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Imagination as a Catalyst for Relational Leadership:

Educational Leaders' Perspectives

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Abstract

This research examines the role of imagination in relational leadership. Specifically, the following question was explored through a case study of a unique offering of an imagination-focused MEd program in Educational Leadership in a large, public research institution in British Columbia, Canada: How do participants understand imagination's role in leadership after completing a two-year imagination-focused MEd leadership program? The 13 participants—all aspiring and emerging leaders in their professional settings—shared their developing conceptions of leadership, imagination, and the role of imagination in educational leadership. Participants articulated how imagination contributes to understanding themselves as leaders, engaging others with empathy, and building connections. The *relational* role of imagination was a dominant theme. According to participants, imagination is necessary for forming and enriching relationships, and reciprocally, relationships enhance imagination. Participants indicated how imagination supports their sense of belonging; imagination allowed participants to see themselves as potential leaders, and to feel they belonged “at the leadership table.” According to these preliminary findings, imagination may also create more opportunity in leadership. Overall, imagination emerges in this study as promoting not only relational, but *humanizing* leadership practices. This research contributes to understandings of relational leadership and highlights directions for future research. It identifies new directions for supporting equity and diversity in educational leadership and has clear implications for leadership education.

Keywords: imagination; educational leadership; humanizing leadership; relational leadership; equity

Background

Human beings are relational; we need relationships to survive and thrive in the world. And yet, relationality has not always been a focus of research in leadership theory or practice (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). The “story most often told” in leadership has tended to emphasize individuals in formal positions of hierarchical power, and the traits, skills, and behaviors these individuals can universally employ to be effective (Dugan, 2017, p. xv). Leader-centric—or “heroic” (Sobral & Furtado, 2019)—approaches tend to disregard human connection and the emergent and contextual nature of leadership. Missing from these individualized conceptions of leadership is a concern for all the other people—the relational beings—that actively participate in and shape communities or organizations. Missing too is a sense of the complexity of contexts and the multiple ways in which processes, people, beliefs, and values interact. Clarke (2018) suggests that conceptions of leadership based on formalized hierarchies of power, top-down influence, and assumptions of universal applicability are no longer appropriate in a highly complex, diverse, and dynamic world. Rather, relationality and the multiple facets of a relational approach to understanding leadership are.

Scholarship on relational leadership theory and practice acknowledges the interconnected nature of human beings and the complexly interconnected nature of the world (Uhl-Bien, 2004, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). We seek to contribute to scholarship in this area. Our case study research focuses on a largely unexamined aspect of relational leadership: the role of imagination. Imagination is defined here as “the ability to envision the possible in all things; it is the generative feature of mind that enables understanding of the self, and others, and that fuels creativity and innovation” (Judson, 2020, p. 79). This article shares findings from a case study with 13 graduates of a two-year imagination-focused MEd program in a public research institution in British

Columbia, Canada. Through this research we sought to understand participants' perceptions of imagination's role in leadership. Our research question was: How do participants understand imagination's role in leadership after completing a two-year imagination-focused MEd leadership program?

While some of the themes expressed by participants predictably aligned with the goals and foci of the program, this research provided surprising findings on the relationship between imagination and leadership and on the potential of imagination in creating space for diversity at the leadership table. Interestingly, participants described imagination as a catalyst for a more humanizing future for education and educational leadership. Their responses also revealed a complex and dynamic relationship between imagination and relationship—imagination is integral to building relationships and is enriched and further cultivated through relationship. In addition, data revealed a connection between imagination and inclusion: several participants indicated that through developing understandings of imagination and leadership, they were able to envision themselves as belonging as leaders. The findings from this case study have notable implications for leadership education, diversifying leadership, and promoting inclusivity.

Following a review of literature on relational leadership and imagination, we describe our research methodology and case, and present our participants' conceptualizations of imagination, leadership, and the role of imagination in leadership. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

On Relational Leadership Theory

The field of leadership studies provides varied perspectives on what leadership is, what it does, and what is required to be an effective leader. Traditional theories of leadership emphasize

personal characteristics or traits that are necessary to lead, as well as the interactional style of leadership between leaders and their communities (Dugan, 2017). For example, “soft skills” like being responsible, flexible, and motivating are considered necessary to engage and influence others towards an identified goal (Tang, 2019). Using these skills, leaders may lead others in an authoritative, managerial, paternalistic, or democratic and transformational way (Tang, 2019). Sobral and Furtado (2019) call these traditional approaches “heroic” in that they are hierarchical and leader-centric with a sense that individual leaders have exemplary traits or skills to make change. These heroic traditions include charismatic, transformational, and visionary leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Blackmore, 2013; Kowalski, 2010; Sobral & Furtado, 2019; Sy et al., 2018). Sobral and Furtado argue that heroic approaches reveal thinking of a top-down industrial era in which leadership was considered unidirectional and originating from one person. These approaches reflect white-Western (i.e., colonial, racialized, and gendered) thinking about what leadership is and how it is enacted (Blackmore, 2013; Ladkin & Patrick, 2022; Wane et al., 2023). These leader-centric ways of theorizing, practicing, and researching leadership do not suit the culturally diverse and rapidly changing circumstances in knowledge societies today (Clarke, 2018; Sobral & Furtado, 2019).

No single leader can hold, as an asset or trait, the knowledge, expertise, and experience needed to navigate complex and rapidly changing contexts (Grint, 2010). Nor can a leader examine those contexts through all necessary perspectives. Instead, leaders work collaboratively and thus, leadership becomes a practice or enactment rather than a formal position. That is, leaders emerge in relation to particular contexts—in time, space, and in varied arrangements with others and in relation to specific ideas, concepts, or goals. Relational approaches to theorizing, practicing, and researching leadership bring into focus the connections and networks in process and in context that

constitute leadership (Clarke, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Relational leadership takes as a core tenant that, as Clarke (2018) states, “leadership, first and foremost, takes place or is enacted through relationships and networks of relationships” (p. 12). He goes on to acknowledge the larger scope of who contributes to leadership stating, “many individuals may be required to exercise leadership irrespective of whether they occupy formal leader roles or not” and, how leadership is the result of collective capacity and action: “leadership should be seen more as a potential capacity in organisations, rather than simply the sum of recognised ‘leaders’” (p. 12).

Relational leadership is challenging to define concisely as it involves a range of theoretical perspectives and practices from more entitative to more constructionist views (Hosking, 2000; Hosking & Morley, 1991). Entitative perspectives on relationality, for example, consider relationships, but do so in relation to individuals. For example, entitative approaches consider how individuals form relationships, and then how they each work as individuals with and in those dyadic relationships to make change. Relationships are the entities or things individuals work with to advance leadership goals (Clarke, 2018; Hosking, 2000). From an entitative perspective, relationship may be studied within a more traditional view of hierarchical power (e.g., power between formal leader and follower). Simply put, an entitative perspective recognizes that leaders build relationships with followers to influence and produce change.

In contrast, constructionist perspectives in relational leadership theory shift attention away from the individuals involved, to the shared spaces between. From a constructionist, relational leadership perspective, understanding leadership means understanding the processes of social construction between co-operating and coordinating stakeholders (Hosking, 2000). Leadership is understood as emerging between participants in dynamic and changing contexts. Leadership involves leaders and followers and exists in the space between these participants. The focus

therefore in this domain of relational leadership is on the “invisible threads” connecting all people engaged in leadership processes (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012, p. xx) and the responsibilities these people share. A constructionist, relational leadership approach reveals a shift, therefore, away from formalized leaders in positions of power, to connections between people in communities or collectives and the processes that generate change.

With relationality and connection situated at the core of this way of theorizing, practicing, and researching leadership, relational leadership theory acknowledges diversity in leadership in terms of who is recognized as a leader, what they do, who they are, and how they do their work. It acknowledges the multiple spaces in which leadership occurs and, thus, embraces different voices, ideas, beliefs, and values in leadership. As described below, this constructionist, relational leadership perspective aligns with our ontological and epistemological positionalities as educators and as researchers. Before exploring the role of imagination in leadership, and educational leadership specifically, we review the literature on imagination.

On Imagination

The human imagination is a capacity many people associate with whimsy, fantasy, and child’s play (Judson, 2020, 2023b). This research works to expand and enrich this narrow conception of imagination, defining it as “the ability to envision the possible in all things; it is the generative feature of mind that enables understanding of the self, and others, and that fuels creativity and innovation” (Judson, 2020, p. 79). Informed by the work of imagination scholars such as Asma (2017), Egan (1992, 1997), Pendleton-Jullian and Brown (2018), and Stephenson (2009) among others, we are curious about how imagination contributes to relational leadership practices and, specifically, practices that support equity. While there is not much research on imagination in leadership (Judson, 2020), extant literature offers some insight.

First, research on imagination suggests that it is essential for change. Imagination comes before any creative solution or innovation (Judson, 2023b; Judson & Dougherty, 2023; Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009; Robinson, 2017); it represents a way to conceive of, and bridge, the gap between the now or known and the not-yet (Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018). It is, indeed, involved in all the changes we do see in the world. Evoking this idea metaphorically, Judson (2023b) conceptualizes imagination as the soil out of what all innovations grow. Being the source of novel ideas and solutions, what leaders can possibly do is rooted in imagination (Beghetto, 2018; Cranston & Kusanovich, 2014; Greene, 1995; Spehler & Slattery, 1999). Cranston and Kusanovich (2014) note the importance of this possibility-seeking in leadership stating: “without imagination, school leaders cannot perceive even one outcome, let alone the infinite that are possible” (p. 59). Without imagination, we cannot envision how things may be better and how we can contribute to making them better (Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018). Pendleton-Jullian and Brown (2018) argue that it is imagination tied to action that is required to navigate and thrive in a “broadly connected, rapidly changing, and radically contingent world” (p. 7). Imagination, thus, can offer the flexibility and capacity of mind to work for change within a dynamic environment.

It is important to remember that imagination, on its own, does not guarantee ethical leadership practice—using imagination says nothing of how this imagination is used (Asma, 2017). Imagination can be put to use to support action for social justice (Greene, 1995)—it offers a shared emotional space to envision the not-yet (Judson, 2022)¹. Rapp (2002) suggests that leaders have a responsibility to engage the “oppositional imagination” in support of social justice (p. 226). Patricia Werhane’s (e.g. 1998, 2002) extensive work in the realm of business ethics identifies the imagination—specifically the moral imagination—as essential to ethical decision-making. By

¹ While a fulsome discussion of 'social justice' is beyond the scope of this paper, we ground our work in Fraser's (2009) model, emphasizing justice through redistribution, recognition, and representation.

enabling understanding of other perspectives’ and advocating for others, imagination helps equip leaders to address issues of ethics and social justice (Ciulla, 2015; Judson, 2022; Novak et al., 2014; Rapp, 2002). Our research digs more deeply into the role of imagination in relational leadership, and how this contributes to more inclusive, humanizing space for leaders.

Methodology and Analysis

In keeping with case study methodology (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) we begin by indicating the delimits of our research context, describing the participants, our data collection and analysis processes, and our positionality as researchers.

About The Case

Our case in this research was a unique offering of an imagination-focused Master of Education (MEd) in Educational Leadership program in a large, public research institution in British Columbia, Canada. The 18 students in the program were K-12 educators with varied backgrounds and experiences. Many of the cohort members were involved in informal leadership (e.g., mentoring new teachers, providing professional development sessions, engaging students in various initiatives) and some held formal administrative positions (e.g., head teacher, vice principal, principal). Thirteen of the students agreed to participate in our research.

The program was conceived as an imaginative project, where exploration of imagination, education, and leadership were woven into traditional educational leadership curriculum (including courses on leadership theory, organizational theory, educational policy, and research methods). The program applied a particular theoretical framework for imagination—called Imaginative Education—to educational leadership. Kieran Egan’s (1997, 2005) theory of Imaginative Education (IE) largely focuses on teaching and learning for people of all ages. However, it has value for explaining leadership too as it is a sociocultural theory of human

development that describes how our imaginations grow, change and work throughout our lives. In line with Lev Vygotsky's understanding of human development, Egan (1997, 2005) describes how the human imagination and meaning-making are shaped by an array of different thinking tools—or what he calls “cognitive tools”—that they employ. These tools help human beings to think and remember because they bring emotion, imagination, and knowledge together. Egan's theory of IE describes different sets of cognitive tools that accompany orality (e.g., the story-form, mysteries and puzzles, dramatic tensions, metaphor, vivid mental imagery), literacy (e.g., humanization of meaning, sense of wonder, extremes of experience and limits of reality, heroic qualities), theoretical language (e.g., general ideas and their anomalies, sense of agency) and highly reflexive language (e.g., irony).

A portion of each course in the MEd program was allocated to developing understanding of imagination and connecting imagination to the specific content of the course. Cognitive tools of IE were employed to shape course content and applied to learning about key leadership processes including understanding self and other, cultivating equitable communities, and communicating in meaningful ways. In short, the cohort of MEd students learned about imagination in educational leadership while also experiencing an imaginative learning process.

Our desire to better understand imagination and to produce actionable knowledge for the field of leadership education led to our research question: How do participants understand imagination's role in leadership after completing a two-year imagination-focused MEd Leadership program?

Data Collection and Analysis

In line with best practices in case study research as outlined by Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995), data were drawn from multiple data sources: individual reflective assignments, a

collaborative manifesto, artefacts from a series of community-based sessions with practicing leaders, and individual interviews with the cohort members. We reviewed participants' assignments and artefacts collaboratively early in the research process to provide context and to structure the interviews with participants. Then, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant (n=13). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Our questions focused on participants' perceptions of leadership, imagination, and the role of imagination in leadership, as well as their thoughts on the program pedagogy and structure.

Interviews occurred over Zoom (due to pandemic safety requirements), were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The interviews focused on student intentions in entering the program, student learning (in imagination and leadership, explicitly), significant learning events, and how students were enacting their learning as educators and leaders. We were both involved in interviewing each participant. Following each interview, we engaged in a debrief and reflection on the content together, and individually kept ongoing research memos.

Processes of data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously and in an ongoing way as we engaged in examination of data as it emerged and recursively returned to data as more was gathered. We took an inductive analytic approach of in-case and cross-case coding of interview transcripts (see Miles et al., 2014). We each individually coded all transcripts and then we compared codes. We discussed our codes and were able to interrogate our analytic process and the code creation to come to agreement. Our initial analysis identified key areas for exploration from the semi-structured interviews, including developing conceptualizations of imagination and leadership, leadership practices, and the role of imagination in enacting leadership.

Researcher Positionality

We entered into this research as educators committed to cultivating imagination in ourselves and in others. We recognize the value of imagination in catalyzing curiosity, empathy, and connection in teaching and learning and in leadership. In our work as educators, we are committed to the potential of education to support anti-oppressive change, and of leadership to help envision and navigate change, in pursuit of equity and social justice. We are passionate about exploring this potentiality in our classrooms, communities, and in our research. As researchers, we see ourselves as always already in relationship; we do not exist outside of relational entanglements. We identify ourselves as actively becoming within relational arrangements and we recognize our knowledge as dynamic, partial, and relational (see Barad, 2007). Our intention is to produce actionable knowledge that contributes to our understanding of educational leadership and helps shape leadership education for the future.

We both were involved in the graduate program that our participants completed; Gillian taught in and co-designed the program and Meaghan worked as a teaching assistant with the cohort. We acknowledge that our relationships with the participants (as students) were potentially both productive and an impediment to our research process. It appeared that our existing relationships allowed the participants to trust in our intentions, the purpose of our research, and they seemed to feel comfortable discussing parts of the program that we had shared. This shared experience created a common language and understanding so participants could expand upon the significance of their different experiences. On the other hand, given our relationship with participants, explaining what did not work or was not helpful to their experience may have been more difficult for them to share. We acknowledge this is a potential weakness of this research.

Findings

Participants discussed how their ideas of leadership and imagination changed substantially through their studies. They also shared the importance of relational leadership and practical aspects of imagination. While these findings are congruent with the focus of the MEd program and the IE framework guiding their learning, participants also shared insights about imagination as a leadership process and capacity. This is the new knowledge we gained from engaging in this qualitative research. They explicated the relationship between imagination and leadership, highlighting necessary and connected aspects like empathy, connection, risk-taking, vulnerability, and collaboration. Of interest, the data showed a reciprocal relationship where imagination promotes human connection and this connection further cultivates imaginative potential. Also surprisingly, the participants shared how their reconceptualizations of imagination and leadership opened space for diversity and belonging in educational leadership. Below, we offer a rich description of these findings, and discuss the implications for leadership and leadership education.

Developing Conceptualizations of Leadership

Entering this program, participants' views of leadership were leader-centric and focused on desirable qualities, traits, or behaviors. Through the program they learned to see leadership as a relational practice. They discussed leadership in terms of processes of connecting to others for the purposes of empowering others, shared growth, development, and common work for the benefit of larger communities. Good leadership, according to Baljit², is not a "blueprint" or "top down" but is, rather, "all about relationships." As Angela succinctly stated: "leadership is less management, but more about creating relationships—maintaining them and just being there as a good human being for everybody that you come in contact with." Reflecting on what good

² All participants have been provided a pseudonym.

leadership entails, Jose stated, “it's the human element of it, it's the empathy behind it.” Clark stated that “relationships are foundational” for leadership. He went on to describe leadership as being about “empathy, relationships, seeing the whole picture, being holistic.”

Departing from a sense of the “all knowing” leader, participants identified leadership in terms of a collaborative process of growth and inquiry with a common purpose. Students recognized that leaders need to assess, imagine, and enact relational processes in various ways, with different people, in the various contexts within which these relational encounters occur. They spoke of how leaders must relate in multiple ways to lead in diverse communities. For example, Clark emphasized how leadership is not about having all the answers or necessarily being responsible for finding all the answers. Leadership does not mean you “know everything.” Rather, leadership involves growing and searching and seeking the possible with others; it is about growth and collaboration. For Baljit, leadership involves “looking for answers. Not necessarily having them but helping guide people, helping empower them to be better and believe in themselves as well.”

Connecting to Baljit’s point, Octovio offered that true collaboration involves inspiring others and growing others’ abilities to engage with possibility. Leadership thus involves shared decision-making, trust, and curiosity:

I've always been someone who gravitates towards collaborative processes, but [this program] really caused me to think ... how do I inspire other people's thinking and imagination? I think that shared decision making has become something that has evolved [for me] ... trusting the thoughts and the imaginings of my colleagues and that I don't have to be the one who comes up with the final piece—we're going to build this together. And I'm here to support your vision.

We've got this wider vision, but my job now is to help you all tap into that vision and the best way to do that is to harness everybody else's thinking and wonderings and imaginings to say—What could this be and what do we want it to be? And I think that's been a real boost to my leadership.

Participants recognized that connecting collaboratively requires vulnerability, humility, empathy, and curiosity. It can be challenging to compromise a position of power and expertise to truly collaborate with others. For example, Yumiko shared:

Leadership doesn't have to mean that you have all the answers. *It just means that you're the person that's willing to find answers with others.* It's okay to be vulnerable—as a learner, as a human, as a teacher, as a future leader—that's part of what we do as people. We're humans and we need to be vulnerable and that actually doesn't mean that you're weak or unsure what you're doing, it just means that you're human. (emphasis added)

Participants' understanding of leadership shifted from a sense of power and expertise sitting within one person's formal role, to seeing the processes involved in connecting, inspiring, and collaborating with others to expand what is possible. Participants recognized that a leader needs to be able to be vulnerable, show curiosity, and engage empathetically for authentic collaboration. The next two sections describe participants' developing understanding of imagination and how it directly contributes to leadership processes. Participants discussed imagination's roles in the relational and humanizing practices of good leaders, bringing into focus often unacknowledged ways in which imagination supports leadership. We connect humanizing leadership practices to opening up space for diversity and equity in leadership education, and subsequently, educational leadership.

Developing Conceptions of Imagination

Participants' conceptualizations of imagination developed throughout the program. Interestingly, most participants started with a narrow and stereotypical view of imagination as representing whimsy, fantasy, and the impractical. As their understandings expanded, participants found it difficult to define imagination as "one thing." For example, Angela's understanding of imagination went from "Disney" to "doable", from a sense of imaginary things to practical roles. She said:

I started with sort of that Disneyland-style perspective of, "imagine outside of the box" ... you can just imagine your way out of it. And it's just like as simple as that. You have your little feathery bird friends come along and help you out.

It became so much more practical. It's applicable and everyone is already doing it.

Similarly, by the end of the program, Brian's understanding of imagination changed "from that kind of whimsy, high fantasy imagination to what's actually practical and usable and accessible." For Octovio, the scope and diversity of imagination makes it challenging to understand. They learned to "stop thinking about it as being only one thing and seeing that it can be so many things." For them, "the most challenging thing about imagination is that it can be so many things."

When asked why they chose this imagination-focused leadership program, some participants self-identified as imaginative and said they wanted to use this capacity in leadership. Others felt they wanted to develop their imaginations. Universally participants described imagination as a capacity everyone has that can and must be developed. For example, Hans reflected: "I feel that everyone is imaginative, that everyone can be more imaginative if they put

effort towards it.” Similarly, Chen acknowledged how imagination is a kind of potential tool everyone has and that it is educable:

it's something I came in with, but I think my understanding of what imagination is just got stronger or what it could be and how to access it maybe was something that allowed me to develop more through the program.

Overall, participants’ initial conceptualizations of imagination in action as involving formal role plays, skits, or artistic creations changed to include broader and more subtle understandings of imagination. One theme emerging in relation to participants’ broadened understanding was the role of imagination in seeing things differently. Participants described imagination as involving taking on new perspectives or, metaphorically speaking, looking at situations or ideas through different lenses. They described imagination as representing the new, novel, unique, and appealing. Imagination involves actively seeking out what is *not yet*. As Sebastien poetically stated, using imagination involves “some sort of ingenuity, or [finding] a stone that hasn't been turned over.”

By seeking new ideas and new perspectives, imagination represents possibility. Clark expressed this similarly: “I understand imagination as perceiving, wanting, envisioning the possible and one of things I really appreciated [was] when you talked about the wonder-full and seeing the possibility in everything.” Participants equated imagination in leadership with seeking and supporting alternatives to the status quo, new ideas, and actions. Octovio, for example, described imagination as co-seeking possibility:

I [understand] imagination and leadership as possibility ... I think that's the thing that I take away and put into practice every day now. What are the possibilities in this? And it's not just me imagining what might those possibilities be. But I really

learned how to tap into other people as a resource to exploring possibility and deciding how might we take these possibilities. Which ones do we want to pursue as actual opportunities and bring to fruition?

Similarly, when asked about imagination's role in leadership Brian, replied:

It's creating a culture and creating an environment where that bigger thinking and strange thinking ... is encouraged and is welcome and that might not be the idea that you go with, but it opens up the door to different possibilities. That's something I've always really tried to use in my classroom, and I've always really tried to use as a leader.

The next section elaborates on participants' understanding of how imagination is grounded and practical and how it supports relational leadership practices in subtle but profound ways. Specifically, we see the ways in which participants saw imagination as *required* in relational leadership practices. Imagination allows for connection and collaboration, which enable humanizing and relational leadership. However, imagination is also cultivated in and through relationship. In the following section, we examine the complex and reciprocal relationship of imagination and connection within the context of humanizing, relational leadership.

Imagination as a Catalyst for Relational Leadership

As indicated in the previous sections, participants expressed a strongly relational conception of leadership including the importance of connecting to others, demonstrating empathy, and understanding a wide range of perspectives. It was also clear from these data that participants identified imagination as necessary for inclusive leadership processes to occur. Imagination was identified as essential for engaging with knowledge and seeking new or novel ideas. For example, in terms of relationality, when asked what one of her main learnings was from the course, Clark

stated: “I think imagination is hugely intertwined and foundational for relationships.” To the same question, Angela replied “[I learned] that all leaders have to be imaginative in some capacity, in order to relate to every single person that you come across.” Noting the emotional aspect of imagination, Neha said: “[it’s] emotional engagement that I think I’ve learned about imagination ... that it is a way to connect with people.”

Many participants identified imagination’s role in empathy specifically. For example, Clark said, “imagination is needed for empathy for relationships, and for leadership as well. At least to be an effective leader in my mind.” No imagination, no empathy: “Relationships are foundational. Empathy is huge. And that takes imagination ... you can’t have empathy if you’re not able to, to [understand] others’ perspectives.” When asked about how she understands imagination’s role in leadership, Angela stated: “it’s really paying attention to that humanistic side ... and just being together. And I think that’s what the biggest growth for me is, being able to imagine what’s going on for other people.” Brian even acknowledged that studying imagination and working with imagination “made [him] a more empathetic leader.”

In addition to understanding others’ perspectives, participants suggested that imagination creates space for diverse ideas. For Yumiko, imagination gives meaning to seeking and valuing others’ perspectives:

I want to be the understanding, the patient ... kind of leader that goes, Yeah, I understand what you’re saying. And I’m hearing you and I’m understanding you.

And here, let me give you another perspective to think about.

Brian was humbled by the advocacy imagination allowed:

I found it a bit humbling, that through imagination, I could actually work even better and advocate for other people’s ideas in different ways that maybe I hadn’t

been doing. And I also found the empathy piece of imagination helped me to understand other people's perspectives.

In addition to connecting with others personally and inclusive ways, imagination was identified as important for flexibility—it allows for changing ideas. Yumiko, for example, realized how imagination is necessary for rapidly changing and unprecedented circumstances:

Before when I thought of leadership and imagination, I thought of them as two separate pieces. But now from my experiences in the program and also being a fly on the wall watching the principals and the leaders in my life, I think that they're connected and one and the same. I think good leadership needs imagination, especially now during COVID. In this uncertain time in our lives, nobody has the answer. Everyone's pivoting and making changes. And I think if you don't have an open mind, you're not willing to try new things, and use your imagination to come up with solutions.

Several participants described a process of questioning or what if'ing within their communities as an example of how imagination supports developing new ideas. Octovio, for example, explained how she introduces “beautiful questions” to her staff that evoke wonder and, in their open-endedness, bring people to a place of considering new ideas: “I start the year with beautiful questions now. And when we meet, we explore things through that, asking a question that opens up the realm of possibility. And then we start to turn over the stones together.” Octovio’s beautiful questions included prompts such as “Why did/do we...? What if we...? How might we...? How should we...?”

Finally, imagination was identified as necessary to ignite interest, passion, and make communications more meaningful. For example, Brian suggested:

To me ... an imaginative practice, is really about trying to like engage the parts of our students, or the people that we're working with, the parts of their mind, that kind of like sparks that wow feeling or that's interesting. It really sparks their interest, sparks their engagement.

Brian continued, saying imagination allows an emotional connection, a reaching or engagement:

But it's how we reach that part of a person where they are feeling engaged and interested and their passion is kind of being ignited into a subject. So, to me, with leadership, it's like, how do we do that? How do we kind of like reach that part of the staff that we're working with? Or reach that part of the policy that we're working with or whatever, but how do we reach that inner piece that is really going to ignite interest, action in the person.

Our findings revealed a complex, nuanced understanding of imagination and its roles in relational leadership. Imagination is necessary for empathy and perspective-taking that are needed in building meaningful connections. These connections allow us to 'what if' new futurities together. While imagination is necessary for building connections, our connections also help us further cultivate our imagination.

An unexpected theme arose from the notion of relational leadership. Participants recognized that empathy and perspective-taking promote inclusion, providing space for all people and ideas. This can translate into providing space for more diversity in leadership, in education and beyond.

Creating Space at the Leadership Table

A common theme that emerged from our data was how imagination was diverse and also how it supported diversity. As a space of and for diversity, imagination ultimately allowed people to feel a sense of belonging. For example, Ciara emphasized the difference that imagination

involves: “I see imagination brought through in different ways from different people ... carried out or defined differently by different people too.” Yumiko, a student who expressed her concern about “belonging” in the group, associated imagination with an inclusive space for learning. They said imagination offers “a soft start for everyone. Everyone has something to contribute which I really like.” Imagination created a space for all to belong: “I felt like I had a seat at the table; everyone was able to give me space and I was able to share my ideas.”

Picking up the theme of imagination and inclusion, Yumiko stated that imagination created a space for all to contribute:

And I think that's one really powerful tool of imagination, being able to solve problems and come up with solutions in interesting ways and also to be able to give space to people that maybe historically weren't always given space traditionally, because it's everyone's learning and everyone's coming from their own experience.

Imagination opens doors to seeing things differently; this includes seeing leadership—and one's potential place at the leadership table—differently. A more nuanced and practical understanding of imagination allows for empathy, perspective-taking, and more space for belonging. This has significant implications for leadership education and improving equity and diversity in educational leadership.

In the following discussion, we examine the significance of a nuanced understanding of imagination for *humanizing* relational leadership and consider broader implications for research and practice.

Discussion

We began by pointing to the need to deepen understanding of *relationality* in leadership. We learned through this research, that participants understand imagination as integral to

relationships. The educational leaders we interviewed, described connecting—understanding others’ perspectives and their stories—as the work of imagination. These findings align with other scholarship in the field of imagination generally that indicates the powerful connective power of imagination (Asma, 2017; Egan, 2005). For example, as Maxine Greene’s (1995) famously said, it is “imagination, above all, that makes empathy possible” (p. 3). Participant responses indicated that imagination enables empathy, vulnerability, perspective-taking, and risk-taking; all of which are necessary in building positive collaborative relationships. It is through imagination that one can empathize and engage with a situation or new knowledge from various perspectives.

Egan (1997, 2005) describes humanizing as an imaginative process. Humanizing is an act that involves connecting on the plane of shared human emotion: it involves imagination as we connect with others’ hopes, fears, and passions (Egan, 1997, 2005). This research supports this idea. The data suggest that imagination is necessary for empathy, understanding, and true connection. This understanding of self and other also promotes inclusivity in educational leadership; emerging leaders are able to envision themselves as leaders and feel like they belong at the leadership table. However, relational leadership is not necessarily inclusive or humanizing. For example, entitative conceptions of relational leadership can be purpose-driven and support leader-centric processes. Relational leadership that is more entitative in nature may use connection as a tool to influence others towards pre-determined, and possibly inequitable ends. In contrast, our participants suggested that imagination supports more equitable relationships that honour diversity and provide space for varied backgrounds and experiences. This is the humanizing potential of employing imagination in relational leadership.

Humanizing leadership involves connection and relationality; engaging in the risky and vulnerable collaborative work of the possible requires connection. Imagination is necessary for

collectively envisioning an equitable and just education system and connection is necessary to work towards possible futurities (Judson, 2022). These findings add to understanding of what constitutes and drives humanizing processes. They confirm the importance of relationships for leadership and also contribute to better understanding of what drives the formation and growth of relationships. Acknowledging imagination's roles in connecting to people and to ideas is a step towards improving how these processes occur.

Interestingly, our data suggest a complex and dynamic relationship between imagination and relationship—imagination is both a catalyst for relationship and is also enriched by relationship. As Clark stated, “especially in leadership, imagination is not a solo thing. You need other people.” So, connection serves to further cultivate imagination; relationships with people with varied experiences and backgrounds expand our understanding and ability to imagine things differently. Within this culture of connection, *humanizing* relational leadership is possible. Rather than the power and answers residing with a single “leader,” ideas, questions, and possible solutions emerge from the spaces in between, from within the connections. This allows for various leaders to emerge in various contexts, regardless of their formal role. This increases diversity in leadership and promotes a sense of belonging. To paraphrase one participant, it allows more people to see themselves “at the leadership table.” Imagination may be understood as opening spaces of shared human emotion for everyone. We can imagine leadership differently; we can understand leadership as a relational process of connection that is inclusive and diverse.

Conclusion

These research findings add new knowledge to constructionist understandings of relational leadership theory and practice by highlighting the role of imagination in humanizing connections. They enrich understanding of relational practices in leadership that support and empower others,

rather than simply meet instrumental leader-centric goals. Future research on imagination in leadership might usefully consider *how* imagination develops within the relationships that constitute leadership. We wonder: How do people experience imagining together? How does imagining possibilities inform leadership choices? What influences processes of imagining in relationships? How do different stakeholders experience, engage, and participate in imagining? How does power play out in shared spaces of imagination as stakeholders inter-act around leadership issues? Future research might usefully look at how the cultivation of imagination with/in organizations/communities contributes to individual and collective identity formation and how the development of imagination is affected by positionality and subjectivities, including race, class, gender, and ability.

Based on our findings, there are also clear implications for leadership education. Imagine with us for a moment that increasing calls to imagination (see for example Ardichvili et al., 2016; Anderson, 2023; Brandon, 2023; Judson, 2023a; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015; Raptis et al., 2021) represent an *imaginative* turn in leadership scholarship. What new pedagogical practices and theories of learning in leadership are required? In an article focusing on arts-based imaginative pedagogy in leadership education, Judson (2023a) points to possible limitations of current leadership education approaches, asking:

Are current leadership education instructional strategies multi-dimensional or multi-modal enough to cultivate leadership imagination? How well will leadership education instructional strategies support this *imaginative* turn in leadership theory? And importantly, what *theories of learning* are available to support this imaginative pedagogical turn? (p. 76)

While this paper focuses on participants' understandings of imagination, leadership, and imagination's roles in leadership, our broader case study also considers the educational practices in the program itself that developed and enriched participants' understandings of what imagination is and does and how they practice leadership. Future research will hone in on the pedagogical practices and tools of imagination employed in this program that grew these leaders' understandings of imagination and their comfort in employing imagination in their professional lives. This pedagogy will be of value in wider contexts interested in humanizing relational work, and in changing the status quo to support inclusion, equity, and social justice.

Imaginative pedagogical approaches in educational leadership may also promote a ripple effect. That is, imaginative practices promote humanizing relational leadership and disrupt who is traditionally viewed as a leader. This may result in more people seeing themselves as belonging at the leadership table and in others recognizing the value that diverse leaders bring to educational leadership. This process could expand recruitment and retention strategies for educational leadership programs. Will more people seek out leadership positions if imagination and the relational spaces it offers are inclusive to all leaders? How might the "faces" of leadership change? How might new leaders work to humanize education? What new possibilities arise for the future of education? Using this research as a stepping stone, we hope others will join us in pushing past misconceptions of imagination as mere whimsy and acknowledge its role in inclusive relational work in all contexts.

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