

**Cultivating Imagination: Leading Towards a Just Future
Transcript for Episode 0**

**Imaginative Leadership for a Just and Sustainable World
with Gillian Judson and Meaghan Dougherty**

Meaghan Dougherty:

When you think of imagination, what comes to mind? In *Cultivating Imagination: Leading Toward a Just Future*, we seek to move beyond imagination as whimsy to engage the power of imagination. In this podcast, we make sense of what we know of educational leadership and imagination in and create new potentials of what could be. We engage experts in imagination leadership and social and ecojustice and dialogue to determine imagination's integral role in changing the future. We seek practical tools to cultivate imagination for both sense making and sense breaking in education and in our wider communities. Welcome to the conversation.

Stephen Hurley:

So today on the *Cultivating Imagination* podcast, it is episode zero. And that zero has nothing to do with the value of the conversation that is about to take place. It's just a launch pad for the rest of the episodes that you will hear. Happy to be joined by Gillian Judson and Meaghan Dougherty, who are the masterminds behind this. The imagination behind cultivating imagination the podcast welcome to you both.

Gillian Judson:

Thank you.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Thanks so much for having us.

Stephen Hurley:

Gillian, let's start with you. Let's talk a little bit about the work that you do in the area of imagination. Introduce yourself to our audience, who's waiting with bated breath to find out about Gillian Judson. Who are you? What inspires you around this work?

Gillian Judson:

Absolutely. And also, I really appreciate this opportunity for an episode zero. I have been studying imagination now for just shy of 20 years, actually. I am an assistant professor in educational leadership at Simon Fraser University. And way back, starting in 2004, when I was doing my doctoral studies, I had the great opportunity to work closely with Dr. Kieran Egan, who was just a pioneer in terms of making sense of the role of imagination in learning and in our intellectual development. And so those were my beginnings with being interested in imagination. I spent many, many years looking at the role of imagination in curriculum and specifically in outdoor education and the cultivation of ecological kinds of understanding. But this work really is in terms of leadership. And my new role as an assistant professor in leadership has really led

me to wonder about how imagination is employed, why we don't talk about it, and how we can talk more about it in leadership circles.

Stephen Hurley:

And that's exactly what we're going to be doing not only today, but throughout the series. Meaghan Dougherty, let's turn to you. Who are you and why this work?

Meaghan Dougherty:

Sure, I'm a faculty member in the Department of Child and Youth Care at Douglas College in British Columbia, and I think generally in my work, I am interested in disrupting the story most often told about education. So whether that's, I guess, in relation to the purpose of education, the relationship between education and work, teaching and learning encounters in educational leadership, any sort of area around education. My interest is in deconstructing our assumptions and trying to reimagine education as a force for social change. So not just making our existing system more equitable, but to actually reimagine our system as this catalyst for social and ecological justice. So I encountered Gillian's work when we were both doing some work with MEd students at Simon Fraser University in a kind of inaugural cohort that focused on imagination in educational leadership, and our worlds kind of collided and have been connected ever since.

Stephen Hurley:

We're talking about the podcast cultivating imagination leading toward a just future, and maybe we could unpack that a little bit by asking, what do you want to be exploring in this work? And in the episodes that we're going to hear, what do you hope to explore? What do you want to learn through this work? Meaghan, let's start with you.

Meaghan Dougherty:

I think, like Gillian had mentioned, our big kind of shift is in looking at imagination as an integral and vital tool in educational leadership specifically. So Gillian's done, like she said, a huge area of work in imagination and curriculum and teaching and learning and eco-education. And we're interested now in kind of examining imagination in this kind of new context of educational leadership. And there's not a lot of work being done in relation to that connection. And I think what really drove us to look at that connection is the potential, right? So we are committed to working towards social and ecological justice, and we're interested in how imagination plays a role in, like I said, disrupting kind of the taken for granted day to day and what it makes possible in terms of working towards justice in all of its kind of facets. Dr. Anne Pendleton-Julian and John Seely Brown, they talk about in their book *Pragmatic Imagination*. They talk about imagination as being a tool of both sense making and sense breaking. And I think we really resonate with that idea. And that imagination helps us kind of close the gap and understand what's happening and kind of make sense of things on the day to day. But also it offers us this kind of way of seeing beyond what's happening, not only making sense of what's actual, but also kind of creating the possibilities of how we can break through those normal day to day kind of acts and imagine something completely new.

Stephen Hurley:

So, Gillian, as an expert in the area of imagination, but as someone that's very curious and continuing to learn, I'm curious about your curiosity. What questions are you bringing to this project?

Gillian Judson:

Well, I want to echo everything that my great partner there has said, and I want to pick up on the piece of deconstructing, reimagining the story most often told. And one of the stories most often told is a problematic one when it comes to what imagination is, because we have these misconceptions about imagination that leave it for most people seemingly unrelated to the work of a CEO of a company, or the head of a school district, or a principal of a school. And so part of this podcast, or actually part of our work together, and I might as well mention a shameless plug for a book we put together that came out earlier in 2023— it's called *Cultivating Imagination and Leadership: Transforming Schools and Communities*. In doing this work, as I mentioned, I made a shift into the role of imagination and how it's being conceptualized and enacted in the context of leadership, not just curriculum, looking for those folks that are very practically and explicitly exploring imagination in leadership. And there is very little and so very pragmatically needing a textbook to use in our courses. Meaghan and I sought chapters from folks around the world that are, in fact, explicitly thinking about the role of imagination in their leadership practice. And we put together this book through Teachers College Press. It's sort of in three sections that really outline some of what we know already about leadership, and it points to what we want to learn more about. So this is kind of a roundabout way to answer your question. One of the sections in the book is just all about the ways in which imagination, for these leaders, supports possibility, cultivates possibility, and allows the finding of possibility. The second section is about the poetics and the aesthetic dimensions of leadership that imagination supports, allows, and enlarges. And the third is the role of imagination in sort of social and ecological justice work. And so in finishing that text and realizing there's far more to be said about the work, we really want to see not only how these practicing leaders who are active in the realm of ecological and social justice work, how they make sense of imagination, but then the practical tools they use to employ it. And this is where we're bringing in our knowledge and expertise on Kieran Egan's work around cognitive tools and how those actually grow human imagination, and sort of trying to tease out with our expert leaders how they're employing those tools. And then, of course, for listeners, how listeners can then use those tools themselves to make sense of imagination. But that's one of the things I'm hoping to achieve there for myself. But also, this is part of a SSHRC Connections Grant. We're trying to unpack and expand a more fulsome understanding of what imagination is.

Stephen Hurley:

Okay, so this is perfect, because as much as we use the word imagination and like to talk about it, imagination is something we can't see. Is it possible that it's also something we can't define? What exactly is imagination?

Gillian Judson:

Well, fortunately or unfortunately, many people associate imagination with very frivolous things. SpongeBob squarepants imagination or Disney fantasy. And there's nothing wrong with that, because one aspect of imagination certainly is the fantastical and the make believe. But when we associate imagination with those sort of off the ground, up in the air fantasy, make believe things, we tend to associate it then with certain realms and aspects of society, certain age groups, children, for example. We are very specifically using language for our podcast and throughout our discussions of imagination, that introduces a much more grounded metaphor. And so we talk about cultivating, and by talking about cultivating imagination, we're already pointing to our conception of imagination. And we'd like our listeners to think about imagination as soil. We're bringing it down from the glitter and the make believe to the idea that we actually cultivate imagination. And we have tools to do so. These are tools that we can employ as leaders to grow, to increase the fertility of our imaginations. And so if you think about imagination, that ability to envision the possible in all things as a kind of soil, as supporting us all, as something that we can, in fact, enhance and enrich through use, it just expands the applicability of imagination. And my thinking about imagination as soil was really inspired by Liu and Noppe-Brandon's 2009 book *Imagination First*. They have a quote in there about planting the seeds within the soil of imagination, or something along those lines. And that really resonated for me because I've been working with cognitive tools of imagination. And so the idea that if we start talking about cultivating imagination, people will more readily see that they can do that in their own lives. And we can also, through this podcast, look at the real, tangible, important, significant ways in which leaders use imagination for real world, impactful things. We can address some of those misconceptions. And just quickly, we're not aiming this podcast for leaders, only in the sense of the principals, the vice principals, those named administrative roles at all. We have a much more relational, experiential sense of leadership, and every one of us are leaders in different ways in our lives. And so how are we leading in ways in our lives? How are teachers leading in ways in schools, through instructional leadership, through the ways in which they engage with students, through the ways they support inclusivity, et cetera, et cetera, how are they using imagination to do so?

Stephen Hurley:

So, Meaghan, that shift of metaphor for me, seeing imagination not as a thing, a product, something that itself is visible, but the soil, which, yeah, visible, but that's a totally different way of looking at it. How does that resonate with you?

Meaghan Dougherty:

Yeah, I think that's a lovely metaphor that we've kind of used to act as the foundation, the soil, for the work that we've been engaging in. And I think just to highlight some of the excellent points that Gillian's making, like, when we look at imagination as soil, we're also able to see leadership as this relational ecosystem. Right? So it's not just that we're talking about leaders, i.e. Principles or formal administrative roles, but we're talking about leaders in relation in this kind of complex ecosystem in which imagination is like a very foundational part, and we're able to kind of examine the various agents in that ecosystem in different ways. And from that imagination, the soil of imagination, grow these kind of innovative and creative ideas. And so that metaphor, I think, allows us to, no pun intended, ground the idea of imagination in some

way, but also make it very practical. So we are talking about tools, Kieran Egan's work on cognitive tools and relating those to tools that you would use in your garden when you're hoping to enact some change in your ecosystem or to grow new ideas or grow new plants. So I think the metaphor really helps keep it out of the realm of the confusion that Gillian mentioned, confusing it with creativity or innovation and seeing it as this foundational, vital piece.

Stephen Hurley:

So, Meaghan, how do you, quote, unquote, sell that to leaders, whether they're informal leadership positions or not? Who may think that it's about creativity and who may think that it's about innovation? How do you pull them back to this ground and not convince them, but get them to entertain this idea of imagination in leadership?

Meaghan Dougherty:

I think that's a really good question, and that's part of the work that we're intending to do, I think with this exploration, with this knowledge mobilization. Part of that, I think, is a reflective process, and checking in kind of individually with ourselves about where we're at in relation to how we see these concepts and how we enact these ideas in our kind of day to day interactions. And I think, interestingly enough, imagination plays a big role in being able to do that. So we talk about the power of imagination to really understand oneself and to understand others. And then that understanding helps fuel those things that we're talking about, like creativity and innovation. So ultimately, I think we have the same kind of goals of moving things forward in different ways. But our ideas with imagination is, it really does come back to yourself in some ways. As a starting place.

Stephen Hurley:

Gillian, I wanted to ask you about that connection between imagination and justice, and in particular imagination and social justice. It sounds good on the ground. Can we talk about some of the connection between imagination and social justice and the hope that you want to engender through this podcast?

Gillian Judson:

Exactly. I mean, why do we need to explore imagination and leadership? It seems to me that this connects back to the question you just asked, Meaghan, sort of like, how do we make this of interest? How do we unlearn previous conceptions of imagination and open this space? And I think that in times like ours, we really don't have a choice. And I think that this is partly how and why leaders will be, should be, and can be interested in the work we're doing. One of the authors who did the final chapter of our *Cultivating Imagination and Leadership* book, Laurie Anderson, talks about— and he cites from Bennis and Nanus 1985— he refers to the complexity of leadership as VUCA. We're living in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous times. And if that was cited in 1985, it's only increased. And so when you're facing this volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, how do we do this unless we are able to flexibly envision what is possible? And how do we support all learners in school? All learners in school, we say that all the time, supporting all learners. But that is a massively challenging task when we're facing increasing inequities and oppression. And some of these have been obviously made more

visible through the pandemic and through legislation that is continuing to oppress and increasing divisiveness and ongoing calls for reconciliation within Canada, for example. How do we actually do this work? And I think that is the piece related to the social justice. We can talk about ecojustice in a second, but humans have a capacity to engage and expand and make sense of and connect with others, and that is imagination. There is no empathy without imagination. But we also need to envision new ways of doing things when the ways we're doing them currently continue to oppress. And so, like Meaghan said, rather than just retrofit a system that is unjust, how do we reimagine a system that supports everybody, lifts up everybody, and is centered on notions of hope so that more children come out of schools with brighter futures, if you will. And so for me, it's this connection between envisioning the possible within systems that are highly resistant to change, enacting that. This is the connection with social justice. This is the work. But I believe that as leaders, the work will become easier when we have a collective of leaders that are using the language of imagination and doing it together, because at the moment we don't. So this is part of what we want to achieve here, is to support more leaders knowing about the power of imagination and using it in that realm.

Stephen Hurley:

There's a lot of questions that are out there, and I wanted to give Meaghan a chance to weigh in and just, Meaghan, when Gillian talks about a common language, I'm going back in my mind to your opening comment about the narrative and the stories that we tell. And with that common language, maybe those new stories can start to emerge. But you probably have a lot to comment on, on what Gillian has just said.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Well, I absolutely agree with what you're saying about the power of story, and I think to fit that in with what Gillian's saying, we generally can see that things aren't working. And Gillian's raised a number of ways that we are seeing that in various areas. And imagination, I think, in leadership, why we want to be thinking about this is that it offers this possibility to rethink what we're doing. And I think that sounds a lot more grandiose maybe than it's intended. It is a rethinking on a broad scale, on a macro level, but it's also rethinking your day to day interactions, how you're relating to your team, to your students, to your community, to the parents. So we want to keep that practical aspect really front and center. One thing I like, that I pull on Dr. Rob Hopkins, who was a guest on your podcast as well. He talks about imagination being mischievous and problematic. And I really like that idea of it kind of having this more playful kind of element where he's saying it's been designed out of our educational processes right now, but it can be used to completely and fundamentally reimagine the systems that exist within our society so we can reimagine our education system, our economy, our climate. And he talks specifically, like you mentioned, about using stories as this kind of affective connection that allow people to, for lack of a better word, I guess, buy into this desire for change. They pull together in the collective and have this kind of common story, common goal around what needs to change.

Stephen Hurley:

Gillian, you mentioned ecological justice. Is that something completely different than the conversation on social justice, or is it a connected thread?

Gillian Judson:

Well, I think the social and ecological justice, as many scholars note, are completely interconnected at this point. So we're excited to have people like Dr. Hopkins on the podcast who's going to be sharing much of his work. He's done a ton of work in terms of climate change and considers this a failure of imagination and just knowing practically the ways he sees reimagining of our educational systems, our food systems, our economic systems to support social and ecological justice. We also have, hopefully we'll have Dr. Mark Fettes and Sean Blenkinsop as well from Simon Fraser University looking at aspects of leadership, ecological leadership, for social and cultural change, and the tenets they have developed in their research for how do leaders employ imagination to support ecological transformation, to support the sort of land based, place based schooling. Well, this is what I wanted to add. Here is some of these questions about, so what are the practical examples? That's why we wanted to have this podcast, to have the leaders in themselves. And I'm really pleased to have, for example, Dr. Jade Ho, who's worked for many years in advocacy and leadership. Her scholarship really looks at a radical pedagogy of place and community through a lens of decolonization. And after years of experience supporting communities and Vancouver's Chinatown and marginalized communities in Taiwan as well, she's really developed, through her leadership practice, a practice of possibility, I believe, that is really tied to her advocacy. We have Indigenous educator Heidi Wood, who's coming in to talk about the role of imagination in her work with educators towards reconciliation, and then a whole host of principals: Moraima Machado, Christina Velasco, Myra Quadros, Lori Driussi, Michael Datura, all of these principals are actively making sense of their principalships and their work through the lens of imagination and also social and ecological justice. So those practical examples and answers, I'm pleased to say, will come from a lot of our leaders who are participating with us on this project.

Stephen Hurley:

It's quite a lineup. And then you have Meaghan and Gillian's voice, who will bring some insights on the cognitive tools. And I wondered if we might be able to explore just a little bit more about that dynamic, because as challenging as it might be to define imagination in people's minds, you're bringing, well, I don't want to say a discipline, but you're bringing some of the current scholarship and some important scholarship around imagination to the table and to these conversations.

Meaghan Dougherty:

The cognitive tools really recognize learning, understanding, sense making as more than a cognitive process. Right? So it's an embodied affective process of sense making. And so these cognitive tools are very specific possibilities in terms of engaging that affective sense, that connection. So we talk a lot about that in terms of how we might design lessons or how we might present curriculum based on those cognitive tools. And now we're looking at how can we actually use these tools, like we're talking about with story as an example of a cognitive tool, how can we use these to really connect effectively with people, kind of understand where one another are coming from, and create this shared kind of experience or shared vision of where we might want to go together? So really looking at switching those cognitive tools, I mean, both

Kieran and Gillian talked about them in relation to teaching and learning as, I mean, they're really just ways of understanding the world. They're just kind of cultural ways of making sense of what we're presented with. So we're interested in using some of those very practical tools, like story. We talked about imagery, mystery, wonder, those kinds of aspects to really hook people in. Right. And I think, you know what I mean when I say like, that affective intensity. It's not like we're explaining cognitively, these are the reasons why you should engage imagination in your practice. Right. These are the things that it's going to enable. It's like you feel that connection with the process and you kind of are more physically engaged with moving in that direction.

Stephen Hurley:

Gillian, your thoughts?

Gillian Judson:

Yes, I think the notion of cognitive tools, as Meaghan has said, has been more thoroughly explored through curriculum and pedagogy in that dimension. But what I feel like it's going to help us do in this context of leadership is it's going to help us really dig into our conversations with our experts, Dr. Vidya Shah, Dr. Andrew Hargreaves, that are coming on. We've got a whole range of folks that have massive experiences in leadership, and what the language of cognitive tools can help us do, which some of those leaders may not have the same familiarity with that particular Kieran Egan's conception of cognitive tools and how they grow imagination. But with that language, with that theoretical framework of the power of story and metaphors and images and mysteries and puzzles and all of these tools, we can then interrogate, dig in, dig deeper. And what it means is we don't sort of gloss over that leaders are doing imaginative things. We can then dig deeper, sort of identify, find the roots of what it is they're doing. And those roots are these tools, which means ultimately, that they can become more practically accessible, transferable to leaders listening to the podcast, if that makes sense.

Stephen Hurley:

I'm sold. I want to listen. But what do you want to say to potential listeners that may be listening to this episode zero in terms of why they might want to devote some time to it. We've talked about your curiosity and the question that you're bringing. Let's talk about the curiosity that your listeners may be bringing to this. Why this podcast? Why now?

Meaghan Dougherty:

I think, like Gillian's mentioned, leaders may be feeling frustrated. They may be feeling tired, they may be feeling uncertain. And I think this is really a great opportunity to kind of stop and pause and maybe unlearn and unlead, like Dr. Vidya Shah talks about, to unlearn and unlead some of these very established ways of knowing and enacting leadership and education. So just a time to think about what we're doing and how we're doing it and why we're doing it and how it's working for various people so we're not reproducing the same kind of oppressive system. So hopefully, again, coming back to this idea of hope, leaders who might be feeling disconnected or worn down or like things are a bit overwhelming might have that kind of affect of intensity and hear practical examples and connect with the speakers and the scholars in terms of what they're doing and how they're enacting these specific tools of imagination in their day to day practice

and might feel rejuvenated and perhaps have some practical strategies that they can then kind of engage with their teams or with their communities to further that kind of sense of possibility and sense of change and progress.

Stephen Hurley:

So, Gillian Judson, the final word to you. This is episode zero, which means there's a lot ahead of us, but you probably have some final things that you want to tell us about.

Gillian Judson:

Well, the great sense of mystery is that I didn't get to name all of the amazing leaders that are going to be presenting and sharing on the podcast series. I also want to mention that we have a three part process here. We've got our podcast series. We've got a blog series that goes along with each podcast. So, for example, each leader who shares can then write a little bit more about what they're doing and develop that. And then we're hosting a virtual roundtable in next summer. And anyone who's listening, if you're interested in hearing more about that activity, it's virtual, it'll be online. And we are hoping to sort of get sort of a collective of leaders that are interested in imagination for social and ecological justice. Begin that group that we can share this discourse. So there's the mystery of who's going to be on the podcast. You definitely want to come to our website, cultivateimagination.ca, and check it out. We're going to be launching that and sharing podcasts regularly, starting in the middle of January. But for me, I think I've asked my students often, I'm like, what is a physical gesture that represents imagination? And when I first start teaching students, they often do this sort of mind blowing gesture, like, wow. And by the end of working together, they often show a gesture that's more about leaning in. Imagination allows us to lean into things. When we're imaginatively engaged, we lean into topics we want to learn more. We're open affectively to experiences and ideas and possibility. So why would leaders of all kinds want to follow this podcast? I think because it can inspire you. It can give you ideas with the challenges you're facing, and it can effectively engage you in the great work that you're doing. So that's my hope, is that it allows leaders to lean in, that they feel compelled to share it, tell others about it, and begin to talk more about imagination in their practice.

Stephen Hurley:

Well, hopefully this half hour with you and with Meaghan have piqued, tickled, incited people's imagination to at least learn more and listen. And it sounds like a wonderful project. I'm thrilled to be part of it. Let's get started.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Thank you so much, Stephen.

Gillian Judson:

Thank you.