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What are Imaginative Capabilities and How Do They Develop? A Grounded Theoretical Approach to Understanding Imaginative Leadership.

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What are Imaginative Capabilities and How Do They Develop?
A Grounded Theoretical Approach to Understanding Imaginative Leadership.

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis presents findings from a grounded theoretical investigation of imaginative educational leaders and the knowledge embedded in their lived-experience and practice to inform new theory on imaginative capabilities and their development in leadership. Through a grounded theory approach, interviews with 15 leaders of social change and innovation were analyzed for emergent themes using open, axial, and selective coding. 686 initial codes were theoretically coded through constant comparison until data saturation was achieved. Selective coding was then used to conceptualize themes into core categories and their related capabilities.

Two core categories emerged that each represent an holistic behavioural pattern comprised of three interrelated and inseparable behaviours: 1) Sense–Think–Act and 2) Ponder–Enact–Play. From these behavioural patterns, six imaginative capabilities were identified as core to imaginative leadership. While the sample size and method are limited in terms of generalizability, rich findings offer potential transferability to a variety of leadership contexts where imaginative capabilities are desired or required. Practical implications and recommendations for educational systems, leadership education, and future research are discussed.

This is a novel investigation of imagination that provides insights on behaviour and capabilities not yet captured by contemporary educational leadership theories. Findings are original and distinct and identify a critical connection between cognitive and embodied experience, as well as unstructured time and space, as central to the formation of imaginative practice. Moreover, to my knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to investigate imagination outside the head, particularly in relation to a leader’s environment and lived experience.

Keywords: Leadership development, imaginative capabilities, innovative behaviour, grounded theory.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Paul David John Syme. The semi-structured interviews reported in Chapters 2-4 were covered by Ethics Certificate number REB22-1508, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Ethics Board for the project “Grounding Theory in How Educational Leaders Develop Imaginative Capabilities” on February 14, 2023.

Acknowledgments

This has been an extremely rewarding journey. The faculty at the Werklund School of Education have provided me with the tools to investigate a question I have had since I was a small child: what is imagination, and how can we do it full time? Luckily, I had parents, friends, and teachers who shared this curiosity and encouraged me to pursue it throughout my life. My students continually proved the transformative vitality of embracing imaginative creativity in their lives. As a father, my kids, Mollie and Andi Syme, taught me the additional depths the imagination plays in forming a compassionate, thoughtful, curious, and thriving human being. I am grateful for all the lessons they taught me.

I am grateful to the fifteen participants who offered their time and expertise to inform this study. This thesis would likely have never happened without the brilliant, kind, insightful, and playful guidance of Dr. Brittany Harker Martin. Nor could it have taken shape to move forward without the enthusiasm, expertise, and critical clarity of my committee, Dr. Amy Burns and Dr. Dianne Gereluk.

Lastly, I want to thank the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education (AVRCE), the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU), and the numerous cafés in the Annapolis Valley for supporting me in this endeavour.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, John and Maria Syme (née Bucciarelli), along with the mentors, teachers, and leaders who inspired me to dig deep for beauty where it is least expected and to imagine ways to reveal it for others to enjoy. Though the imagination is a human ability, many have too little understanding in its potential to uplift their lives and those around them. I am reminded of this in the joys and struggles of the people closest to me, my colleagues, and everyone I teach.

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Chapter 1

What are Imaginative Capabilities and How Do They Develop?

A Grounded Theoretical Approach to Understanding Innovative Leadership Development

Introduction

The growing complexity of schools and society means educational leaders require expanding capabilities (Dreier et al., 2019; Jacobson et al., 2019). Within this context, a capability is understood as a practical ability to achieve a specific outcome. This dissertation seeks to unpack the black box of developing and applying human imagination within the context of educational leadership. For the purposes of this study, educational leaders are administrators in formal positions of authority responsible for designing and leading operations in schools (public, charter, or private) at various levels, including school, regional, and provincial levels. Educational leaders manage an unprecedented pace of cultural, environmental, social, system, and technological change (Leo & Wickenberg, 2013; Robinson, 2017; Thomas & Brown, 2011).

Schools arguably need educational leaders with the imaginative capabilities to conceive and deploy bold remedies to the grand challenges and opportunities that occur before their learning communities (von Wright, 2021); yet, to date, there is limited scholarly literature to inform such leadership practice. To address this, I have conducted an investigation of educational leaders who have demonstrated imaginative capabilities as evidenced through proposed and implemented alternatives to conventional practice in education.

Positionality of the Researcher

I am a Canadian-born Caucasian cis-gendered male who has taught visual arts in public schools for over twenty-five years. I am also a professional visual artist and amateur actor. While I have spent most of my professional career in the classroom, I have also served my region as an

education consultant, and my union as a staff officer for professional learning. I have been a leader in provincial and national professional organizations and lecturer of Bachelor and Master of Education courses, primarily around creativity. I position myself as a leader from the middle (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012, 2018), working between leaders and teachers to better understand their relationship with each other and students. My research interests are found at the intersection of students, teachers, and leaders with a lens on how the power of the human imagination can drive positive change.

Research Context

In my career, despite conversations with truly imaginative leaders, for the most part, I seldom observed a leader stray far from systemic traditions. Likewise, I rarely saw visionary leaders supported in taking the bold action necessary for effective change. To me, it seemed like leaders with the capabilities to imagine big-system change were somehow dissuaded, discouraged, or disabled from enacting them.

Many years as an arts education consultant exposed me to educational leaders willing to confide their insecurities about their capabilities to mentor and model instruction in creative, imaginative disciplines. I wondered how I could help these leaders better understand their own imaginative capabilities and how this could inspire more innovative remedies in education?

In response, I designed and taught my first Master of Education courses that engaged graduate students in a journey to unpack, embrace, apply, and grow their imaginations. Through this, we explored how imagination, creativity, and innovation are related but not synonymous. I became aware that imagination education is seriously underdeveloped and underserved in the field of education, and specifically in educational leadership, with limited theory to inform it.

During this time, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019, April) heightened the urgency for educational leaders to possess capabilities that support and develop creative competencies in learners. They announced that the new “PISA 2021 [deferred to 2022] creative thinking assessment will provide policymakers with useful, reliable, and actionable measurement tools to help them make evidence-based decisions” (p. 5). Since the thirteen provinces and territories that make up the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) have committed to aligning their curricula behind the OECD’s Global Competencies (CMEC, 2021; Lane & Christensen, 2016), it is imperative that educational leaders also possess capabilities that support and develop their own creative competencies. Educational leaders have a responsibility to guide this initiative which involves fostering the capabilities that fuel creative achievement.

Through work with graduate students that I teach, it became clear that, where imagination is assumed to be essential to creative activity, knowledge on how it can be developed in the educational leaders tasked to lead it is required. Yet, there is limited scholarly knowledge to support this, and a serious gap in theory to inform it. This research proposal serves to fill that gap by investigating imagination within the context of imaginative leadership: specifically, what capabilities are required, how they can be developed, and how these show up in practice.

Scholars acknowledge that educational leaders face ever-changing circumstances that require capabilities for rapid, creative strategic response (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2011; Fullan et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018; Judson, 2021; Stephenson, 2009). According to Robinson (2017), educational leaders require capabilities in using relevant knowledge from research and experience, and abilities solve the complex educational problems that stand in the way of achieving improvement goals. While this

provides us with the ‘what,’ in terms of capabilities, it falls short in providing information regarding how these might be acquired. Since imagination is essential to creativity and innovation (Hopkins, 2019; Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009; Runco, 2016), the challenge is in figuring out how imaginative capabilities are enacted in leadership, and how they were acquired.

To date, imagination has been considered one of the hardest things to teach and “keep alive under pressure” (Reeves & Fuller, para. 3, 2020). Nevertheless, Greene (1995) posited that it is vital to see beyond what is “normal or ‘common sensible’ to carve out new orders in experience” (p. 19). To do this, leaders require professional learning that fosters and encourages imaginative capabilities and approaches.

Unfortunately, imaginative activities often come with perceivable risk, and an innate drive for certainty and equilibrium (Martin, 2017; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992). Even so, Seashore-Lewis and Wahlstrom (2011) share that “... principals face increasing pressure to deliver (or at least promote) better support for instruction ... [and] stimulate teachers’ innovative behavior” (p. 30). Thus, educational leaders are frequently required to create and influence systemic change while facing change-resistant forces (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Geels, 2004; Schein, 2017). A paradox is inherent in a role that pressures educational leaders to conform and yet find novel solutions to a never-ending stream of unanticipated challenges.

Thus, it seems that imagination may be the missing, untapped ability that educational leaders require to address the ongoing uncertainty and shifting priorities in education. The case has never been more urgent. As a pandemic revealed, when a crisis destabilizes and displaces educative practices, educational leaders require imaginative capabilities to pivot, re-pivot, and pivot again. They need better tools. They need more support. Therefore, I make the case that we

need better theory that better prepares educational leaders with imaginative capabilities. To date, there is very limited, if any, research-informed professional learning to support this (Judson, 2020).

Research Problem Statement

With the case made for educational leaders to require imaginative capabilities, there is neither adequate theory nor knowledge that informs what such capabilities are, how they are developed, and what supports their application in practice (Asma, 2017; Judson, 2021; Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009; Stuart, 2019). In a search through educational research databases for literature on ‘imagination’ and ‘leadership,’ Judson (2020) found that only one article of over 1000 talked “about ‘imagination’ and ‘educational leadership.’ Further, replacing ‘educational leadership’ with ‘leadership’ resulted in...less than 3 percent of the total [and she concludes that]. ... The concept remains largely unexamined” (p. 2). It is possible that the complexity of imagination, its role in educational leadership, and the lack of cohesive knowledge of these cognitive and performative capabilities have left a gap in theoretical knowledge. Thus, the research problem can be stated as such: there is a lack of theory, and specific gap in our knowledge, on how to define and develop imaginative capabilities in educational leadership.

Methodology

In such cases, where adequate theory does not exist, it is useful to employ a grounded theoretical approach to seek knowledge from within the context of the phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A grounded methodology is ideally suited “not only to uncover relevant conditions but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions” in complex deterministic systems (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5).

Thus, I proposed the pursuit of a new theory on imaginative capabilities in educational leaders, grounded in the knowledge of individuals who exemplify them.

Method

A qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was used to gather knowledge that could inform the nature of imaginative capabilities and factors that influenced their development. Using a grounded approach allowed for new conceptual theories to emerge from systematically collected data analyzed through “an interpretive process, not a logico-deductive one” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 637).

Participants were recruited first by expert referral (identifying individuals with reputations for leading social change and innovation), then through a self-selection survey with criteria that screened for individuals who conceive of and deploy novel ideas in response to social and organizational challenges and opportunities, envision and facilitate complex change, and promote imagination as part of their innovative practice and/or team culture (found in Appendix A). These individuals were then invited to meet with the lead researcher for individual, semi-structured interviews using Microsoft Teams. Interviews took approximately 45-60 minutes and were conducted between February and April 2023.

The resulting sample consisted of 15 imaginative leaders, an appropriate size determined in line with grounded theoretical protocols for data saturation (Guest et al., 2006, 2020; Thomson, 2011). Data collection resulted in over 50,000 data points, coded line-by-line using NVIVO software. Initial coding resulted in 686 codes found across the sample. Line-by-line codes were then theoretically coded within each participant’s case and sorted into emerging themes indicative of imaginative behaviours and capabilities. Last, behavioural themes were constantly compared with data and other arising themes until data saturation was achieved.

Participants validated the data samples from semi-structured interviews before being analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes revealed from participant samples were subjected to constant comparison. Once saturation was realized, and “no new similarities or differences could be identified” (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018, p.247), the selective codes or core categories were drawn upon to conceptualize the emergent theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While no predetermined matrix dictates how many participants are required (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in following the guidance of Guest et al. (2006) for sufficient participants to achieve saturated themes, key theories began to saturate after comparing the data of three participants, and all six theories were apparent within ten participants.

Research Purpose

This research aims to provide educational leadership scholars with new knowledge that can inform a grounded theory on what imaginative capabilities are in leaders and how they develop. Leaders are often required to make sense of a situation, imagine themselves in the shoes of others, and render novel remedies in response to emergent forces (Stephenson, 2009). Arguably, the abilities that educational scholars praise (being able to consider possibilities and transform their schools) may be born out of the imagination (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Judson, 2021). This would underlie an urgency for knowledge on what leaders ought to learn and experience to develop imagination and lead imaginative work. Despite this, imagination education in leadership has been dismissed as “frivolous, unrealistic or detached from the real world” (Judson, 2020, p. 4). To counter this, Judson (2021) posits that by applying imagination education to leadership education:

...we may grow leaders' imaginations so they not only have strong imaginations themselves, but also an understanding of how imagination works in their organizations, what leadership processes it produces, and how they may facilitate its cultivation. (p. 19)

To date, there is not yet a theory that adequately supports the development of imaginative leaders, which I define here as those who apply imaginative capabilities as part of their professional practice. Therefore, this study aims to generate a grounded theory that identifies what those capabilities are and explores how they were developed in a way that the new theory better informs imagination education in leadership education.

Research Questions

This study investigates the following research questions:

1. How do imaginative educational leaders conceptualize imagination and imaginative capabilities?
2. What do imaginative educational leaders perceive as fundamental to developing their imaginative capabilities and imaginative practice?
3. What themes emerge as theoretical outcomes that might inform professional learning for imaginative leaders in education?

Significance of the Problem

Educational leaders determine the strategic direction of teachers who influence the worldviews, knowledge, and capabilities of generations of children. A leader's imagination can inform how they perceive circumstances, construct a vision of the future, navigate novel phenomena, approach perplexing problems, and empathize with those they interact with and serve. This grounded investigation of imaginative leaders should inform theory to support the development of imaginative leaders. Thus, this dissertation seeks to uncover new knowledge that

can inform the field of educational leadership studies regarding the imaginative capabilities of educational leaders.

To undertake this study, it was vital to initially ask, what is imagination? It is, perhaps, most commonly understood as something pictured in the mind. People can imagine something narrated, described, or listened to; something that has already taken place; something fantastical; someone else's emotions or feelings; or something entirely realistic and mundane. If you are asked to imagine a purple dragon, and you immediately picture a purple dragon in your mind, you are imagining. If asked to imagine a spoon, the same is true. This understanding aligns with Kind (2016) who defined imagination as "a speculative mental state that allows us to consider situations apart from the here and now" (para. 1). In this way, imagination is not necessarily about novelty or newness but is an integral part of the creative and innovative process. It is understood as a mental state to envision something intangible, as though it is.

For this dissertation, I embraced imagination as an ability to envision something within the mind. I comfortably assume this is an inherent ability within everyone (although presumably, largely untapped). However, some individuals demonstrate themselves to be more imaginative than others, with ample evidence of creative output, a potential indicator of imaginative capabilities. This is the essence of my inquiry: to gather knowledge from imaginative educational leaders who serve in varied settings, to distil it into a new understanding of what imaginative capabilities are and how they are developed and applied within an educational leadership context.

Perhaps the complexity and breadth of imagination underlie why some imaginative properties have been studied more than others? Abraham (2016), for example, posits that studies on imagination far exceed those of aesthetics or fictional experiences and the ability to

conceptualize novel possibilities. Judson's (2020) search for literature related to imagination and educational leadership reviewed literature on "affective leadership," "esthetic leadership," "artful leadership," "visionary leadership," and "leadership education" (p. 2), exposing a breadth of relevant dimensions for imagination in leadership, with limited knowledge regarding the capabilities behind it. Moreover, other disciplines interested in imagination bring their unique lenses, with high praise for imagination as important, but a limited understanding of how it can be developed or tapped. Thus, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 examines the current state of our knowledge of imagination, drawing on philosophical, cognitive, organizational, and capability perspectives as they relate imaginative capabilities to educational leadership.

Definitions

While the literature offers a wide variety of meanings for the terms used throughout this dissertation, for the purposes of this study the following are defined as follows:

Collaboration: In contrast to cooperation where a group may interact to complete tasks concurrently, collaboration involves "contexts of highly interactive group initiatives, where group members bring complementary skill sets to create potential that was not necessarily attainable by any individual working alone or alongside other individuals" (Kelly, 2020, p. 14).

Educational Leader: A professional teacher in a primary to grade twelve setting in a public or charter school system. This person is responsible for instructional practices, school growth, and the supervision of professional personnel. They may carry the title of Assistant Deputy Minister, Superintendent, Director, Headmaster, Principal, or Vice Principal.

Educational Leadership Capabilities: The ability to use relevant knowledge to solve complex problems (Robinson, 2017), to promote a student culture of learning (Hallinger, 2010), to build trusting relationships that inspire and support teachers (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Robinson, 2017), and to improve and transform a school.

Imagination: A process of conjuring phenomena drawn from conscious and unconscious thoughts that are made conscious in the form of “information rich perceptions / memories / image schemas / bodily gestures” (Asma, 2017, p. 9) and occurs somewhere between stimulus response and behavioural action.

Innovation: Lee and Trimi (2018) reduced innovation to “the actual implementation of new ideas or technologies to create new value in fundamentally different ways than in the past” (p. 7).

Imaginative Leader: A leader who applies imaginative capabilities as part of their professional practice.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study solicited the participation of educational leaders who were identified as innovators by peers and who further self-identified as such. In the end, my memos noted that eight men and seven women participated in semi-structured interviews. Perhaps this study’s most limiting aspect was in participant recruitment. As a qualitative study that relied on interviews with participants with niche characteristics, I depended on link tracing from my contacts and their referrals to reach those I did not know directly. Atkinson and Flint (2001) warn that “because elements ... are dependent on the subjective choices of the respondents first accessed, most snowball samples are biased and do not, therefore, allow researchers to make claims to generality from a particular sample” (p. 3). Even though snowball methodologies were applied to

reach imaginative educational leaders and broaden cultural representation, this sample was biased by the limitations of referees' social networks (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), and the sample was visibly limited in terms of racial representation. Given the type of sampling used, a decision was made to focus on an understanding of imagination from the sample as it arose and to consider future research protocols that are inclusive of ethnic, cultural, gender, age, and neuro-diverse perspectives. As a result, findings are limited in this regard, with a noted intention to examine this topic further to include diverse perspectives.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) acknowledge that while unexpected obstacles to “data collection techniques or on the populations available to researchers because of bureaucratic regulations, costs, shortages of time, or language barriers ... affect the initial plans ... choices and decisions abound” (p. 30). If the access and shape of interviews had proved insufficient to form theories, broader angles of observance might have been required.

Subjective participant perception is also an accepted limitation in grounded theoretical research. Initially, this study reached out to people who self-identify or are referred to by others as ‘imaginative leaders,’ keywords that are packed with perceptual bias. The selected participants may have relied on, inspired, or restricted the imaginations of others and presented a range of leadership capabilities and tendencies. The sample size required accommodating subjectivity, a necessity for abductive reasoning when developing a set of grounded hypotheses. Moreover, efforts were made to gain participants’ trust (Moore, 1996) and ensure them that their subjective lens would be honoured as part of the findings.

It should be noted that the research topic itself has limitations. Imagination, cognitive development, and educational leadership are complex topics on their own, let alone when examined together. Saturation was influenced by the relative research complexity, the

homogeneity of participants, my experience as a qualitative researcher, ethical limits to interview times and visits, and the opinions of critical readers (Bonde, 2013). Each variable was considered and guided along the way under the advice of the supervisory committee.

Last, in pursuit of innovative educational leaders, the study was further delimited by the age of the sample, coming from a generation with experiences that may be less common in younger leaders. Consequently, this may limit applicability in terms of how these imaginative capabilities developed organically, with the challenge of re-thinking how these might be acquired in future leaders and adapted for professional learning contexts.

Conclusion

This study interviews innovative educational leaders to unpack and understand how they developed and deployed their imaginative capabilities. Patterns identified offer hope that these capabilities may be broadly shared and spread throughout the systems that select and prepare educational leaders. To do this, I sought the participation of educational leaders who have demonstrated creative and innovative solutions from what I presume are influenced by imaginative capabilities. I then used a grounded theoretical method to investigate this and analyze related knowledge and themes as they emerge through the process. Through this, I could derive new knowledge to inform a grounded theory on imaginative capabilities, how they develop, and how they are enacted within the context of educational leadership.

The following chapters explain and discuss the study. Specifically, Chapter 2 explores scholarly insights on imagination as it relates to this stream of research. Chapter 3 outlines how a grounded theory research methodology is deployed to unpack and clarify how these leaders identified and developed their imaginative capabilities. Chapter 4 reveals the results of this

investigation, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings. Chapter 6 offers conclusions and implications for educational leadership, leadership training, and future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature on imagination and theories related to educational leadership. To start, imagination must be understood as a phenomenon apart from creativity and innovation. Where creativity and innovation draw on imagined ideas, the former two typically result in a product while the latter is assumed to be a process within the mind informed by the senses. This involved developing a basis of understanding and common language for conversations on imagination, to tease out knowledge on the capabilities that inform it.

The literature review begins by exploring the term imagination and other keywords, including creativity, imaginative capabilities, educational leadership, leadership capabilities, leadership development, and leadership in complex systems. I then review how imagination is understood philosophically, followed by what is known about imaginative cognition, imaginative activity in complex organizations, and leadership capabilities in these settings. The sum of this chapter reinforces the gap in theoretical knowledge about what imaginative capabilities are and how they can be acquired.

This dissertation, in part, seeks to discover how imaginative leaders develop and apply their imaginations as part of their leadership practice with the goal of contributing new knowledge to leadership education. Arguably, leaders who capably draw on their imagination can better understand that which is elusive and conceive of something that does not currently exist. Imagined concepts could lead to creative manifestations or innovative forms to fulfill functions (Judson, 2021; Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009). Given that educational leaders are tasked to manage and influence the educative discourses, policies, and practices under their care, imagination may influence how leaders consider these complex issues.

Leadership and Imagination in Education

In educational leadership, imaginative activity requires an understanding of its value, what it is, and how it works. Left unchallenged, assumptions, understandings, and relationships to imaginative activity can reinforce and crystalize judgements into a lasting and unwavering predisposition for, indifferent to, or against imaginative, creative, and innovative activities (Gardner, 1993). Moreover, the value of activities that rely on imagination may lead educational leaders to cast creative personalities, pedagogies, and practices in the same light (Dewey, 1938/1959; Eisner, 1994). Eisner (1991) pushes back on “the prevailing view, the arts are nice, but not really necessary” (p. 13) by reminding school leaders that imaginative capabilities develop in people like other “living organisms that can grow only if the medium in which they reside is hospitable to their growth” (Eisner, 1994, p. 11).

Eisner (1991) summarily states, “Imagination is fed by perception and perception by sensibility and sensibility by artistic cultivation” (p. 14), and he promotes the arts as one way to develop imaginative individuals. Efland (1995) views school leadership as a determinant for whether or not programs nurture imagination, noting that the leader’s perceived value of a subject or ability “is likely to affect whether it is taught or not” (Efland, 1995, p. 25). What is clear is that, in order to cultivate schools ripe with imagination, the field of educational leadership needs to better understand it, and how to foster imaginative capabilities.

Positioning imagination within an educational leadership context is no easy feat, largely because notions of imagination permeate all disciplines, and few examine it in terms of capabilities that can be acquired and taught. Arguably, imagination is a requisite part of any novel output, from creative production in the arts, architecture, and design to discoveries in science, medicine, and engineering. Egan (1997) observes that like all produce of imagination,

“Logico-mathematical forms of thinking, or rationality ... grow out of and develop along with it; they are among its implications (p. 69). Asma (2017) locates imagination beyond the arts as an improvisational process that allows humans to drive “everything from engineering, marketing, cosmology, economics, and ethics” (p. 2). More fundamentally, Judson (2021) “returns imagination to the realm of everyday engagement and also to everyone rather than the gifted few” (p. 3), as the fertile ground from which people conceive of possibilities. These positions reflect a common understanding that, for something new to take shape, it must first be mentally conceived, and imagination is required to bring it forth into consciousness and then into reality (Brown, 2012; Thomas, 2004). Contemporary understanding of imagination itself is informed by a variety of perspectives from philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, organizational science, and education. Thus, at this point, it is important to explore current understandings and to search for what is yet unknown.

Philosophical Perspectives

To begin at the surface of imagination is to address its frequent application and interchangeability with creativity and innovation. Perhaps it is to understand that people must first be able to imagine the change they want to see in the world or that any search for creative or innovative solutions begins with imagination (Asma, 2017; Egan, 1997, 2005; Judson, 2021; Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009). Liu and Noppe-Brandon (2009) establish creativity as “imagination applied: doing something, or making something, with that initial conception. ... Innovation comes when an act of creativity has somehow advanced the form” (p. 19). Stuart (2019) distills the imagination as a function that is “crucial for managing our cognitive interaction with the world” (p. 712), where people associate the novel with the familiar, conjuring content that is not necessarily present to the senses, such as the properties of water in its absence. Thomas (2004)

recognizes imagination philosophically and cognitively as that which “makes possible all our thinking about what is, what has been, and, perhaps most important, what might be” (para. 1). Finding novel responses to emergent conditions requires leaders who nourish their imaginations as they look to their experiences and senses for inspiration and insight. As Greene (2007) observed,

to activate the imagination is to discover not only possibility, but to find the gaps, the empty spaces that require filling as we move from the is to the might be, to the should be. To release the imagination too is to release the power of empathy, to become more present to those around, perhaps to care. (p. 4)

Imaginative capabilities that include divergent, inductive, iterative, improvisational activities, and, as Greene (2007) provides empathy, draw leaders to look for possibilities in the connections, correspondence, and blurred boundaries found among people and paradigms foreign to the place in need of solutions (Judson, 2021; Ulmer, 1994).

For Dewey (1939/1991), educational leaders value the learning experience as “a social process... [where] the teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of the leader of group activities” (p. 37). Imagining these roles and activities for students or staff requires a leader with openly constructivist, artistic sensibilities to lead through “a kind of interactive relationship that involves multiplicities, not just more than one individual, but individuals who are themselves multiplicities of different (heterogeneous) elements: desires, habits, capacities” (Jackson & McCullagh, 2015, p. 184). The imaginative leader maintains a macro prospect beyond what is planned to consider variations on what is, has been, and may be for those they serve.

Applying these philosophical lessons to imaginative leaders makes it possible to inform when they think imaginative capabilities that are not necessarily planned or replicable are valued. Collingwood's (1967) description of creative expression as "an activity of which there can be no technique" (p.111) pointed to the imaginative activity found outside of contrived plans, patterns, sequences, or routines. To Collingwood, imaginative ideas are distinct from reproductive or abstract concepts generated by the conscious and orderly mind (Wiltsher, 2018). This imagined idea "is the deliquescence of the stuff of sensation into the matter of thought" (Wiltsher, 2018, p. 771). In contrast, the rational intellectual idea is born of thoughts and adjusted to fit abstract orders such as clock time and language. Too often, linear and abstract educational processes pass as creative forms while the input of senses and emotions is circumvented. For Collingwood, an imaginative education would make space "for time in the literal (clock time) and the ephemeral sense, unknowable space for the subconscious to operate and make connections outside of rational or analytical thought" (Syme, 2017, p. 23). In this sense, imaginative leaders can step out of a shared reality to accommodate what may be fantastical alternatives to their normative order and real for others beyond it.

Marković (2012) offers a dimension of imagination as phenomenology-based aesthetic engagement triggered as a response to a work of art. Specific works of art can elicit an aesthetic experience in a viewer characterized by three phenomena. First, the viewer is fully attentive or engaged; the second is highly "'cognitive,' that is, semantic, symbolic, and imaginative aspect of aesthetic experience;" and in the third instance, they have an 'affective' "aesthetic fascination and aesthetic appraisal" (Marković, 2012, p. 3). Highly aesthetic, expressive, or conceptual creative works can be used to trigger and reconfigure open-ended, generative activity. Therefore, this stream of research advocates for deliberate provocation of imagination through aesthetic

response. In short, imagination can be stimulated by the arts... but then what? Again, more research is required to better understand how imagination works within the leadership context, and a new line of inquiry opens to consider artistic and aesthetic experience in relation to imaginative leadership.

Education philosopher Dewey (1939/1991) proposed a progressive education movement where learning by experience, actions, and democratic ideals replaced traditional autocratic approaches that preferred principles and doctrine. While Waddington (2010) gives context to Dewey's early concerns about imagination education for children, Dewey would come to see experience, effort, and deliberation inform the imaginative capabilities required to foresee novel aspirations. Dewey (1939/1991) grew to value the imagination for providing routes to envision 'what could be' in schools.

Dewey (1939/1991) was concerned with institutions, such as those anchored in science and religion, where their "social imagination comes to have a certain tone and color; intellectual immunity in one direction and intellectual sensitivity in other directions are the result" (p. 159). He noted that when educational leaders embrace "a culture which permits science to destroy traditional values but which distrusts its power to create new ones is a culture which is destroying itself" (Dewey, 1939/1991, pp. 171-172). At its extreme, the institution "demands the total allegiance of all its subjects. It must first of all, and most enduringly of all, if it is to be permanent, command the imagination, with all the impulses and motives we have been accustomed to call inner" (Dewey, 1939/1991, p. 70). When traditions lose purpose and position, leaders with imaginative capabilities are vital to reimagine new cultures of possibility. In this way, Dewey highlights the importance of imaginative capabilities in leadership, but we are still left with little information on the requisite capabilities and how to develop them.

Corbett (2004) offers a sociological theoretical critique highlighting persistent systemic barriers to a Deweyian leader. He notes that since Dewey, educational leaders have placed “all of our eggs in the technical baskets of computer technology, brain-based research, and a curriculum meticulously preoccupied with experimentally 'proven' developmental notions and age stage outcomes to fit those notions” (Corbett, 2004, p. 162). Educational leaders continue to contend with “calls for relevance, accountability in the form of clear and measurable outcomes, and economic utility of vocationalism, corporate partnerships, pragmatic skills training, and increasingly technical education” (Corbett, 2004, p. 165). Leaders who contend with disruptions of kind and degree need to accommodate archetypes that reshape their systems beyond the instrument’s planned application. Corbett (2013) posits that to do so, educational leaders need to “imagine social life as a form of improvisation ... where identity itself is transformed through the encounter with the other into something new. As such, identity is a new performatively imagined space, which is improvised in territory opened up by the encounter with the other” (p. 1). To find harmony between the present and the emergent ‘other,’ they will require the imaginative capabilities to improvise and experiment with novel approaches (Corbett, 2013; Geels, 2004).

A number of philosophers place particular emphasis on the lack of imaginative leadership as less of a problem with methodologies than with ontologies – educational change is affected more by how leaders perceive it than how they approach it. Beycioglu and Kondakçı (2021) found “literature on change in schools suggests that, parallel to the change intervention in other organizational settings, largely fail” (p. 788). Rather than a school as a place of people and things undergoing episodic change, educational leaders could adopt an ontology that schools undergo continual change or ‘becoming’ (Beycioglu & Kondakçı, 2021). To shift a school’s culture from

an ontology of ‘things’ to one of ‘process’ could alleviate the ontological insecurity leaders may have as they consider change through the unimagined and the unexplored. This fits with an approach that supports leaders in acquiring the capabilities to reimagine and lead such change.

For Fettes (2011), imagination emerges beyond “the mundane and imitative” through novel experiences or the “direct, unmediated sensory encounters with the world” (p. 114). Fettes draws on Egan (1997) to establish experiential understandings in the body as ‘somatic,’ “something beyond language, something foundational to all later understanding” (p. 169). Shusterman (2006) posits an understanding of the body as “the basic instrument of all human performance, our tool of tools, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought” (p. 2). In doing so, these scholars consider imagination through the lens of somaesthetics, which “concerns the body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning. ... [This work] seeks to enhance the meaning, understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and of the environments to which our movements contribute and from which they also draw their energies and significance” (Shusterman, 2006, p. 2). As such, somaesthetic assumes the sensorial, lived experience in the body stores embodied substance for inquiry and imaginative activity.

Snowber (2012) studies the body in motion as a “place of inquiry and its generative possibilities for deeper understanding” (p. 53). Tschaepe (2021) observes the intersection of inquiry and somaesthetics through discomfort as it “initiates certain inquiries, alters bodily self-conception and establishes habits that have evaluative consequences for beliefs, attitudes, and future decisions, ... [and potentially] contributing to moral imagination and tools that foster empathy” (p 1). Therefore, imaginative and creative experiences may be understood as manifestations of the feeling body and curious mind.

Psychological-Neurological Perspectives

The notion of imagination as cognitive ability aligns with many mainstream understandings of imagination, influenced by the field of psychology. A common understanding of imagination is that it is a cognitive process that generates novel ideas through conscious and unconscious processes through which combinatorial thought patterns take place.

While imaginative activity is challenging to isolate, let alone measure, imagination in the field of psychology is generally considered part of the creative process (Liang & Chia, 2014; Runco, 2014). Runco and Jaeger (2012) draw on the first modern definition of creativity offered by Stein (1953) as “novel work that is accepted as tenable or useful or satisfying by a group in some point in time” (p. 94). Mednick (1962) similarly defines “the creative thinking process as the forming of associative elements into new combinations which either meet specified requirements or are in some way useful. The more mutually remote the elements of the new combination, the more creative the process or solution” (p. 221). This idea that novelty is a product of creative thinking lives through Zimmerman (2009), who sees creativity as “reflected in production of useful, new ideas or products that result from defining a problem and solving it in a novel way within a particular cultural context” (p. 386). These theories share a functional concept of imagination as the combinatorial juxtaposition of disparate concepts to form novel ideas.

Psychologists have reasoned that some conditions are more conducive to imaginative activity than others. Kounios & Beeman (2009) investigated antecedents to the imagination, finding that happiness, curiosity, and the thrill of revealing the unknown prepare the mind for imaginative insights. Happiness is also correlated with imaginative activity in the studies on ‘flow’ by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who describes this ultimate mental state as a product of being

immersed in joy, creativity, and a process of total involvement. Flow studies are often referenced in relation to the mental states of imaginative, artistic, and creative thought because of the relationship flow has with the mindset entered when designing something innovative (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Martin & Colp, 2022).

Egan (2005) explores notions of play in imagination development and builds from Vygotsky's psychological tools to offer cognitive instruments for playful activities that turn problems into stories that explore imaginative dimensions. Egan's (2005) stories, composed to develop imagination during a child's literacy stage, were based on themes of reality, opposites, heroes, wonder, and a search for schema and meaning. Translated to capabilities, Egan's capable imager can "grasp irregularity... [to] perceive new forms of order in the world," often to address deficiencies (Fettes, 2010, p. 3). This capability, Fettes (2010) offers, is his first among eight imaginative capabilities, including grasping detail, composition, wholes, possibility, struggle, indices, and inconsistencies. Of these capabilities, "three might be thought of as grasping the substantive, stable nature of the world, its 'thingness,' three as grasping its emergent, shifting nature, its 'becomingness,' and two as spanning the divide" (Fettes, 2010, p. 4). Egan (2005) further urges practitioners and their mentors to emotionally commit to imaginative story development to receive imaginative potency through emotive investments and connections. Therefore, Egan's imaginers would possess the developed capabilities to emotionally invest themselves, identify and form meaning from deficiencies, conceive of what could be, and how the emergent novel form might merge with the current order.

Technological advances in neuroscience have enhanced recent understandings of cognitive processes. Specifically, imagination has been studied through functional Magnetic Resonance Imagery (fMRI) to observe brain images while imagination occurs. Studies have found that

imaginative behaviour can be observed among subjects in a restful but awake state in the Default Mode Network (DMN), a variety of cortices, including medial prefrontal and parietal cortices, the anterior lateral temporal cortex, the inferior parietal cortex, and medial temporal lobe structures (Abraham, 2016; Fink et al., 2009; Kong et al., 2020; Kounios & Beeman, 2009). This event network has been studied to show that imaginative insights occur when the conscious mind is at rest or involved in activities that require little thought when participants picture past events or those that may arise in the future (Mather et al., 2013). Unfamiliar contexts implicate the DMN to trigger “intentionality-based imaginative processes” where the imaginer spontaneously recalls phenomena from “an extensive and diverse repertoire of relevant knowledge,” likely in harmony with their worldview (Abraham, 2016, p. 4203). These ‘images’ include “autobiographical and episodic memory, episodic future thinking, mental state reasoning or theory of mind, self-referential thinking and moral reasoning” (Abraham, 2016, p. 4203).

Electroencephalography (EEG) and fMRI analysts have also observed imagination during DMN activity as spontaneous insights or ‘aha’ moments that arrive without stimulus (Kounios & Beeman, 2009). This kind of imaginative activity occurs when individuals subconsciously ponder seemingly impossible problems used to induce counterfactual in a way that triggers “novel combinatorial thinking” (Abraham, 2016, p. 4203). When confronted by novel-combinatorial events, where a condition is open-ended or ill-defined, in these moments of freedom, the problem solver seeks remedies through conscious acts of converging contrasting forms or through unconscious processing of disparate connectivity (Abraham, 2016; Fink et al., 2009; Kong et al., 2020; Kounios & Beeman, 2009). This imaginative dimension is commonly linked to creative works. Like surrealist art and jazz music, artists create works by juxtaposing

disparate concepts or remote associates via serendipity, similarity, or mediation (Fink et al., 2009; Kounios & Beeman, 2009; Mednick, 1962). More so, Abraham notes (2016) that:

The wider the net cast to sample information needed to reach these explanations/ideas/hypotheses, the stronger the engagement of the DMN. ...The opposite is true in the case of novel-combinatorial-based imagination where the situation calls for either overriding the prepotent response or taking account of previously unconsidered perspectives—and this necessitates the added recruitment of non-DMN networks. (p. 4205)

In other words, neuroscience has found that the powerful imagination production of new ideas occurs when the mind is relaxed. Whether that is a prerequisite condition or one condition among many is not yet known, warranting more research to understand better what conditions best enable imaginative states.

Organizational Perspectives

Imaginative leaders can clarify obscure spaces, expanding and casting the field of vision for others to direct action in preparation for what is coming. A shared or led imaginative vision for the future directs change. As Patriotta (2019) notes, imaginative leaders “translate undefined dreams and desires into worthy causes” (p. 1755). Complex organizations such as schools should have leaders with the imagination to prepare for daily surprises, from the trite to the extreme of fires and armed threats. Conversely, the day-to-day sameness secured by routines and policies “create fixed expectations and blind spots that suppress imagination, reduce the field of vision, and prevent leaders from ‘seeing things coming’” (Patriotta, 2019, p. 1755). March and Weil (2009) posit that “effective leadership requires an ability to live in two worlds: the incoherent world of imagination, fantasy, and dreams and the orderly world of plans, rules, and pragmatic

action” (p. 3). Schools, therefore, benefit from leaders with imaginative capabilities who lead a team to contend with the unexpected in the context of fixed patterns, routines, and expectations.

Geels (2004) applies a multi-level perspective (MLP) to consider “insights from sociology, institutional theory and innovation studies” (p. 897) in the study of socio-technical organizations under transition that require leaders with imaginative capabilities. Socio-technical systems, which include public school systems, are the links between society and its functions “(e.g. transport, communication, and nutrition) ... [that] consist of artefacts, knowledge, capital, labour, cultural meaning, etc.” (Geels, 2004, p. 900). For a complex system to excel as it adopts new media and changes, leaders with an unyielding determination to adapt to new mediums through accommodation and innovation are essential (Geels, 2004). Geels’s (2004) system leaders act to maintain and navigate the policies and traditions that shape the perceptions and activities of their organization’s members. Schools are among socio-technical rule-laden institutions where leaders support and direct school activity through the deployment of curricula, social policies, and resources that domesticate through “symbolic work [and] practical work, in which users integrate the artifact in their user practices, and cognitive work, which includes learning about the artifact” (Geels, 2004, p. 902).

From clocks, announcement systems, and day planners to photocopiers and classroom management system software, leaders rely on instruments for coherent structures and compliant behaviours that undergird their complex education systems. Logan (2010) contends that the linearly organized school systems are out of step with the new, more organically arranged world. In this climate, systems that navigate and prosper will look for leaders to “redefine both the ‘core’ and the ‘periphery’” of their institutions (Logan, 2010, p. 124; Manu, 2006). The smartphone represents such transformative artifacts that, through the work of advertisers

combined with the commercial, entertainment, and communication functions that the device performs, redefines the core and periphery of institutions. The rapidly omnipresent nature of these artifacts, among other emergent phenomena, suggests that schools should have leaders with the imaginative capabilities to decide what risks they will take to plan and prototype approaches to these forces within their educative, managerial, and social functions.

Educational leaders are often tasked to imagine how disparate components might evolve and reconstitute into a new cohesive picture. Responding to the cultures of refugee populations, dealing with classroom intrusive technologies, and ‘innovative’ program pilots represent a few of the shifts educational leaders are left to include within their school’s structure. Expansive and complex education systems are “gradually, and sometimes quite rapidly, transformed by exchanges with the environment, leading to alternating periods of equilibrium and disequilibrium” (Montuori, 2011, p.416). Leaders who seek stability in these open systems by treating their schools as closed systems fixed in equilibrium should understand that education systems are ‘change.’

When confronted with novel phenomena, educational leaders with underdeveloped imaginative capabilities may have a strategic blind spot (Clarke, 2012). Fortwengel and Keller (2020) suggest that leaders craft systemized paths to agentic behaviour through mechanized interruptions that free “organizations to regain scope for maneuver” (p. 1195). In this way, imaginative leaders are not only better prepared to navigate and address disruptions, but they are also positioned to design and instigate them. The flip side, of course, is that nonimaginative leaders are rendered as cogs in the machine who respond to disruptions in a cycle of trial and error. Thus, organizational theory identifies disruption as another potential trigger for

imagination, this time at the system level, and another line of inquiry emerges – imaginative capabilities as they relate to systemic disruption and affecting change.

Whether they act passively or with intent, system and school educational leaders shape the contexts where people respond to disruptions and changes of kind (e.g., a pandemic) and degree (e.g. technological acceleration and scholastic decolonialization). Seashore-Lewis and Wahlstrom (2011) found that “... the development of improved learning and innovation contexts for teachers, ... [stemmed from] the ability of principals to stimulate teachers' innovative behavior” (p. 30).

Deal and Peterson (2016) remarked that “things improved in schools where customs, values, and beliefs reinforced a strong educational mission, a sense of community, social trust among staff members, and a shared commitment to school improvement” (p. 10). Moreover, in a review of educational innovations in the USA, Serdyukov (2017) observed that if a school “supports innovations in education, then its educational system will continuously and effectively evolve and progress. If it does not, education will stagnate and produce mediocre outcomes” (p. 17). Therefore, it is arguable that educational leaders who value and possess proven theories on how the imaginative capabilities that foster innovative activities are developed would appreciate how to shape contexts that support this – theories that this dissertation proposes to uncover.

What is rewarded, critiqued, and discouraged are known to impact innovative behaviour and change, so much so that the impact of positive and negative feedback deserves a critical understanding. Cybernetics theory teaches that negative feedback is essential to correct the runaway entropy of positive feedback. When continuous positive feedback leads to deviation and disequilibrium, negative feedback corrects a course back to equilibrium. Montuori (2011) extends this and observes that “positive feedback can also kick-start a situation that has become

stuck – the more somebody exercises, the better they feel, and so they keep exercising” (p. 415). In this way, particularly imaginative leaders are inspired by disruption and “draw on disorder, in the form of the unconscious and the irrational as sources of novelty in their own work ... believe an encounter with it can allow them to generate a higher, more inclusive ordering principle” (Montuori, 2011, p. 415). The implication is that from disarray and confusion, a leader can not only restore a reliable equilibrium to a disrupted organization but, with imaginative capabilities, can bring about a new order to something better than before.

To make sense of notable qualities common among influential leaders in contexts that face destabilizing factors, such as schools, Brown (2012) suggests that “how a leader knows is at least as important if not more important than what a leader knows” (p. 561). Constructive-developmental research, or the study of how people at various stages of meaning-making development think, deepen awareness, and empathize, acknowledges that “as individuals develop into post-conventional stages of meaning-making, novel capacities arise” (Brown, 2012, p. 561). This means that people from varied cultural contexts and experiences will interpret what they come across differently from others. Brown (2012) critiqued leadership researchers for infrequently turning to frameworks, models, and exemplars that accommodate meaning-making diversity within their studies. More specifically, Brown (2012) “calls into question the credibility of leadership theory that has not incorporated a constructive-developmental perspective ... [if] society is to achieve the difficult and complex objectives of global sustainability, we will likely need a myriad of leaders with advanced meaning-making capacities” (p. 572). Through their breadth and depth of experience, and knowing when and how to include the insights that represent their community’s diversity, leaders with advanced-meaning capabilities account for diverse perspectives on challenging situations.

Built on established theories of 'action logics,' Brown (2012) posits that approximately five to six percent of the population possess the collective capacities to “take a systems view and even a unitive view on reality; simultaneously hold and manage conflicting frames, perspectives and emotions; and deeply accept oneself, others, and the moment, without judgment” (pp. 561-565), tasks expected of educational leaders. Brown (2012) distributes these traits of the most rare, mature, and influential change leaders among action logics of which other leaders may possess to varying degrees, the “Strategist, Alchemist, and Ironist” (p. 561). Where strategists “point toward a greater vision; expose people to new perspectives; push their edges; support and enable their fullest growth and greatest potential; remove problems and barriers; [and] reframe, integrate information for others” to catalyze change, alchemists “create an energetic field and the spaces for innovation to emerge and group meaning-making to develop” and serve their collaborative team to cultivate the “greater Other,” their gestalt (Brown, 2012, p. 569). Brown’s (2012) ironists design their system to maintain an attuned sense of wonder that embodies openness in “energetic tension for that next stage of maturity to emerge” (p. 569). Ironists guide their teams to imagine, and to engage in an “evolving nature of consciousness and wonder ‘where are we?’, ‘what are we becoming?’ and ‘what is needed and wanted next?’” (Brown, 2012, p. 569). Through these action logics, imaginative capabilities prove essential for leading imaginative activity across teams, systems, and organizations. The dimensions of the strategist’s visionary capabilities, the alchemist’s advanced collaborative leadership capabilities, and the ironist’s wonderment echo many of the imaginative leadership abilities described in other fields and others still to follow.

Educational leaders are not only required to lead change, but they are also expected to strategically design systems which require distinctive cognitive skills and behaviours. Design

thinking is a framework that structures imaginative work to inspire new ideas and rapidly test them to reimagine them in an improved state. The literature on design thinking provides a vehicle for transforming collective imagination into action. The roots of design thinking can be traced to the 1960s when Buckminster Fuller “called for a ‘design science revolution,’ based on science, technology and rationalism, to overcome the human and environmental problems” (Cross, 2001, p. 50). In the decades to follow, design thinking evolved and broadened its appeal as a form of inquiry. Design thinking is human-centred and experimental, predicated on participants applying:

Deep empathy and understanding of the needs and motivations of people. ... [A participant] benefits greatly from the views of multiple perspectives, and others' creativity bolstering [their] own ... [through the] fundamental belief that we all can create change—no matter how big a problem, how little time or how small a budget. No matter what constraints exist, ... designing can be an enjoyable process ... to fail and to learn from mistakes. (IDEO, 2012, p. 10)

Through collaborative empathy, integrative thinking, optimism, and experimentalism, design thinking is for people who design for others through budgetary, policy, and time restrictions (Brown, 2008). Design thinking is a sequential albeit iterative process that, when deployed to solve complex problems, should involve substantial imaginative reflection and conversations. While design thinking processes can be useful in understanding the order of imaginative activity, it does not restrict how ideas are conceived or reasoned (Cross, 2011), and while making space for ideas to surface, it does not expect nor teach people how to be imaginative. A highly imaginative person can go through the same process as someone relatively unimaginative, and while the results will be different, why they are different still comes down to

our missing understanding of the capabilities required to make the work imaginative. If openly applied, the process provides a platform to exercise imaginative capabilities, but without them, the design process falls flat.

According to scholars in the field, design thinking offers an effective and reliable approach to professional human-centred success planning (Friesen & Jacobson, 2015; IDEO, 2015; Jacobsen, 2014; Roberts et al., 2016; Rosales, 2017). Amidst a wave of design thinking processes being adopted as best practices across many systems, those practising design thinking should equally benefit from the imaginative capabilities to navigate it successfully. However, where a design thinking process guides collaborative ideation, its weakness lies in lacking strategies to spark the requisite imaginative activity.

Organizational scholars have also looked at design thinkers through the lens of innovation and entrepreneurship. Dyer et al. (2009) studied how the most successful entrepreneurs came up with ground-breaking new ideas and asked: “If it were possible to discover the inner workings of the masters’ minds, what could the rest of us learn about how innovation really happens?” (para.

1) The study revealed that entrepreneurs could ‘associate’ or:

Connect seemingly unrelated questions, problems, or ideas from different fields;...
question the unquestionable; ... in observing others, they act like anthropologists and social scientists; ... [experiment to] construct interactive experiences and try to provoke unorthodox responses to see what insights emerge; ... [and, by] devoting time and energy to finding and testing ideas through a network of diverse individuals gives innovators a radically different perspective ... innovative entrepreneurs go out of their way to meet people with different kinds of ideas and perspectives to extend their own knowledge domains. (Dyer et al., 2009, paras. 9-26)

Here, Dyer and Gregersen (2014) noticed that entrepreneurs exemplify design thinking principles and possess capabilities in rapid experimentation and prototype testing with practices in place to capture and explore imagined ideas (Servian, n.d.). Dyer et al. (2009) noted that “senior executives of the most innovative companies—a mere 15% in our study—don’t delegate creative work. They do it themselves” (para. 4). Where organizations rely on leadership that invests in imaginative capabilities to realize profits from design thinking, often depending on visionary leaders to possess them, it is reasonable to seek theory on what constitutes a visionary leader.

Farmer (2022) observed that intense feelings of lacking often trigger visionary leaders. The satisfaction-deficit feeling is a catalyst for curiosity and a “matching intuition” behaviour where the subject relates the scenario to “images, patterns, prototypes or schemas recorded in subconscious memory and acquired through experience” (Farmer, 2022, p.10). The future-vision ideas of leaders in this study tended to “emerge spontaneously thanks to intuition, often associated with patterns and schemas, ... then subjected to rigorous critical challenge, most of the time conducted as a team, in a spirit of consensus” (Farmer, 2022, p.13).

Farmer (2022) aligns this forward reasoning response with Kahneman’s (2011) ‘system 1’ or fast intuitive thinking and ‘system 2,’ contemplative and often deductive reasoning. It is the intuition, Farmer (2022) theorizes, to be decisively opportunistic and to “‘project’ oneself into the future,” and it is the intuition that makes decisions “in the context of uncertainty” (p.11). In these visionary leaders, a deficit stimulates spontaneous and intuitive insights (system 1) that are then broken down, critiqued, and tested (system 2), if not on their own then through a team (Kahneman, 2011; Farmer, 2022).

Aspects of Farmer's (2022) study of visionary leaders appear to validate the perspectives previously discussed in this chapter. Study participants commented on how they prepared their minds for creativity or forward reasoning through meditation or sports (Farmer, 2022) – a theory supported by cognitive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Horan, 2009; Kounios & Beeman, 2009; Martin & Colp, 2022). Similarly, educators in Martin's (2019) study “emerge[d] from a [creative learning design] planning session, feeling invigorated and energized rather than exhausted” (p. 580). Perhaps any lack of visionary leadership is not a deficit of imaginative capacity but rather evidence of a deficiency of encouragement to explore and develop efficacy in their “artistic or innovative potential, and it lies dormant” (Martin, 2019, p. 578). Thus, consideration of the situations that spark and fuel imaginative activity are of interest to this study.

When implementing novel ideas, particularly in a world resistant to change, visionaries anticipate constraints with efforts to prove feasibility, such as through affordability and prototype testing (Farmer, 2022). Farmer (2022) found validation in a study by Medeiros et al. (2018) that followed up on top executives who asserted that constraint is a “critical component of creativity” (p. 471). Visionary leaders are often selflessly motivated to “make a difference” (Farmer, 2022, p. 12). While acting on deficits and constraints are not necessarily imaginative activities, imaginative capabilities can help a leader address shortfalls and conditions. Deficiencies noted by a leader who is determined to make a difference provide catalysts for intuitive insights that, when combined with restraints and a collaborative team, compose defensible visions for the future. This proposed study into how leaders acquire such capabilities should benefit education systems as they contend with the dynamic forces before them.

Taken into the field of leadership studies, Judson (2021) suggests that a cognitive tool approach would help structure leaders' thinking about “What Is” (p. 12), “What Could Be” (p.

13), and how “to Create Ethical and Inclusive Communities” (p. 15). Through imaginative tools that induce stories, Judson (2021) posits that “the produce of imagination is emotional; our own emotional engagement and our affective connections with other people, ideas, and concepts are crucial to bountiful, fruitful organisations” (p. 17). Although Judson’s (2021) model focuses on imaginative output, or what she calls the ‘produce of imagination,’ she conceives of an education that fosters specific capabilities assumed to influence imaginative effectiveness, namely: self-awareness, empathy, ideas, and future outlooks. She suggests that educational leadership learning programs would benefit from “centralising imagination conceptually in leadership discourse and practically in leadership education” (Judson, 2021, pp. 18-19). Paradoxically, it may take considerable effort to convince resource and time-strapped educational leaders to rely on marginalized practices that they may regard as frivolous or strangely unscientific to deliver solutions. The keys to convincing them otherwise may lie in theories gleaned from imaginative leaders within educational circles who have moved imaginative practices out of the margins and into focus.

Conclusion

The research topic of imagination is informed by an interdisciplinary field that draws on philosophical ideals, psycho-neuro processes, and organizational theories. The literature reviewed here supports the view that imaginative leaders are driven to empathetically envision novel solutions and alternate realities within the context of relaxation, creative ideation, constraints, and systemic disruption. While these studies offer theories of what imaginative leaders do and how they do it, they do not provide a research-informed approach to imagination education for leaders seeking to develop and apply imaginative capabilities.

This literature review shares where, philosophically, imagination is sparked by deficits and disruptions and emboldened by the potential of what might be found beyond sequences and routines in open-ended, often combinatorial, improvised, and experimental activities. Cognitively, imagination occurs during states of relaxation and disruptive provocation. Organizationally, imaginative leaders have the empathy and presence to influence positive change and lead others also to be imaginative. Reviewed literature also suggests that an educational leader's ability to use and apply their imagination can make the difference between an effective, strategic response or disastrous rigidity.

With this understanding of imagination informed through this interdisciplinary lens, we are still left with a void in understanding what, exactly imaginative capabilities are and how they develop. Investigating this could reveal knowledge necessary for creating conditions that empower imagination to grow and flourish within leadership and educational contexts. If educational leaders can lead through imagination, they can presumably shape a system of peers and teachers who can do the same (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson, 2017; Robinson & Gray, 2019; Runco, 2014).

At its core, imagination is ambiguous, personal, and hard to measure. Across the literature reviewed here, there is a steady assumption about what imagination is, but little is known about the capabilities and professional learning required to empower it. Thus, this dissertation seeks to unpack this black box by gleaning knowledge from expert leaders in education.

Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter outlines a qualitative research design informed by the methodology of Grounded Theory (GT) in the Straussian tradition (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 1998), as it aligns with my paradigmatic orientation and is optimal for answering my research questions. It further unpacks the methodology from the selection of participants through to the particular methods for sampling, analysis, and processing before discussing its trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Paradigmatic Orientation

Considering the relative absence of adequate theory to inform the research questions, a grounded theoretical approach was employed. This investigation was qualitative and oriented in line with interactionist and social action philosophies and assumptions (Blumer, 1969; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Weber 1922/1995). In grounded theory, researchers accommodate the interactionist assumption that social reality is continually constructed through ongoing interactions (Blumer, 1969). As they uncover patterns, categories, and relationships found in data that may not have been initially apparent, grounded theorists acknowledge a dynamic and emergent nature of social reality. This fits within the umbrella of social action theory by incorporating the perspectives and experiences of participants into the analysis to emphasize an understanding of how individuals' subjective meanings and interpretations influence their actions and reflect their society (Weber, 1922/1995). In this, a grounded theory's deliberate lack of hypotheses allows for empirical findings that are not informed by previous findings. What can amount to a theory is revealed through each educational leader's narrative, only to emerge through a comparison of patterns found in their experiences as they tell them.

As a qualitative form of research, GT offers different reliability of “quantitative research [that] yields rigorously verified findings and hypotheses” (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, p. 5). Deady (2011) observes that grounded theorists embrace an “epistemological anarchy” (p. 43) where the researcher remains “open to the non-forced, non-preconceived discovery” (p. 42) of social value and personal narrative, or to even identify a problem when is not previously conceived. Unlike positivist quantitative research which is set to prove something, or functionalist research which reduces participants to a “set of structures, functions, and mechanisms whose purpose was to keep society homeostatic and orderly, static and conventional” (Kendall, 1999, p. 744), the GT analyst does not approach a problem didactically with stated hypotheses, expectations, or beliefs to test or prove (Clarke, 2007; Kendall, 1999; Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). Instead, the grounded theorist engages in a phased theoretical review of literature. Initially noncommittal, researchers ‘pre-research’ literature on a phenomenon (in this case, imagination) to gain theoretical sensitivity, discover a problem domain, and determine the right methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After conducting their study, the researcher then conducts an ‘integrative’ phase comparing “emergent theory with extant theories to render the new theory in the context of existing knowledge and thus make the substantive theory more valuable” (Urquhart & Fernández, 2013).

Grounded theorists do not seek theory that follows a logico-deductive process from hypotheses, rather they compare data to inform a ‘theoretical perspective’ on a situation or phenomena to find the breadth of substance within it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2017). In this way, the grounded researcher does not assume explanations of phenomena in advance. Instead, they ask questions of a specific population (e.g., by age, gender, or location) to uncover when, where, how, and what in pursuit of their descriptions that can inform a more holistic understanding.

From such questions, the grounded theorist then analyzes responses and consults their memos to codify emergent concepts and identify those that are common among participants. The theorist may then return to ask more questions that lead to honing the codification process. Through this process, grounded theory enables the researcher to look past existing assumptions, searching for the overlooked and misunderstood, providing reliable routes to explore, compare, and interpret data until fully saturated and reliable concepts or theories emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

While before the study I knew what I thought imaginative leadership looked like in practice, I had no theory of imaginative capabilities or how they developed. However, through the constant comparison and refinement of categories that emerged from interviews with identified imaginative educational leaders, I uncovered knowledge that can inform new theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) on what imaginative leaders can do, how that came to be, and how we might support that in others.

Selecting a Grounded Theoretical Stream

Since its early days, the field of grounded theory has branched into three main streams, often associated with the significant theorist who led them: “Classic GT” is associated with Glaser (1978, 1994, 2004) and Glaser and Strauss (1965, 1967, 2017), Straussian GT with Strauss (1987, 1993, 1995) and Corbin and Strauss (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and Charmazian GT with Charmaz (1995, 2005, 2009, 2017, 2020).

Glaser and Strauss (1967, 2017) first conceived of GT as a new social research approach to be “operationalized in quantitative studies, ... understandable to sociologists, ... [and] fit the situation being researched” (p. 3). From its inception, GT was understood as particularly suited and “exceptionally influential in the domains of qualitative research, perhaps most especially in terms of promoting empirically based inductive (actually abductive...) conceptual work”

(Clarke, 2007, p. 423). A grounded theorist straddles what divides the quantifiable from the qualifiable in their openness to a theory that is extracted from the data and compared through saturation of themes that arise about the situation under study.

Glaser, Strauss, and Charmaz's grounded theoretical methodologies differ on epistemological grounds. Glaser and Holton (2007) remained with the "classic" GT that rejects the descriptive nature of qualitative data analysis, criticizing its "subjectivity, its interpretative nature, its plausibility, the data voice and its constructivism ... [describing it as] downgrading and eroding the GT goal of conceptual theory" (p. 2). Glaser (2001; Glaser & Holton, 2007) holds a critical-rationalistic perspective of grounded theory that theoretically avoids the subjectivity of descriptive analysis claiming it best arrives at theory that accurately explains the situation under study. However, Strauss and Charmaz believed that grounded theory can accommodate a plurality of possibilities due to symbolic interactions where "what becomes 'data' in both approaches are manifestations from our experiences of organic interactions in the world" (Yamagata-Lynch et al., 2016, p. 2).

Both Straussian and Charmazian approaches align with Dewey's (1917) pragmatism, where knowledge acquisition moves from the realm of spectatorship to that of the experimental reality where languages and knowledge are provisional "instruments or tools; coping mechanisms, not once-and-for-all-time truths" (Bryant, 2009, pp. 14-15). A pragmatic epistemology accommodates the didactic speaker and the storyteller. The break from "classic" GT assumes reality is subjectively reflexive to each participant who shares their experiences through personal didactic and poetic linguistic choices. Through such provisional knowledge, the grounded theorist can hope to reveal shared patterns of behaviours, beliefs, and capabilities. While Glaser (1978) described the tension between adhering to a mechanical process and the

subjectivity of interpretive insight as “theoretical sensitivity,” Suddaby (2006) advises new grounded researchers to “become both patient and tolerant of ambiguity, because it is the ongoing interaction between researcher and data that generates the fundament of successful grounded research” (pp. 637-638).

Classic grounded theory (Glaser, 1999) adheres to a strict methodology where a “series of systematic, exact methods that start with collecting data and take the researcher to a theoretical piece that is publishable” (p. 836). Alternatively, Straussian approaches allow for diverse methodologies and make room for many theories abductively. Strauss leans on a pragmatic focus on cycles that flow through “beliefs to actions to consequence” (Morgan, 2020, p.64). Since beliefs are subjectively and socially constructed, Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) pragmatism allows for varied perspectives and techniques that enable access to data that leads to results (Creswell, 2012). The Straussian grounded theorist is “less focused on subjective experiences of individual actors per se and [is] instead more attentive to how such subjective experiences can be abstracted into theoretical statements about causal relations” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 635).

Unlike Glaser or Strauss, Charmaz embraces constructivist assumptions that include data on the researcher’s experience (Bryant, 2009). Charmaz’s (2009) constructivist grounded theory claims a contextually “relativist epistemology” (p. 138). In this, Charmaz (2017) scrutinizes the analyst to locate “the research process and product in historical, social, and situational conditions” (p. 34). In simpler terms, Classic GT seeks an objective truth where Charmazian scholars co-construct a context-dependent theory with their participants. A Straussian approach sits in the middle, sampling data to discover and allow a spectrum of possibilities to emerge (Bryant, 2009).

My selected approach to grounded theory looks for definitions, exemplars, and theories in participant testimonials. While my own experience may shape the work, I follow a Straussian (1995) approach of attempting to withhold my subjectivity from being incorporated into the data or findings. I neither try to impose interpretations of who I am nor how I may unconsciously taint the study, and I avoid obscuring uncomfortable messages or ideas that validate or conflict with my understanding of the phenomena (in this case imagination, capability development, or leaders and the challenges they face). In this study, I was determined to understand the intentions behind what participants said as I codified and compared their words line by line (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This attempt to hold my subjectivity outside the data and leave open the potential for theory abduction is the hallmark of a Straussian approach.

Methodology

This study employed a grounded theory methodology informed by Corbin and Strauss (1990; 2008) to gather knowledge that can inform the nature of imaginative capability acquisition in organizational leaders. This grounded approach allowed new conceptual theories to emerge from systematically collected data analyzed through “an interpretive process, not a logico-deductive one” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 637). The iterative approach to theory induction made this a practical methodology for studying behaviour and processes where existing theory is insufficient to inform emerging inquiry (Martin & Turner, 1986; Parry, 1998; Pearse & Kanyangale, 2009).

A Straussian methodology is driven through a third way of reasoning to arrive at a theory through ‘abduction’ rather than induction, where “theorising is generated by tacking back and forth between the nitty-gritty specificities of empirical data and more abstract ways of thinking about them” (Clarke, 2007, p. 425; Bryant, 2009). Abductive reasoning allows for multiple world

views to inform the observed phenomena. That is to say, Straussian grounded theory allowed for the possibility that cultural contexts played a decisive role in developing imaginative capabilities. For example, the fact that participants grew up before the digital age meant that it is reasonable to assume they shared a cultural experience distinctly different from others.

Straussian grounded theory aligns with my positioning as a pragmatist who embraces the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, where language structures determine a person's thoughts as much as the content expressed (Panko, 2021). To locate a theory that explains how imaginative capabilities are acquired by educational leaders invites unknown dimensions of personal, environmental, and cultural experiences that shape human behaviour and experience. I believe locating myself in the study risks diminishing participants' voices. After all, they are the leaders speaking of what they know best: their lived experience. Strauss and Corbin's methodological openness to each participant's preferred mode of expression and abductive paths to imaginative capabilities provided the most promising route to arrive at my findings.

Participants

Participants in this study were fifteen individuals who exemplified innovative contributions to a school community. In grounded theory, while it was "essential to obtain an appropriate sample size" that generated "sufficient data, the sample size is not predetermined and is primarily determined by the narrowness versus the breadth of the research question (Thomson, 2011, p. 46). No predeterminant matrix dictates how many participants are required (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Thomson, 2011), though studies on reliable sample size found 13 to 18 participants should achieve highly reliable and transferable themes in a study of this nature (Guest et al., 2006; 2020). For example, peer-reviewed publications have reached requisite saturation in as few as five participants (Stuart, 2019), while other studies extended to over

twenty-five participants, particularly in more heterogeneous participants and contexts (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Thomson, 2011).

I used a selection criterion to screen for participants with experience leading innovative initiatives within an educational context. Such initiatives were defined as educational models or programs branded and described as drastically different alternatives to contemporary public education. For example, one participant was the principal of a new middle school design, two were principals of newly conceived thematic charter schools, and another unified provincial educational and health leaders to conceive how to adapt their system to the 2020 COVID-19 shutdown. Participants were invited through criteria whereby individuals self-select as thought leaders behind the innovation. With the assumption that imagination is requisite to reimagining education, these imaginative educational leaders informed knowledge on what their imaginative capabilities are, how they were developed, and how they are enacted in their workplace. In order to access a broader set of imaginative educational leaders, I employed a snowball technique of link-tracing by asking participants to identify others they believed would contribute to the scope of this study, which led to finding five of the participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) advise analysts to narrow their research focus from the beginning and again after a few interviews. As such, my questions and prompts (found in Appendix B) were predetermined and, though the flow of conversations changed, the same fundamental topics were covered. Furthermore, where Aldiabat and Le Navenec (2018) caution that such qualitative methods of theoretical sampling and constant comparison “require the researcher to select participants carefully, and often require more than one interview, ... to facilitate data saturation” (p. 252), I allowed time and space to manage such uncertainty.

Methods

Following tri-council ethics certification, invitations to fifteen potential participants were extended. The response rate was 100%. Semi-structured interviews of approximately 45-60 minutes were conducted with fifteen participants and transcribed.

Interviews offered the necessary opportunity for unexpected topics to arise, allowing me to clarify statements and probe for additional information (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Research questions and potential follow-up probes are included in Appendix B. The number and nature of core research questions remained relatively constant to control the data from deviating into unrelated territory and, at the same time, ensure I learned from my participants rather than oversteering the conversation (Creswell, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This structured flexibility is typical within GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data and concepts from transcribed interviews, field notes, and memos were collected, sorted, reduced, and abstracted. As I listened for insights, I constantly compared samples from interviews to unfold emergent theory in a way that the reader can reasonably assess how the data-informed results (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Suddaby, 2006).

Following interviews, data samples (transcripts) were validated by each participant before they were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Concepts revealed from participant samples were subjected to constant comparison. Once a full range of thematic discoveries occurred within the first four interviews and saturation was realized with “no new similarities or differences could be identified” (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018, p. 247; Guest et al., 2006), the selective codes were drawn upon to conceptualize the emergent theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Throughout the process, data were sampled “to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 201). When, for example, participants described “imagination” in a range of dimensions and each in different ways, clarity was sought within examples of their various imaginative activities. Identifying and comparing similarities and differences densified, differentiated, and specified categorical variables. Strauss and Corbin (1998) celebrate theoretical sampling’s capacity to offer the researcher access to “unchartered areas...avenues of sampling that can bring about the greatest theoretical return” (p. 202). Moreover, accumulating samples helped me move from generating a plurality of categories to developing, densifying, and saturating categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Along the way, I focused on systemic consistency (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to arrive at evenly and fully developed categories.

Sampling/Analysis

My sampling protocols followed grounded theory’s three stages of coding: Open, axial, and selective coding. I shaped initial data during open coding into categories where “events/actions/interactions are compared with others for similarities and differences” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). During this time, I remained sensitive to theoretically significant events while regularly reorganizing data “according to theoretically relevant concepts” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 209). Once categorized, grouped, and labelled in open coding, I broke down qualities into sub-types through axial coding.

I tested codes derived from open coding against data, new incidents, and literature categories in axial coding. This process “suggest[ed] a variation of the original hypothesis, which can then be revised to include various new, provisional, conditional relationships” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14; Ratnapalan, 2019). Notably, this work followed protocols of constantly

comparing coded categories and interview data until saturation or “informational redundancy” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) before moving to the final stage of selective coding.

During selective coding, I unified the themes or categories around two ‘core categories’ and filled in categories derived from axial coding with descriptive detail (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). My aim was to succinctly explain how all the events or interaction concepts are connected and how variations correlate (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The process did not end there, as categories were reconsidered by reporting findings where theories were refined to be compelling, coherent, and validated.

Questions for a Grounded Analysis

Three research questions sparked this inquiry, as stated previously. These questions provide the scaffolding for interview questions (Found in Appendix B):

1. How do imaginative educational leaders conceptualize imagination and imaginative capabilities?
2. What do imaginative educational leaders perceive as fundamental to developing their imaginative capabilities and imaginative practice?
3. What themes emerge as theoretical outcomes that might inform professional learning for imaginative leaders in education?

To understand the leaders’ capabilities within the scope of their leadership context, Schein (2017) recommends asking participants to discuss “‘why they do it that way’ ... [and] why they do what they do... [to then] discriminate [among] those that are part of the ideology or philosophy of the organisation, and those that are rationalisations or only aspirations for the future” (p. 30). My interview questions were constructed to prompt and drive iterative conversations in pursuit of nuances while teasing out meaning.

Data Processing

The collection and line-by-line coding, particularly during the initial or open coding stage, was processed through NVIVO software. Close adherence to the language participants utilized in open coding tied emergent concepts to the participants' perspectives, avoiding distortion from my unconscious bias and prior theoretical awareness (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Trustworthiness

A Straussian approach should prove trustworthy to reveal novel and useful theories that explain complex or elusive phenomena when approached with rigour and sensitivity. After over fifty years of broad application and global appeal, grounded theory is often critiqued by quantitative scholars for its reliance on testimonials, being prone to bias, too interpretive and, therefore insufficiently positivist (Clarke, 2007). This research is positioned as pragmatic and social interactionist, assuming prejudice and privilege are unavoidable. To address this, I practiced axiological reflection to acknowledge and check my preference mindfully. Strauss and Corbin (1998) maintained "that it is not the researcher's perception or perspective that matters but rather how research participants see events or happenings" (p. 47). However, being reflexive, I sustained awareness of my role in the work and its potential impact in a way that helped keep my subjectivity and assumptions in check (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Suddaby, 2006).

Additionally, trustworthiness of Straussian GT has been critiqued through a Marxist lens where "structure and power are always relentlessly processual..., relentlessly social, organizational and structural through the plastic/elastic forms of social worlds, arenas, discourses and negotiations at the meso level" (Clarke, 2007, p. 430). Accepting the possibility that power structures exist means that I must account for these possibilities through axiology and reflexivity.

Thus, I established trustworthiness by following sensitive and rigorous research protocols (Clarke, 2007).

A grounded study can be credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable to corresponding contexts when participant data and emergent themes are constantly compared because the “comparative method is almost wholly in the service of verification” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 120). In employing this comparative process through to saturation (until no new theme or contradiction occurs) I adhere to the reliability protocols of GT, its integration with existing theory, and its application in ‘real’ world contexts. Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out that, unlike determining reliability and transferability in positivist studies:

... reproducing social phenomena can be difficult because it is nearly impossible to replicate the original conditions under which data were collected or to control all the variables that might possibly affect findings. That is the difference between doing research in a laboratory, where one can to some degree “control” variables, and conducting it out in the “real” world, where events and happenings follow a natural course. (p. 266)

My themes emerged through discriminant sampling and constant comparison in search of “evidence, incidents, and events... [not explained by] existing processes found in the literature...” (Creswell, 2012, p. 442). To the best of my ability, I ensured that conditions for optimal trustworthiness were met.

Ethical Considerations

This study asked participants to recall and discuss their lived experiences to seek out how they developed their imaginative capabilities and applied them as leaders. Before conducting this research, I gained approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculty Research Ethics Board (found in Appendix C). While open interviews can be sensitive, this study presented no

concern for distress and limited possibility of causing undue harm. Any probe into a person's memories can risk bringing up stressful memories; however, the consensus is "that the potential for harm during unstructured interviewing is no greater than that from having a conversation, discussing similar issues, with a friend" (Potrata, 2010, p. 157).

Determining the length and number of interviews in grounded theory involves ethical considerations. Having only one interview under an hour with the potential for a brief follow-up conversation was comfortably within ethical bounds (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018).

Conclusion

In summary, through a paradigmatic orientation that aligns with interactist and social action philosophies, I make the case for grounded theory as relevant and appropriate for my inquiry, and identify my approach as Straussian. I describe how the abductive processes of this methodology fit my positionality as a pragmatist seeking to generate new knowledge on imaginative capabilities and how they develop in imaginative leaders. I explain my research plan in terms of study participants, selection protocols, and my chosen method for data collection as semi-structured interviews, followed by a breakdown of my analytical approach with consideration of trustworthiness and ethical compliance.

In the next chapter, findings reveal patterns observable through six behavioural themes and six corresponding capabilities distributed among two core categories. These findings are then discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to existing theory and leadership styles. Conclusions and implications from these findings are then discussed in Chapter 6.

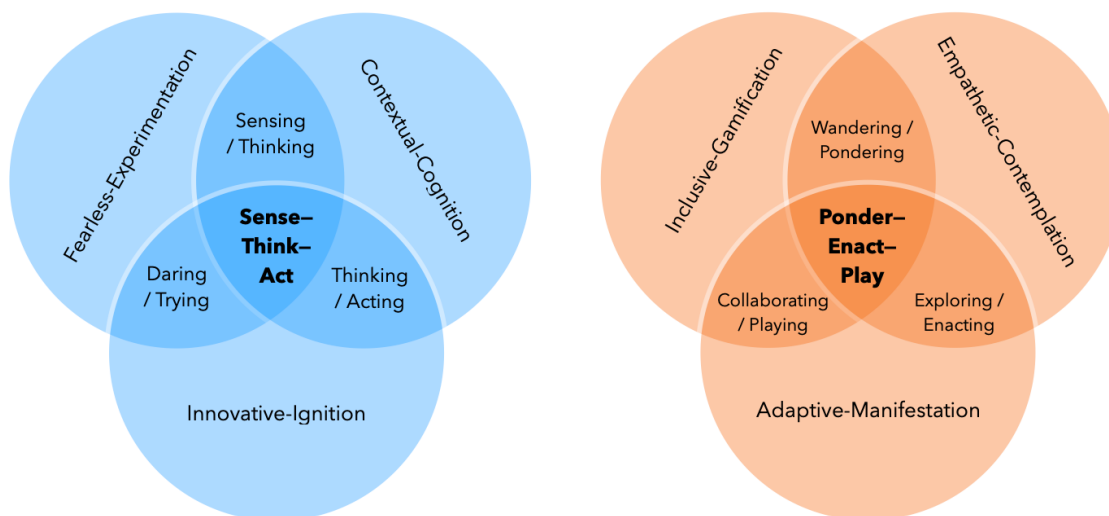
Chapter 4: Evidence and Findings

Chapter Introduction

Following a Straussian grounded theoretical approach, emerging themes crystallized into related concepts that grouped together into core categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The findings here revealed six themes that form two core categories. As seen in Figure 1, each core category represents two distinct behavioural patterns practiced holistically by the imaginative educational leaders in this sample.

Figure 1

Two Core Categories of Six Behavioural Themes and Their Corresponding Imaginative Capabilities.



The first core category (on the left) represents a behavioural pattern of three interrelated activities: sensing, thinking, and acting. This category, coded Sense–Think–Act, emerged from stories of behaviours from childhood, still enacted in leaders’ current imaginative practice. These were sensing/thinking, thinking/acting, and daring/trying. From these behaviours three

imaginative capabilities arose from the data, 1) contextual-cognition, 2) innovative-ignition, and 3) fearless-experimentation.

The second core category (on the right) represents a behavioural pattern of three, interrelated activities: pondering, enacting, and playing. This category, coded Ponder–Enact–Play, unfolded three more behaviours from childhood that are embedded in leaders’ current imaginative practice: wandering/pondering, exploring/enacting, and collaborating/playing. From these, three more imaginative capabilities arose from the data: 1) empathetic-contemplation, 2) adaptive-manifestation, and 3) collaborative-gamification.

In total, the two behavioural patterns revealed six imaginative capabilities central to the leadership practice of these leaders. The following sections present the results. Themes are presented within the relevant sections.

Core Behaviour: Sense–Think–Act

Three themes emerged from the data that informed the first core category: Sense–Think–Act. This pattern is made up of three behaviours, deliberately connected to each other with an en dash to signify the holistic nature of the pattern for processes of sensing, thinking, and acting as part of these imaginative educational leaders’ professional practice. Themes that inform this category emerged as behavioural couplets that play out in an ongoing and iterative process: 1) sensing/thinking, 2) thinking/acting, and 3) daring/trying.

Through these behaviours, participants described ways they pay attention to and frequently ponder social challenges, abilities for generating ideas that are readily implementable and being willing and able to take creative risks for the sake of the greater good. Across interviews, participants described an openness to perceiving novel ideas, intrinsically linked with an intention to act on them. Embedded in the data for each behavioural couplet were three related

imaginative capabilities, presented below as: 1) contextual-cognition, 2) innovative-ignition, and 3) fearless-experimentation. These capabilities were found in the stories of leaders who continuously scan their context for opportunities to make improvements, formulate actionable solutions and drive positive change, undaunted by perceivable barriers and compelled to make the world a better place.

Behavioural Theme: Sensing/Thinking

Imaginative educational leaders described being open to sensing the conditions around them in ways that inform and tap their imaginations. They simultaneously perceive and ponder social problems. “Positive outcomes” (Participant 11) were described as arising from conditions and sparking creative solutions that seemed “inspired” from an unknown origin. For example, participant 15 described being like a conduit for solutions to social issues:

... it's like I'm a conduit for an idea.... There can be lots of imagery that bubbles up for me, but then there's some that are just so they stick.... I feel like I can reach out and touch them ... then there's like a picture ... I let it kind of percolate....

Participant 2 described intentionally tapping into a “universal energy” to capture ideas that they unpacked as “bubbles flowing around, and they land in your head.” They noted, “But how many of us suppress things, right? Or just dismiss things. ... So, I think a lot of it is just ... bringing people's awareness to ... Let's notice. Let's pay attention.” In these final words, Participant 2 reveals how sensing and thinking occur in a dynamic relationship.

In these samples, imagining involved sensory awareness and picking up on cues from the context in ways that allow effective solutions to emerge. To them, imagination required an openness to receive the right information for thinking up improved scenarios. For example, Participant 4 described sensing-thinking as something that the body communicates to the

imager, but only when one is attuned, explaining “The body speaks to us... if we ignore that ... we lose that sense of imagination.” Participant 12 described this as a willingness to sense beyond what is happening and “thinking of what could be that doesn't presently exist, ... something beyond the present circumstances.” Likewise, Participant 3 described such sensory exploration involving, “pulling on our lived experiences and then adding a creative structure ... mould it into whatever visuals, whatever feelings inside.” In these statements, sensing and thinking are described as ongoing interrelated and iterative behaviours.

Notions of imagination as somatic and sensory is a marked shift from contemporary psychological views of imagination as cognitive and cerebral. For these imaginative educational leaders, imagining is an embodied experience that couples physical sensing with thinking and requires sensory awareness of the context to notice when things are off and sense opportunities for improvement. Thus, here, the data informs an initial imaginative capability: Contextual-cognition, an ability to simultaneously sense problems and generate solutions within the social context in a way that inspires ideas and actions for social change.

Imaginative Capability: Contextual-Cognition. Contextual-cognition is the capability to simultaneously sense problems and generate solutions within a social context in a way that inspires ideas and actions for social change. This looks like, in practice, a leader who senses unease, inequities, exclusion, and the barriers to addressing them. They may notice someone who attempts to hide their poverty as if they committed a crime and then strive to help them deal with the shame and the injustice of their situation. These leaders often see much-needed changes in areas that their system is determined to preserve.

In a variety of ways, participants described a capability to sense signals within a problematic context, always in conjunction with contemplating ways to improve it. Participants 4

and 9 shared stories of sensing the unmet needs of underprivileged individuals and a strong desire to make things right. “I understood their embarrassment at being poor because that was my experience, you feel like it's your fault” (Participant 9). With their influence and authority as a school leader, Participant 9 was determined to end the social stigma of poverty, driven by their own familiarity with conditions they witnessed in the present context.

Participant 4 echoed this sentiment. They thought a school leader had the power to improve the educational context. They described “... allowing [them] to build capacity within themselves and feel trusted and to share their imagined ideas ... I was actually drawn to the profession to come in and change it.” The ability to see and make change through their profession of teaching was what inspired this participant to become a teacher and eventually a school leader. Participant 8 advanced this sentiment when considering “what things could be like in the creation [of] change. ... It's that contrast of being able to survive in a system, whether it's a good system or not, but being perceptive enough to add personality and add opportunities to be creative and imaginative within that system.” In these words, these participants unveil an awareness of contextual barriers to systemic change, with equal emphasis on the potential for creativity and the imagination to see past them.

These leaders understood that systemic change had numerous challenges, including bias against innovative behaviour with potential career consequences, like not being taken seriously, “and you're set aside” (Participant 8). In fact, Participant 1 described this as “the opposite of the ideal workplace ... to the attainment of some sort of standard ... And they try to do some of the highly innovative things ... they've failed over and over again because you can't bureaucratize creativity.” Yet, participants shared how they found or created ways to enact imaginative

educational leadership, despite at times feeling “clamped down” or “muzzled,” (Participant 7).

Participant 12 describes imaginative practice as good leadership:

... leadership means change... And often a big challenge for me is fighting the bureaucracy.... what that taught me was that I just had to get better at what I did...that I will have the content knowledge, the expertise to cope with whatever comes my way ... the more you can become more imaginative ... you can actually see things that other people don't.... (Participant 12)

Where Participant 1 experienced the repeated failure of systemic transformation efforts that stifled creative processes and blocked meaningful change, Participant 12 sought out contexts that enabled creativity and imagination, finding their own way to see and do things otherwise overlooked by colleagues and superiors. Their contextual sensitivity triggered and fed how they thought about leading change. Likewise, Participant 3 described thinking about these restrictive conditions and how sensitivity to the context drew them to contexts that nurtured their imagination in contrast to those that restricted it. They contrasted their experiences in natural spaces, with the often unnatural context of schools, describing natural contexts as “... the relationships in nature, the symbiosis.... the elements nature just seems to give. It seems to be produced a sense of abundance and potential and possibility that emerges from it.” In stark contrast, rather than seeing schools as an extension of nature, they described schools as

... conditions of separation and scarcity... in boxes upon boxes on boxes and those can be very limiting in a very visceral kind of way, and... imaginative or... experiential kind of way. And so the idea of needing to do anything to be worthy to be a value, seems to melt away in nature and it's a lot easier to just be and I think in that state of being is where some of my richest contemplations. (Participant 3)

Here, Participant 3 describes schools and school systems as restrictive boxes that limit possibilities otherwise found in nature's abundance. For this participant, the more they could bring the outdoors in or people inside out into nature, the better they could freely access imagination in a natural state. In other words, for Participant 3, to think out of the box is akin to cognition around contextual constraints, and ways to think outside them.

Ultimately, leaders with the imaginative capability of contextual-cognition know how to sense and solve problematic situations, and seek possibilities for improvement from their context, including bureaucratic barriers that are recognized as something requiring crafty circumvention. They sense opportunities within and beyond the context while thinking up feasible solutions.

Behavioural Theme: Thinking/Acting

In a related but different process, participants also described how sense-informed thinking was inseparable from contemplations of action and considering how to make ideas come to life. For example, Participant 1 described this in two, connected parts:

The first part is just ...come up with an idea in your head. But it's ... operationalizing it. ...

Anybody can solve the world's problems sitting with a glass of wine and on a deck.... But imagination, to me, is a functional capacity. I can't recognize [it] unless it's put into action... For me, ... it's a state of mind of action.

For this leader, an idea is meaningless unless it informs action. Similarly, Participant 9 explained that imagined ideas need to be articulated and then acted upon. "...if we can't describe it, we can't be surprised when we don't attain it." These participants rejected a separation of thought from action. For them, thoughts are coupled with doing. Data for this theme described imagination as a tool that taps conscious and unconscious thought that includes cognizance of

mechanisms required to take action. For instance, Participant 14 described thinking about social change as “mini movies running in our mind all the time and [people] become involved in our little mini-movies in our mind.” Participant 4 described thinking/acting as taking “all of that information and knowledge and experience and moving forward out of a box.” For this leader, it is not about the idea, but the actualization of the idea that matters.

... [to] be engaged in the box, particularly a box of a constricting paradigm can make it hard to really be innovative. ... But to do something differently, I think we need to ... look at things a little bit differently and ... dream about the different potentials and possibilities.

(Participant 3)

Across these data, imaginative educational leadership is not about solving problems but instead is about seeing things not as they are and then making that new vision come to life or “acting within what their mind can come up with” (Participant 4). While ideas occur naturally, imagining how to make them real is of equal importance, to which Participant 1 summarized as “a state of mind of action.”

Again, where the field of psychology sees ‘doing’ as external to cognitive processes of ideation, creative thinking, and planning, these leaders link ideation with action. Participants do not just think about doing it - they also plan to do it. Thus, narratives of thinking/acting reveal a second imaginative capability: Innovative-ignition, an ability to imagine positive social change that includes motivation to serve as a catalyst to make it happen.

Imaginative Capability: Innovative-Ignition. Through thinking/acting, imaginative leaders reveal their distinct capability for igniting effective change or innovative-ignition. Participant 3 created a culture of inclusion, saying, “I don't think we can mandate or be top-down and impose change on individuals. Change actually comes from inspiration, and at the core of

that is establishing good relationships where somebody feels safe or somebody feels heard. Somebody feels seen.” For Participant 12, their goal was not “about being creative, but certainly breaking out of the present status quo,” describing imaginative educational leadership as “...seeing what is potential or possible beyond your circumstances.”

Innovative-ignitors think up and spark change through relationships and analogies. Participant 1 set up opportunities for creative activity, explaining it as the organization’s “heartbeat,” and Participant 5 conceived of an approach “to know the pulse” of the organization by monitoring staff styles, tendencies, and priorities as their “set plays,” “fills,” and “big ideas.” They studied and encouraged employees to observe, support, and innovate with each other.

Participants also shared different analogies they used to share their vision and create a culture of change. For example, Participant 5 explained their approach as analogous to a sports team who know each other’s “set play.”

You have to have people around you that understand what your vision is.... And so everybody knows we're working on set plays where if I do this then you know you should be here.... But to be effective ... you know when there's good plays and not good plays.

Participant 5 compared imaginative educational leadership to musical improvisation, where a musician’s “fills” enliven a song’s “set play.” Many “...songs are classics [and] they have two chords...and suddenly it's all about the strumming rhythm, and the little fills that kind of make it creative.” Participant 6 described igniting innovation through the metaphor of gardening, “...planting those seeds of inspiration to allow people to explore their own innovation and creativity.”

These leaders practice what they preach and teach skills for imaginative educational leadership by modelling a Sense–Think–Act approach. Participant 7 invited their staff to “react

to the ‘right now,’ let's imagine, OK, what can we do right now and let's look ahead so that the decisions we make now, let's imagine the biggest, bestest thing we can grow ... And let's go there methodically ... making educated decisions based on research and sound judgment.” Through this statement, Participant 7 explained a desire to harness promising ideas and act on opportunities that are bold yet methodical. Through this, Participant 7 shows how ideas and action can work in tandem, in a way that there is thought behind every action.

Ultimately, leaders with a capability for innovative-ignition know how to imagine and implement positive change, drawing others into their creative vision through their interpersonal awareness and a shared interest in realizing improvements.

Behavioural Theme: Daring/Trying

The third theme as part of Sense–Think–Act arose from statements related to the kinds of action these leaders take and how they take it; in this sense, an element of assertiveness plays into the conception of imaginative leadership with a willingness to give something new a try, having a priority over continuing with dissatisfying situations often found in bureaucratic systems. Participants discussed how an observable bureaucratic culture of risk aversion and conformity was a barrier to less imaginative educational leaders, or what Participant 4 called “conformists...worried [and] exhausted by new ideas that don’t work ... fearful of new ideas.” In such contexts, being imaginative was perceived as having a social stigma, making it risky to suggest something threatening the status quo. And yet, these leaders would go for it anyway, taking social risks for the greater good.

Participant 10 described resistance to innovation by hearing comments like, “There’s always something new ... Why do you have to do this, or why is this good for us, or why do we even want this as part of our change ecosystem?” Likewise, in the culture of conformity,

Participant 12 encountered resistance but felt it was a “moral imperative” to make social change. “I always felt that my goal in life was to make society better ... where I could help a lot...” (Participant 12). Participant 4 concurred, noting that the social risk could be lessened within a supportive community. “I need the resilience of the community around me that's strong and respects my ideas as I respect theirs, so we all can achieve, and we can all succeed” (Participant 4). These participants were determined to try new things to help their community, finding these efforts serve to strengthen their community as a “change ecosystem.”

Even when they did not feel support, imaginative educational leaders noted the boldness and confidence “to take a risk ... is the key” (Participant 14). While they expressed exhaustion, stress, and disappointment with not being heard, they pushed forward, morally compelled to make a social impact. Others noted enjoying the challenge, such as Participant 11, who found creative risk “fun.” Participant 7 described a resistant culture as a motivator, “that kind of fueled a fire in me always to push and be better and not satisfied with the norm of well, ‘you just go in, you open your door ... you close your door, and you'll leave’” (Participant 7). As leaders, these participants had a disposition to dare and try new things even when norms or push-back resisted them.

Despite cultures that discouraged rocking the boat, these leaders were daring and determined to try out solutions for daunting problems, boldly working to remove barriers and influence positive change. Participant 7 recalled “not being inhibited by...bureaucracy,” and Participant 9 described a refusal to give up and “trying to figure out” how to manifest necessary change. These leaders, despite social constraints and systemic barriers, dare to try something new.

Notably, when participants discussed problem-solving, they did not discuss rendering solutions to conventional problems. Instead, they used words usually reserved for soldiers on the battlefield, like “uninhibited” (Participant 7), “confidence” (Participant 14), “imperative” (Participants 4 & 12), and requisite bravery to alleviate suffering in the world. Through daring, imaginative action, their combined skills in “leadership and creativity” sparked “unthought possibilities” (Participant 12) that spurred them on to “fight” (Participant 2) for innovative alternatives. They had the uninhibited confidence in their capabilities to fight for lofty possibilities. As career leaders, they saw past social and career consequences to do what they believed was vital and achievable.

Thus, through daring/trying, these leaders honed skills to navigate change within tightly bureaucratic systems, expressing comfort and passion. Words and phrases that informed this theme emphasize grit and courage to buck the system to improve it. In this, a third research-informed imaginative capability arises: Fearless-experimentation, an ability to ignore or circumvent social perceptions and barriers to give new ideas a try and learn through action.

Imaginative Capability: Fearless-Experimentation. Imaginative leaders demonstrated their fearless-experimentation, the capability to ignore or circumvent social perceptions and barriers that interfere with efforts to try new ideas and learn through action. Across the sample, stories of bravely trying out new ideas revealed this vital capability for any innovation. Like ideas of prototyping as part of design thinking, these leaders sought an extra layer of support for a trial-and-error approach by creating conditions that would heighten their chances of success, especially when perceiving systemic or social barriers. They found sanctuary in organizations that allowed them to be experimental, thriving under “political coverage” (Participant 12). Thus, this participant explained an awareness of the necessity of support from their superiors and

community (parents, students, and staff) to protect them from perceived bureaucratic consequences of being innovative.

Some narratives revealed seeking “leeway ... outside of the structures of bureaucracy” (Participant 7), with an ability to reflect on “things that other people don’t” (Participant 12), knowing that they see things that others do not see and feel compelled to give it a shot. They were specially empowered when their own leaders were people they could “bounce ideas off ... [who would then] bounce their ideas off of us” (Participant 13). Participant 14 celebrated a superintendent who would “show up [to graduation] ... circulate and not the most comfortable spots to be because a lot of those parents, they never finished school, right or guardians there, but she would go in and be kind and friendly and yeah, it's a change man.” They further explained how this superintendent understood “the dynamics of poverty not first-hand, but she understands from working with families.... So, she saw the need to provide leadership and support to those groups.” While some participants rooted out structures that allowed them to experiment without fear, others found a supportive superior who was present and amongst them, noting how important it was to have their own leader’s support for protected conversations about their work.

The impact of freedom from fearful elements in their experimental ambitions was not lost on these imaginative leaders. According to Participant 6, “When there's no fear, your innovation and creativity have a better chance of coming out.” They knew the impending consequences of being “willing to kind of grow it, if you're willing to say yes, if you're willing to take like, it was a big risk...[and] where you need to take the risk and have the courage and the confidence” (Participant 6). Participant 8 noted the rewards too, recalling that “... to do it, and when I think of my tons of career experiences, that was one decision that I was happy with ... and you need some confidence to take a risk. You need to be situated in a way where you have enough

experience and enough positive feedback.” The rewards of risks found in their success, experience, and recognition combatted the fear that stopped others from acting.

For example, when Participant 8 opened themselves up at staff meetings to receive teacher ideas where they “felt they had a place to express themselves publicly and then we would probably solve publicly. The fear was you're crazy.... It's gonna become a bitch session.” Their experience and fearlessness to pursue this experiment was navigated by their ability “to manipulate, manage and go in a different direction. I had more teachers come to me and say we've never had this voice. Thank you so much. But I was the benefactor. I was the winner in all of this.” Their self-confidence and capabilities drove them to take this risk. It could have been further affected by something Participant 1 noted, that giving into that fear was not something they opted for, sharing that “fear mostly, while I [could decide] ‘better go for the default easier route here’ and I refused to take the easier route. That's something that my father set up in me.” Along the way in life, these leaders gained the confidence, determination, security, and grit for fearless-experimentation. As fearless leaders themselves, these imaginative educational leaders understood the value of making a safe space for those they lead and including them in imaginative work. Participant 9 explained, “If you're gonna be successful, every single person who reports to me has to be comfortable.... I say ... I can help make that happen.” In this quote, Participant 9 demonstrates a willingness to create a context that enables safe experimentation.

It is important to note that fearless-experimentalists are not reckless. Participant samples exhibit they were aware of the potential consequences to their career, drawing on abilities for sensing and thinking to work on an effective plan for doing. “You could try to do it as a maverick, but you're gonna be ostracized ... Crazy nonconformists [are] not interested in a renegade.... [So], you seek strategies. You seek places where you're able to add the personality

of your community, your staff, ... and you're able to make decisions that are creative or imaginary.” (Participant 8). Whether experimenting with new ways to end cycles of poverty, neglect, and social exclusion or distributing decisional capital amongst the staff, this capability draws on experience, knowledge, and finely tuned skills for navigating their professional experiments.

Ultimately, leaders with a capability for fearless-experimentation know how to ignore or resist social barriers and then take action to do what is right. They know the risk is worth the reward, even if it means proving it by doing something that’s never been done. They know how to do this professionally, never in a reckless way, by drawing on years of lived experience leading successful experimentation.

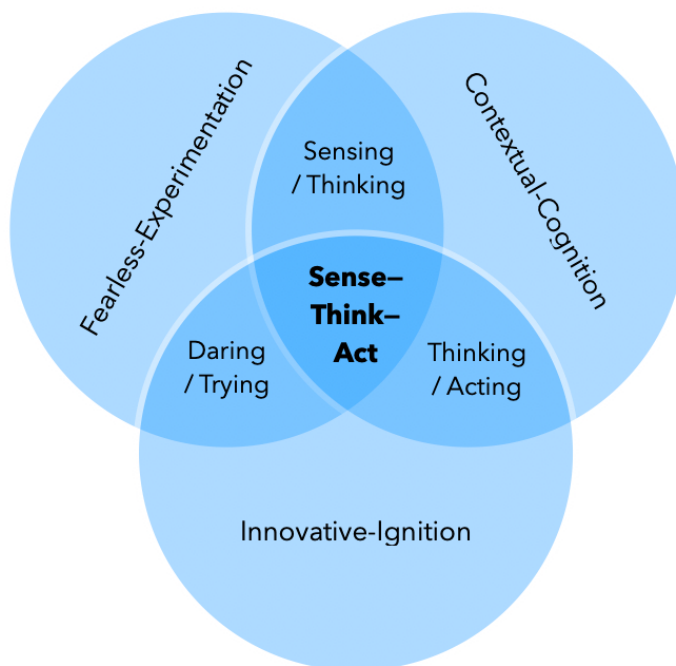
Summary: Sense–Think–Act Capabilities

Through sensing/thinking, thinking/acting, and daring/trying, these imaginative educational leaders reveal an holistic behavioral pattern of Sense–Think–Act, underpinned by three capabilities of contextual-cognition, innovative-ignition, and fearless-experimentation. This core category and its components can be seen in Figure 2.

As seen in Figure 2, a capability for contextual-cognition is enacted through a constant state of sensing/thinking, which primes imaginative educational leaders to draw on their capability for innovative-ignition in a way they are always thinking/acting, using their capability of fearless-experimentation to dare/try new ideas, even when faced with social or bureaucratic barriers. In general, imaginative educational leaders continuously scan their context for opportunities to make improvements, formulate actionable solutions and drive positive change, undaunted by perceivable barriers and compelled to make the world a better place.

Figure 2

Behaviours and Corresponding Capabilities as Part of an Ability to Sense–Think–Act



Core Behaviour: Ponder–Enact–Play

A second core category formed around themes for behaviours that enabled educational leaders to be imaginative through a pattern of Ponder–Enact–Play. This pattern is made up of behaviours that were all described as forming in childhood, full of experiential learning through play. Themes that inform this category also emerged as behavioural couplets that occurred in childhood and continue as part of their leadership practice today: 1) wandering/pondering, 2) exploring/enacting, and 3) collaborating/playing.

Under this category, participants revealed three more imaginative capabilities related to being able to consider the plight of others, being able to generate and make social change, and abilities to effectively engage others in their imaginative work. Tales were of childhoods rich with unstructured time and unsupervised activity (absent of adult supervision), which freed them

to explore, experiment with, and enact their ideas. They also involved a wide diversity of social interaction. Through this, three imaginative capabilities emerged: 1) empathetic-contemplation, 2) adaptive-manifestation, and 3) collaborative-gamification.

Behavioural Theme: Wandering/Pondering

Participants credited being imaginative to large amounts of unstructured and unsupervised time in childhood. Notes indicated that the approximate average age of participants was fifty-five, so their childhoods were of a different era before ‘helicopter parenting’ and scheduled ‘playdates’ were a thing. Across the data is a standard narrative, distinctive to their generation, of being outside wandering, sent out by parents who expected them to be out of the house, making friends, and finding things to do.

Narratives of wandering/pondering were told with nostalgia for the adventure of not knowing what would happen but going out to find out. Stories involved building forts, trekking through the woods, and simply roaming the neighbourhood looking for something to do. Participant 1 attributed unstructured, independent time as foundational to becoming a “... highly imaginative kid.” Similarly, Participant 2 described “... a lot of unstructured time, a lot of time with friends, a lot of time socializing, testing things out.” Likewise, for Participant 8, wandering the neighbourhood was all about “learning to problem solve, learning to interact, learning to create all of that for me came from unstructured play during my childhood.” Through these quotes participants described how they learned early in life that unstructured spaces in time and place could be filled with opportunities to imagine, socialize, explore, solve problems, and play: a foundational awareness of behaviours that they carried into their adult life and profession.

Childhood narratives were packed with creative play and lessons in managing conflict. They learned social skills in sometimes competitive situations, such as “rivalry... with kids in

the other end of town” (Participant 12). Participant 6 reminisced about not having “parents around telling us what to do or how to solve our problems. You come back and, like, you got in a fight with the neighbour kid, and like, you gotta figure that out.” Thus, participants deliberately connected how their childhood lessons taught them to rely on their senses, wits, and actions autonomously in the absence of supervision.

Participants recalled many times spent just thinking, remembering it as a valuable and enjoyable activity. Participant 2 described the lack of “critical parenting” as necessary, stating that without adults controlling the activity, they could “... be who you are and you can dream and you can say crazy things, fantastical things, wild ideas, crazy plans...” In this quote, Participant 2 shared how freely wandering afforded them the time and space to enact imagination without an agenda for anything other than enjoying the act of imagining.

Participants also shared how they pondered who they were and what they wanted to become while they wandered. Wandering/pondering featured prominently in many participant stories as vital for developing imagination. Unstructured time in unsupervised space allowed them to contemplate deeply, allowing thoughts to develop and fully crystallize. At the same time, the constant interaction with others provided exposure to various personalities and perspectives that proved to be a testing ground for navigating different points of view. Importantly, these interactions were organic, not by design or adult intervention, and involved multi-aged and mixed demographics. For Participant 1, the creative play they engaged in provided opportunities to try on different roles and consider how other people might think or feel in ways different from themselves.

From stories of wandering/pondering, a fourth imaginative capability emerged: Empathetic-contemplation, an ability to ponder circumstances around you with the intention of improving them for others.

Imaginative Capability: Empathetic-Contemplation. An ability to empathize and contemplate circumstances for social improvements was highly coded in the data, often noted as being acquired through unstructured play. As imaginative educational leaders, their stories point to their empathy, enabling an openness to alternate perspectives while also tapping imagination for ways to help others. Participant 8 stated, “learning to problem solve, learning to interact, learning to create all of that for me came from unstructured play during my childhood. That's where all of that came from.” Unstructured play allowed this participant to solve problems, which included gaining the skills to understand and interact with diverse people. They spoke of the importance they placed on learning how to “read people” because where they grew up “was tough. People were rugged.... You better be aware of your surroundings.” They brought this capability into adulthood where they “could dress up with a suit on and have lunch with the queen. ... and hang out with the homeless people. And I'd fit in either way... I always felt one gift that I had is reading people” (Participant 8).

Participant 14 made similar connections between taking perspectives and contemplating during their unstructured time, recalling that their childhood community “...was very diverse. I think the exposures to different groups and different environments, but lots of free time to in those environments, lots of free time to explore and discover... really makes pathways blossom in your brain.” When combined with experiences where they helped others, Participant 14 learned “the importance and value of relationships and finding out about people and you get to learn at a young age that it feels good to help people.” Through this explanation, this

participant unpacks how unstructured play provided opportunities to learn about and build relationships with different people, while fostering capabilities in empathy and contemplation about the many lives they encountered. Moreover, by freely knowing and helping others, they learned the joyful rewards of using their empathy to think up social innovations.

As professionals, empathy allowed them to invite, listen, and understand the needs and motivations of their team and students, leading participants to make space for others to be imaginative and to include their insights among their own. In practice, leading workplace improvements was often discussed as a form of rescue, to save employees from unnecessary stress. For example, Participant 7 explained, “it’s putting your needs secondary to others. ... A well-rested [employee] is gonna have way more imagination and way more innovation than someone who’s pushed in a million ways.” Through this, Participant 7 reveals a priority for allowing employees time and space that they see as necessary or relevant for imagination to flourish. Participant 15 expressed similar leadership priorities sharing, “I would categorize my leadership style as one of a servant leadership, like how can I help you be your best self. Because in you being your best self, you will in turn, be your best for students.” In these declarations, each leader tells how awareness of the situation and feelings of others helps them contemplate ways to create conditions for success.

Participant 11 described how their childhood experiences influenced their approach to creative work as “always a back and forth. ... picking up the vibes of the individuals. ... [It’s] important to really be able to sort of set aside the rational to a certain extent and also allow the non-rational, the creative, the imaginative, the imagistic. ... what could we build together.” By holding space for their team to safely explore and share their creative insights, this leader used their empathy to contemplate how to include their team in an innovative process.

Participant 13 described how their value for unstructured time today came out of childhood experience with it in a way that they now try to create that in the workplace. Likewise, Participant 15 drew abilities from wandering and pondering as a child to now being able to create opportunities for staff to engage in imaginative collaborations, building a “culture of people” with “diverse” voices that shape “change.” Participant 6 said they manage others:

... by wandering around kind of philosophy where I'm just present. ...most people who are in creative pursuits would say, ‘I need to be in a space and I go for a walk or I clear my mind’ or I [say] like ‘you gotta separate yourself and then that opens up your mind to different possibilities.’ And, you'll be observant and you get out in nature You gotta do that with the staff too to create that creativity.

For Participant 6, being present allowed them to contemplate the possibilities floating in their mind and to respond to those encountered as they wandered among hallways and classrooms. Across the sample, participants connected how they contemplated the circumstances of others as consistently part of their thinking.

Spending so much time deep in thought helped to develop skills for reflexivity, especially regarding the experience of others. As a result, these leaders spend time in contemplation as part of their leadership style, ruminating on ways to improve conditions for those around them and really getting to know them. At an early age, they learned the impact they could have by getting to know everyone’s perspective, largely because they did not have a choice on who they played with that day. They learned to quickly get to know whoever showed up on the block.

... if it’s your own imagination, you’re gonna be disappointed. Because you feel too much about yourself, the imagination you need to tap into ... [is] the imagination of every single person ... you know, the sky’s the limit.... [From childhood], I was very interested in the

people around me and their imaginations and their vision. And [today] it's shared vision, shared leadership model. And that's how you know, if you want imagination, if you want vision, you need to expand it. (Participant 8)

In this, Participant 8 acknowledged that an individual imagination can be limited when trying to meet the diverse and complex needs within their school. Therefore, they contemplated how to engage the collective imagination of their staff to construct a school vision and sought conditions that expanded it.

Participant 4 stated that for the imagination to flourish, leaders needed to “lead with light and imagination ... to inspire new ideas to inspire your imagination.” Similarly, Participant 2 advocated for organizations to deliberately open space for reflective and shared imaginative thinking that gives “permission” for people to “pay attention” to the otherwise unnoticed and to share the “ridiculous.” In their childhood, they had experienced how thoughts can emerge from in-between spaces as “machinations and new ideas that might not even make sense.” As an imaginative educational leader, they work to “tap into” a “universal” or “collective energy ... for people to be ... trusting and just saying you can be who you are, and you can dream...” For this leader, empathetic-contemplation helped them create “those kind of spaces” and empower “people's awareness” by drawing on their lived experience noticing, paying attention, and helping others.

Participant 2 deliberately worked to replicate the joys of unsupervised and creative conditions, establishing “a nurturing environment where we don't judge ... an environment that's safe ... Were given permission to ... just remember what it's like to be a child.” Likewise, Participant 1 worked to recreate conditions from childhood for their staff. “Like, I'm protecting this space from the other influences that are out there ... we are going to have a creative space

here.” In these words, Participant 1 declares their determination to secure creative spaces regardless of opposing influential forces.

Participant 14 explained how, today, they work to engage staff in building an imaginative culture, rather than just fixing problems or making them go away. “I want them to problem-solve it, man. And if they can’t, then I want me to problem-solve with them” (Participant 14). This leader directly connected empathy to imagination. Through “exposures to different groups and different environments, ... [with] lots of free time to explore and discover.... And I think that's what really makes pathways blossom in your brain.... We have individual initiatives and group initiatives and that's how we team build.” Here, Participant 14 explains how they teach their own staff to contemplate the situation of others as part of a shared imaginative practice.

Perspective-taking is an important part of a capability for empathetic-contemplation, as articulated by Participant 10:

I could look at it from my lens, but that's gonna be different from yours ... so I think it's about making sure that you have lots of different kinds of lenses when you're looking at a problem and trying to solve it [through] different voices. Different perspectives. And that you utilize those in coming to the solutions because there's never just one solution for any wicked problem.... You need to gather that data, those perspectives, and that information to be able to come up with those multi-pronged solutions. (Participant 10)

For these leaders, the imaginative capability of empathetic-contemplation arose out of repeat opportunities to experience and consider a variety of personalities while also witnessing the discrepancies in social justice through exposure to mixed demographics and homelife situations (noted by several as something not often encountered by kids today).

Ultimately, leaders with a capability for empathetic-contemplation value and know how to consider a multiplicity of perspectives and allocate time to imagine needed change. They don't try to find problems and fix them. They live in a constant state of reflexivity, actively wandering and pondering their organization to really know and understand its people and perspectives in a way that helps them imagine solutions that work.

Behavioural Theme: Exploring/Enacting

As children out on their own, participants recalled how this provided ample opportunity to explore curiosities and spend time making something out of nothing like “snow forts and treehouses” (Participant 3). The relative absence of adults on scene meant freedom to just do what they wanted – not to be confused with permission, because sometimes they would get up to mischief, making slingshots (with planned targets), shooting guns, exploring abandoned buildings, and building things, Participant 6 noted how they imagined “their way through” summer days with a parent saying, “throw some things in a backpack, and we'll see you at supper.” This participant shared how through exploring in the absence of adults they encountered abundant possibilities for making things, creating, and enacting their imagination. They continued,

... we headed out into the forest. ... Lots of the things we did were probably pretty dangerous, but we had to figure our way through that. And there was so much more for our imagination to grow, and I remember ... tearing moss out of the ground and building a fort with it. ... we didn't have parents around telling us what to do or how to solve our problems. Like you come back and like you got in a fight with the neighbour kid and like, you gotta figure that out, right? (Participant 6)

Here, the participant credits childhood days spent with friends exploring their environment and enacting possibilities in unsupervised spaces all the while building capabilities for imaginative acts.

Participant 13 tells a similar story of where exploring the neighbourhood and imagination went hand in hand: "... there were a lot of other kids. I could imagine myself, ... we would leave the yards and go back and ... play war. We had quite a little rivalry going with the kids in the other end of town. ... So, we would load up a wagon with ... whatever we could throw." Like Participant 6, Participant 13 left their house looking to imagine and enact games with other kids.

Participant 2 connected how playing make-believe developed their imagination:

We played non-stop self-organized ... games we just made up with the kids in the vicinity.

I think that was probably helpful for imagination as we had to self-organize and it changed all the time ... it allowed my brain to have completely open time to figure and reconfigure, without the noise of other ideas or influences.

This participant connects their experiences during free play to making-up and enacting games as part of their developing imaginative capabilities. Similarly, Participant 8 positioned play as central to an imaginative childhood, "... basically, we played. I drove around on the banana seat bike with a baseball glove on the handlebar and ... games could develop at any time... kids were everywhere... we would spend hours upon hours ... playing..." Across the sample, participants spoke of countless days spent exploring their neighborhoods and engaging in spontaneous activities with whomever was willing to join them. Participant 3 further connected unstructured playtime to their developing imagination, explaining that "out in nature ... I tapped into imagination where we're [building] the snow forts and treehouses. ... roadways and paths and build things and collaborate on stuff together." Likewise, Participant 13 connected playing

pretend with a developing imaginative capability through "...being able to be whatever... creating a character... spurred my imagination on quite a bit." Through this, they learned how to 'be' or 'create' something that started as an idea, realizing the power of bringing the intangible into reality.

Participant 9 spoke of exploring their neighbourhood as foundational to learning how to imagine ways to pass the time, often with kids of different ages.

... we had a huge amount of autonomy So, we would have been all summer like going to the brook to swim and kicking the ball around and playing with stuff, but nothing that costs money... So, that's the learning, right?

Here, Participant 9 attributed their autonomy and sometimes boredom as their motivator to seek out entertaining and imaginative ways to pass the time. Within the data, Participants attributed imaginative capabilities to time spent in childhood thinking up and acting on ideas. If they could imagine it, they would try to find a way to enact it. Blankets, sticks, and mud became make-shift forts, weapons for battle, and sculptures. Through exploring/enacting, these leaders learned capabilities for working with others to innovate and manifest ideas. Participant 8 described this as "learning to interact [and] learning to create."

Unstructured time and spaces as children created the context for acquiring leadership skills like learning to balance free time and responsibilities, with permission to go out and have fun, but accountability to be back on time or do chores. Several lamented that this was a vanishing parenting style, discussed as a privilege, implying their context for fostering imaginative capabilities may sadly be a thing of the past.

For these leaders, exploring and enacting was an integral part of their imagination education, honing abilities through open-minded pursuit of things to do and make. Thus, a fifth

imaginative capability emerged from the data: Adaptive-manifestation, an ability to imagine and create at the same time, with skills for incremental refinement in real-time.

Imaginative Capability: Adaptive-Manifestation. With childhoods packed with roaming, befriending, and creating, it only seems natural that these individuals would develop a capability for imagining, creating, and refining as they go through adaptive-manifestation. The duality of adaptability and manifestation is something that sets imaginative educational leaders apart from others. These leaders do not just daydream about making the world a better place. They make it. As young children, Participant 11 ran a school and put on plays for the older kids and Participant 4 drew on defending other kids in grades 3 and 8 for teaching them they had to stay cool under pressure and use their imagination to adapt on the spot “because once you upset, then you're gone and you can't ...utilize my imagination.... [and] advance myself and advance others.” As leaders, Participant 11 looked for innovative ideas from data overlooked by peers and superiors while Participant 6 looked for ways to take their staff off-site to spark conversations about how to make change happen.

Making something out of nothing was a constant theme, but it was always connected with the awareness that there was no one there to judge or tell them what to do. Ideas were adaptive and easily brought to life because conditions were ripe to explore without any expectation other than entertaining companionship. As imaginative educational leaders, participants continue seeking contexts that invite suggestions, possibilities, and creation with an element of fun. These leaders not only come up with great ideas, but they also know how to enact them –willing to try and tweak the process until they get it right. This, of course, takes time – unstructured time to be exact – and the perception that no one is watching in a way that the pressure is off, and they can play at innovation to get it right.

It should be noted that not every kid who was out playing became an imaginative educational leader. In these data from imaginative educational leaders, they identified as the ones who led the activities, sought action, pulled kids together, and made stuff happen. They had the time and space to do it, but they also had the motivation from a confidence that grew with every success. Participants included stories of protecting their teams from limiting forces or systemic restrictions to innovation, pursuing ways to manifest collaboratively meaningful change focused on inclusion. Participant 12, for example, expressed frustration at standardized approaches that miss the “outliers,” noting how leadership opportunities often implicitly suggest following established practices and discouraging disruption. For Participant 12, being imaginative sometimes led to being dismissed or feeling overlooked in ways that innovative opportunities were missed. Their philosophy was, “we should be chasing the outliers” (Participant 12), thinking up improvements that address everyone, not just most. For this leader, it was important to consider possibilities for individuals marginalized within the system.

Participant 14 risked stepping outside organizational norms to explore remedies for the disenfranchised, even when they did not necessarily understand how to do it. They reflected on individuals and found personalized solutions, noting this as a favourite pastime in their schedule, ... functioning at a high level, cognitively, confidently ... [but] sometimes you don't always [know]. ... You do your best to hammer down everything, but you gotta be flexible enough to incorporate things that you're not understanding. (Participant 14)

In this quote, the participant demonstrates how trying a new idea on the spot without fully testing it out and vetting it for approvals is exactly what adaptive manifestation is all about. While this idea may scare mainstream leaders taught to only take well-calculated risks, imaginative

educational leaders know how to calculate and adjust in real time. Participant 2 noted that ideas needed to be explored in action, not carefully “metered out.”

There isn't usually a cookie-cutter fix for it, but let's just talk about how we're working through this. ... [It's] creating an environment of trust and relationship and risk taking that you really support the culture of learning by doing. So that you just got to sort of jump in and do and success builds the brain... failure informs us. ... we're just gonna do it. We're not gonna study it to death or get it a prototype or pilot all the time and meter out careful steps. (Participant 2)

Being able to just jump in and make effective change is an acquired skill. These leaders could envision how to achieve better results, with lived experience to know how to make it happen. They know what they are doing. They've done it their whole lives. Their confidence comes from experience. Plus, they know it is worth it – and for them, the payoff is social impact, sometimes at the expense of personal gain.

These leaders were not fearful and would often circumvent barriers that discouraged deviance from the norm. Participants referred to finding ways to make changes around the system, seeking shelter or distance from bureaucracy to be their imaginative selves. Wanting to foster a more imaginative culture, Participant 6 “allowed for space” for “organic conversations,” using what they called the “power of yes” when resolving issues. When it came to their own leaders, they were able to thrive under leadership that supported them and their staff to give fresh ideas a try. “...in general, we don't do that well.... We are all about output, but the magic is in allowing a little space for input so the output can be better” (Participant 6). Learning from their lived experience, this participant brought their staff to neutral spaces with the belief that if imaginative strategies are to emerge, there should be no expectation for staff to come up with

them under pressure. Through this, they demonstrate an understanding that their capability for adaptive-manifestation arose in the absence of an agenda.

... like, hey, 'let's go off-site ... away from their normal kind of day-to-day grind' ... [and] organic conversations start to happen.... You see something really inspiring and then you go out ... you talk about it, but you also talk about what you're doing next week.... There has to be space for that creativity kind of organically and then once in a while, the conversation would laser-in on something. ... I can tell you a million things come from it. (Participant 6).

Here, Participant 6 draws on their capability for adaptive-manifestation to design off-site lunches or trips that opened unstructured contexts and fueled imaginative conversations. In similar ways, Participant 4 advocated for organizations where everyone around feels seen and heard, allowing and not 'hampering' them from being imaginative.

A huge barrier ...is protocol over methodology. And so, I'm highly one [for] method over protocol 'cause methods are always evolving. Methods are always utilizing experiences and knowledge of other people. Protocols hamper, they're put there for complacency. They're put there for control.

In this comment, Participant 4 explained their intentions to remove structures from work that stood in the way of freely thinking of adaptive strategies for evolving situations.

Just like kids seeking others for a pick-up game or make-believe, these leaders are skilled at engaging everyone in a way that validates each person's value and empowers them to be part of the action. Participant 4 continues to share:

I've been told by many 'Thank you for being here because you see me' ... so many of our [staff] are not seen, especially those with imagination, especially those that want to

challenge the status quo. They're not, ... they're basically denied any opportunity to utilize your imagination.

In these words, this participant described a desire to support staff in their own imagining and manifesting of possibilities through encouragement rather than denial of imaginative activity.

Participants described how an imaginative educational leader can influence the inclusive, hopeful, and secure conditions for others' imaginations to thrive. They conversely reinforced the need to protect their staff from the negative effect of restrictive administrative oversight, encouraging staff to "challenge the status quo" through thought and action.

In my own work I was looking at that intersection. ... Imaginative or thinking outside the box is ... not only looking backwards at what we have learned about what will work, ... [it is] thinking, 'what creative approach in this situation would work?' ... I'd say it's a balance between what has been shown to work and what we need to try out in a given context.

(Participant 9)

Participant 9 role-modeled imaginative practice by spending

... a lot of time talking to people, asking 'What does that look like So, we're saying this ... what does it look like in practice?' ... We can teach people who are very good at tasks to develop their relationships, by bringing it from the unconscious into the conscious. ... What's the context? What works? What do we need? What do we don't need? What can we develop? ... How do we develop it? ... So, I think we create conditions that allow individuals to reflect.

In this way, Participant 9 modelled reflexivity through questioning to help others acquire imaginative thought routines.

As a senior leader, Participant 2 ensured policies were flexible to allow for innovation, enacting adaptive-manifestation at the systems level through policy with “a lot of leeway.” They understood that, to create conditions for imagination, they needed to recreate the conditions of childhood play –an imaginative context that encourages exploring and enacting ideas without fear of getting in trouble. They understood that:

... almost always the intention of policies and standards somewhere came from the intention of supporting best practice ... or how we ran things. And so yes, there were some that were ... more limiting possible policies, but I just would be it figuring out ways to get around it. (Participant 2)

These leaders both enacted and inspired adaptive-manifestation by creating contexts and policies that support imaginative approaches. Narratives revealed an ability to manifest ideas on the spot, in connection with their perpetual state of pondering how to improve things. A lifetime spent doing this served as conditioning for seeing what needs to be done and an ability to do it.

Ultimately, leaders with a capability for adaptive-manifestation know how to rapidly imagine solutions and test them, capable of iterating as they go to refine an idea quickly for maximal impact. They are resourceful, resilient to limitations, motivated, and supportive of a culture that empowers positive change.

Behavioural Theme: Collaborating/Playing

Many of the childhood recollections involved social interaction in pursuit of play. Collaboration and play were something encouraged by their caregivers, even in their absence. This absence of authority was markedly never regarded as neglect. It was discussed as a deliberate parenting style that fostered natural people skills. Participants went out of the house to find kids and initiate games. In fact, Participant 2 attributed their self-reliance, determination,

and “grit” to numerous self-organized activities. Seeking playmates was often a “way of coping” with boredom (Participant 1). For Participant 5, getting outside was the code for free play:

Parents were, ‘Get outside, get some fresh air,’ and then suddenly you would start playing with your friends and you would make up games ... different versions of cops and robbers and kick the can and all that stuff, right? ... and then suddenly [we would] come up with an idea and suddenly you would start playing this stuff, right? ... where you would just kind of go in the woods and you would just play imaginary stuff ... (Participant 5)

In this quote, Participant 5 highlights how collaborative play can emerge suddenly when immersed in unstructured time, emphasizing how play took on greater imaginative dimensions when shared with others.

Participants used their imaginations to envision what they could do to excel, seeking opportunities to turn developing skills into a challenge or game for self-learning. For example, Participant 15 recalled “... going outside, and so you'd lay in the grass and picture ... the clouds ... you'd have competitions with your friends. Well, I can see a bird.” Making benign activity a competition appeared throughout the data. “There was an element of having to create ... [and] you're going a little bit higher, pushing yourself ...” (Participant 15). Here, this participant reflects on how playing with others motivated them to engage their imaginations.

Participant 1 explained learning to make up games to make things interesting, “I’m precocious and so that makes things that are not fun, ... fun again because I just play with stuff.” Participant 11 recalled how making art taught them that “things can be [both] fun and have positive outcomes ...not all just rational issues to be solved..., but that there are beautiful things in the world. We can do it.” If unstructured time and space allowed participants to practice

finding people and inventing things to play, here they made fun everywhere and achieved things as they played together.

Participant 11 found socializing with multi-aged kids allowed them to understand inclusion as it allowed them to play with others. Their age set them apart from others who were “almost two years younger than everybody else ... the whole thing about life was then fitting in ... particularly my outdoor experiences.” When quite young, they found how to play with other neighbourhood kids by leading how they play together by making something big together:

So, [with] no real experience of school, I ran a school ... and they all had to turn up in my veranda and I would have seats set out for them.... they're a bit older than me ... my sister might have seen a movie or something.... and then we had to make it into a play. And so, we would involve other girls in the neighbourhood. (Participant 11)

Through various social interactions, participants learned to understand and connect with people, fostering a value for diverse personalities. Experiences in a rough neighbourhood helped Participant 8 acquire important interpersonal skills.

It was tough. People were rugged. So, you walked into a group of kids. I don't care if you are eight years old or 15 years old. You better be aware of your surroundings, or you might get a puck to the mouth, you know? ... So, you learned to defuse, or you learn to connect with people and listen to people.

These experiences taught Participant 8 how to play roles that would allow them to “fit in” with diverse personalities. They explained:

I could ... have lunch with the queen or I could walk the streets ... and hang out with the homeless people. And I'd fit in either way, a bit of a chameleon that way. [Today], I can sit in the meeting ... and for the first twenty minutes, I'm just scanning, watching people,

listening to what they have to say and then, very quickly, I can formulate ideas and find an opening.

They also described how navigating social situations independently taught them situational awareness, by sensing threats in their environment, managing conflict, knowing when to conform, and when to challenge.

Yes, there were a few fistfights along the way. ... Someone got the upper hand. [The] fight was over and they were all playing ball again ... You know, but learning to problem solve, learning to interact, learning to create all of that for me came from unstructured play during my childhood. That's where all of that came from. (Participant 8)

Here, Participant 8 explicitly credits unstructured play as the foundation for their developing capabilities that arose through collaborative play.

Through a variety of social interactions, participants gleaned skills and attitudes that led them to lead, master, compete, entertain, get along, or keep up with other children. Moreover, these stories exhibit where collaborative play led to opportunities to sometimes instigate and navigate conflict. While encountering social conflict does not seem imaginative, it taught Participant 8 that they needed the people they were fighting with to be playmates, so they learned to navigate conflict to move on to more play.

For these leaders, collaborating and playing nurtured imaginative capabilities by learning how to be included and be inclusive of others so everyone could join in the fun. In this, a sixth imaginative capability is revealed inclusive-gamification, an ability to engage a wide variety of people to playfully work together on fun challenges.

Imaginative Capability: Inclusive-Gamification. Inclusive-gamification emerged from the data where imaginative leaders capably engaged various people to make up games together

and playfully tackle challenges. As children, these leaders described time and again how they actively gave structure to unstructured time through interactive games. Participant 1 revealed how inclusive-gamification is part of their leadership style today as a playful approach to the relentless challenges of teaching and leading, where “there's a challenge... it's a marathon.” This perspective of finding ways to make games out of life's challenges includes considerations of fairness and a willingness to “change the game” for others.

Several participants shared how playing games together in childhood taught them ways to gamify their work:

... [work is] made-up of a lot of little finite games that are happening. And so, the understanding of actually how to kind of understand the rules, how to play with the rules, how what rules can we bend also sync in with creativity because, you know, creativity can love constraints. But it's also about how you play with those that can allow for that influence. (Participant 3)

Like Participant 1, this participant not only views their work as a series of games, but they also noted how creativity is inspired within perceivable constraints.

Participant 12 explained how collaboration skills support inclusive practice. “I see this being able to work inside a collaborative team or listen to people.... I'm seeing it as being a collective thing that somehow impacts individuals that allows them to work through other people.” Skills for teamwork were acquired through play, specifically noted by Participant 5 as learning and communicating each of their employees' “set plays.”

One executive described how collaborative play advanced capabilities used during the COVID pandemic, they believed that,

... [because] there isn't one answer to many things... [I led] over 100 collaborative meetings with the [teachers union], the Department of Health, the school administrators association, and the department. And working through what it would look like during COVID for teaching and learning. ... it wasn't a monologue. It was a dialogue ... [with] opportunities ... to fulfill our mandate and in creative and new ways ... to accomplish at that time period ... an important step in equity ... So, another opportunity as well.... There was lots of innovation that came out because we had to. And I think one of the things that does is it helps pave the way for other innovation, too, because we took chances and took risks and took new turns that we might not have taken as quickly during that time period.

(Participant 10)

When this system leader had to respond to a monumental and unprecedented disruption, they engaged everyone in creating remedies, referring to innovations through the lens of “we” not I. Participant 10 continued to explain that:

To unite people in this VUCA [period of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and] ambiguity ... [and make it] less ambiguous. How do you make sure that people feel comfortable instead of chaotic? You know, what are the strategies you do to set the playing field so that people can actually play? ... It gives you permission to be more innovative and creative if you recognize that ... you could fight it all the way, but you're not gonna win. So, why not just figure out? So, change management theory coupled with all of that right? ...when you know you're trying to create that comfort for people to understand ... what's OK, what could be right, what's the possibilities?

Here, this leader described how they called on a collective of individuals from the teachers' union, principals, and the departments of health and education to play, innovate, and enact possibilities together.

For these leaders, inclusive-gamification is not child's play. It is something they use as imaginative educational leaders to draw others into their work. Participant 8 shared being willing to start with "dim ideas" to open the conversation that would help make them great. Likewise, Participant 2 explained:

Whenever there's a collaborative or a team ... I'm just so fluid. I love those times. I might come in with all my preconceived cool ideas and I'll throw them completely out the window because I just love that energy of when you've got at least maybe three or four people talking about something that you're trying to brainstorm. (Participant 2)

For Participant 2, collaboration is fun, and inclusive contexts leverage collective imagination as a tool for change. Their practice included scheduling time for staff to connect with their colleagues, finding it creates "agency" and "space for all sorts of learning and potential innovation and imagination... Structurally, it means that we have fun" (Participant 2).

Across the data, there were many examples of ways imaginative educational leaders gamify the workplace. Participant 13 found staff were most engaged by the fun of learning. "In fact, it turned into a project that could never end and at the end of the year, we just had to kind of say, 'well, this is as far as we've gotten with this' ... [We've] learned [and had a] hell of a lot of fun." Like how Participant 10 approached a large disruption as a collaboratively creative opportunity to accelerate changes to how things are done, this leader created a positive disruption to the entrenched norms and practices, providing an opening to explore novel approaches to their systems.

Participant 6 reflected on how work “had to be fun, it had to be exciting,” despite the incredible social challenges facing them in the non-profit sector. It’s “pretty fun. We’re pretty lucky to be in this world.... I mean, the people part of it is what I love. But it’s also what I sometimes hate ... solving problems with people is incredibly complex and difficult” (Participant 6). For this participant, fun made the difficult parts of the job worthwhile.

Participant 7 also adds fun for fun’s sake, saying to employees, “Let’s go have some fun as a staff... trying to balance that for them because they’re running fast and they’re running hard, and they’re tired.” They explained how fun feeds morale and employee engagement as it builds the team. “I am absolutely blown away by the collaboration by ... just how excited they are to come to work every day.” This indicates they knew that when their staff was having fun they were more willing or even enthusiastic about sharing in the imaginative exploration of novel ways to work.

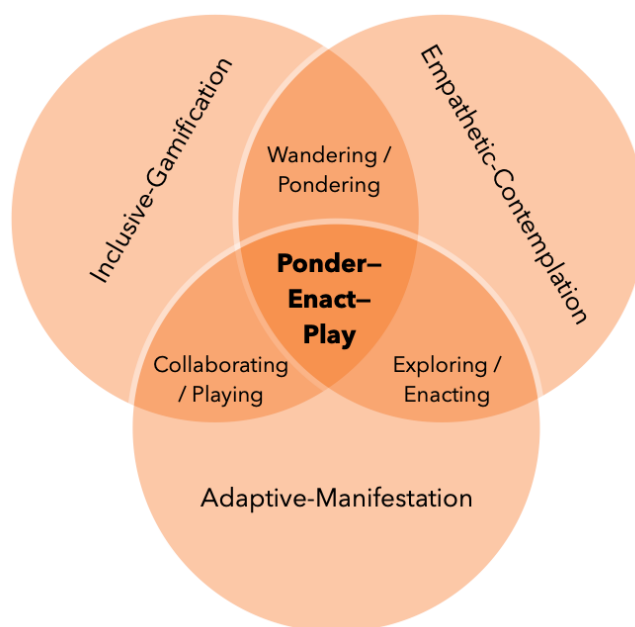
Ultimately, leaders with a capability for inclusive-gamification know how to involve a variety of personalities in a way that everyone feels involved, and they do this with a deliberate infusion of fun. They know how to collaborate through a spirit of diversity, even when things are dire, to capture and inspire everyone’s imagination.

Summary: Ponder–Enact–Play Capabilities

Through childhoods of wandering/pondering, exploring/enacting, collaborating/playing, these imaginative educational leaders reveal a holistic behavioral pattern of Ponder–Enact–Play, underpinned by three capabilities of empathetic-contemplation, adaptive-manifestation, and inclusive-gamification. This core category and its components can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Behaviours and Corresponding Capabilities as Part of an Ability to Ponder–Enact–Play.



As modelled in Figure 3, a capability for empathetic-contemplation was acquired through ample time for wandering/pondering, which primes imaginative educational leaders to draw on their capability for adaptive-manifestation in a way they are always exploring/enacting, using their capability of inclusive-gamification to collaborate/play with colleagues and ideas.

As with the previous core category, these behaviours happen in an on-going, iterative, and interactive way that does not exist as a sum of its parts. Yet, unlike capabilities for Sense–Think–Act, this core category is formed from parental expectations that they learn to entertain themselves during vast amounts of unsupervised and unstructured time. Wandering outside with lots of time to ponder provided a context for mindfulness about others and daydreaming about ways to improve the world. Over time, this became forged into a capability for empathetic-contemplation, thinking about others and imagining a better future. Being free to roam meant encountering a heterogeneity of places and people with whom they would make up ways to pass

the time. Through this, they acquired a capability for adaptive-manifestation, knowing how to rapidly act on good ideas and make them great. Similarly, childhood collaboration and play-time fostered a capability for inclusive-gamification, the ability to engage various people through play.

Conclusion

Through semi-structured interviews, this grounded theoretical approach revealed the formation and active practices of imaginative capabilities. These leaders seemed calmly optimistic that if they can Sense–Think–Act to establish conditions that allow for collaborations guided through Ponder–Enact–Play, they can lead a team to solve even the most disruptive problems. While these examples all point to their positive experience with the behaviours and capabilities of this core category, they also emphasize that the right conditions were required to enact them.

Imaginative educational leaders articulated how they conceptualize imagination and imaginative capabilities and their perceptions of childhood experiences that were fundamental to developing them. To them, the relationship between sensing, thinking, and acting is indivisible within their imaginative practice. This pattern persisted in their childhood stories of pondering, enacting, and playing, and how that manifested in their professional leadership practice. Thus, the behavioural pattern of Sense–Think–Act revealed capabilities of contextual-cognition, innovative-ignition, and fearless-experimentation. Likewise, the behavioural pattern of Ponder–Enact–Play revealed capabilities of empathetic-contemplation, adaptive-manifestations, and inclusive-gamification. The third research question is answered by identifying data-informed emergent themes that serve as theoretical outcomes that might inform professional learning for imaginative leaders in education and is addressed over the next two chapters.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

This investigation offers insights into how imaginative educational leaders conceptualize imagination and imaginative capabilities. This chapter discusses the six behavioural themes that emerged from the findings. The first three themes, united under the core category of Sense–Think–Act, reveal how leaders perceive imagination and their related capabilities as a unified behavioural process of conjuring novel thoughts and actions in response to what they sense in problematic contexts. In three additional themes, consolidated under the core category of Ponder–Enact–Play, imaginative educational leaders perceive having the freedom to wander and ponder, explore and enact possibilities, and collaboratively play with their team, developing their imaginative capabilities and imaginative practice.

The findings revealed leaders who picked up on contextual cues for positive change, were attuned to opportunities that, when sensed, ignited imaginative possibilities to manifest them – and they did. This holistic pattern of Sense–Think–Act could not be broken down into linear steps or sequential parts. It is an interconnected way of being and leading in the world, a leadership style unto itself. Likewise, the imaginative leader is in a constant state of contemplation, pondering things in their present and potential future states, and playing with alternatives through an engaged network of collaborators. Again, this pattern of Ponder–Enact–Play is holistic in its iterative and generative nature, where the leader may be pondering several scenarios, while enacting something totally different, always drawing more and more players into the co-creation of a re-imagined world. Thus, imaginative leaders are marked by individuals who Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play to serve as imagination-empowered change agents as a regular part of their leadership practice.

In grounded theory methodology, the emergent theory drives the discussion through a post-hoc exploration of existing theories in pursuit of potential alignment to bridge gaps between current state knowledge, and new knowledge revealed here (Suddaby, 2006). First, I return to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 to relate these new understandings of imaginative capabilities to how imagination has been understood philosophically, cognitively, organizationally, and developmentally. Then, I explore findings in relation to contemporary literature in management and educational leadership.

Philosophical Perspectives

For the imaginative educational leaders in this study, the will to act is contingent on sensing a contextual deficiency and opportunity. As noted in Chapter 2, the philosophical discourse on imagination commonly positions imagination as an antecedent to creative action. Liu and Noppe-Brandon (2009) set imagination apart from creativity and innovation, asserting that they are “imagination applied” (p. 19). While these data also position imagination as potentially prior to creative action, they add an iterative, generative nature whereby the act of creation influences the thinking. In a novel twist, the idea that leaders Sense–Think–Act aligns with imagination preceding creative acts in a way that action is somehow willed (Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009) while adding sensory awareness and openness to receive contextual stimuli as part of the matrix. This triad of interaction between body, mind, and action provides the missing piece for philosophers, in explaining why imagination triggers the will to act: it is in response to a perceived need and possibilities to meet it. In this way, the drive to innovate does not necessarily begin in the mind with the imagined idea. To Sense–Think–Act means imaginative leaders are primed to imagine through sensory awareness and empathy.

Capabilities for Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play engages processes of mind and body with their environment as part of the entire imaginative process. This aligns with the literature on specific processes of imaginative activity, from sensing and grasping of irregularities to perceiving mental imagery and embodied phenomena (Egan, 2005; Fettes, 2010; Judson, 2021; Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009). To imagine with and through physical actions involves the dynamic interplay of sensing/thinking with thinking/acting and daring/tying to manifest in spaces, relationships, and conditions conducive to wandering/pondering, exploring/enacting, and collaborating/playing to innovate. Participants did not decouple sensing when thinking and generating “something beyond the present” (Participant 12). Imaginative leaders do not separate their minds from externalized actions; these are indivisible couplings. To be an imaginative educational leader is to conjure novel remedies through the mind and body, in concert with the spaces and people who collaboratively play with them in their environment. Moreover, if Egan (2005) is right, imaginative leaders may owe their holistic commitment to a vested interest in making positive change.

This is a callback to Maxine Greene’s (2007) philosophy on imagination as it relates to empathy, as demonstrated through the data on participant responses to perceived inequities and injustices. Empathetic-contemplation is a recurring theme in the data that shows up as a steady state of rumination on the ways to improve the lived experience of others. Through this, leaders access a spectrum of experiences and models to draw upon and play with in ways that build capabilities for innovatively responding to problematic situations (Judson, 2021; Ulmer, 1994). Imaginative leaders capable of empathetic-contemplation cultivate contexts and invite complexity into their sandbox to reveal a multiplicity of possibilities that inform authentic response change (Jackson & McCullagh, 2015).

Moreso, it is through collaborating/playing within a community where the cycle of finding opportunities to ponder and explore novel approaches repeatedly occurs (Corbett, 2013; Geels, 2004). In this, I make a novel contribution to the philosophical understanding of imagination and social change by grounding the empathy and sensory awareness of people and places.

Summarily, as imaginative leaders wander/ponder they explore/enact new ideas. Then, while collaborating /playing to innovate, they sense how to affect people and places to promote imaginative activities.

Collingwood (1967) observed that creative expression cannot be reduced to a replicable technique, noting the composition of a person's imaginative context extends from their unique experience. And yet, though each participant shared distinct lived experiences, findings here reveal two replicable patterns of these innovative leaders where they developed imaginative capabilities through behaviours they practiced, often aided by ample unstructured time and unsupervised space.

Thus, a distinct leadership style begins to emerge in a way that branches from philosophical notions of imagination by linking the behaviours of Sense–Think–Act with Ponder–Enact–Play. Recognizing and empowering these patterns could embolden more educational leaders to not only envision and pursue what ‘could be’ in schools, but to sense what ‘should be’ (Greene, 2007). Building these capabilities in educational leaders offers new possibilities for leaders to think beyond administrative duties and imagine, and potentially enact, more effective strategies for educational neighbourhoods full of people who want to be engaged and are ready to play. Through this, leaders are better positioned to see “conventions and traditions, particularly those that may be orphaned from their initial purpose” (Dewey, 1939/1991). Imaginative leaders can make sense of contexts in continual change, like

educational systems, using their abilities to steer them through transitions of ‘becoming’ (Beycioglu & Kondakçı, 2021).

Identifying the behavioural patterns of Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play links sensory awareness to the imaginative act, and grounds empathy within the embodied experience. The imaginative leaders of this study thrive in spaces where they can invest more than their minds to include their whole being to realize what is possible, even if it is beyond the scope of what others believe to be feasible, in ways that they can sense and envision improvements to the lives of others and make it so.

Psychological Neuroscientific Perspectives

An imaginative leader offers cognitive psychology a new perspective on how leaders innovate possibilities (Liang & Chia, 2014; Runco, 2014). Their innovations come from holistic Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play patterns that are not captured by Enid Zimmerman’s (2009) definition of a creative process that begins with “defining a problem to be solved” (p. 386). These imaginative leaders point to a different process, where the problem is not necessarily defined before they act to solve it. Instead, imaginative leaders may toggle between pondering/wandering, exploring/enacting, and collaborating/playing as they iterate and generate responses to a sensed deficiency. Much of a problematic phenomenon’s complexity may be addressed subconsciously and through activity, and is not necessarily sufficiently observable to be articulated and defined. The imaginative freedom to explore complex and elusive problems and arrive at novel remedies before a problem is defined means leaders can worry less about logistics and established protocols and continue to follow a distinctive style they have developed over a lifetime of experiences.

Sense–Think–Act behaviours may represent a leader’s search for conditions that allow for the application of Ponder–Enact–Play capabilities to a complex problem as possible ‘flow’ states of happiness, curiosity, and the thrill of revealing the unknown (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2013; Kounios & Beeman, 2009; Martin & Colp, 2022). As imaginative leaders Sense–Think–Act they reshape their context to maintain a flow. These dynamic couplings, provide the philosophy of imagination with another explanation for how sensory information from the body informs the imagination that leads to action (Fettes, 2011; Shusterman, 2006; Snowber, 2012; Tschaepe, 2021). Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play behaviours offer a more holistic and dynamic relationship view to how people imaginatively respond to their senses.

In cognitive science, imagination is viewed through the lens of tracking and explaining imaginative activity as it occurs in the mind, it observes that imaginative insights or ‘aha’ moments arrive to those in a relaxed and contextually prepared mind (Kounios & Beeman, 2009; Mather et al., 2013). Whether they are aware of it or not, imaginative leaders deploy Sense–Think–Act capabilities to compose contexts that prepare their minds for innovative activity. Through their inclination to Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play, participants draw on “an extensive and diverse repertoire of relevant knowledge” (Abraham, 2016, p. 4203). Again, the common psychological neuroscience understanding of imaginative activity pertains to “novel combinatorial thinking” in the mind (Abraham, 2016, p. 4203). However, imaginative leaders engage in novel combinations of Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play, drawing upon information from their lived experience. Thus, participants revealed how they resolved complex challenges in ways some literature predicted in pieces but has never been articulated in a holistic model (Abraham, 2016; Fink et al., 2009; Kong et al., 2020; Kounios & Beeman, 2009).

Organizational Perspectives

Organizations rely on leaders with imaginative capabilities to adapt to emerging, complex, and accelerating socio-technical change (Geels, 2004). Organizational leadership theorists have observed these capabilities in leaders who see through the reifying and narrowing effects of routines and expectations to translate their organizational and team needs into a shared vision that directs action to what is coming (Geels, 2004; Patriotta, 2019). Imaginative leaders use their Sense–Think–Act capabilities to reshape their workplace to enable their Ponder–Enact–Play capabilities to contend with novel conditions and forces. Their capabilities allow them to maneuver their organization past blind spots and transform their worksite while maintaining order, or crafting an ordering principle that better suits the new conditions (Clarke, 2012; Fortwengel & Keller, 2020; Montuori, 2011). Moreover, these distinctive behavioural patterns model how leaders can harmonize March and Weil’s (2009) two worlds of pragmatism and fantasy into one. Not only do these patterns explain how imaginative leaders successfully navigate an organization through change, but they also show how organizations can reliably do so without restricting innovative activity to “‘skunk works’ ... [or] ‘incubation rooms’ for radical novelties” (Geels, 2004, p. 912). Moreover, organizations that identify, value, normalize, and promote these practices in their workplace stand to benefit from introducing expansive possibilities beyond what the bureaucracy predicted.

Brown (2012) discussed leadership qualities that guide their organization through change, as reflected in the behaviours and capabilities of imaginative leaders. He observed that “strategists” offer their team a vision and routes to fresh perspectives and growth, ‘alchemists’ create “spaces for innovation to emerge and group meaning-making to develop” (p. 569), and ‘ironists’ generate a sense of wonder to keep a team growing. Imaginative leaders rely on their

contextual-cognition to discover variables, innovative-ignition to inspire a team, and fearless-experimentation to explore and chart possible routes past barriers. Where the strategists, ironists, and alchemists represent three archetypal leaders, imaginative leaders demonstrate a set of behaviours and capabilities that illuminate barriers, expand perspectives, and access new spaces for growth. Where Brown's (2012) "research focused on very rare leaders who hold one of the ... [three] action logics" (p. 561), imaginative leaders possess capabilities found in all of them. Upon providing catalysts and spaces "for innovation to emerge" (p. 569) from a unified team, imaginative leaders go on to practice and promote Pondering–Enacting–Playing with innovative possibilities. It is worth noting that Brown's (2012) three leaders are guided by service to others, with the strategist grounding their service "in personal meaning," the alchemist "in trans-personal meaning," and the ironist "in unitive meaning" (p. 569). Imaginative leaders share this service orientation and may vary which ground they draw upon for meaning.

While established organizational theories hold that imaginative behaviours and capabilities are of value to organizations, none provide a single theory that explains the phenomena. Some theories offer perspectives related to imagination and innovation in the workplace. The knowledge-based theory of the firm is leveraged, for example, when imaginative leaders draw on their imaginative capabilities and institutional knowledge to create an imaginative learning culture (Grant, 1996). When these capabilities or the behaviours that create them are not fostered by the school or organization, then it is an organically occurring indirect capability that is not being acknowledged. By not strategically developing or enabling such capabilities among their leader's valued knowledge capabilities, the knowledge-based theory of the firm would warn that the organization risks losing it (Grant, 1996). Institutional theory further highlights that reifying institutions that prioritize consistency and repeatability presents a challenge for innovative

leaders. When imaginative leaders struggle to innovate in schools that primarily look for improvements through coercion, norms, or mimesis, they will seek a way out of the ‘iron cage’ that holds them (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Alternatively, self-determination theory (often cited in organizational psychology) suggests leaders innovate under conditions where their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Deci and Ryan (2000) observe that when these social contexts are available, people experience positive effects as they:

- (a) maintain or enhance intrinsic motivation; (b) facilitate the internalization and integration of extrinsic motivation resulting in more autonomous motivational or regulatory orientations; and (c) promote or strengthen aspirations or life goals that ongoingly provide satisfaction of the basic needs. (p. 263)

Participants were determined to expand professional competencies through play, freedom from bureaucratic constraints, and the strengthening of relational bonds with their community of leaders, students, teachers, and parents. Meanwhile, while self-determination theory describes conditions in which leaders innovate, it does not explain the processes that taught them how to bring about innovations, as the findings in this study do.

At the organizational level, absorptive capacity theory views a leader’s capacity to innovate relative to the prior knowledge they are surrounded by to inform innovation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), yet it does not point to factors that develop or enable imagination itself. On the other hand, a dynamic capabilities model relies on leaders who can “continuously create, extend, upgrade, protect, and keep relevant the enterprise’s unique asset base” (Teece, 2007, p. 1319). Findings here reveal that this is what imaginative leaders do, offering fresh insight for this theory regarding how dynamic capabilities can be tapped at the leadership level.

Findings suggest a direct contribution to gamification theory, which suggests that leaders who engage their team in playful activity “affect their willingness to risk an initial trusting move” (Scharlemann et al., 2001, p. 619). This research aligns with and extends this theory in explaining how imaginative leaders use gamification not only to build trusting relationships but also to encourage playful innovation and experimentation within contexts that support learning through doing.

Even as this discussion highlights how imaginative leaders benefit organizations, no organizational theory has yet explained how leaders develop or enact their imaginative capabilities. To explore more possible theories to explain these phenomena, findings are further discussed as they relate to leadership theories in education.

Educational Leadership Perspectives

Where education is less a business than a service, educational leadership scholars tend to examine leaders through their impact on learning. Seashore-Lewis and Wahlstrom (2011) recognize leaders who promote innovations in the classroom are pivotal to improving student success. Deal and Peterson (2016) noted effective educational leaders “foster a strong educational mission, a sense of community, social trust among staff members, and a shared commitment to school improvement ...” (p. 10). Beyond improvements, Serdyukov (2017) lauded leaders who cultivated educational innovation for continued school evolution. Imaginative leaders shape their school culture and direct resources to allow for imaginative activity and innovative potential to improve learning and equity for every student. It is important to turn to the literature on effective educational leadership. According to Heck and Hallinger (2010), effective educational leaders align resources to support learners and motivate

professional staff to grow and implement innovations. This suggests a need for capabilities demonstrated by the imaginative leaders in this study.

Harris (2008) acknowledges that the composition of successful leadership practices evades being reduced to discrete theoretical frameworks or for dominant theories to mean the same thing to all practitioners. This may be true for educational leaders in general; however, the emergent behaviours and capabilities revealed through this study articulate a common framework that allows for a multiplicity of personalized approaches and unexpected paths. Under broader conceptions of ‘leadership for learning’ (Hallinger, 2011, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2020a; Leithwood et al., 2020b). Leithwood (2021) found that leaders who improve student equity and achievement integrate transformational and instructional leadership practices. However, existing leadership theories do not provide a unified framework that supports leading educational innovation.

Among claims of what makes an effective educational leader, Leithwood et al. (2020a) posit that “almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices [found among four domains:] Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, Redesigning the Organization to Support Desired Practices, and Improving the Instructional Program” (p. 7). Study findings here align with and contribute to this stream of research by adding the missing knowledge on specific behaviours that facilitate these practices, the capabilities required, how these can be acquired, and a new framework for how it can work in schools. According to Leithwood (2021) and others (Leithwood et al., 2020a; Ng, 2008) there is a common initiative to make teachers instructional developers, led by administrators prioritizing distributed instructional leadership over administrative leadership. These leaders serve to motivate and establish contexts for professional growth as they value their

accountability to advance their schools (Leithwood, 2021). Educational leaders are responsible for schools as both centres for learning and as complex facilities where time and people are managed. The additional tasks of advancing a vision for student success, distributing new professional learning to grow teacher efficacy, and improving equity require leaders with a breadth of advanced capabilities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Leithwood, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020a). Yet, until now, little theory has explained how these capabilities are holistically developed and effectively enacted.

In general, the field of educational leadership has prioritized factors and practices from mainstream leadership theories as they relate to leadership style. There are aspects of several leadership styles that can be seen in the behaviours of imaginative educational leaders, specifically transformational, transformative, distributed, servant, and shared leadership. Findings from this study reveal that while imaginative leaders share aspects of these leadership styles, imaginative leaders approach their work through a completely unique leadership style, distinct in its reliance on their imaginative capabilities to drive educational innovation. Thus, a new theory, grounded in the lived experience of imaginative educational leaders, is derived that suggests imaginative leadership as a novel leadership style. This warrants an exploration of imaginative leadership as a style in relation to other leadership styles.

Assuming findings in this study are transferable to a more general population of imaginative leaders, several propositions emerge as central to imaginative leadership. Behaviourally, imaginative leaders continuously Sense–Think–Act as they serve their community, and Ponder–Enact–Play as part of their leadership practice. Through these behavioural patterns they are always primed for imagining novel solutions and engaging everyone in their vision. Within the context of educational leadership, these leaders demonstrate

aspects of other leadership styles (Avolio & Gibbon, 1988; Blake & Mouton, 1985; Blanchard et al., 1993; Casimi & Ng, 2010; Zigarmi et al., 2013), namely transformational leadership, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, distributed leadership, and artful leadership; however, they are unique in their perpetual enactment of imaginative leadership behaviours, within and beyond the workplace, as a way of being in the world. To consider this fully, I will explore similarities and differences with established leadership theories, with attention paid to distinctions made evident through this study's findings.

Imaginative leaders are more than just transformational leaders. While they guide change through values and self-identity (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988) that is beneficial to organizational growth through relationships (Blake & Mouton, 1985; Casimi & Ng, 2010), findings show us 'how' they do it, through distinctive abilities for agility and innovative responsiveness to emergent and complex situations (Blanchard et al., 1993; Zigarmi et al., 2013). Imaginative leaders not only move their organization toward a transformative vision of what it should be (Hewitt et al., 2014; Shields, 2010), but they shape that vision through sense-based, context-situated contemplation and catalyze change despite systemic barriers.

Likewise, imaginative leaders are more than just servant leaders (Greenleaf, 2005; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Roberson et al., 2017) While also serving their ecosystem through sensitivity to the needs of others (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Roberson et al., 2017) with allegiant staff (Greenleaf, 2005), their service is rooted in reimagining the circumstances of others. If service is the 'what' of servant leadership, imaginative capabilities are the 'how' for imaginative servant leadership.

While there are aspects of adaptive leadership in imaginative leaders' behaviours, we now understand this as enacted through their perpetual application of the two behavioural patterns. Through the patterns of Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play, they model adaptive

leadership behaviours in fostering an adaptive community that grows together (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 2009); but now it is known how: through their imaginative capabilities. Thus, imaginative leadership offers schools and systems a set of behaviours and capabilities for adaptive leadership that can be learned, with the unique bonus of skills for realizing effective remedies to notoriously ‘wicked’ problems.

Imaginative leadership is similar to distributed leadership. Like distributed leaders, imaginative leaders rely less on their position than their positive relationships to improve their organization and to help students achieve (Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020a). Distributed leadership focuses on governing through the “interaction of individuals” at every level and actively cultivating “leadership abilities within all members of a team” (Harris, 2008, p. 174). Distributed leadership practices may include normalizing daily and incremental creative activity by providing “the ‘spaces’ and ‘opportunities’ for creativity to flourish” (Harris, 2009, p. 10). However, imaginative leaders additionally cultivate and draw from these relationships to Ponder–Enact–Play as they imaginatively conceive and implement reliable and novel remedies to organizational problems and unmet needs. Where an imaginative leader may employ distributed leadership tactics, they are embedded within the imaginative behaviours and capabilities identified here. Thus, an imaginative leadership style adds social impact benefits to distributed leadership models.

Last, findings regarding sensory and embodied experience as embedded with cognition signalled an unexpected connection to a different but emerging leadership style: artful leadership (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Imaginative leaders are not alone in their ability to lead systemic change in rigid systems. Artful leaders also avoid patterned remedies (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010) and engage in sense-making: “continually coming back to the evidence of his or her physical

senses and making sense in ways congruent with this emergent data” (p. 237). As artful leaders assess their context and data against their lived experiences and senses, they also hold space for their community to connect with their senses (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Like a playwright can create paradoxical characters and musicians contrast major and minor chords, artful leaders are similar to imaginative leaders in moving through the contradictions of systemic structures through diverse relationships and contemplation of sensory experience. This brings us back around to Eisner’s (1991) notion of imagination being “fed by perception and perception by sensibility and sensibility by artistic cultivation” (p. 14). It also connects to work on aesthetic considerations (Eisner, 1985) as essential to making heartfelt decisions and sensitively responding to human relationships (Klein, 1999). In artful leadership, Klein (1999) explains that “art, like leadership, has the power to inspire, transform, heal and connect us to something larger than ourselves” (p. 25). Thus, an artful leadership style may very well also be an imaginative leadership style, with potential overlap and possibilities for cross-pollination between these two growing fields of study.

While findings revealed how imaginative leaders conceived, developed, and deployed their imaginative capabilities, this study did not access data relevant to these leaders’ artistry, nor the relative latitude they enjoyed in their workplace. Subsequently, there is more work to be done in terms of understanding imaginative leadership relative to artful leadership. For now, it can only be claimed that, like artists, imaginative leaders distinguish themselves through their holistic behaviours and capabilities that draw upon conscious and unconscious senses and thoughts made conscious in the form of imagination, defined early in this dissertation as “information-rich perceptions / memories / image schemas / bodily gestures” (Asma, 2017, p. 9). What can be claimed is that imaginative leaders go beyond artful leaders’ reliance on their senses, artistic

agility, relationships, and analysis for school improvement. Imaginative leaders also embody capabilities developed from behaviours repeatedly practiced in various unstructured contexts among their decisional ponderings and enactments. Thus, there is a promising bridge between conceptions of artful leadership and imaginative leadership in their similarity for drawing on sensory, affective, and aesthetic awareness as part of leadership practice. Likewise, new revelations here around pondering, enacting, and playing may offer new avenues for scholars of artful leadership to investigate applications of imaginative capabilities.

Through this exploration of similar yet different leadership theories, this study makes a valuable contribution to identifying a new leadership style based on a research-informed framework. It also explains how coveted and previously elusive capabilities can be developed, fostered, and sustained. A more fulsome exploration of this new style will be discussed in the next chapter.

Sociological Perspectives

An imaginative leadership style raises the question of how leaders can hold competing or contradictory priorities in mind, something required by educational leaders expected to maintain systemic order while reimagining it. Sociology offers some perspectives in this regard.

Bourdieu's (2008/1990, 1998) sociological discourse explains how people can inhabit the structures, norms, and dispositions or 'habitus' of multiple 'fields.' He builds from Goffman's (1974) social interactionist approach of observing social dynamics through 'frames,' like how a play offers a frame to observe a character's nature through their contextual behaviour.

Through their particular frame of reference, sociologists observe how people and societies 'autonomously' or 'heteronomously' (Bourdieu, 1998) inhabit arrangements of fields and structuring forces that shape the player, actor, and society. This is to say, an imaginative leader's

‘habitus’ is a heteronomous intersection where the playful and imaginative behaviours they practiced over a lifetime are deployed to serve, navigate, and alter the systemic structures that employ them to lead. In this study, leaders described applying behaviours learned through childhood play that were learned while also participating in education systems similar to those they would later be entrusted to lead. Sociologically, educational leaders’ habitus includes numerous socio-technical structures. Possessing capabilities that empower effective, positive change within a role of competing frames seems not only important but urgently required in educational leadership.

Behavioural Perspectives

The behaviours of imaginative thinkers align with the literature on design thinking, particularly as it relates to innovation that meets human-centred success needs (IDEO, 2015; Roberts et al., 2016; Rosales, 2017). While design thinking responds to complex problems through prototyping solutions, the requisite aspect of imagination is relatively ignored within the literature (Brown, 2008; Cross, 2011; IDEO, 2012; IDEO, 2015). Capabilities to Sense–Think–Act help us understand how design thinkers can identify and imagine solutions for complex problems, while capabilities to Ponder–Enact–Play unpack how imaginative leaders nourish the empathetic and iterative ideation required for meaningful solution design. Therefore, findings provide new knowledge on ways to better develop skills in design thinking through the lens of imaginative behaviours and capabilities.

When it comes to innovation, the capabilities to Ponder–Enact–Play embed diverse lived experiences that help form inclusive and novel perspectives, essential to an organization’s innovative potential (Dyer et al., 2009). “... senior executives of the most innovative companies ... don’t delegate creative work. They do it themselves” (Dyer et al., 2009, para. 3). While

schools and school systems are not often classified as innovative, imaginative leaders have the capabilities to see beyond the rigid bureaucratic structures that serve as barriers to other leadership styles. Findings suggest that the will to innovate may be within more leaders but is currently disempowered or untapped by the system.

In the literature on innovative leadership, the lack of knowledge of requisite behaviours and capabilities limits access to an innovative leadership style. Identifying the imaginative capabilities for contextual-cognition and empathetic-contemplation helps us better understand how some leaders can learn to sense “intense dissatisfaction” that comes from a “need” or “problem” that currently has “no satisfactory response” (Farmer, 2021, p. 10). They need to be immersed in contexts that support the behaviours of imaginative leadership in ways that their imaginative capabilities can be acquired. Likewise, observed behaviours in innovative leaders “matching intuition, ... [fueled by] interest and curiosity” (p. 10), reflect what imaginative leaders do as they weave through patterns of Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play on their own and with others. Notably, innovative leadership is largely rooted in decision-making and cognitive activity, whereas an imaginative leadership style sees innovative leaders requiring a context of dynamic interplay between body, mind, and context. Through this, imaginative leaders are not isolated as the sole imaginers in Farmer’s (2021) ‘future vision’ by innovative leaders. Instead, they engage in community and facilitate a collaborative vision together.

Managerial Perspectives

While the imaginative leaders sampled for this study were selected for their success with educational innovation, it can not be assumed that all leaders are capable of this. Potential pitfalls from managerial perspectives deserve consideration. For instance, radical imaginative leaders may undo vital structures, services, or strategies in ways that disrupt a system and create

dysfunction (Montuori & Purser, 2000; Mueller et al., 2011). However, the perilous concerns over disorder for some are another's opportunity, a duality that effective organizational leaders manage (Montuori & Purser, 2000). While there is no indication that it is riskier to trust an imaginative leader than, for example, a charismatic transformational leader, there will always be systemic resistance to uninvited innovation within systems that are tightly controlled for a variety of reasons, including liability (Martin, 2017). From a managerial perspective, transformational aspects of imaginative leadership can be perceivably threatening (Mueller et al., 2011). For example, Mueller et al. (2011) found that creative leaders can be viewed with skepticism by their senior leaders and “trigger impressions which, at least for leadership potential, are not automatically positive” (p. 497). While the imaginative leaders in this study were good at leading innovation, this may not always be the case. In seeking to understand imaginative capabilities, the sample was deliberately skewed towards imaginative leaders with demonstrated success, and while many did so despite systemic barriers, such barriers are often in place as managerial controls. There is more work to be done to best understand when it is perceivably safe to empower imaginative capabilities, and while abilities to generate “novel and useful solutions... [may be] the most important leadership competency for the successful organization of the future” (Mueller et al., 2011, p. 494; Kern, 2010), how this works effectively within top-down managerial systems has yet to be explored. Thus, we can not assume that an imaginative leadership style will always be in alignment with organizational goals, and there is much to be learned in this liminal space. The managerial crux is in finding ways to leverage imaginative capabilities while maintaining adequate governance.

In their survey of 106 studies, Mehraein et al. (2023) investigate the potential dark side of creative and innovative leaders, they note cultural differences also have a part to play, especially

in countries with high power distance (Hofstede et al., 2005), which can limit perceived authority to even consider making systemic change (ergo containing it within cultural perceptions of managerial control). On one hand, Mehraein et al. (2023) cited two studies from China (contexts of high power distance between management and employees), that revealed how tightly controlled leadership hindered innovation (Feng et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2003); yet, in another Chinese context, studied by Zhang et al. (2021), the cultural sense of belonging and collectivism somehow empowered innovation, despite the authoritarian system. In short, tight managerial control does not necessarily eliminate opportunity for imaginative leadership to flourish, but an organizational culture needs to be designed to enable it. According to Deci and Ryan (2013), positive leadership is required for employee creativity, and if systems want to leverage the abilities of their imaginative leaders within, they need to consider how they are communicating perceptions of employee-level change.

Power distance relationships not only vary from country to country but also from one organizational culture to another. Low power distance relationships are common in innovative human-centred organizations, as are various forms of positive and “constructive leadership, namely transformational, authentic and empowering leadership” (Mehraein et al., 2023, p. 740; Hughes et al., 2018; Mainemelis et al., 2015). The imaginative leaders in this study also revealed a preference for low power distance between them and their staff, leading from below or within, walking among staff, respecting and collaborating with them. While this worked for them, they also shared tales of seeking shelter from bureaucratic controls. They learned how to hide innovation within the system, or in some cases, completely left it for places they could enact novel ideas. The challenge for educational leadership is to find ways to train, retain, and empower imaginative leadership within reasonably governed structures.

Conclusion

Overall, this chapter shares how findings reveal complex behaviours and capabilities that seem to be part of existing theories, not yet adequately understood or explained by them. This research indicates that imaginative leaders holistically engage their capabilities to Sense–Think–Act and Ponder–Enact–Play in ways that they co-create positive change. When they Sense–Think–Act, imaginative leaders facilitate a community that Ponders–Enacts–Plays together.

Findings suggest that imaginative leadership capabilities grow from behaviours developed over a lifetime of lived experiences, most notably through unstructured and unsupervised time and diverse interpersonal activity. Most surprisingly, when I set out to understand what imaginative capabilities are and how they developed, I did not anticipate the revelation of a distinct leadership style, particularly one well suited to guide schools through complex change. Chapter 6 draws conclusions from this discussion before offering implications for education systems, leadership training, and future research.

Chapter 6: Study Conclusions

Through semi-structured interviews with imaginative educational leaders, a framework for imaginative capabilities is drawn that reveals a distinctive leadership style: Imaginative Leadership. The core categories of holistic behavioural patterns reveal six distinctive capabilities of imaginative educational leaders, with data that unpacks how these developed over time. Sense–Think–Act behaviours allow imaginative leaders to fashion their workplace to be somewhere they can Ponder–Enact–Play and through this unique combination, a new leadership style is identified. While this theory is still emerging, findings encourage an early attempt at defining an imaginative leadership style. According to findings here, imaginative leaders capably respond to sensory stimuli by drawing from conscious and unconscious thoughts to conjure innovative solutions to complex problems and taking behavioural action to enact positive change. They do this through an holistic, non-linear set of behaviours that include: sensing and thinking about problematic circumstances; thinking about and acting on possible solutions; daring to take calculated risk and trying out untested ideas; wandering without purpose and pondering unknown possibilities; exploring physical space, social settings, and mental constructs while enacting ideas in real-time; and, consistently collaborating and playing as part of professional practice. Imaginative leaders do this through their well-honed, imaginative capabilities, derived through experiential learning, of contextual-cognition, fearless-experimentation, innovative-ignition, empathetic-contemplation, adaptive-manifestation, and inclusive-gamification.

Proposing a new leadership style has implications for philosophical, psychological, organizational, leadership, and behavioural theories as they relate to innovative and imaginative

activity. After discussing these implications, I offer recommendations for school systems, future research, and leadership education.

Implications

An imaginative leader's holistic coupling of the mind with action has implications for philosophical perspectives on imagination. While the contexts these leaders generate through Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play are unique to their experiences, their change process occurs holistically as they sense, envision contexts, and enact solutions, shifting among the various couplets of behaviours as they emerge during their day. For example, at one moment they can be thinking/acting on a bureaucratic barrier to addressing food security concerns for kids, and in the next, they may be collaborating/playing with staff and students on remedies to the same or another issue. Their mental and interactive activity is not discrete, but instead are interwoven and indivisible.

This new understanding of imaginative capabilities, suggests that philosophers and psychologists might reconsider imaginative activity as something that occurs beyond the mind to include the body and environment as part of the entire imaginative process. This further means that the mental image or vision may not be the only spark that ignites the fuel to act. For imaginative leaders, their engine is always running, prepared to move in directions that engage their Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play inclinations.

Knowledge of imaginative leadership as a style has implications for schools and similar organizations. While organizational theories explain the benefit of leaders who can organize a team to pursue a shared vision, maintain order, navigate constraints, and harmonize pragmatic thinking, they do not explain how to develop these kinds of leaders. A stark observation in my memos is that participants emphasized that they did not learn how to do these things at school.

Instead, they credit countless hours of unstructured time and unsupervised spaces over their lifetime.

Data in this study came from participants whose childhood days could be spent wandering/pondering, exploring/enacting, and collaborating/playing without being distracted and entertained in digital spaces. This suggests that, for an imaginative leadership style to form, sufficient time to play freely is required for the requisite behaviours to evolve and imaginative capabilities to fully develop. This has implications for developing future imaginative leaders currently working in structured, social, and digitized spaces that compete for their time and attention.

Implications for Educational Leadership

The discussion of findings reveals how imaginative leaders demonstrate attributes found in other leadership style. Through the identification of and definition of imaginative capabilities, with the understanding of their complex relationship with one another, the findings from this study establish a new theory on imaginative leadership as its own distinctive style. While some of the behaviours and practices relate to aspects of existing leadership styles, this new framework that unites capabilities for Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play distinguishes them as leaders who deliberately access and enact imagination as part of their leadership routine.

Thus, imaginative leadership offers a holistic framework of behaviours and capabilities that improve education through inclusive innovation. This framework is malleable in that it does not prescribe how imaginative leadership occurs in a sequence or series or steps. It allows for a multiplicity of personalized approaches and unexpected paths taken by imaginative leaders to address complex challenges.

Imaginative leaders studied here offer their schools and school systems a dynamic breadth of advanced capabilities geared toward managing a variety of contexts, inclusive of diverse personalities and people in a way that unites them in a shared vision for something better. They capably mobilize teams to respond to complicated, emergent situations through imaginative capabilities. Thus, findings fill the gap in knowledge on behaviours and capabilities that facilitate innovation in schools, including a rich understanding of how they can be acquired. Findings make a valuable contribution to the scholarship of leadership education, and leadership in general, in providing a new understanding of how an imaginative leadership style can evolve.

Recommendations

Educational Systems

With evidence to support imaginative leadership as distinct from other leadership styles, this study offers a way to consider leadership development. Findings here reveal imaginative capabilities formed organically in unsupervised spaces and unstructured time. The challenge before school systems and scholars is considering how we might recreate this within professional learning. What are ways leaders can be granted the space and time to play with novel ideas and approaches and encounter contexts like the childhood neighbourhoods that informed findings? In a world riddled with complexity, inequity, and uncertainty, innovative leaders require new ways to acquire capabilities that simply cannot be taught through traditional professional learning models. They need to leverage their distinctively human imaginative capacity in ways that technologies have yet to replicate. To teach this, it must first be understood and this study provides a new lens through which to view professional learning for imaginative leaders.

Where dominant leadership styles focus on distributing instructional and transformational leadership, imaginative leaders model how to integrate what works for them from such styles to

meet organizational priorities, with their imaginative capabilities geared towards innovating. Moreover, as they cultivate an imaginative school culture, these leaders offer a potential route to spark classroom innovations that advance student learning, engagement, equity, and inclusion. Consequently, educational systems could adapt the capabilities revealed in this study to identify imaginative leaders in their system and work with them to grow to make room for their leadership style in advancing school and system successes.

System leaders might examine where to free leaders in their schedule to explore and experience how their school functions and why. Theoretically, this is essential to developing the behavioural pattern of Sense–Think–Act as part of imaginative educational leadership. Sensory experience informs sensory awareness, and by encouraging leaders to move and meet people, they will encounter colleagues they may not otherwise encounter and engage in activities not possible from their desk or department. Data here suggest such activities spark imagination and seed innovation. Therefore, system leaders might invite imaginative leaders to apply their Sense–Think–Act capabilities as they enter a school, where they are granted greater autonomy and voice in shaping their own context for leadership.

This imaginative leadership style represents a previously unknown or discussed set of leadership capabilities. Organizations with complex human-centred problems stand to benefit from leaders who can capably lead professionals in a context of complex and accelerated change. Not only can they capably achieve organizational priorities, but they also provide the organization with the empathic, adaptive, and innovative capabilities required to lead a team to reveal and address human-centred problems. Their disposition to persistently Sense–Think–Act around unnecessary barriers to imaginative activity and to Ponder–Enact–Play to solve systemic problems are well suited to leading collaborative innovation processes like design thinking.

As a set of innovation processes Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play provides implications for the innovative potential of organizations and their leaders that, like schools, strive to adapt to a changing world within bureaucracies reliant on predictable conditions. If imaginative leaders can consistently navigate constraints and solve meaningful problems that make a difference, their behaviours and capabilities represent a leadership style worthy of being moved from the margins and into centre view.

Today's educational leaders must navigate the responsibilities of overseeing facilities and resources, guiding both staff and students toward achieving and upholding standards, all while striving for expanding goals. The breadth and complexity of these tasks are challenging enough without the additional complexities of tackling childhood traumas and poverty, and the growing unpredictable nature of social and technological change. Findings here suggest there is value in relieving leaders of administrative tasks that could be performed by others to then afford imaginative leaders the time to Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play with their staff and deal with more complex human-centred challenges. Through provisions of time and systemic support for imaginative leaders, organizations can counter systemic values that discourage leaders from daring to try new things, especially if they want to excel in their careers. Instead of the consequences for daring to try innovative ideas, systems that validate imaginative leaders could see immeasurable gains as leaders share multiple possible approaches to remedy school challenges, including staff retention, engagement, and who is promoted to lead.

Leadership Training

This study shows how imaginative leaders capably navigated bureaucracy to wander/ponder and collaboratively/play with their team to explore/enact possibilities. It also reveals new knowledge regarding the behaviours that develop the capabilities of imaginative

leaders in ways unknown and unrepresented in contemporary educational leadership theory. While the findings here are delimited to the sample of participants, there are implications of transferability for organizations to improve how to enable innovative leaders and develop imaginative capabilities through professional learning.

I see the potential for imaginative leadership where crises occur, such as learner engagement, poverty, and inclusion demand critical responses. Imaginative leadership capabilities are vital to the future of schools currently lagging behind the pace of change. The hopeful story of this study is that its emergent themes point to replicable experiences worthy of consideration in the professional development of educational leaders. Specifically, findings support unstructured time and unsupervised spaces for people to wander and ponder, and play and learn from others as a promising pedagogy for acquiring imaginative capabilities in ways that also teach leaders how to design this for their teams. Embedding fun in hands-on approaches to professional learning instils a collaborative, playful approach that is contagious, noted as essential to engagement for leaders who innovate, and foundational to forming the behavioural pattern of Ponder–Enact–Play.

This study asks system leaders to consider school benefits if these capabilities were intentionally cultivated in educational leadership programs and schools. An innovative professional learning program could lead more schools to realize novel remedies to long-standing and emergent struggles. Professional learning time and opportunities would encourage leaders to receive mentoring and try their hand at a spectrum of sensory, contemplative, exploratory, and collaboratively playful generative experiences directly and indirectly related to education.

System leaders might loosen bureaucratic attitudes, structures, and policies in ways that invite imaginative leaders to approach unknown and unexpected challenges through their holistic and imaginative style. If imaginative activity were to be elevated and included in leadership training, perhaps it could flourish throughout school life. Whereby, imagination could be understood for what it is: a fundamental human ability required to address complex and novel problems.

Where innovation is prized, an organization might replicate key aspects of the neighbourhoods that fostered an imaginative leadership style. This could be adding time for wandering and pondering in nature, experiencing and experimenting with new ideas, playing and having fun with coworkers, and encouraging diverse social interactions.

A leadership development program that values the Sense–Think–Act / Ponder–Enact–Play lessons in this study would encourage participants to reflect on and share stories of their development where they engaged in these behaviours. In conjuring and comparing stories, participants become conscious of how and where their development led them to teaching and leadership.

Future Research

Considering that a new leadership style was revealed through a grounded theoretical approach, more study stands to challenge, confirm, refine, and/or expand its findings. Future qualitative research is needed to examine if and how imaginative leadership capabilities can be developed through professional learning. There is also reason to expand this study beyond educational contexts to include imaginative leaders in other kinds of organizations and sectors.

Future research could also benefit our understanding of how generalizable findings are through quantitative studies with large samples of imaginative leaders, or through focus groups

investigating determinants of imaginative leader failure or success. In schools, it would be meaningful to study where imaginative capabilities thrive, or are underused, overlooked, and undervalued. It would also be useful to study how mainstream leadership styles might benefit from our new understanding of imaginative leadership capabilities, particularly through a transdisciplinary lens where they may contribute to a new model of leadership that addresses emergent complex challenges.

Conclusion

Across this study, participants shared how their imaginative capabilities evolved from pivotal times in their lives. These leaders learned from adventures, tussles, bullies, rivalries, make-believe, pick-up games, and encounters with diverse personalities. In their professional practice today, they have either found or created a workplace contextually akin to their childhood neighbourhood: a place where imagination is empowered to create a better world.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter and Consent Form



Dear _____,

We invite you to participate in a study entitled “Grounding Theory in How Educational Leaders Develop Imaginative Capabilities.” Educational leaders manage an unprecedented pace of cultural, environmental, social, system, and technological change. Schools arguably need educational leaders with the imaginative capabilities to conceive and deploy bold remedies to the grand challenges and opportunities before their learning communities; yet, to date, there is limited scholarly literature to inform such professional learning.

You have been identified by _____ [an educational leader or scholar] as someone who has conceived and deployed a vision for teaching and learning that your colleagues might consider as innovative or radical. This study seeks participation from educational leaders whose professional duties include the supervision and leading of professional teaching staff (e.g., a headmaster, principal, or vice-principal) and who has successfully conceived of and deployed alternatives to conventional educational practices. This study aims to gather data that can inform a grounded theory for educational leaders and scholars on the development of imaginative capabilities.

The research study is being conducted at the University of Calgary, Werklund School of Education. You are being invited because of your achievements as an innovative educational leader.

Please consider the following questions as a self-selection criterion to verify that you meet the conditions of a study participant:

- Do your professional duties include the supervision and leading of professional teaching staff (e.g., a headmaster, principal, or vice-principal)?
- Have you conceived of or significantly shaped a vision for teaching and learning that your colleagues would consider innovative or radical?
- Have you successfully integrated one or more of these innovations within your school's structure?

If you responded with “YES” to these three questions, we invite you to participate in an interview that explores how you developed your imaginative capabilities. This interview will be 45-60 minutes and will be held over Microsoft Teams (at a time that is convenient for you). Participants will have the opportunity to review and verify the transcript. If you so choose, you may withdraw yourself from the study until you return the validated transcript or up to sixty days after the initial interview.

All participants in this study will receive a report on the preliminary findings with recommendations that they can apply to their practice.

As someone familiar with this topic, would you be willing to either introduce us by email or pass along the name and contact information of any friend or co-worker who may satisfy our criteria and be

interested in participating? There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information. We will be letting potential participants whom you refer know that you were the source of the referral. You also have the right to request that you are given time to notify the potential participants prior to us contacting them.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. The content of our interview will be kept confidential and resulting data is made anonymous, at which time all identifying information will be removed from the study data.

This study has received ethical approval from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB22-1508).

Thank you in advance for your time and participation in this valuable research toward improving resources and support for educational leaders.

Will you be participating? To arrange a time to meet on Microsoft Teams at your convenience, please contact paul.syme@ucalgary.ca

Sincerely,
Paul Syme, EdD Candidate
Investigative Researcher
Werklund School of Education
University of Calgary
paul.syme@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Brittany Harker Martin, PHD
Werklund School of Education
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bhmartin@ucalgary.ca



Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Paul Syme, Graduate Program in Educational Research, Werklund School of Education, 902-670-3070,
paul.syme@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor:

Dr. Brittany Harker Martin, Associate Professor, Werklund School of Education, bhmartin@ucalgary.ca

Title of Project:

Grounding Theory in How Educational Leaders Develop Imaginative Capabilities

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Participation is completely voluntary and resulting data will be made anonymous before the presentation or publication of findings.

Purpose of the Study

This study unpacks the black box of developing and applying human imagination within the context of educational leadership. The growing complexity of schools and society means educational leaders require advanced imaginative capabilities to conceive and deploy bold remedies to grand challenges and opportunities. Educational leaders are often required to make sense of a situation, imagine themselves in the shoes of others, and render novel remedies in response to emergent forces. This study pursues a theory of how to develop and enact imaginative capabilities in educational leaders, grounded in the knowledge of educational leaders who exemplify them.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

Participants are asked to participate in face-to-face interviews and, when unavailable, to meet via video conference (i.e., Microsoft Teams). Interviews will be semi-structured conversations guided by questions that allow participant knowledge to emerge. These sessions are anticipated to last between 45-60 minutes. Conversations would include such prompts and questions as: How do you define imagination? How is it related to creativity or innovation? Can you point to a decision you made that did not follow conventional procedures? Do particular settings or objects stimulate your imaginative activity?

To track and compare emergent concepts, these conversations will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher. A copy of the transcript will be shared with you for review and confirmation, after which your data will be coded with a pseudonym for you and your school to protect anonymity. Although the description of the school and/or initiatives may provide information that suggests your participation, data will be aggregated into themes in a way that individuals will not be identifiable.

Where your participation in this study is completely voluntary, you may refuse to participate altogether, refuse to

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participate in parts of the study, decline to answer any and all questions, and withdraw from the study at any time.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your name, preferred pronoun, and email address.

Access to recordings will be limited to the researcher and supervisory committee members. Recordings will be destroyed once they are electronically transcribed into documents.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission for audio/video recording of the Microsoft Teams session: Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself if you quote me is: _____

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

Should you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to recall and discuss lived experiences to seek out how you developed imaginative capabilities and where you have applied them in your leadership practices. The interviews may bring up personal memories that you wish to keep private. As a volunteer participant, you would retain control over what you share and wish to have recorded or deleted from the recording.

As an innovative educational leader, you managed to conceive of or significantly shaped a vision for teaching and learning that your colleagues would consider innovative or radical and you have successfully integrated one or more of these innovations within your school's structure. This study aims to gather data that can inform a grounded theory for educational leaders and scholars on the development of imaginative capabilities.

In honour of your time and expertise, participants will receive a \$20 gift card to an online merchant of your choice, such as Amazon, Chapters, or Starbucks.

All participants in this study will receive a report on the preliminary findings with recommendations that they can apply to their practice.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

The researcher and their research supervisor will be the only ones with access to the information collected.

Your contribution will be transcribed, codified, and compared to the samples of other participants. The data will be kept on the researcher's password protected laptop computer, and data will be identified only by pseudonyms.

Participants are free to withdraw until they return their validated transcript or up to sixty days after the initial interview, after which the data will be anonymized and aggregated for analyses. In the event the participant requests to withdraw all data the participant contributed to the study be destroyed until this is not feasible.

No one except the researcher and their supervisor will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers in the interview footage. Only group information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. The anonymous data will be stored for five years on a computer disk, at which time, it will be permanently erased.

Would you like to receive a summary of the study's results? Yes: ___ No: ___

If yes, please provide your
contact information (e.g., e-mail address) and your preferred pronoun.

If more information is required, are you willing to be contacted for a brief follow-up interview, with the understanding that you can always decline the request? Yes: ___ No: ___

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____  _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Mr. Paul Syme
Werklund School of Education
paul.syme@ucalgary.ca
902-670-3070
and Dr. Brittany Harker Martin, Supervisor,
Werklund School of Education, bhmartin@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The following questions guide semi-structured interviews:

I'm here to try to get a better understanding of imagination as it is developed and applied in educational leadership. You've been identified as someone who uses imagination in your work, so I want to ask you a series of questions that will help us unpack this together. These questions will act as my guide, but if something new comes up, or if you think of something that seems relevant but not quite a fit with the question, we can go there too.

- **Definitional:** What is imagination to you? How would you describe or define it?
 - Prompts: What abilities or capabilities enable it? personality traits, distinguish from related constructs like creativity or innovation, etc.
- **Contextual:** What does imagination look like as part of your job? Are there conditions that really allow you to tap into or inhibit that?
 - Prompts: How do you enact it? What is the ideal workplace? How does that compare to what you have now? What do you wish would change? Why?
- **Behavioural:** Is there anything in particular that you do when you find yourself being imaginative at work? Do you have any strategies or ways of working that support being imaginative? What are your current pastimes? Do they relate to imagination, and if so, how?
 - Prompts: Can you describe that mindset? What does that look like in a typical workday? How do you make it a priority?
- **Developmental:** How do you think your imagination developed? Can you recall using your imagination as a kid? Can you describe what you were doing? Were these alone, with others, or both?
 - Prompts: reactions to success? Failure? Learning? Lessons? Fields or disciplines? Activities?
- **Pedagogical:** Do you employ practices that teach or empower imaginative approaches in your staff? What do you do? What do they do, and in what conditions are required for success?
 - Prompts: Examples of change in others? How do you know?