educational value is how cognitive tools do not only temporarily engage emotion and imagination; they actually *grow* imagination (Egan, 1997). These tools are used in all cultures to think, understand, and cultivate the imagination. Importantly, these tools come in "sets" with different forms of language (oral language, written language, theoretical language and reflexive language). (For more information on imaginative education and cognitive tools, visit the Centre for Imagination in Research, Culture, and Education, or CIRCE, website: www.circsfu.ca.)

The application of IE's cognitive tools to the context of leadership is new and offers many opportunities for future research (e.g., Judson, 2020, 2021). Table 1 includes a few examples of how leaders may employ cognitive tools within their communities to engage imagination in equity-focused work. These cognitive-tool focused guiding questions may be used by individuals, in pairs or in small to large groups to push the limits of what is possible. My initial work on equity-focused leadership aims to show conceptually how IE theory and the practical use of cognitive tools could engage imagination directly in practices of unlearning, relearning, and reframing the work required to create *inclusive* schools that are grounded in community and reflect culturally diverse knowledges, stories, and voices (Lopez, 2020).

Concluding Thoughts

A premise of this article is that the roots of inclusive and socially just communities lie in imagination—not only the ability to envision something new, but to *care*, to understand the perspective of another person or group, to take action, and, guided by principles of EDI, to build communities that support all people. An ecological conception of imagination as *soil* offers a generative way to move past current “heroic” and entitative kinds of understanding of imagination as the possession of certain charismatic or transformative leaders and to understand it as a shared human capacity (Curtis & Cerni, 2015; Curtis et al., 2017; Patriotta, 2019; Ylimaki, 2006). It highlights how imagination, like soil, can grow in fertility. I present the theory of Imaginative Education and cognitive tools as valuable for leaders to cultivate imagination in the work of creating truly equitable schools.

There are many possibilities for future research into individual and collective engagement, meaning-making and growth of imagination in equity-focused leadership. In addition, Non-Western conceptions of imagination such as Sheridan and Longboat (2006) and Place-based research methodologies such as Ensemble Leadership (Rosile et al., 2018) may be employed. As well, thinking about imagination as soil brings attention to the relational spaces of school leadership. Responding to Uhl-Bien and Ospina’s (2012) call to focus inquiry on the constructionist, processual dimensions of leadership relationality, future research may seek to understand how cognitive tools such as story, metaphor, and mental imagery engage imagination in relational spaces among people in school communities in ways that support equity.

Table 1:
Examples of How Cognitive Tools Can Support Equity-Focused Leadership

| Activity Title | Main Cognitive Tools | Guiding Questions |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Seek Understanding: What's The Story Here?</i> | <p>seek the story-form</p> <p>identify rhythms and patterns of emotional experience</p> <p>engage the body</p> | <p>What or whose “story” dominates here? What or whose is missing? What limitations or constraints make it difficult to share experiences of ex/inclusion here? What are the rhythms or patterns of marginalization here? Be attentive to your emotional responses to the stories and experiences you hear about. How are you personally implicated in this story?</p> |
| <i>Engaging in Extreme What If-ing</i> | <p>engage with extremes of experience and limits of reality</p> <p>engage the body</p> | <p>Engage in some collaborative and <i>extreme</i> brainstorming. What is your ideal image of this community? What would it look, sound, feel like? Close your eyes and put yourself in this space: what do you notice? What do you feel? Who or what would be part of the conversation? Now create as many statements as possible to consider options for moving to action.</p> |
| <i>Evoke Wonder: Bring Uniqueness into the Bright Light of Recognition</i> | <p>unleash a sense of wonder</p> <p>sense of agency</p> | <p>What is unique and inspiring about your school community? How does diversity enrich your community? What <i>glimmers with wonder</i> in this community? How can being part of a school rooted in equity, diversity and inclusion contribute to your life? What action can you take with others to amplify what is wonder-ful?</p> |
| <i>Practice Feeling Comfortable with Discomfort: Body Forth</i> | <p>identify dramatic, affective oppositions/tensions</p> <p>engage the body</p> | <p>Listen and learn from all the stakeholders in your school community. What are the tensions that people feel here? Name these. (powerful/powerless; hope/despair; fair/unfair). Allow yourself to experience discomfort. Avoid the urge to escape this discomfort. What do you notice about your emotional response? How can you channel this emotion into acting to create equitable relationships? What <i>gestures</i> represent these tensions?</p> |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Enact Care</i> | employ a sense of agency | Deep transformation to support equity requires relationships based on <i>care</i> and sharing stories and experiences. Imagine an ethic of care infuses the organization (Sheppard, 2010). This is your starting place. What does it mean to work from a place of <i>care</i> ? How does <i>care</i> frame all of the interactions in your school? Think about care as an <i>action</i> —what actions of care do you see in your school? |
| <i>(Make) Metaphors Matter: Beyond Rhetoric (aka: Not Window Dressing)</i> | play with metaphors | Genuine inclusion is not <i>window dressing</i> (Chenier, 2020, p. 77)—it isn't rhetoric with little change. What <i>is</i> equity in action in your organization? It <i>is</i> ____ (fill in the blank with your goal—your metaphor for genuine change). In this organization we _____, we refuse to _____. <i>What if</i> _____? |
| <i>“Picture” It: Snapshots of Equity and Inequity</i> | evoke vivid mental imagery revolt against injustice; seek idealism | What does equity look like in this organization? What does inequity look like? Examine the similarities and differences of your community members' images of equity/inequity. What is missing? What procedures, processes or relationships are reproducing the inequity? Define measurable steps to address each inequity. What policies or processes need to change? Which can you, as a leader, ignore or change in support of equity? |

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