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Leading With the Possible in Mind: Educational Leaders' Experiences Engaging Imagination in Practice

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This research seeks to better understand the theoretical and practical dimensions of imagination as a practice that supports relational and ethical leadership. Specifically, this article shares focus group data that was part of a larger case study looking at educational leaders' conceptions and practices of imagination. Data from a focus group involving seven participants reveals educational leaders' understandings of imagination and leadership, and the practical ways they enact imagination in their own leadership practices. Participants' descriptions of their imaginative practices and how they are received in their school cultures highlight the opportunities, challenges, and tensions of being imaginative in educational leadership contexts. It is risky to be imaginative, and while leaders find space to be imaginative, they often engage in covert use of imagination to avoid judgement and condescension. This research contributes to deepening understanding of relational, whole-hearted, and ethical approaches to leadership in hopes of addressing misconceptions of imagination and developing cultures that support and promote imagination for all leaders.

Educational Leaders' Experiences Engaging Imagination in Practice

How to lead in complex, rapidly changing and increasingly contentious times is a significant question for all leadership contexts. The paradigms and related practices that informed leadership and leadership education in the world a few decades ago, do not suit the demands of a post-pandemic, globalized, knowledge-driven, climate changing world of today (Anderson, 2023; Hopkins, 2019; Judson & Dougherty, 2023; Thomas & Brown, 2011). Of course, scholarly and practical responses to this question will vary, reflecting different beliefs, values, positionalities, and priorities. Our response is situated within relational leadership theory and practice—specifically, relational leadership that is focused on supporting equity and social justice. We are concerned with *ethical* leadership and how leaders can develop and enact empathy to support the well-being of others (Branson & Gross, 2014). We understand, theorize, and enact leadership in ways that acknowledge the emotional nature of human beings. We understand that human beings are *perfinkers*, a term coined by American psychologist David Kresch (cited in Egan, 2005, p. 89). That is, human beings never just *think*—rather, human beings *perceive*, and they *feel*, and they *think* at the same time; they *perfink*. Thus, like Byrnes-Jimenez and Yoon (2019) we acknowledge that "as scholars,

we are intellectual *and* emotional human beings" (p. 2). This seemingly simple—even obvious—statement has profound implications. Primarily, it means that navigating the "white water world" (Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018) of today requires *heart*.

In an article entitled "Leadership as an Act of Love: Leadership in Dangerous Times", Byrnes-Jimenez and Yoon (2019) outline a "whole-hearted" conception of leadership. They suggest that four "habits of the heart" are required to lead whole-heartedly and ethically: harmony, wisdom, courage, and imagination. Imagination is arguably the least studied of these four leadership habits and is largely misunderstood in the context of educational leadership (Judson, 2020, 2023). Accepting Byrnes-Jimenez and Yoon's (2019) invitation to question, extend, and elaborate their framework, this paper contributes to understanding the imaginative dimensions of *leading with heart* as an ethical practice. Of course, we do not see imagination as a separate and self-contained process; it is closely connected to harmony, wisdom, and courage. However, given the limited understanding of imagination overall, we also consider the value in honing in on the imaginative practices of leaders. Moreover, given that imagination is always emotional (Egan, 2005), knowledge of imagination contributes to understanding leadership as a whole-hearted practice.

Imagination is both the *what is* and the *what could be.* In this research, imagination is defined 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. 8). Imagination plays an integral role in a range of leadership practices, including in processes of connecting, empathizing, collaborating, and envisioning (Judson, 2022, 2023). Imagination allows us to understand—to perfink—what *is* in relation to self and other. That is, imagination contributes to a leader's sense of self (Asma, 2017; Stephenson, 2009) and their understanding of the other (Greene, 1995; Guare, 1999; Nussbaum, 1997). Through imagination, leaders can self-reflect, and empathize with the experiences and understandings of others (Clarke, 2018). This imaginative process of exploring self and others in context allows for new possibility. When leaders engage their imagination, and the imaginations of those they are working with, they can collaboratively envision new possible outcomes and processes for reaching these outcomes, specifically ethical and inclusive outcomes. Of course, imagination alone is not enough; ethical leadership requires honesty, authenticity, intentionality and an unwavering commitment to what is best for all (Branson & Gross, 2014). Guided by what is right and best for all, imagination supports leaders in considering, with others and for others, what *could be* in support of a just future. In some cases, an unexpected, innovative outcome may emerge. Thus, we recognize the potentiality of imagination in ethical leadership, in cultivating empathy and envisioning the 'not yet' in ways that best support all members of

communities (Branson & Gross, 2014; Greene, 1995). Without imagination, we cannot envision how things may be better and how we can contribute to making them better (Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018).

In other words, imagination is both an integrative and generative force (Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018); imagination bridges the gaps between what is known and what is new as we perfink the world and as we engage in different forms of reasoning. Imagination also promotes speculation and experimentation—sense-breaking that allows us to see the possible within the actual, to push boundaries and surpass constraints to create space for new interpretations that move beyond the status quo (Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018). As a catalyst for sense-making and sense-breaking, imagination is a tool of learning and of leadership (Judson, 2023; Judson & Dougherty, 2023). Imagination enables unlearning and pushing beyond the 'we can't' to open up new possibilities. In the ever-changing contemporary landscape for leaders, there are increased calls for developing and using imagination (Brandon, 2023; Hopkins, 2019; Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018; Raptis et al., 2021).

To advance understanding of imagination's role in relational leadership, this paper shares findings from a focus group with seven educational leaders who were part of an imagination-focused Masters program in leadership. As follow-up to a study about how these leaders understand imagination and its role in their leadership following their program, this focus group—conducted approximately 18 months following completion of the program—allowed participants to discuss the practical ways they enact imagination in their own leadership practices. We explored how they enacted imagination in practice and how their school cultures may promote or suppress imagination. The participants' articulation of what they do and how it is received in their school cultures highlight the opportunities, challenges, and tensions of being imaginative in educational leadership. Participants shared how imagination contributes to their work and how they find spaces to enact imagination. However, participants enact imagination covertly, to avoid widespread misconceptions of imagination. These misconceptions can lead to judgement and condescension for some leaders; how leaders are received is connected to their positionality and implicit bias about their expertise and ability and the cultures within which they work. Building connections and having explicit conversations about imagination may promote more supportive school cultures. Relationships between people emerge as spaces of possibility in which change can be envisioned and enacted. Overall, this research contributes to understanding the *heart work* of leadership by illuminating the vital yet complex role of imagination.

On Relational Leadership as Emotional Work

Drawing on Bennis and Nanus' (1985) work, Anderson (2023) describes the contexts leaders navigate as increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, or VUCA, due to "social media; disinformation; climate change; eco-anxiety; epistemic crises; rising inequality; pandemics; opioid crises" and

economic conditions (p. 173). Within rapidly changing, challenging, and inequitable conditions, how leadership is enacted has real, material impacts on the lives of others. Thus, like Duignan (2006), we advocate the need for ethical, authentic leadership. By ethical leadership, we mean leadership that works for social justice, equity and inclusion. This involves recognizing and re-envisioning educational practices that reproduce inequality ("Inner Landscapes of Leadership," 2023; Strom et al., 2023; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). By authentic leadership, we mean leading with integrity and reflective practice that supports understanding who you are as a leader. This kind of leadership is not easy (Shapiro & Gross, 2013) and "isn't for the faint of heart" (Judson et al., 2023, p. 22). Leaders offer their genuine self—their whole heart—in relationship with others. This whole heartedness requires courage. The courage to be vulnerable. To take risks. To embrace not knowing as a generative starting place for collaboration. In their relationships with others, authentic and ethical leaders critically examine what is assumed to be true and demonstrate the courage to "challenge unethical and immoral policies and practices wherever they find them" (Duignan, 2006, p. 11). Ultimately this is *relational* leadership work.

Much has been written exploring 'effective' leadership theories, styles of leadership, and leadership practices. Our response to questions of how to lead in VUCA times centers on some of the emotional dimensions of leadership—emotional dimensions that cross theories, styles, or particular actions. Rather than emphasizing any specific styles or practices, therefore, we seek to more deeply understand leadership as a relational and emotional process (Uhl-Bien, 2006) that may include a range of specific approaches and actions. From a relational perspective, leadership occurs *between* people, *within* relationships. This greatly expands conceptions of "who" a leader is beyond those in formal leadership positions. Since leadership emerges within relationships, one may take on a leadership role in relation to other people, within certain contexts or environments, and in relation to specific content. From a relational perspective, roles and ideas of leadership come out of the collective (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). There is no specific style of leadership or leadership skill that is inherently effective; the types of interactions and the skills and traits necessary within those interactions are contextual to the specific collective (Blackmore, 2010). People take on roles as leaders and followers in that interaction, and the boundaries and expectations of the collective are distinct to that leadership interaction. Understanding, therefore, that everyone has the potential to lead creates a great deal of possibility and recognizes the power of each individual in envisioning and enacting change.

Methodology

Participants

In previous work (Judson & Dougherty, accepted/in press), we interviewed students engaged in a unique offering of an imagination-focused Master of Education in Educational Leadership program in a large, public research

institution in British Columbia, Canada. We sought to learn more about the students' reasons for engaging in this program, their developing conceptualizations of both imagination and leadership, their significant learning, and the processes that facilitated their learning. The analysis provided excellent insights into the relationship participants saw between imagination and humanizing leadership. As discussed elsewhere (Judson & Dougherty, accepted/in press), participants discussed unlearning traditional views of trait leadership and articulated the importance of connection and relationship in leadership. Specifically, participants discussed imagination as fueling connection and connection helping to further cultivate imagination in a cyclical process. Participants had an expanded view of who could be a leader and how one could enact leadership practices. For us, this generated additional questions about how imagination might be enacted in practice and what cultures or contexts may promote or suppress imagination, and for whom. We wondered, since graduating, how had the participants been enacting imagination in practice and what tensions did they experience in these enactments? How did their positionality influence how their imaginative practices are received? These questions are the focus of this paper.

To explore these questions, we invited the previous 13 participants[1] to a focus group, approximately 18 months following the completion of their graduate degree. Of the 13 interview participants, seven participated in the focus group. Topics for discussion included school culture and its role in promoting or inhibiting imaginative practices, the imaginative practices enacted by participants and how they are received, and how the participants see their own positionality influencing how their imaginative work is perceived.

Some background information about the participants' graduate program is necessary in order to contextualize their experience and their dialogue in the focus group. The MEd program was conceived as an imaginative project, where exploration of imagination, education, and leadership was woven into traditional educational leadership curriculum (including courses on leadership theory, organizational theory, 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) connects closely to educational practices and focuses on teaching and learning for adults of all ages. However, it is, more broadly, a unique sociocultural theory of human development that describes how our imaginations grow and change throughout our lives. In line with Lev Vygotsky's conception of human development, Egan describes how, as cultural beings, our imaginations and the meanings we make of our experiences in the world are shaped by the different thinking or cognitive tools we employ. These tools help us to

1 All participants had provided written consent to be contacted for follow up research.

think and to remember because they connect emotion, imagination, and knowledge. Egan's theory of IE outlines different sets of cognitive tools that come along with oral language (e.g., the story-form, dramatic tensions, vivid mental imagery, metaphor), written language (e.g., revolt and idealism, sense of wonder, extremes of experience and limits of reality), theoretical language (e.g., general ideas and their anomalies, sense of agency) and highly reflexive language (e.g., irony). While it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed description of Egan's theory, we introduce it to explain participants' references to cognitive tools. When asked about how they engage imagination, this is the discourse they employ. In this program, IE was explored and applied to key leadership processes including understanding self and other, cultivating equitable communities, and communicating in meaningful ways.

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. The instructional team also employed cognitive tools in enacting the curriculum, to promote affective and cognitive learning. In short, the cohort of MEd students learned about imagination in educational leadership while also experiencing an imaginative learning process.

Given their professional and academic background, the focus group participants offer a very important perspective on the role of imagination in educational leadership. The participants are K-12 educators with varied backgrounds and experiences; many are involved in informal leadership (e.g., mentoring new teachers, providing professional development sessions, engaging students in various initiatives) and some hold formal administrative positions (e.g., head teacher, vice principal, principal). They chose an imagination-focused graduate program and have developed nuanced theoretical understandings of imagination and leadership. They are emerging leaders in practice who are enacting what they have learned in varied contexts. They view imagination positively and are motivated to enact imagination in their relational leadership. Even with this desire to lead imaginatively, these participants experience barriers and limits to enacting imagination in their educational environments. It is for these reasons that we sought their perspective on how imagination can be enacted in educational leadership environments, and how imagination may be perceived or understood by others.

Data Collection and Analysis

The focus group involving the seven participants—Martin, Sasha, Tanisha, Angela, Tracy, Jade, and Jasper (all pseudonyms)—occurred on Zoom, which allowed for automated transcription; we later cleaned the transcript using the audio for accuracy. We decided to analyze the text rather than examining other aspects of communication (see Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009); we individually coded the transcript from the focus group (see Miles et al., 2014) and then we compared codes. We collaboratively analyzed the transcript in a third stage in which we examined our individual analytic processes

and code creations; based on this discussion came to an agreement on the emergent themes we discuss here. These themes include: finding space to be imaginative; promoting belonging through imaginative practices; and engaging in covert use of imagination.

Findings

Finding and Creating Space to be Imaginative

In discussing their own leadership practices, participants tended to delineate their personal leadership actions from formal leadership positions. Several participants noted that while they engage as leaders with students, parents/caregivers, and other teachers, they do not hold a leadership position or lead the "school as an entity," as stated by one participant. In sharing their experiences with leadership, these relational encounters with various stakeholders seemed to be viewed as less important or meaningful than traditional school leadership enacted by administrators.

Although perhaps perceived as being more limited in scope, the participants discussed that they found ways to be imaginative within their positions. They clearly articulated how imagination enabled their relationships with stakeholders and the collaborative work they did together. When discussing how their imaginative practices were received, participants discussed how, in many cases, their efforts went unnoticed or, when noticed, were not associated with imagination.

One participant highlighted the need to find space to be imaginative. Martin[2] stated that people using imaginative practices in schools:

> Tend to navigate themselves towards an environment where they will be received...I don't really think that anyone in that context would look for an environment where their voice would not be heard. It's more really like where we are.

This demonstrates that leaders emerge and enact imaginative practices where they can be accepted. What matters, according to Martin, is "where we are" and what we can do within that specific context. This highlights the relational and contextual nature of leadership. It is conceivable that leaders are drawn into relationship with others who can cognitively and affectively connect to imaginative practices.

Sasha noted that while she sees several teachers and department heads in her school using imagination and cognitive tools (like storytelling and metaphor) in their practice, these imaginative practices are not noticed. She describes these imaginative practices as "small bursts" blossoming around the school; when asked how the administration creates or supports a culture for imagination, she stated:

2 All participant names are pseudonyms

> I actually don't think that they [administrators] notice. I don't think that that's been much on their radar. And I'm seeing other teachers really try [to use imagination] too, and not just because of me. But I think there's a group of us who have really tried to use imagination and storytelling and metaphors in our own practice. And there's other department heads that try to do that as well. And so, I think these things are happening in this school, in kind of these small bursts. But I think if I asked anyone on our senior leadership team if they had seen any of that, I think they would say no.

While Sasha's school culture does not impede imaginative practices, these practices may go unnoticed and, consequently, unsupported. She acknowledges how there is a small community of educators attempting to engage cognitive tools in their practice, but these imaginative approaches are not recognized by senior leadership. This appears to be a lost opportunity to further cultivate the motivation and innovation of these imaginative practitioners.

Tanisha noted that her school had a new administrative team, which led to things being "chaotic" and "feeling like we're still playing catch up." In terms of "school-wide feelings for fostering imagination" she noted that "...there aren't as many opportunities as there have been in previous years." Two other participants noted that changes to their schools' administrative teams led to "growing pains" and attempts to "figure out the lay of the land." Because of administrative changes at her school, Sasha noted, "it hasn't really been a great year for any innovation or trying new things."

Participants shared that changes to the formal leadership of the school can destabilize school culture and may limit the ability for educators to be imaginative and innovative. New administration may result in changes to school culture that influence imagination; imaginative practices are not fostered or cultivated as personnel attempt to adjust to the change. Another reason why these practices may go unnoticed is because of a lack of explicit dialogue about imagination. As described in more detail later, some participants explained that using the term "imagination" can be risky due to a lack of a shared understanding of imagination. In the following section, we examine specific, practical examples of how these wholehearted leaders are engaging in imaginative practices.

Promoting Belonging and Care through Their Imaginative Practices

The participants provided practical examples of how they have been engaging students, parents/caregivers, and other educators with imagination. These examples highlight the importance of the relationality of leadership. Sasha, one of the participants holding a formal leadership position in her school, explained that in her role with transition planning, she often uses imagination and cognitive tools to collaboratively plan with students and their families. She is explicit about asking students to imagine their futures,

using metaphor of journeying and exploring various paths. She explains that engaging in this process together pushes back again a more traditional discourse around academic and career planning that emphasizes a linear path from secondary to post-secondary to a career.

> My work with students and families when we're talking about post-secondary plans—especially with a student body that all has a learning difference—and maybe that post-secondary plan isn't necessarily a typical journey for kids, I have explicitly been like, let's imagine something different. Let's look at our values, let's talk about journeys and taking different paths. I use a lot of storytelling and getting speakers to come in to talk about their own winding career journeys. And explicitly using imaginative terms, explicitly saying, we are going to imagine what your future looks like and what you want it to look like. As far as how it's received by the students and by the family that I'm working with, I think that they've liked more of an open-ended, possibilities-are-endless kind of take on the student's future.

Sasha continued to explain that academic trajectories are often assumed; if the student gets good marks, they can attend a 'good' post-secondary institution and then get a 'good' job. Or, as she explained, if you get "into this mediocre school, you get a mediocre job." Sasha intentionally employed imagination to work against this narrative with students. She recognized the learning differences of each student and invited the student to imaginatively explore what they wanted their future to look like. This seemed to be an empowering process that both the students and their families appreciated.

Tanisha also engaged students through imagination in the classroom, recognizing the importance of meeting students where they are at and finding different approaches that may fit the varied needs of students.

> In my classroom, and the way that I support my students—specifically students that learn differently or are on IEPs [individual education plans] or have some behavior needs or social emotional needs—I'm able to use that imagination piece in my classroom, which is wonderful. My students are really open to different ways of learning. So that's been lovely.

Both Sasha and Tanisha recognize the value of imagination and cognitive tools in sense-making with students with different needs and abilities. They discuss using cognitive tools to promote belonging and to meet the needs of each individual student.

Angela discussed how they engage students through various cognitive tools, like humour, role play, and metaphor. She discusses how she has been able to build these approaches over eight years of teaching and that other teachers are becoming interested in what she is doing and why she is doing it.

> I've had eight years to develop my program for grade sixes and sevens - but I come up with a lot of like things that people walk by, and they see well, like you're wearing a bunch of crowns, and you're like acting like little diplomats and things like that. What are you doing? Or just have a lot of questions. And this year, in working with a new team of teachers coming in and getting to know the students and some of the projects that we are able to do, they asked me - where do you get these ideas from? And so that starts the conversation about finding the story and trying to bring that engagement through fun and humor and role play and through metaphor and all of those different types of [cognitive tools].

Tracy, a principal of a school, explains how, as a leader, it is much more than just asking people to be imaginative. She explains that she engages various cognitive tools depending upon the problem or discussion at hand:

> I think that as a leader you've got to choose which facets of imagination might come into play. Are we possibility posing? Are we looking for metaphors to try to help ourselves or students or parents understand something? Are we looking for humor, or are we looking at the limits and extremes to try to enact different ways of thinking or envisioning what an outcome might look like? But also...we might imagine something, and as we go along that path we also have to have that ability to be flexible with our imaginations. That just because we imagined it doesn't mean it's going to be just the way we imagined it. It's a little more fluid and dynamic than that. So, I think that imagination can keep you at the leadership table and help you more successful once you get there.

Tracy goes onto explain the importance of truly collaborative relationships:

> My metaphor for imagination is the prism - where do we need to shine the light and where do we need to dim the light? And who needs to step into the light, and who maybe needs to step out of the light? And sometimes it's you as the leader, and sometimes it's you as the leader who's got to step out of the light and let other people shine.

Participants recognize the practical and generative nature of imagination in working with students, families, educators, and other stakeholders. Imagination creates space for understanding and for pushing beyond traditional narratives that may keep people constrained. Their discussion of using cognitive tools intentionally to build relationships, to collaborate, and to help provide new stories or narratives demonstrates the power of imagination to promote a sense of belonging and care for others. Imagination

appears to allow leaders to determine not only which tools of imagination (cognitive tools) to draw on, but also to be open to re-evaluating or improvising if their initial approach is not productive. This includes stepping back and creating space for others to shine.

Working in Tension and Engaging in Covert Use of Imagination

In general, leaders are ambivalent about imagination: that is, leaders felt positive about the idea of imagination, but are hesitant to employ it themselves (Judson, 2020). They do not talk about imagination often and when they do, it is often associated with risk (ibid). The same theme of tension emerged in this study.

Tanisha offered that although she uses imagination to connect to at-risk learners and create plans to best support their learning, she explained that "no one actually uses that language [imagination] to describe" their work. "It's a different way of thinking, and even using that word 'imagination' in schools, in a leadership position isn't always embraced. Or understood fully, I think, is the big piece".

Imagination is often equated with play and imaginary worlds (Judson, 2020). While perhaps accepted and encouraged in younger children, imagination can be wrongly viewed as something we grow out of. Or mistaken as something that only adults with creative, artistic, or musical talents continue to use (Hopkins, 2019). There may be resistance to the term as it may be seen as too emotional, or whimsical, for important educational contexts (Judson, 2020). For us, and other scholars (e.g., Asma, 2017; Egan, 1997; Hopkins, 2019; Pendleton-Jullian & Brown, 2018; Raptis et al., 2021), imagination is practical, relational, essential, and can be cultivated in each of us.

Only one of the participants noted their explicit and intentional use of the word "imagination" in their practice. Tracy discusses how being explicit about imagination enhanced the culture for imagination on her team:

> We deliberately included the word imagination, and it was quite an interesting discussion, because we're saying - what's our purpose of the team? It is to imagine new possibilities for learning and student life at our school. So, it's created the space for us to be more flexible in our meeting structures, because when we're preparing to come to a meeting, we might be asked to explore something and bring our ideas, or what we imagine. We've also been much more intentional because of that to invite other voices to the table to say - hey, we only represent a specific set of voices, and we need to invite these teachers in, or we need to talk to some parents or some students. And so just expanding the sphere of the collective imagination...I think having that word imagination in our purpose statement for our team has opened up the space for that.

Except for Tracy, most participants seemed to employ imagination *covertly;* most participants indicated they do not use the term imagination explicitly in their practice. Martin explains: "I think sometimes people don't use that language. They might use the tools but are not aware of that. Again, I think the context, like the environment that someone is in, will play a role in how they will be received." Jade admitted that innovation and creativity were words that fit more easily into the language of her leadership—to explicitly speak about imagination would require contextualization and more explanation of her meaning. She stated:

> I don't know if I actually ever say imagination. And I think that's because I have to provide more context behind how that form of imagination is viewed, how we would conceptualize imagination.

Jade notices imagination's tools at work around them, by others and themselves, but they do not name the work as imaginative because of a lack of understanding of what imagination is.

Interestingly, participants acknowledge how imaginative practices are beneficial and ubiquitous but often are not identified as imaginative. Jasper reflects:

> When I think about leaders that I've had, or of people that catch my eye, there's something about people, it's because they're knowingly or unknowingly employing these tools that captivate you in a certain way. So, does using imagination allow you to be more captivating, if that's what you're going for? Absolutely. Does it allow you to build connection more to what you're talking about or to the people that you're trying to speak to? Yes. Is there something about doing a job well, especially, we're working in service. We work with people. It's a people profession. Is there something about using imagination and doing it well and having people see that? I have to wholeheartedly agree.

So, while participants expressed comfort employing imagination and its value in their work in schools, they were less comfortable using the word imagination with others. Imagination, they said, is misunderstood.

In summary, while school culture and misconceptions about imagination may limit expressions of imagination in leadership, the participants find space to engage relationally, using cognitive tools. Participants discussed the possibility created by enacting imagination and using cognitive tools while leading. This is mostly covert work. In most cases, these imaginative practices are not explicitly connected to imagination and may go unnoticed by the wider school community. The next section shares why this covert work may

be necessary; participants share some challenges employing imagination in school contexts as leaders, including being judged for their use of imaginative practices.

Facing Judgement Due to Imagination

Five of our seven participants suggested that talking about imagination can have negative consequences. The participants describe being dismissed, judged by others, or treated with condescension. For two participants, Tanisha and Sasha, the emotionality of imagination was used against them—they were typecast by other educators in their school as naïve and idealistic due to their interest in imagination. Tanisha shared the following:

> I think being a woman is obviously part of it, but I think also being a woman of young children ... with the current people I'm working with, I think there is kind of a level of dismissiveness, because there is a lot of me that is seen as a mother now at school that even a couple of years ago I mean, that wasn't the case. It really feels that has changed people's perception of me at school. And that's some of the ideas, or the [imaginative] things that I am trying are definitely seen as, "that makes sense because she has little kids". And it's super frustrating. And I'm getting like a bit choked up thinking about it, because it's a very real thing that I experience almost every day at my work right now. And I don't think it would be the same if I was a man with young children.

Here you can sense the emotionality and frustration that Tanisha experiences as her imaginative practices and engagement with cognitive tools is dismissed as something for young children. In her experience, her imaginative pedagogy is seen as play a mother would engage in with her children, rather than an intentional and effective teaching or leadership approach. Tanisha is not able to express herself fully as she is typecast as a mother, rather than viewed as an educator and leader. She does not believe a young father would be similarly dismissed and judged.

Sasha has had similar experiences and is treated with condescension by colleagues and administrators for being 'naive' and 'emotional' in her work in an inner-city school:

> I can definitely empathize and feel exactly the same thing [as Tanisha]. I don't have a formal leadership position at my school, but I do take on a lot of responsibilities. And even if it's talking about plans for student success—and specifically because I work at a complex school in the inner city, so there's a lot of need there—just the way that I view student success is like, "you're so naive. You have a big heart. You have a little boy at home. You're

> so emotional, you're so connected." And even the way that I'm spoken to by leadership is very condescending. Like – "it's okay, Hun." And like these little degrading kind of comments.

Sasha emphasizes connection with and "showing up for" her students. Her strengths-based approach and her resistance to 'at-risk' narratives of her students is dismissed by leadership as being naïve and overly caring, emotional, and maternal. She goes on to note that comments are also made questioning her ability to move into a more formal leadership position based on the assumption that she will likely go on maternity leave again.

Jade further explained that while imagination has the potential to build connection and care, it can also be easily misinterpreted as weakness. She explains the risk in enacting imagination:

> The challenge of trying to share that imaginative piece, if they're not open to it, if they're not willing to see it, it's very hard to break down that barrier. A lot of times ... it becomes dismissive, and it becomes a sign of weakness—rather than a sign of nurturing, caring, empathy. I think that's still a very large gap in trying to know when it's psychologically safe [to be imaginative]. Like depending on the people in the room, are you able to actually provide your voice and feel safe in that environment? Knowing that your voice is going to be heard, not judged and heard right, accepted, and acknowledged. I think there's a very large gap there, and I think all these tools that we have with imagination, we know the value behind what it can bring and why we're trying to embrace that. But there's definitely still a barrier to overcome.

Angela noted that she was often judged for her appearance and other educators assumed she was new to teaching. She found when she built a relationship with her colleagues and explained her approach to using cognitive tools, they became more interested and engaged. While initially dismissive, once Angela had established herself as experienced and holding expertise, others became much more interested in how she used imagination. Unfortunately, implicit bias can result in very capable, experienced leaders being questioned, judged, dismissed, or belittled. As Martin explains:

> I see that certain groups, and again, that could be depending on gender, but that could also be depending on their ethnicity, are more likely to be ... belittled maybe at times, or I guess, rather pushed aside.

He goes on to discuss an experience he had as a representative for his school at a district event; Martin was disappointed by the lack of diversity in the group of representatives he met with. He found that some representatives were given more space and others were pushed aside; he noted that gender

and ethnicity both related to who was allowed to take space—that is, voice their ideas and lead—and who was not. Speaking about this district event, Martin lamented:

> I found that experience to be a little bit disheartening because you would think that in more formal leadership roles, all voices are given an equal share, or at least a possibility to share their opinion, and that was not the case. I think that's also what I told myself when thinking about my own career, and eventually, maybe moving into leadership. I think that's why I would push that aside, and I don't really see that for myself because I think there are other voices who need to be pushed more, and it doesn't have to be another white male who already takes so much room in certain leadership roles. I think we need more diversity. A lot more diversity.

Participants responses indicate how enacting imagination can be risky; even more so for leaders who are not in a safe space or whose experience and expertise are questioned. Unfortunately, how leaders present—their age, gender, ability, ethnicity, sexuality, and many other characteristics—can lead to unfounded assumptions about their abilities and thus, a dismissiveness of their imaginative practices. Imaginative practices are misinterpreted as weakness and judgements of the educator/leader can limit their potential for imaginative practices.

Wonderings

Building on the work of Burkeman (2012) and Wheatley (2006), Anderson (2023) shapes his concluding chapter in an anthology on imagination and leadership around the notion of *opensure*. He suggests: "Closure implies finality, *opensure* means receptivity. Opensure is about remaining curious, responsive, and agile, ready to switch gears as opportunities emerge. ...opensure is a necessary condition for imagination to flourish" (Anderson, 2023, p. 172). Anderson urges leaders to make *opensure,* rather than closure, a default in their leadership. This notion inspired this "conclusion."

While limited in size and scope, our focus group data illuminates some interesting themes for future research. These themes relate to leadership education, to misunderstandings about imagination, to the relationship between positionality and imagination, and to imagination as a shared practice. Our work with imaginative leaders leaves us with curiosity. And so, rather than offer a conclusion to this work, we offer our wonderings in support of future research.

First, if we seek to expand and deepen understanding of imagination's role in whole-hearted leadership, then it is necessary to examine the practical ways to bring imagination into leadership education. We echo calls for research on leadership education that focuses on emotionality and imagination (Byrnes-

Jimenez & Yoon, 2019; Judson & Dougherty, 2023; accepted/in press). As described earlier, this particular group of leaders learned about Imaginative Education and, specifically, the tools of imagination, or cognitive tools, that they could use in their work as a focus in their graduate study. The fact that our participants explicitly refer to using cognitive tools such as metaphor, story, role play, and humour in their work nearly two years following graduation, suggests that this particular approach to leadership education did make imagination more tangible and did offer leaders "tools" for imaginative engagement. Further research is required on imaginative pedagogies such as Imaginative Education in the context of leadership education.

Second, our data reveals concerning barriers to expanded use of imagination. For example, despite indicating they value imagination, the use of imagination was *covert*. We wonder, how do we move beyond the covert to imagination being part of the dominant discourse in leadership and leadership education? Moreover, there were negative implications for some in *being* imaginative. As long as misunderstandings exist about imagination and its very real, very *adult* and practical uses in leadership, it is likely that contexts will remain inhospitable to imagination. The vulnerability required to enact imagination in these contexts—and the emotional toll that may result if one feels judged—is significant and, conceivably a deterrent for some leaders.

Third, the themes related to age and gender associated with imagination require further deeper investigation. Though we did not interrogate the influence of race, ethnicity, or sexuality in this focus group (as these experiences were not shared by participants), we can see from this research that positionality makes it more or less difficult to take the risks associated with using imagination. For some leaders—especially those that are already denied equity in a systemically White, heterosexual, and male-dominated field—employing imagination may be too risky. This has significant implications if we return to where we started: the challenges of leading in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times *require* imagination. We wonder, how can imagination be leveraged to do the *un*learning required to address these widespread misconceptions about imagination? How can imagination support the unlearning and deconstruction of historically exclusionary views of leadership?

On a positive note, it is exactly the work of imagination that can lead to the unlearning and recontextualizing of leadership knowledge that will address widespread misunderstanding. Here's the rub for any leadership education: We need to *use* imagination to understand imagination's real impact and value. Whole-hearted leadership scholars Byrnes-Jimenez and Yoon (2019) speak of love as a strategy *and* a framework for leadership (p. 3). Our work suggests that imagination may be considered a *strategy* for leadership but may, more importantly, represent a relational space through and in which to lead in challenging, complex, and contentious times. And this leads to our final wondering regarding *shared* imaginative spaces in leadership.

Fourth, while it was encouraging to see how these leaders cultivate their own imagination—albeit through covert operation—and thus grow this aspect of their whole-hearted leadership, our preliminary data did reveal a very individualized conception of imagination. We wonder, how might shared relational spaces of imagination be cultivated? And what kind of research might interrogate those spaces? Further research should seek to understand how *shared* spaces of imagination in leadership are formed, sustained, and shared. As Byres-Jimenez and Yoon (2019) suggest, authentic and equitable leadership calls for storytelling and story listening in leadership:

> By cultivating a shared habit of imagining, leaders can help people find where they belong. Perhaps most important is the role of leaders in crafting and listening to the histories and stories of individual students, teachers, staff, parents, and their communities. These stories are sources of wisdom and identity, of shoring up courage with reminders of past success or resilience. (p. 7)

We feel that story—arguably the most powerful tool of imagination for individuals and communities (Asma, 2017; Egan, 1997; Judson, 2023)—is worth investigating as a powerful means to address misconceptions about leadership. In terms of concrete practices that support or fulfill relational processes, the story emerged as a kind of vehicle of imagination in action in our larger case study. Our participants noted how communication can be made meaningful and memorable through story-shaping. We think is worth investigating further how story creates relational spaces in which people can develop shared meaning, multiple voices can be heard, and new possibilities can develop.

Relational leadership requires leaders to bring themselves—their whole heart—into their encounters. Whole hearted leadership practices that embrace emotionality and honour our connections create space for the possible. These practices also strengthen our relationships, encouraging shared experiences and collective imagination. However, as seen through our participants' experiences, it is risky to engage in imaginative, whole hearted leadership practices. These approaches can be misconceived by others, leading to judgement and condescension, especially where implicit bias colours interpretations. More investigation is needed on how leader positionality impacts how their imaginative enactments are received. Most imaginative work is done covertly, in found spaces that allow for vulnerability and connection. Through story and centering dialogue on imagination, we hope to develop cultures that support imagination for all leaders.

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