

## **Cultivating Imagination: Leading Towards a Just Future Transcript for Episode 9**

### **Reclaiming Imagination: On Leading for a Different Reality for Marginalized Youth with Soraya Sablo Sutton and Woo Williams-Zou**

#### **Stephen Hurley:**

So here we are for another episode of *Cultivating Imagination*. I'm Stephen Hurley along with co-hosts Meaghan Dougherty and Gillian Judson, and as is our tradition here, I'm going to turn it right over to Meaghan to introduce our two guests for today.

#### **Meaghan Dougherty:**

We're thrilled to have two amazing people joining us today, Soraya Sablo Sutton and Woo Williams-Zou. Soraya is a continuing lecturer and the program director of the principal Leadership Institute at UC Berkeley. Soraya's research focuses on school leader retention and sustainability and instructional coaching and literacy in urban schools and prior to joining the PLI, the Principal Leadership Institute, Soraya worked in San Leandro Unified School District and Oakland Unified School District as a teacher, instructional coach, and elementary principal for over a decade. Doctor Sablo Sutton led district wide equity focused professional learning for teachers and administrators, and her research looks at how engaging imagination in leadership education can be done through arts-based pedagogies that support leadership for social justice.

We also have Woo Williams-Zou joining us, who's an educator and youth advocate for over 25 years. Motivated by experiences with racism growing up, Woo's work is an exploration of multiple pathways towards promoting love, healing, and justice with and for young people from oppressed communities. Woo joined a community of educators committed to social justice and liberation in schools, and they co-founded a school dedicated to offering safe, nurturing, and empowering learning experiences for students who are marginalized. Woo left site-based school leadership to work towards systemic educational transformation through her work as a coach, facilitator and consultant with the National Equity Project and as a lecturer with the Principal Leadership Institute at UC Berkeley.

We're thrilled to have both Woo and Soraya here today. Thanks so much for joining us.

#### **Stephen Hurley:**

We want to jump in right away to deepen those biographical introductions a little bit more from the lens of leadership. And so, Woo, I'm wondering if we could start with you, if you could tell us about the work that you're doing now and maybe look at that work through a leadership lens and a little bit the leadership priorities that you're seeing emerge in that role.

#### **Woo Williams-Zou:**

So I currently have two roles. In my work at UC Berkeley, in the PLI, I'm a lecturer and support aspiring school administrators. And in my work at the National Equity Project, I am an equity leadership consultant. And I have the privilege and honor of supporting mostly school based or

district leaders, but also nonprofit leaders across the country who are wanting to work towards systemic change and particularly towards greater belonging for BIPOC students and other marginalized youth. My work in both places really intersects. And I would say that a primary priority is just around belonging and in getting to that belonging, just making space for healing and agency. And I think that in order for leaders to tap into their agency to lead in oppressive systems, that healing has to happen. And that healing is both a journey that happens individually, but also that happens collectively.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Do you think that's a relatively new conversation for leaders to be having or leaders to be thinking about in most spaces?

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

Yes. I think that I am pleased to see the conversation happening more and more. I hear a lot of people referencing the work of Doctor Shawn Ginwright as one example, and his work around healing-centered engagement, but I think it's still on the margins. But there's, you know, as one of my major learnings coming out of that experience of founding the school where we served primarily Black and brown students, there was a lot of pain that not only the students had experienced and trauma that they had experienced in their lives, in their schooling, but also that the adults, their parents, as well as the staff. And when we're not making space to acknowledge how we are impacted, our traumas collide with one another. And it doesn't make it so that learning can't happen, but it really inhibits our ability to learn and to tap into that agency that is going to allow us to lead for justice or whatever it is that we care about.

**Stephen Hurley:**

And I know we're going to have a chance to dig into more of that later on. But, Soraya, I wanted to turn to you and ask about your current role in some of the leadership priorities that you find yourself imagining and facing.

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

In fact, well, I am the director of the Principal Leadership Institute here at UC Berkeley, and what that means is that I'm charged with working with the next generation of school leaders. I teach in the program as a lecturer. I have the immense privilege of working with folks like Woo, who, you know, just brings so much humanity and so much, just so much of herself to this work that it really makes my job so joyful, because as a former school leader. I know what it means to sit in that office and to, you know, hold the immense responsibility of keeping students and families and teachers safe. And when I say safe, I mean, you know, obviously physically safe, emotionally safe, academically, intellectually, creatively safe, it's a big burden to bear. And I mean that with all of the positivity and love that the word burden could hold for those who choose to take that on as a career path, I think there's a lot of preparation that is required for someone to do that well and do it well, not to their own detriment. So my research focus here in my position is really about thinking about leader sustainability and resilience, because we know that both teachers and leaders are burning out of the workforce at rates that are astronomical. And so I really want to think about how we can do this job of leadership preparation better so

that the students and the families and the teachers get leaders who are actually able to stay in their jobs long enough to transform schools.

**Stephen Hurley:**

When you talk to the folks that are coming into your programs— and they're school leaders currently?

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Our students are primarily classroom teachers. There may be one or two school school leaders who have their intern credential, but primarily, we work with teachers who have been working in the field for between 5, 10, 15 years and are now transitioning from the classroom space to a school wide position once they leave our program.

**Stephen Hurley:**

So when you look at your vision for good school leadership, high quality school leadership, and you listen to the people that are coming into the program, is there a common language that is being spoken? Do they come in with sort of common challenges in mind and priorities themselves?

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

You know, I think that as they move through our program, I think that what we witness is a growing sense of awareness of the challenges of the system. So, you know, they arrive understanding that we have a lot of work to do if we want to really serve all children. And as they continue to engage in reading, the scholarship, and learning about the history of schooling and the way that students of color have not been served by the system, you can almost see, you can see the look in their eyes as they realize, wow, if the past hundred years hasn't been able to make schooling better for Black and brown kids, who am I to believe that I could do it? And so that's where this idea of critical hope comes in, that Jeff Duncan-Andrade talks about and the concept of imagination, right? Because if you think that you as a social justice leader are able to make a difference and make a change when so many others before you weren't able to do it, it requires a new approach, and it requires this ability to, you know, as you all say, imagine what's possible, because if not, you can get really stuck, and it can become a huge, huge undertaking where you feel like, you know what? We're not actually making any progress.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Well, I wanted to stay with you, Soraya, on that, because we wanted to talk about that conception of imagination. And you're someone that's talking very explicitly about imagination and the work that you do. When you talk to students, potential leaders, about imagination, what words do you find coming out of your mouth to explain what that is?

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Yeah, I mean, I think the words that come to my mind are this idea of possibility, this idea of just rethinking maybe the experiences that you've had as a student, as a teacher. I can remember I was talking with a student after we had read articles about culturally responsive teaching and

culturally responsive pedagogy and restorative practices, and the student came to me and said, you know, this sounds great, but I'm sorry to tell you, I've never worked in a place that looked like this or felt like this. Do schools like this actually exist where teachers are affirmed and students are affirmed, and there's actual space for everyone to feel like they can live out to their full potential? And it was in moments like that, I have to say, yeah, it's possible, but it's not possible if we allow ourselves to default to the way that things have always been. Right. Our system is very good at replicating itself. And when you get into the leader space, it's very easy to default to the way that things have always been done. And so I find myself always trying to encourage aspiring leaders that, yeah, you might be the one. Right. We need you to be the one to think differently about how school is done and how leaders show up, especially leaders of color. One of our program priorities is to help diversify the leader workforce, because we know that most leaders don't look like the kids that they serve. And so when we're talking about Black and brown folks taking on the principalship, when there's never been a Black and brown leader, maybe in that space, that definitely requires imagination because there's no model. Right. And so, yeah, there's a lot of hope and a lot of imagining what might be possible.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Woo, I wanted to turn to you on that same idea of the conception of imagination. How do you find yourself explaining what you believe imagination to be to others?

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

I believe that imagination is the practice of rethinking our current reality. And I really have been inspired by the work of adrienne maree brown, who said that— I'm going to share a quote from her book *Emergent Strategy*. She said that, "Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people is a revolutionary, decolonizing activity." I really keep that close to me because it is easy to get disheartened, as Soraya said, by the current state of things. And I also draw a lot from Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. And he talks about oppression as objectifying students and presenting reality as something that's fixed or static, when in reality it's not. We have agency to reshape our current reality and to conceptualize our current realities in different ways. Like, I don't need to see reality as it is now the same way that you see reality, and that's a big problem in education, is that we are presenting reality to students and to our teachers and leaders in a fixed way. And we have to be able to rethink our current reality. If we want our students to be equipped to go out and lead the world in the way that we need, that humanity needs them to lead. And we have to make space for that imagination.

**Stephen Hurley:**

So you're talking about deep structural problems here. You're not talking about using imagination to redesign classroom seating. This is like, this is heavy stuff. What does that look like when you and your colleagues bring your conception of imagination to some of those deep problems?

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

So I think it starts with the small things, and the small things seem small, but they're actually really big. So I remember starting as an administrator in a school. I was the only administrator, only leader of color. And it was a culture shock because the schools that I had come from prior were mostly staffed and led by BIPOC folks. And so it was just a very different way of being and relating to one another. And one small example is, like, in our meetings with each other, it was, like, very transactional. What are we here to do? Let's cut to the chase. And there was not so much as a, how are you doing today? And that's that act of slowing down to check in with one another, to learn about each other as human beings, to understand, like, who we are, why we care about the work we do. Like, that is a really important part of our work. And if in our work with each other as colleagues, we're not making space for our own humanity, that's going to translate to students in the classroom. And if the teachers in the school are having experiences in their professional development meetings where they are feeling dehumanized and they are objectified, then that's the model and experience that they bring into the classrooms. And so I really don't believe that anything is too small to attend to. Of course, we want to build towards the greater, the big systemic issues. But I also think that we fall into a trap in our work where we think that we overlook the deep complexity of these problems and we try to latch onto these silver bullets, overly simplistic solutions that are supposed to solve problems that have been plaguing us for generations. And that's just not going to happen. And we have to get more fine grained in how we are approaching our understanding of what's playing out in our systems and then get to the place where we can reimagine different ways of being and doing.

**Stephen Hurley:**

So when you as a school leader, move from that transactional to the relational to the more humane, maybe even transformational way of approaching a staff meeting, for example, what happens? What do you see happen over time to the people that are involved?

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

Yeah, I see a shift in how people are engaging. So, you know, to go back to something you said a couple minutes ago about like, well, you know, it seems like imagination, using your imagination is more than just rethinking a seating assignment. And again, to go to the small things. In the same school staff meetings, teachers were sitting in rows, and there was a leader at the front of the room who was, you know, just kind of disseminating information. And a simple shift that I made was like, let's sit in a circle so we can all see each other. And how does that change the way that we relate? You know, it shifts the focus from the leader at the front of the room to each other and to really to subtly signal that this is about our collective work. It's not about an individual leader who's going to show up with their vision, but it's about how are we engaging with one another and getting clear about what our collective vision is and our collective work in service of that vision.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Soraya, I wanted to go to you and ask you about some of the challenges that you're addressing as a leader and some of the ways that imagination has played into addressing those challenges.

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Sure. Oh, my goodness. So, so many examples. So in our program, we ask that our students attempt change projects at their school site. And this is, it's part of our pedagogy because we very much believe in, you know, what Gail Furman talks about as social justice leadership, as praxis, you know, which comes from Paolo Freire and this idea that we have to constantly be engaging in both action and reflection. And so we ask our students to go try something, right? Figure out what you care about, figure out what you need to transform, and then come back and think about what happened, and then go try it again. So it's this iterative process, and a challenge that our students often bring back is that, you know, the teachers, the staff, the folks who they're working with can be very resistant to trying something new. And that can be anything from transforming the discipline system to the way we talk about Black and brown kids to grading policies, you know, you name it. Right? And it's not because these folks are, you know, bad people. It's not because they're not, you know, about helping kids. But folks can get very fossilized in the way that they have done their jobs. And they, the teaching profession in particular, is one where the privatization of our work is normalized. And so from a leadership perspective, the challenge becomes, how do you shift the way adults are going about their jobs, still having them feel efficacious, but having them feel vulnerable enough to take risks, vulnerable enough to try something, fall down, make a mistake, and get back up. And so when I think about imagination and I think about leadership, there's a second challenge that immediately comes to mind, which is the sense of time. Imagination, to a certain extent, is a luxury, to have the opportunity to sit around and think and say, well, what about this? And what if this happened? And what if we tried this? And within the context of a typical school day, you know, a leader's job doesn't always afford that time and space and luxury. And so within our program, as we prepare leaders, I think what we're trying to do is help to build that, not being always in a reactionary space, but taking the time that's necessary to, as Woo mentioned, consider the complexity of the problem. Widen your perspective about everybody who's involved in the situation so that way you have a better chance of approaching whatever issue you're trying to approach from a perspective that serves everybody involved.

**Stephen Hurley:**

So I know now that Gillian and Meaghan are just waiting to get in on this conversation, I'm going to turn to Gillian.

**Gillian Judson:**

Thank you so much, Soraya and Woo. I'd like to ask a question. Maybe you could both reply to it. I love what you're saying here, Soraya, about needing the time and the space. And I'm reminded of Stephen Asma's work on imagination itself. And he says, imagination is in large part improvisational. So there's that hot improvisation where, in the example of leadership, you have to put out a fire. Little fires everywhere. As one of our students said, you have to quickly think about how to respond in those situations, and ultimately, those can be reactionary, I think, as you're saying. But imagination can also be involved if we have the luxury in that slow improvisational space where we can, in fact, use tools to maybe unlearn some of the dominant narratives that we know are conveyed in education, that we need to unlearn in order to be leaders that support equity. So my question is understanding the need for time and space.

When you have the time and space with the leaders you work with, what are some of the actual activities you might do to help them unlearn or push past or challenge some of the dominant narratives, whether imagery or— I know you've done work with photography— or what do you do to put a crack in the dominant narrative in a way that gets them leaning in to those questions of how can we think differently?

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Yeah, this is the fun part, right? We have 14 months with the students from the time they arrive to the time that they leave. And as I mentioned, when many of them arrive, they've been, let's say, third grade teachers their entire career. And when they leave us, they're walking into their first job as an assistant principal, let's say. And so during that time, we try to have many ways for them to experience what we call this notion of embodied leadership. So, of course, they do a lot of reading and a lot of writing and thinking about theory and that sort of thing. But we also have a variety of performance assessments that students engage in that we think helps to activate and cultivate both that in-the-moment ability to react and respond, but also really requires them to dig in and think deeply. One example I can think of is, at the end of each semester, our students engage in a full-day activity, which is called assessment center. And when they hear that, they, you know, the traditional notions of assessment come to mind of, you know, they're sitting in a room by themselves, or they have a task that they are required to do individually, and then they're being assessed on it. It's absolutely not that. It is a day that is filled with both live simulations. So, for instance, one thing that they do is they have to, in front of an audience, do a live coaching simulation with one of their peers where they've, you know, watched a teaching video, and they have to engage in a difficult conversation where they are giving feedback to the teacher and reacting, as you said, in the moment, about how to help this teacher think differently about their practice. At the same time, during that day, they're also engaging in an analysis, an extended analysis of a case study with a group of other colleagues, so, you know, never done individually, but with their colleagues to think about, you know, if you were the principal of this school facing all of the various issues that are going on, what would you do? How would you solve some of these issues? How would you begin to think about some of the challenges that are facing this fictitious school that we, we have them think about? And during the day, various, you know, surprise things happen. Like they may get an email that says, oh, the superintendent has just cut your budget. And that thing that you, the professional development you were planning to do, you need to rethink how you're going to do it. So it's a stressful and wonderful simulation of what it's like to be a principal. But we place great value on experiences like this because when they get out in the field, you know, leadership is really life or death is the way that I think about it, because the lives of children really matter. And so leadership preparation has the potential to serve as this incredible practice space where they get to try out various strategies, various approaches, and get feedback so they can reflect on how particular approaches work or don't work.

**Gillian Judson:**

I'm totally smiling over here. Just from my work with Doctor Kieran Egan in imaginative education, there's such a huge role for role play and taking on different perspectives that can happen in role play. And so I can absolutely see how that engages imagination. I'm reminded of

an activity I do in my undergraduate educational leadership course, and it makes me smile every time. So, basically, near the end of the course, when we've been studying all kinds of perspectives and discuss all kinds of issues, and they're feeling like they could just, they could easily lead a school, I give them an assignment, they have 1 hour to clear their inbox, and I've used, I've asked leaders, principals to provide me with, you know, just an example of an email they would have received from parents or a teacher or something that they need to deal with. And the students have 1 hour to do it. Except I, of course, am coming around periodically with a slip of paper that says, uh, uh, there's an issue down in the hallway. You need to support a teacher in the parking lot where somebody's illegally parking and they have to leave the classroom and walk a lap of this area for five minutes. So then they get back and they're flustered because they haven't been able to work on the emails. And so then I give them another one and another one. And by the time they're done, they've tried to respond as thoroughly as possible to the emails, but they're feeling frazzled and they're exhausted. And they said, what about all these other issues? They're getting in the way. So it is important to provide those emotional sort of immersive experiences, even if they're fictitious. So I'm super smiling at that. I love that and I'd love to pass it over to Woo. I have same question for you in terms of what are the practical examples of how you're engaging imagination.

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

I wanted to just emphasize the importance of somatics in our work. And I love the activity that you just described. And improv, I wholeheartedly agree, is a necessary pedagogical tool. And not just a pedagogical tool, but just a strategy to tap into our knowledge in a different way. And so often we just get conditioned to react and to not feel. And that's something that really limited my own sustainability as a school administrator was that I got really good at shoving my emotions down because there was like one fire after another to put out. And after a while, I just became numb to the point where my husband was like, I don't even recognize the person you've become. So that was a wake up call to me. And so something that I feel is really necessary to bring into our work in the PLI and in our work with school and systems leaders in general, is somatics. And in the midst of these situations, are we aware of what we are feeling and experiencing and how that's influencing how we're showing up and is the way that we're showing up in alignment with our values and intentions? Because oftentimes, if we're not aware of our soma, our entire being, so not just how we're thinking, but what our emotions are, how this is impacting our spirit, what's going on in our bodies, that the way that we're showing up is going to be counterproductive to what we're trying to work towards. And so we, in one of the classes that I teach, we have a very heavy disciplinary situation. It's a simulation that students engage in and part of it is, when this comes to you, what are you thinking? What are you feeling? What are you experiencing in your body? And then what is that telling you? And that, what is that telling you is like, oh, okay, well, this is counter to a value that I'm holding, or I'm feeling confusion, or I am feeling shame right now, and then just sitting with that for a moment. And what does that mean? I think that's really underutilized. And it's necessary in our work, when leaders are doing that for themselves and making space in their work with others. Right. Like, we're in a professional development meeting, and we're talking about a new curriculum that we are thinking of rolling out. There are lots of teachers that are gonna have strong reactions to that. So are we making space for people to actually understand what those



reactions are before they just kind of react so that they can maybe process some distress that they're holding. And then when it's time to do our work together, are our emotions dictating how we are engaging? You know, because I'm angry, does that mean that I'm speaking to you in a disrespectful way? Am I getting defensive? And is that conducive to our collaboration or not?

**Gillian Judson:**

Brilliant. Thank you so much for that. Did you want to weigh in on that, Soraya?

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

There's so many, so many threads to pick up on. Right. Something that Woo said really made me think about how leaders go about their job, and this idea of using numbness or kind of ignoring the feeling part of the job, really. It's a survival strategy that some principals may have adopted, and it might come from what they have experienced, from the leaders that they've worked under. And so they kind of replicate that when they get into the job, and it really is very dangerous. I've worked with many alumni from our program who talk about the physical toll that leadership can take on them from, you know, every type of physical ailment you could imagine, and it goes back to them not connecting with how this job really impacts your body and impacts your sense of self. And so, really, when we think about leader resilience, it is about that slowing down. It is about giving yourself permission to kind of go off of the autopilot mode of, I can handle everything. Right. That whole superhero narrative of the singular leader that's going to solve all of the problems and really think about leadership from a collective space where we all have a chance to sit down and say, we don't actually have the answers. We haven't seen this work well in the past, but together we might be able to come up with a new way of approaching the problem.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Meaghan, let's bring you in on this.

**Meaghan Dougherty:**

I'm just trying to take it all in. I'm feeling super inspired. So thank you both for all that you're sharing. I'm definitely kind of in line with what Soraya was just saying. That's where my mind is as well. But I'm picking up a lot of themes that continually are coming up in the various episodes with different scholars around embodiment and somatics and collective imagination, and this creating space, time and space for humanity and relational connection. I was actually thinking specifically around that idea of the physical tool you talked earlier about, how the system tends to replicate itself, go back, default into replication, reproduction. Gillian and I are thinking a lot now about after leadership preparation, how do we maintain that sense of community? How do we create space, time, connection outside of leadership prep programs that's going to be sustainable over the long term when the system, and oftentimes the people that you're working with within the system, are pulling you back into that default position? So I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about, I guess, cultivating community or what that might look like for each of you. Woo, do you want to start us off?

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

Well, I think it starts with seeing the relational work as a necessity and not as a luxury, because when we see it as a necessity, that influences how we use our time and how we see time. I think it's also about starting small. I have some colleagues who repeatedly say small is all, and what do I understand about what my sphere of influence is? And let me start there. Maybe I can't change the entire culture of a district right away, but what I can do is influence the way that this team that I'm a part of and that I lead is working together. And we're going to build those conditions there, and we're going to learn from that, and that's going to have an impact that has a ripple effect on the system, and that will expand, hopefully expand our influence. And when we deepen our connectivity with other parts of the system, that can broaden our spheres of influence and allow us the space to continue to broaden our spheres of influence. And again, this isn't an individual act. It's not about the charismatic leader who is doing this, but it's about how, as a leader, can I use my positionality to collaborate with others and support others, to tap into their agency so that collectively we can be up to this work together. And I think if we start there with the necessity of the relational work, starting within our spheres of influence, and then building our collective agency, that we will be able to have a system wide impact.

**Meaghan Dougherty:**

I love that. Thank you. Soraya, did you want to weigh in on that?

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Sure. I think a lot about this idea of what happens after our students leave us. We have really strong connections with our alumni. They continue to contact us and call and email and text asking for advice or just sharing what's happening in their work. And so that it really helps us maintain a pulse on what's going on in the field. And one thing that has been really transformative for folks after leadership preparation is continuing to engage in coaching. Everybody needs a coach. Whether you've been at the job for a year or five years, or ten or 20, there's always a need for somebody to sit with you and talk with you and help you engage in reflection on your actions. And so our alumni who continue to receive leadership coaching find themselves better able to sustain themselves in the work, better able to critically analyze how they're moving through their school space and how they are inspiring others and how they're able to kind of stay in that continuous learner mode. And this is not just something that is important and critical for the leader, but it's critical because leaders need to model that for all of the adults that they serve. And so if you are the head learner of your school and you are saying, you know what, I still have to reflect on how I showed up at that meeting or how I engaged in that parent conversation, you're inviting your teachers to do the same. And I think that's probably the greatest gift that a leader can offer, is that they are themselves, although they are, you know, the one in charge, if you will, they're also responsible for continually growing their practice and continually, continually reflecting.

**Meaghan Dougherty:**

I love that idea of ongoing leadership coaching and just modeling that reflection and action piece as a leader.

**Stephen Hurley:**

So the subtitle of this podcast is leading towards a just future. And I wondered if we could dig into that just a little bit in our final reel here, and specifically about social and ecological justice and how imagination might be able to help us move towards that more just future. Woo, when you think of social and ecological justice and allow that to bump up against your idea of imagination, what happens?

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

One of the biggest challenges that we need to be thinking about is that the challenge of white supremacy culture having such a detrimental impact on the way that we live in our society, and that it gets imposed on all of humanity, all of existence right now. And that there is one right way of being, thinking, and doing, and where individualism takes precedence over collectivism, where cognitive ways of acquiring knowledge are the only valid ways of acquiring knowledge, where standard English is the only valid way to communicate, where we're driven by urgency thinking, and where our humanity is secondary to our productivity, and the ways that privileging those ways of thinking and being and doing at the expense of other ways of thinking and being and doing has led us to not be in right relationship with each other and with all of existence. I work with so many leaders and aspiring leaders who want to make an impact, who want to work towards justice, whatever justice means to them, but feel that they lack the agency to do so, because they are one leader trying to do things differently in an entire system that expects them not to deviate from the standard ways of thinking, being and doing, and that there's a lot of work that we need to do to tap into our agency. And this is where imagination comes in, which is, I think that there are a lot of beliefs that we hold, and I'll speak for myself, there are a lot of beliefs that I hold about my ability to have an impact that I'm hoping to have, and a lot of those beliefs are limiting. And this goes back to what Soraya was saying a moment ago about the power of coaching and being in partnership. This is why I think it's also, this is not just an individual journey, it's a collective journey. Because I have so many people in my life who hold me accountable to the values that I espouse and say that I want to work towards, and who see my power even when I don't see it in myself and can hold space for me to make transparent what those limiting beliefs are. And then imagine that there's a different way that I can conceive of myself and my ability to impact the world. And there are lots of mindfulness practices that are helpful and too many to detail in this podcast. But that challenge is really tapping into our imagination to see that reality can look different and that we have the ability to actually make that reality come true. And to go back to adrienne maree brown and her work, she talks about our work towards social justice as being creating works of science fiction, because the world that we're conceiving of doesn't yet exist, but it starts with our imagination. She says that at one point, Black folks and white folks eating lunch together at a lunch counter was science fiction. It didn't happen. It was against the law. But somebody imagined that reality could be different, and then their actions followed. An entire movement happened to make that a reality. But it can't become a reality unless we first imagine it.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Soraya, on social and ecological justice and the role of imagination in your thinking.

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Sure. I love everything that Woo said. And I think about one of the frameworks that we really lean on in our leadership preparation program is this idea of critical race theory, and specifically one of the tenets of counter narrative, this idea that leaders have the ability to think of, to imagine, to present a counter narrative that is different than what they've experienced, different than what their staff or their students have ever experienced. And enacting that agency, I think, is necessary to create a more just future. And so often, our students talk about feeling a sense of imposter syndrome. Right. I've been prepared in this rigorous preparation program. I did all the readings, I've turned in all of my assignments, but I still don't yet feel ready to transform schools. It's a big weight to carry, right? But if you hold the idea that well, if I'm able to think of, if I'm able to imagine, if I'm able to pull people along with me, to envision different way of being, and it can be something very, very minute, like thinking about how we allocate resources, for instance, just to give a very concrete example, when I say resources, I mean it in the broadest sense, right? Not just financial resources, but human resources, the resource of a master schedule. If you can think about that leadership work from an equity lens, from a justice forward lens, you all of a sudden have all of this agency at your disposal to do things differently. But in order to even engage in that work, imagining that the budget could look different, the use of people and time and space could look different, you have to start from envisioning a different reality, as Woo mentioned. So I think they're just so integral to each other. This idea of moving towards a just future and starting from a place of interrogating what the heck it is that we're doing now and how we could do it differently.

**Stephen Hurley:**

So, in the very final reel, and let's say 45 seconds for this, Woo, what gives you hope in the work that you are doing?

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

The students in the PLI give me so much hope. I get to witness the ways that they build community with one another, the way that they really are hungering and thirsting for a different way of being and doing things, and that they bring so much passion and so much thoughtfulness that when I'm in space with them and hear the ways that they are tapping into their imagination to envision a different reality for the schools that they are teaching in and leading in and will be leading in the future, it just gives me so much hope for what's possible and the ways that they will tap into their communities and lead in ways that are different from the status quo ways of leading.

**Stephen Hurley:**

And Soraya, final word on hope to you. What gives you hope?

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Yeah, I would have to double down on Woo's comment. It is absolutely the students, anyone who would have, as [George] Theoharis says, the arrogant humility to undertake this job during a time when our country is so polarized and people aren't really able to even sit down and have a conversation when they have differences of opinion, for someone to say, you know what? I'm going to step up. I'm going to lead this school. I'm going to imagine that I could do this

differently. I mean, my goodness, we are, every day we're amazed by the work that they're doing and by their ambitious, ambitious endeavor of, of changing outcomes for children. And I'm so grateful to be able to work with them and to work with folks like Woo.

**Stephen Hurley:**

Well, I'd like to take this opportunity on behalf of Meaghan and Gillian, to thank Soraya and Woo. Thank you for your inspiration, your insights, and thank you for the work that you're doing.

**Soraya Sablo Sutton:**

Thank you.

**Woo Williams-Zou:**

Thank you so much.