

Cultivating Imagination: Leading Towards a Just Future Transcript for Episode 6

Practicing Courage in Leadership: Engaging Imagination to Disrupt Limiting Thinking with Mark Fettes and George Theoharis

Meaghan Dougherty:

Welcome back. We are joining the cultivating imagination leading towards a just future podcast. And I know you're not expecting to hear my voice. We're missing Stephen's harmonic voice and his amazing technical leadership today. But I am here, Meaghan Dougherty with Gillian Judson and we just couldn't miss out on the opportunity to dialogue with the two amazing readers we have today. So we are joined by two incredible leader scholar experts, Dr. George Theoharis and Dr. Mark Fettes. So we're so thrilled to have both of you here today.

Dr. George Theoharis is a professor of Educational Leadership and Inclusive Elementary Education in the School of Education at Syracuse University. He's a former K-12 principal and teacher and has served as department chair, associate dean, and director of field relations at Syracuse. He focuses on issues of equity, justice, diversity and inclusion. So a perfect connection to what we're talking about. Throughout this podcast series, George works to bridge the worlds of K-12 and higher ed. So we're thrilled to have George with us today and he'll be in dialogue with Mark Fettes.

Mark Fettes is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University and his research focuses on the dynamic interplay or ecology of imagination, language, land and community, and what this implies for how we learn, teach, organize, and create together. He's especially interested in revitalizing Indigenous language, the intellectual history and culture of the worldwide Esperanto community, the role of language policy and planning and sustainable development, the theory and practice of imagination and place based education, and the research methodology of eco-portraiture. We're thrilled to have you both here today. Thank you both for sharing your time with us.

George Theoharis:

Thanks for having us.

Mark Fettes:

It's delightful to be here. Thanks, Meaghan.

Meaghan Dougherty:

So I offered a little bit of a bio about each of you, but I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit about what you are currently working on in education, leadership, imagination, and justice. Maybe we'll start with you, George.

George Theoharis:

Sure. Yeah. It's delightful to be here, as Mark said. So thanks. Currently working on a number of things in that regard. I think that's often the way things are, right? You have your hands in lots of pots. Like you said, I really try for all my work to be in a space connecting K-12 and higher ed. We too often have junctures and separations between these really important educational spaces. And there's lots of metaphors people use to describe that, right? On the hill, town and gown, things like that. And so bridging that is really important. So I'm doing a bunch of collaborative work with multiple school districts in central New York around developing pipelines and procedures and investing resources in cultivating and hiring and retaining teachers of color. And that's been really exciting work and really slow and somewhat painful, but also incredibly rewarding. I'm doing collaborative work with one of our consortiums here that works with many districts across the region here around. What does DEI look like now? We're in this moment where schools are back in the limelight around the culture wars, and states are reacting to that in different ways, right? Some states we see nationally are saying essentially DEI efforts are not allowed or illegal. And some states, like New York state, has said, well, we actually want to encourage districts to lean into DEI work. And so what does that look like?. What does that look like across the sort of region of central New York when we have small rural districts and some small suburban districts and medium sized districts that sort of straddle rural, suburban and medium sized to large urban districts? So I'm doing work around that as well, and that's also pretty exciting. And then working on some other writing projects that have come out from other work in the past and just starting a new project again with colleagues in one of the local school districts looking at the issues of race and athletics. And race and athletics in high school doesn't get a lot of play. We talk a lot about race nationally and sometimes in professional sports. But what does it look like in high school? And that's come out of some incidents that we've seen over years here around race. So that's a sampling of some of the things I'm working on. I'm curious to hear what Mark's working on.

Mark Fettes:

I was a little startled, George, when you mentioned building pipelines. Building pipelines here in British Columbia evokes rather different images than the one that you were referring to.

George Theoharis:

Oh, for sure.

Mark Fettes:

Particularly as what brought me into education in a somewhat indirect route was back in the, was working with the assembly of First nations, which is a major national Indigenous organization in Canada, on issues of language revitalization. And so throughout my career, I've worked closely with individuals and organizations in the First Nations world. So that has made me very conscious of things like pipelines for sure. And it has a bearing on this first question about what we're working on at the moment. As Meaghan mentioned in her little bio, I do have this long standing interest in the revitalization of Indigenous languages. But when I, a bit more than 20 years ago, got this position as an education professor at SFU, what I was really interested in is how schools might become more hospitable places for First Nations languages and cultures, which is a much trickier and deeper kind of problem than one might think. And so,

in a sense, everything that I've done since then has been trying to work on that question. That is because First Nations languages are place-based languages. They're languages of the land. And with the land, a school that is hospitable to that and to the culture that comes along with the language or that the language is part of, also need to be schools that are attuned to, responsive to, intertwined with the life of the land and the community where the school is located. And of course, most schools are not like that. There are schools, of course, making efforts to become more place-based and more integrated with their local communities. But from the start, modern public schooling has been based around this notion of taking kids out of their families and communities into this kind of separate space. And we're all familiar with the way that you can go into a school across North America, or indeed around the world, and it's recognizably a school that is different, separate from the community around it. So I'm still thinking and writing into that. Last year, I published with a colleague here at SFU, Sean Blenkinsop, who was on a previous episode of this podcast. We wrote a book together called *Education as the Practice of Eco Social Cultural Change*. Really trying to think into how schools and the education system writ large, and indeed, how our constellation of ideas and practices that come to mind when we think of education need to change and how they might change, what that might look like, what that process might look like in response to the ecological crisis that our civilization currently finds itself in. And that's still very much on the top of my mind. And Sean and I are now starting to work on another book, hopefully written for a broader audience around that issue. And we do see imagination as absolutely central, like a really key aspect of answering that question.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Lovely. I really appreciate each of you discussing a bit about those contextual, relational factors that are kind of shaping and co-constituting the work that you're doing in terms of the culture wars and in terms of our relationship with the land and with Indigenous communities here in BC. So Mark has led us nicely into this discussion of imagination, kind of the heart and soul of what we are doing throughout these podcasts. So I'm curious, George, if you could start us off, how do you conceptualize imagination? How would you describe that big, nebulous concept?

George Theoharis:

Yeah, that's a rich question. I probably don't spend as much time thinking about imagination as explicitly as folks like Mark and Gillian do. But my professional career started as a kindergarten teacher. And we see early childhood spaces as such a rich place for certain kinds of imagination, where kids sort of have a spirit in their minds, can take curriculum different ways, can take interaction and play in all kinds of different ways. And that was one of the beauties that drew me to early childhood to start my career, is that's a space where we get to cultivate that side of kids. So I see that as kind of how I define imagination. As willing to be creative with what is around us and materials and solutions to things. That's sort of a grounding point of imagination for me. One of the things that I remember my very first year of teaching, now, this is a long time ago. It's like 30 years ago, was the excitement and joy and creativity that these little people brought to everything. And how in one way, school is a place that nurtures kids in so many ways, but also is that place that unfortunately sort of quelches that systematically over time and how heavy that was, right? As a brand new professional, to see that there's a lot of beautiful things that come from school, but that sort of squishing of imagination and the

creativity and the spirit of these little people is part of what schooling looks like, at least in the United States, and unfortunate. And so I take that sort of idea of imagination into my work with leaders because I think that's one of the things we lack in many sorts of leadership spaces in K-12 schools in higher ed. Is that our ability to sort of see things we haven't experienced ourselves and to imagine using resources differently and space differently and ideas differently is something that we, at least in K-12 schools, leadership school in the US, I find sorely lacking. So it needs nurturing and it needs support. But it really comes back to, at least in my mind, what I saw initially and what drew me to early childhood was this idea of seeing space and people and resources and solutions in expansive ways. Not limited by other people's ideas or other people's uses of resources or other people's expectations around solutions or relationships or things like that. That's where it comes from for me.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Excellent. Thank you so much. A lot to pick up on there, Mark. Imagination, what comes to mind? What are you visualizing for imagination?

Mark Fettes:

What first drew me to imagination, this is way back when I started my doctoral studies in education back in the mid 90s, was a little book by Benedict Anderson called *Imagined Communities*. It was a book that made quite a splash at the time and indeed has continued to be worked over and responded to. In many ways, *Imagined Communities* is about nations and nationalism. It's about the way that our modern conception of what it means to belong to, say, Canada or the United States, or indeed any other large group of people, most of whom you will never meet or know anything in detail about, relies on this kind of imaginative leap of faith that somehow, despite the fact that these are unknown people to you, strangers, nonetheless, you share something, and that something is what we give such names as nations and countries and communities and cultures and so on. It struck me, because I was working on Indigenous languages at the time, that in many ways, something that schools do is educate people into these imagined ways of. These ways of imagining the world that they live in and their place within it, and that perhaps one reason why indigenous kids have, by and large, not fared well in mainstream schooling is that there's a tacit image of the world that is taught through what is in the curriculum, but also what is not in the curriculum, what is left out, and also through the procedures and processes and practices of schooling, that there's a worldview being presented. You're being invited into, as I say, not necessarily explicitly, in which First Nations, languages, and cultures are irrelevant or even nonexistent.

So there's a kind of way that you're being asked if you're yourself Indigenous. You're being asked to imagine the world in a place where you are simply not present, and neither is your family or your community or the thousands of years of history of your particular culture in that particular place. So that was what I started with, this sort of big picture role of imagination in how we as adults come to picture ourselves as part of these larger formations and patterns in the world. But then once I got the job at SFU and I started working fairly intensively with teachers in a range of schools, I also became really interested in a couple of other aspects of imagination. One is the ways in which teachers saw the kids that they were working with as I

worked, using ideas that we've developed and worked within the center for Imagination Research, Culture and Education, or the Imaginative Education Research Group, as it was called back in the 2000s, when I started this work, as I worked with teachers, bringing in those principles and practices and ways of thinking about curriculum and so on, one of the shifts I noticed that seemed to be really beneficial is that they started to see the children in their class, including the silent ones, the ones who often were disengaged or gave minimal effort to what the teacher wanted them to do. They started to see those kids as resourceful and full of imaginative possibilities that they hadn't seen before. They started to see the children in a more... as having more agency and imaginative agency in particular.

They became interested in what the kids were thinking, how they were picturing the world, the kinds of questions they had. And that seemed to me like a really positive, important shift that was going on in these classrooms that I hadn't foreseen the impact that that might have. And then also the role that imagination plays in the curriculum itself. Finding ways of making the topics of the curriculum, the mainstream curriculum, the same one that everyone else follows, but finding ways to bring those topics alive so that they become areas for exploration and creativity for the children and the teacher alike. So these classrooms could also become very exciting and sometimes noisy spaces to be in, which was also a delightful experience.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Excellent. I hear both of you talking about how school really shapes what's possible or really shapes what we're able to imagine and some themes coming out in terms of culture and the influence of culture on what happens in that school system and what we're allowing for possible futures. So I'm curious for each of you, starting with George, what do you see as the primary challenges right now for your learning community?

George Theoharis:

Yeah, thanks. Mark outlined some challenges through his work and his experience over the years that I see as so salient to this in the work that he, but also other of us do in this area. I see some of the challenges about seeing kids in different ways and allowing them to sort of thrive and flourish as a primary challenge in my work. And I see in schooling, right? In multiple contexts in the US, we see being able to see kids as greater than the composite of their test scores or the composite of their behavior is a real challenge. We label kids early on in schools in a certain way, and we construct their future and don't allow for other, often for other possibilities. Kids who are struggling in first grade are placed in remedial programs, and we don't call it tracking then, but it really is. We track them low and we see them as having less potential, and then they stay in remediation for the rest of their lives. Or kids with disabilities are labeled in a certain way and they are not given the same rich opportunities around exciting academics or arts or music or athletics due to that, right? And so I think that the way we see kids is a primary challenge in some ways. It's seeing who is part of... it's defining who we see as intellectual, who do we see as creative, who do we see has the right to sort of do the expressive and imaginative work that can be such a rich part of schooling.

And so I really appreciate Mark bringing those issues up because I think that's central to improving schools, to making them more emancipatory, inclusive places comes down a lot to how we see and how we imagine kids' futures, and often I think that's really limiting. And I think we've seen some sliding back in the last 5-10 years. Certainly in the wake of no Child left behind, but also in the wake of race to the top in terms of US policies, where people, I think, in some ways are limiting kids in really unproductive ways. So I see that as one primary challenge around these issues. And the other is, I think, and this gets to sort of at least the core of how I think about imagination. From your first question and in thinking about Mark's response is, I think a primary challenge for leadership is to be able to imagine schooling and structures and the way we arrange kids and adults in ways that we might not have experienced ourselves, we might not have experienced when we taught or when we student taught or when we were learning to become administrators. And sometimes new structures are just so outside of what we think is possible because we haven't seen them. Oftentimes when people are asked to solve a problem around K-12 education, they solve it with what they've experienced themselves. If it's an issue about diversity, they respond how to solve it with the diversity and issues that they've experienced. If it's an issue around mathematics, they respond with how they've approached mathematics in the past or professional development, they respond with how they've seen and experienced professional development. And that makes sense, right? We all draw on our experience, but I think lacking in how we think about actually improving schools around issues of equity and justice is our ability to be imaginative, because so much of what we've done in schools is oppressive. To certain groups of kids. And Mark identifies particular First Nation population in Canada. But I think that what he explains cuts across lots of identities, at least in the US, in terms of how the way we've approached communities has been oppressive. And so if we continue just repeating what we've done in new ways, it doesn't allow for a more equitable, and I would say, imaginative future for those kids.

And so a lack of imagination on how to solve problems, I think, is actually a real hindrance in our K-12 school systems. And one example I'd like to draw upon with this is the work around inclusivity, around disability. So many folks in schools, both who lead schools, who teach in schools, and then who support schools, have only seen certain kinds of structures in terms of educating kids with disabilities, and some of those are marginally inclusive. But that's all we can imagine, as opposed to some of the work I've done over the years, is to study leaders who create different kinds of school structures in their schools and different kinds of inclusive services. One of the most hopeful parts of studying those leaders is that they sometimes can imagine things they've never seen, and they can build structures for their staff that then educate their kids in inclusive ways that the adults in that building hadn't experienced before. And it's hard, right? But it's also joyful in the sense that they can build something that is different, and I would argue in many spaces more inclusive than the traditional, quote unquote, inclusive structures that people have had before. So I think those two pieces, I think, are big challenges. The way we imagine kids and their value and then their futures and then our ability to imagine and or lack of imagination to solve issues and build systems and structures are critical, both in my work and in schooling across this country.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Thank you so much. Yeah, we're limited in trying to resolve these big, new, novel problems with the things we've always done in the past. Mark, over to you.

Mark Fettes:

Yeah, thank you, George, for expressing that issue around... We tend to do the things that were done to us, as it were, because that, too, is something that I've been very much wrestling with for 20 years. At SFU, I ran these fairly large scale, community-based research projects with schools and school districts around BC, and I learned a lot through doing that. And always I could find teachers who were open and interested in doing things differently in their classrooms. But my hopes that that might catalyze a wider shift in the schools and school districts that I was working with were largely disappointed. There's a way in which the school system is hospitable to innovation if you put a lot of energy into it, and ideally, energy with some money attached, as I could do in the context of these research projects, and wonderful things can happen. But once the pressure lets up, as it were, once the research project has come to an end, once the funding has come to an end, once people, the people who are most involved, the teachers and administrators who are most committed to that particular new way of doing things, move to other schools or other districts, or retire or whatever. People live lives and things happen over time. The system tends to shift back towards as it more or less what it was before. I'm certainly not alone in observing this. I think most people who've worked with schools over long periods of time have had similar experiences, and I think this has a lot to do with this tacit imagination of what schools can be. That in a sense we don't really believe that schools can look different from how they are. And part of what keeps them the way they are is also parents' expectations. Parents by and large want to be reassured that their children will receive the same kind of education, that something recognizable to them. Let's say it's a relatively small proportion of parents who are willing to go all in and say, okay, what you're doing here is not like anything I ever experienced in school, but go for it. I trust you.

That's rare. What we're dealing with is the way that the school system, because the system that we have has been going for 100 years and more in much the same kind of way. I mean, some things have changed obviously over that time, but many features have remained quite recognizably the same. We're dealing with a system that everyone has experienced, or almost everyone, and that experience has shaped our capacity to imagine what school is like. And if you think as I do, that the way schools are, the way that schools work is in fact a substantial measure contributing to the difficulty our societies are having of responding adequately to things like climate change or the loss in biodiversity, the great species extinction that is underway, and other aspects of the disconnection or disaffiliation of our civilization from the living world, the more-than-human living world around us. If you think that schools are part of what has brought that about, as I do, then this problem, this inability to imagine schools as anything substantially different from what they are and what we've experienced ourselves is a major stumbling block. So that really is the theme, the central topic or focus of this book that now I'm working on with Sean. We're calling it "Educating for the World," that is, and it's clearly not going to come up with all the solutions. But I hope if we can reach a larger audience with it, maybe we can get more people thinking creatively and imaginatively about that question.

Gillian Judson:

Wow, my mind is buzzing. Thank you so much Mark and George, so far for the conversation we've been having. Gillian Judson jumping in for the first time. I wanted to ask you each a question and then a question to both of you. I know a lot of the folks that are listening to the podcast are really hoping for tangible things, as are we, because imagination is so frequently misunderstood. I'm hearing through what you're saying that you do not see it as detached from reality at all. But I think it would be helpful for us to sort of maybe hear from you some of the more specific things you do. And so specifically, Mark, I completely hear you on the challenges of sort of catalyzing larger systems change and the requirement and the necessity that we do so, given what we're facing. However, I wondered if we could bring it down, maybe to when you are working with teachers, what specific tools, tools of imagination, what specific ways do you sort of help them feel like they have imaginative agency to think of what could be? Are there specific tools? You and I both are well versed in Kieran Egan's work with his cognitive tools. I'm wondering if you could speak specifically about some tools you may have used in your work with teachers.

Mark Fettes:

Yeah, that has been a lot of fun, actually. When I first came across Kieran Egan's work when I was a doctoral student back in the mid 1990s. His work was so unusual and, and original, there's sort of no other word to describe it. It spoke to so many of the issues that I was thinking about at the time, but in a way that was quite different from the rest of the educational literature that I was immersed in. So later on, when I moved to Vancouver and came and talked to Kieran and ended up working with him, initially as a postdoctoral fellow and then as a colleague on the faculty, I was really interested in the potential that his ideas offered for working practically concretely with teachers in classrooms, which was something, not having been a classroom teacher myself, it wasn't a world that I knew. So I sort of jumped in with both feet. And Kieran's work really focuses on, in terms of the practical work of teachers, helping them reimagine curriculum topics so that they become full of possibility, full of tension, and connected to stories and heroic qualities and other features of human life that we know are compelling for everyone, children and adults alike. And yet we often don't think about the curriculum in schools in terms of storytelling or in terms of exploration of the push and pull of opposing forces or rebellion and resolution. These kinds of techniques that are familiar though to all of us, through the worlds of TV and novels, literature and movies and advertising and so on and on.

We're all familiar with the ways in which, in human culture, ideas and images of the world are shared in compelling engaging ways. So a lot of the work that I've done with teachers has been to invite them to do more of that kind of work themselves, to look when they're teaching a topic, for ways in which that topic can become mysterious or wonderful to them and through that also to the children that they work with. And that has been really rewarding at all levels, from kindergarten, where I think kindergarten teachers for the most part, are really quite alive to the lively imaginations of their children. And the thinking of imagination as something that isn't purely intellectual, it's emotional, it's embodied as well, and it involves things like play and drama and experimentation and so on. So not necessarily imagination is not limited in some of the ways that we might think of it as just being one kind of thing. This is why I tend to shy away

from questions that invite me to or ask me to define what imagination is, because my experience of it is that it's this rather quicksilver kind of concept that you think you've got it pinned down and then it slips away again and crops up somewhere else. So I've more or less given up the effort to say exactly what imagination is, but it has to do with the sense of play and possibility and meaning that goes beyond the obvious and the expected. Having teachers look for ways of teaching their topics in which the nonobvious and the unexpected and the imaginations of the children in the class can become part, can contribute to how that topic becomes alive for everyone in the classroom. That's the kind of work that I found most rewarding.

Gillian Judson:

Thank you, Mark. I'm smiling. It was great that I feel honored that I've had a chance to work with you. And then as a student of yours originally, it's been fabulous, my opportunities to learn. So thank you. Question for you, George. One of the pieces that you wrote in 2008, it was Theoharis and Kostin. I love the title of it, immediately drew me in: "Oppressors and Emancipators". And then within that, in that work, you shared about what you described as a bold, imaginative vision required of leaders. So taking that up, especially today in your conversation about how we need to help see children differently, how we need sort of to cultivate imaginative agency among our leaders, among our teachers, I'm wondering how you do that. I'm wondering what is it you do to maybe create a context for that, or whether there's tools, whether it be stories or images or, I mean, even in the title of that article, you have this dramatic tension which Kieran Egan would describe as sort of a dramatic opposition, which is in itself a tool of imagination, oppressors and emancipators. It draws us in. So I'm curious if you could speak a little bit to how you actually do the work of helping educators and other leaders see children and school systems and schools differently.

George Theoharis:

Yeah, no, I'm flattered that anyone read anything from 2008 that I wrote. So I'm delighted that you referenced that. It is a provocative title, and I actually think it connects with the way you've framed Egan's work. Moving it towards, you know, my most recent collaborative book with Sharon Radd and Gretchen Givens Generette and Mark Gooden. We have a book called Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership, published by ASCD. And it's a really much more practical book than a lot of academic sort of. We see it more as like a workbook, like a manual, not that it has worksheets in it, but as a way to sort of build teams to do this kind of work. And I think a lot of what we write in there mirrors the way you have framed imagination for leadership. A central piece of this work in terms of helping leaders become more equity focused is this idea of story, right? And it's an idea of sort of crafting their own story, understanding their place in this work, and then looking at the lenses they bring to this work and deconstructing them and wrestling with them and seeing both bias and how their former experiences impact the way they do this work. And we see that as a really important tool that I think mirrors with, like I said, how you frame imagination tools, cognitive tools. From Egan's work about leadership. So I think that's a key piece. I think part of in this book and the framework we propose for leadership doing this work is this idea of identifying patterns. As you say, in terms of a leadership around imagination. And so part of what we ask leaders to do is identify patterns in their local school

district, in their local setting that are both promoting issues of equity and potentially in imaginative ways and issues of inequity. And so I think that a process of gathering information and sitting with diverse stakeholders around a set of data that might be new data, it might be more expansive. We argue for more expansive sort of data collection, not just the traditional sort of looking at test scores, right? But gathering different points and sitting with people and identifying both patterns, but also the processes that got us there resonates with how you write about imaginative tools, cognitive tools, but also how we frame what is sort of equity focused leadership. And then one of the things we encourage across the book is this idea of sort of, and it gets back to that emancipators or oppressors work that leaders need to be disruptors, right?

And I think that resonates with how you frame this idea of sort of engaging your inner rebel. If we're going to be serious about creating more equitable schools that are responsive to diverse communities, we have to disrupt things. And I think that's practicing that. And what that looks like is another sort of tool that I certainly use in leadership preparation is to find these patterns and then imagine what it would look like if we disrupted, create new patterns, create new structures. And then that resonates, like I said, with that idea of a tool for imagination that you write about called engaging in your rebel. And we call it, it sort of disrupting some of these current practices. So those are a few sort of specific tools that we write about in this book, but they're things that I know I use in my work and I know others use in their work around leadership preparation.

Gillian Judson:

I do love that. And I think that was one of the things that Kieran's work does for me, is it sort of gives a language and a framework and a rich philosophy for why is it that sort of rebelling against what is, or of why does that engage a lot of people? And he would say that is a tool of imagination. It gets us emotionally connected to the knowledge. So for leaders, I think some can shy away from the idea of imagination, but when we frame it in terms of the very real and impactful work you and Mark are doing, then we can say, well, wow, we actually do need imagination in these ways. I have one other comment or a question I wanted you to both comment on. If possible. I've just been collecting all these metaphors, and Kieran and others have always said it's very hard to speak without metaphor. It just infuses our language, he would say. But we began with you speaking, George, about bridging K-12 and towns and gowns and discussion around this notion of a pipeline. Mark, you talked about imagined communities causing a splash, and imagination being a quicksilver concept. So for me, all of the use of metaphor is vividly engaging and so helpful. I wondered if you could comment, both of you, on how or if you use metaphor intentionally in your leadership to cultivate imagination.

Mark Fettes:

Well, actually, Gillian, thank you for the question. I wanted to comment on something that George alluded to earlier that indeed involves metaphor, but not necessarily in a good way. He mentioned the American federal programs in the U.S., no Child left behind and race to the top. And he mentioned them as examples of programs that have perhaps accentuated a rather restrictive notion of what it means to become educated and what schooling should look like. And it's interesting, if you look at those two phrases, no child left behind and race to the top, how

both of them involve linear, race-based metaphors. So race to the top has an image of the child that succeeds, and no child left behind has an image of the child who might come last. But in both cases, there's a sense that it is a race and some people make it and some people don't. And that in itself, I think, says a lot about the depth of the cultural problem we're dealing with.

It's hard. Like these are also cliches, right? In a sense, they're used as labels because they trigger an automatic response. Race to the top. Oh, boy. I would want my kid to be at the top. So I'm going to be for this, or I would not want my child to be left behind. We really need to think about metaphor seriously, not only as a source of inspiration and guidance and playfulness and possibility. It is all of those things. But metaphor is also the chains that bind us, the weights that hold us down, particularly metaphors that have become, in a sense, dead metaphors. They are so much part of our habitual ways of thinking that we don't even realize they're metaphors anymore. We take them to be literally. That is what the world is. That is how the world works. That's a problem, particularly when the way that the world works is not working well for a lot of kids and a lot of families and a lot of.... So, absolutely. George talked about disruption, and I think we need disrupting kinds of metaphors, like metaphors that really change the terms of the conversation that we're having.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Amazing. Thank you both so much for those insightful ideas about imagination and the tools of imagination. I want to pick up on kind of Mark's point about, and originally coming from George, around disruption. So how do we then kind of use imagination to move beyond these restrictive kinds of squelching? George described it earlier as squelching. How do we use imagination to move beyond these restrictive and squelching structures to actually pursue social and ecological justice? How do we disrupt? Do you want to start us off, George?

George Theoharis:

Sure, I'd be happy. Now, there's obviously multiple ways to be disruptors. I think. One which I'm going to answer, that by linking back to the metaphor question, because I think one key way to disrupt is actually to sort of think about this metaphor of bridging. I think as we get stuck sort of just recreating what we've always done, that I think does well if we're thinking about disrupting, sometimes we need to engage other people, right? And so a key metaphor, I know I said this earlier, but a key metaphor that I do use, is this idea of bridging. And bridging can be bridging from universities to school districts. It can be bridging from districts to one district to another. In some parts of this country and others, there's lots of sort of small silos of schools. And so that sort of bridging is really important in terms of expanding out of getting out of our own heads and our own ways of doing things. And so I think the possibility for bringing people together and the importance of that, we write about that in our book. But I think that is really important as a disruptive strategy. This idea of bridging. Bridging different communities, bridging communities in our school areas and in our districts that have often been silenced. We see examples of leaders who do that, and that can be transformative to how they think about leading and to the solutions they come up with. And so I think that is one, I would say, strategy for moving a disruptive space is to then engage with people differently. And bridging is one way to do that.

I think another strategy around this idea of disruption is developing our sort of courageous muscles. And sometimes that requires rehearsal, right? Rehearsing how we're going to approach something. Sometimes it requires practicing being disruptive in certain spaces, like how are you going to lead a meeting around this? How are you going to structure the conversation with your leadership team at your school or to your school board or to your teaching faculty. And so the idea of sort of practicing courage, I think, is something we can teach. We can give people opportunities to do that where they both practicing being imaginative, but also then practicing that courage that people need to be disruptors. And so I think there are ways that we can cultivate disruption in meaningful and not just sort of pie in the sky ways.

Meaghan Dougherty:

I absolutely love that idea of flexing our courageous muscles. Mark, how are we going to disrupt and pursue social and ecological justice?

Mark Fettes:

I agree completely with George about the importance of engaging people. A way of approaching this that I became deeply interested in as Sean and I worked on the book we wrote last year is around the notion of design. It wasn't a field that I was familiar with at all. It doesn't really come up in educational conversations typically, but it turns out that there's been this sort of gradual change over the last couple of decades in the field of design. When we ordinary folks, not designers, when we think about design, we think of typically designing objects, artifacts, products, that kind of thing. And maybe we think about also the design of the processes that produce those products, the design of factories or organizations that will yield the result of producing that particular object. And those are the sort of origins of design in the modern west. But increasingly, people working in the field of design have become interested in larger questions of design which have to do with the design of organizations. How do you design large scale organizational systems that don't foreclose on the possibilities for creativity and responsiveness and that kind of thing? And even how do you design societies? Like if you have a society that is dealing with some kinds of intractable problems that simply cannot be solved under using current resources and current ways of organizing, how might that society itself approach that as a problem of design? And the more that you are interested in those larger issues, the more important it becomes to involve a wide range of people, of stakeholders, as designers often say, in the actual design process itself. That is, eventually you come to see everyone as a potential designer. So you can think about design taking place at the level of neighborhoods and towns, the transition town movement, for instance, that has sprung up around the world as a way of people locally organizing to ask, well, what can we do in the face of the climate crisis or in face of environmental problems or whatever it might be. That's a sort of harbinger of this kind of design thinking that can be really quite flexible and applied in many different ways. But as I said, oddly, we don't seem to be having these conversations in the field of education. It's as if no one ever thinks about asking communities, or at least it would be very rare to ask a community to design a school, to design the school that they want their children to be part of. Well, maybe this is indeed a direction that we should be going in, really saying, well, why don't we do that? Why don't we start having meetings involving, as I say, a wide range of people, parents and teachers and administrators, obviously, and children as well, but also

maybe other parts of the community, maybe seniors, for instance, in the community who are not actively involved in schools at all at the moment, but have a lot that they maybe would like to bring to the process of education. What about people involved in the food system or people working in social justice organizations or whatever? So it's important in this kind of design process to avoid what they call early closure. Early closure is when the loudest and most forceful and often most powerful voices offer options, offer solutions, offer design ideas early on, because those are the people who feel most self confident about doing so, or who are expected to have used to having their ideas received favorably and acted on. And instead you try and keep things open so that the quieter voices, the marginalized voices, the unexpected voices, can also have a say. And it's important then to manage the process in a way where those voices are taken seriously and responded to and thought over. So it's not a quick process, but it's a process that I think offers a lot of possibilities. And you can see the relevance to imagination that what you're really asking to do is asking people to do is imagine what an education system might look like that would really respond to their values, their needs, and their sense of the future that they want for their community and their family, their children, their grandchildren and so on.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Wow, that is really powerful. Thank you both for your comments on building bridges and engaging with people. I think there's so many connections between those ideas and some of the comments and ideas we've had shared with previous contributors around engagement and humanizing this imaginative process. And really looking at, I think, this more flattened rather than hierarchical collaborative process. I love the idea of asking people, asking communities to design the school they want, what do they want for their children and their communities? And I like the idea of avoiding early closure. In our book, Dr. Lori Anderson brings up the idea of Openshore, and I think that's a nice contrast potentially to closure. So looking at how we can open up new ideas and new possibilities for the future.

So thank you both so much for your time and sharing your ideas and your work with us. It's been inspiring and we really appreciate all of your comments and we have a lot to think with as we move forward in our disruption. Thank you.