

Envisioning The Possible For K-12 Education: The Imaginative Schools Symposium Series (2019-2020)

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Land Acknowledgement

Initially, we worked together at Simon Fraser University's Surrey campus which is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem (kʷɪkʷəʔləm), Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations. We concluded this project geographically separated across the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish and Huron-Wendat peoples. We are deeply grateful to be able to live and learn on these traditional and unceded territories.

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Introduction

Introduction

Although imagination matters most, it gets the least ink.
(Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009, p. 20)

What if school and community educational leaders, graduate students, educators, and researchers collaboratively explored the role of imagination in leadership, pedagogy, school culture, and reconciliation?

What if cognitive tools of [Imaginative Education](#) (Egan, 1997, 2005; Judson & Egan, 2016) are employed to engage and grow imagination in the professional learning process itself?

What if the project findings offered guidance to imaginative schools?

These are the questions that inspired and ultimately shaped the Imaginative Schools Symposium Series (ISSS) co-hosted by the [Centre for Imagination in Research, Culture and Education \(CIRCE\)](#) and the [Centre for the Study of Educational Leadership and Policy \(CSELP\)](#) at Simon Fraser University (SFU). The Imaginative Schools Symposium Series (ISSS) was an act of imagination in which participants envisioned the myriad practices and requirements of schools that would put imagination first.

The Need: Imagination Misunderstood

In education, imagination continues to be neglected, despite research indicating its importance for learning and formal acknowledgement within the BC curriculum of the need to develop “creative thinking” capacity for success in the 21st century. Few people acknowledge the crucial role of imagination in all aspects of education. As a result, the idea of “imaginative schools” will undoubtedly cause some people to think about education designed for young children or arts-focused pedagogy. Considering imagination outside of arts-based learning and in the context of secondary and even post-secondary education, may cause people to feel uncomfortable—how can we embrace *imagination* and at the same time support *rigorous* academic programs?

Introduction

The problem this project aimed to address was the ongoing misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about imagination's roles in education. Imagination will remain on the educational sidelines as long as it is misunderstood and as long as there is limited knowledge about its contribution to all aspects of education. Rather than associating imagination solely with our youngest learners, the arts, or "artsy types", this project built on the understanding that imagination is crucial for *all* learners, *all* learning, and *all* leadership. In engaging participants in the imaginative act of envisioning the requirements for "imaginative schools", the ISSS revealed a range of educational stakeholders' perspectives, beliefs and values related to imagination in education. What emerged was a fertile landscape of activities and processes rooted in imagination.

About The Imaginative Schools Symposium Series (ISSS)

The three-part symposium series investigated the role of imagination in K-12 education in British Columbia including its contributions to school leadership, teaching, learning, teacher and leader professional development, school culture, community engagement, and reconciliation. It was a collaborative, community-engaged project that involved a total of 40 educational stakeholders. The ISSS community included experienced educators enrolled in SFU's Imaginative K-12 Leadership and Imaginative Education Masters' cohorts, Imaginative Education MEd alumni, retired and acting principals and vice-principals, school and community-based instructional leaders, and professors from SFU's Faculty of Education and Beedie School of Business. All participants shared an interest in imagination. Whether engaged in graduate study of imagination in educational leadership or pedagogy, part of CIRCE's network of imagination accomplices, or connected to the Twitter-based Imaginative Leadership Learning group, participants wanted to learn more about imagination and how they could contribute to the creation of imagination-rich schools.

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This resource has been collaboratively written by the K-12 Imaginative Leadership graduate cohort and their professor, Dr. Gillian Judson. The ISSS served as the backbone for this cohort's learning about imagination in leadership over the course of their two-year program. Guided by the *what if* questions listed at the start of this document, Gillian organized and initiated the ISSS. Gillian facilitated the first two symposia and the Imaginative K-12 Leadership graduate students facilitated the third.

The leadership students' course work involved detailed, imaginative and critical reflection following each symposium session. This resource shares the main themes that emerged from students' thematic analysis of their post-session reflections, notes, and online discussions. The analysis of course documents (including notes, post-session reflections, online discussions) and co-creation of the report occurred between January and February of 2021. To support the analysis and review of all learning artefacts, students shared their previous assignments and notes on CANVAS, SFU's online learning platform. Students used an interactive google document to write, edit and revise this report. Everyone in the cohort was involved in co-creating this document, from writing to design through final editing and revisions. ISSS participants were also invited to review and give feedback on the resource.



Introduction

With the aim of advancing understanding and supporting actions that bring imagination to the heart of education for all learners, the guidance and inspiration offered in this report may be used:

- to clarify and encourage appropriate educational leadership practices that seek to develop and support imagination in schools;
- to shape professional learning opportunities for leaders interested in developing imagination across their school cultures;
- to guide the preparation and orientation of teachers in ways that help them attend to the imaginative well-being of their students;
- as a basis for reviewing school or district-level goals, policies and practices with regard to curriculum and pedagogy;
- to help identify imaginative teaching practices that are adaptable to various curriculum areas, class compositions, cultural contexts, etc;
- to strengthen efforts to embed Indigenous perspectives, histories and ways of knowing in teaching the provincial curriculum.

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Imagination Understood

Imagination Understood

If you could take a ride in a time machine to see the future, would you? Would the journey across time and space change how you might think or act in the present or even how you perceive the events of the past?

The human capacity to see, sense, and feel across time enables us to experience the fullness of what we call *imagination*. Although imagination can mean different things to different people, and the nuances of its meaning can subtly shift in different contexts, it is an infinite resource into which every human can tap. Imagination is our individual and collective capacity to envision, represent, and manifest what was, what is, and what might be. Although the manifestations of our imaginings vary, imagination thrives at the intersection of our minds, hearts, and spirits. It meanders through time, thought, story, culture, and ways of knowing, and gives rise to ingenuity, creativity, and innovation. It takes us beyond what was or is and toward what might be. The imagination is our time machine--our history, our reality, and our possibility. Although we are naturally driven to imagine, the paradox of the imagination is that it appears to require intentional and regular maintenance to run optimally at any age (Egan, 1997; Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009).

One of the greatest opportunities for educators and leaders is to intentionally tap into a reservoir of [cognitive tools](#) (Egan and Judson, 2016) to nurture and sustain our ability to imagine through how we learn, teach, and lead in schools. Teachers can use these tools to intentionally curate learning environments that inspire wonder, curiosity, creativity, connection, and hope. Educational leaders can harness the imagination to gaze upon the horizons of unlimited *possible* futures. They can employ imagination to envision what schools can be today and tomorrow. They can remove barriers and maximize the potential in school cultures to engage in human-centered innovation that creates the conditions to actualize what can be. This was the imperative of the Imaginative Schools Symposium Series (ISSS).

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The Imaginative School Symposium Series Experience

The Experience: A Glimpse

The Imaginative Schools Symposium Series (ISSS) challenged participants to take part in collaborative activities designed to maximize engagement and inspire a rich exchange of information about imagination and leadership. Looking closer at the kick-off activity in the first session of the IS series provides an excellent example of what kind of content and pedagogy the whole series embodied...

Professionals in different stages of their careers gathered together. Some participants had lots of experience, confidence and knowledge. Other participants, starting fresh on their leadership journey, were filled with nervous energy, ready to develop their understanding of imagination-in-action. Everyone was ready to take their understanding of imagination to another level. Each participant took this day out of their busy schedules to play with their perspectives on leadership.

The coffee had percolated. The jackets hung. It was time to get down to business.

Our host offered up our first activity; Twenty-six cards were distributed to each table group, each labelled with a single character trait identified as a [heroic quality](#) (e.g. generosity, humility, determination). Group members were asked to envision an imaginative leader that had inspired them, and to then individually choose five heroic quality cards that represented this person. Next, the group as a whole faced the challenge of combing through all the choices in order to highlight two traits that they considered essential. All groups shared their choices in an effort to identify some defining traits of imaginative leaders.

The need to *pick only two*--a seemingly simple constraint--led to many deep and meaningful conversations between participants in relation to each word's *meaning* and *value* for leadership. Diplomatic negotiation between members became impassioned, as selected words made the top-five list and subsequently fell off, as other words were put forth, scrutinized and evaluated. Conversations with group members often led back to specific actions, choices, pedagogy, and practices that maximize imagination in design and process.

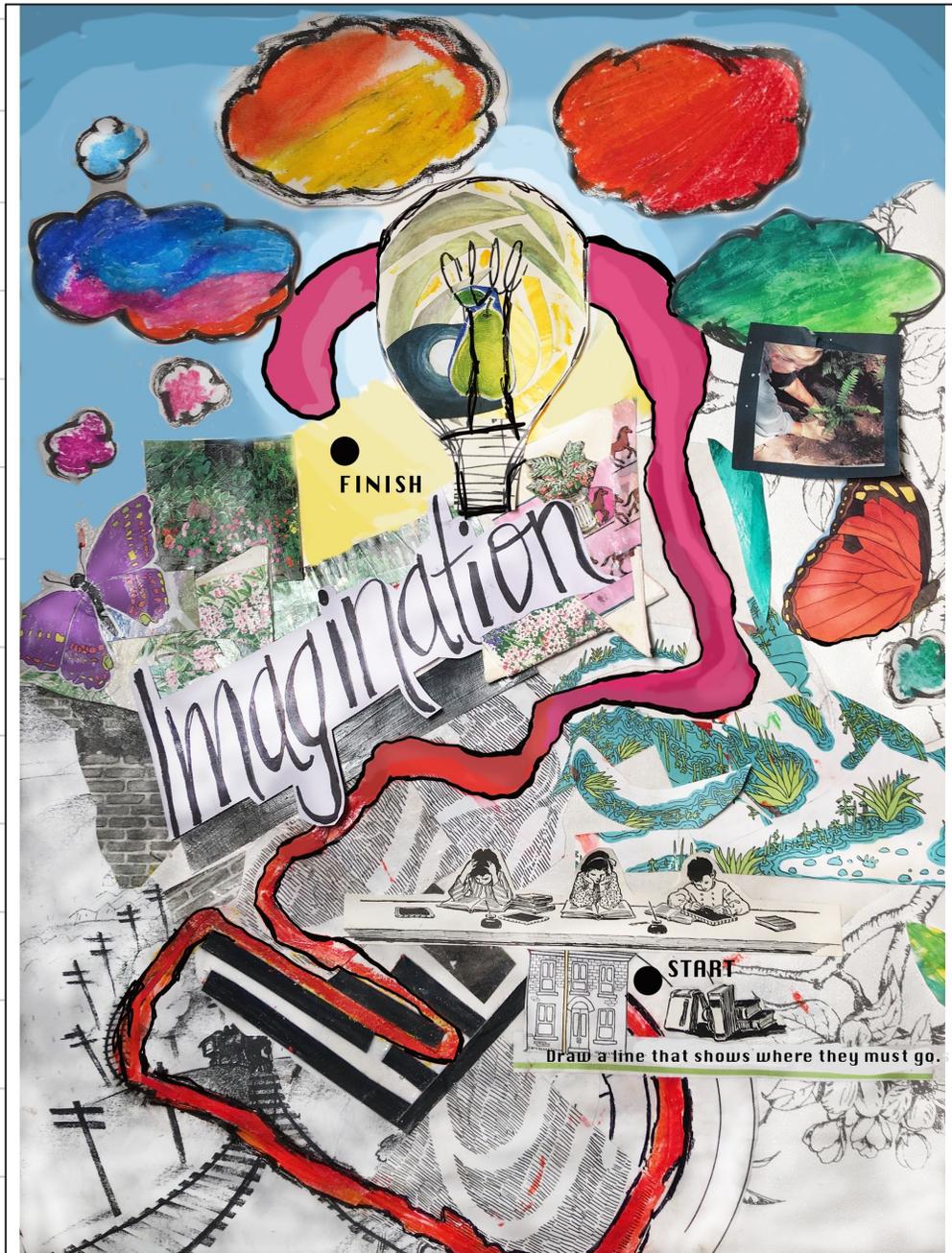
The Experience: A Glimpse

Throughout this first round, stories of leadership and imagination-in-action shaped the group's collective product. As each table shared, we could all see and smile at what had transpired. We were fanning the very first flames, the very beginnings, of what core values Imaginative Schools should embody. The power of words on a table, sorted with a critical eye, through the lens of imagination. Powerful stuff!

The overall series was designed to use imagination in investigating the role of imagination in education, including practical and aspirational influence on school leadership, pedagogy, learning, professional development, school culture, community connections, and meaningful reconciliation. Whether engaging in-person or online, participants had the opportunity to share diverse perspectives through spirited discussion, rich stories, and individual experiences. The common thread woven through all topics for each session was *imagination*, the ability to conceive of the possible in all things, the generative feature of mind that fuels creativity and innovation.



The Experience: Artistic Representation



Artwork by Shannon Benn

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Symposium Discussion Questions

What kind of leadership dispositions/actions support imaginative schools?

How do leaders develop and support imagination in their schools?

How do districts support the imaginative development of their school leaders?

How do imaginative leaders grow their imaginations?

What kinds of opportunities help them do that? What is required? Who are the stakeholders/participants?



Imagination is more than the whimsical spark of creativity; it is an integral skill that allows leaders to move beyond embedded ideas while creating new – and meaningful – change. ~ Enlow & Popa (2008, p. 29)

Photo source: pixabay.com

Imaginative Leadership

Imaginative leaders...

- pursue [Imaginative Education](#) learning for themselves, their staff and families through collaboration, networking and support.
- share inspiring stories to connect, engage, cultivate trust and spark positive relationships to lead positive change.
- engage in, support, and promote Place-based learning in nature and promote eco-friendly practices.
- transform learning cultures (physical environments, methods of teaching and learning i.e. inquiry, universal design, problem-based learning, [Learning in Depth](#)).
- embrace ambiguity and organize for change.
- promote inclusion of, support, and elevation of marginalized groups in school culture.
- celebrate diversity by inviting, sharing and participating in the culture of the school community, and invite awareness and celebration at all levels of global citizenship.

Imaginative Pedagogy

Symposium Discussion Questions

What is imaginative pedagogy?

What kinds of professional learning opportunities/resources support teachers' development as imaginative educators?

How can/should imaginative leaders provide educators ongoing feedback and/or support?



Without leaps of imagination or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all is a form of planning. ~ Gloria Steinem

Photo source: pixabay.com

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Imaginative Pedagogy

Imaginative teachers and learners...

- engage emotions through shared experiences, connections, stories, [cognitive tools](#), and meaningful relationships.
- model and mentor curiosity with a growth mindset, vulnerability, and inquiry.
- create space and time for explorations of *what if's* and are open to and investigate all possibilities.
- focus on what is going well and maintain an open mind and playfulness.
- get outside! Actively engage in Place-based learning.
- honour, appreciate, and acknowledge the unceded land we reside and learn on.
- include and embrace diversity in the classroom; ensure equal representation of voices heard and shared.

To support imaginative teachers and learners, imaginative leaders...

- solicit feedback through multiple mechanisms to create visions, guidelines, or goals for the school community that includes all voices.
- are present in all corners of the school to build relationships with all members of the school community.
- provide time and space for sharing, observations, and collaboration amongst staff, both within schools and between schools and districts.
- seek, bring in, and share opportunities for learning.
- listen, lean in, and act/react based on context and need.

Imaginative Schools and Community

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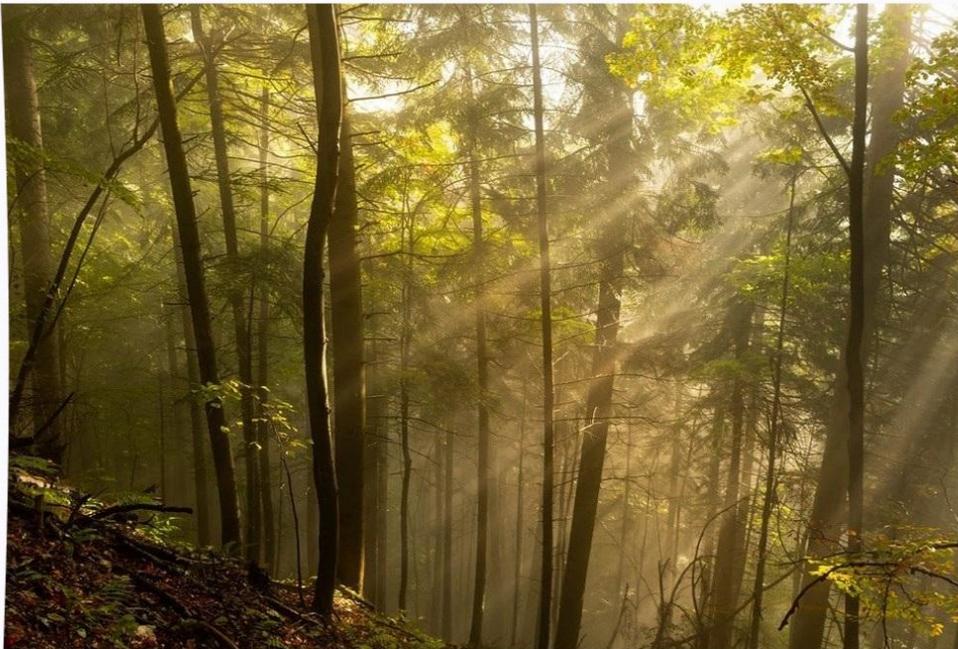
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Symposium Discussion Questions

What kinds of relationships do imaginative schools have with their key stakeholders, such as students' families and members of their community?

How can imaginative schools cultivate strong ties with the human/natural community?

How can educators build a culture of trust in order to create a safe space for meaningful collaboration within the community?



Overcoming barriers and realizing there are multiple pathways to success - imagination is the way to illuminate the possibilities. ~Sound Bite, Session #3

Photo source: pixabay.com

Imaginative Schools and Community

Imaginative schools...

- open opportunities for imagination to thrive by working together to strengthen relationships with the land and with First Peoples (e.g. engaging with First Peoples' Principles of Learning and Place-based learning).
- ignite passions and inspire action/service by developing meaningful and innovative partnerships and mentorship opportunities for students and staff with community organizations.
- explore diverse stories that enhance self-awareness and connections to other students, colleagues and the natural/human community.
- amplify marginalized voices such as Indigenous community members through collaboration (e.g. work with Indigenous community partners to use restorative circles to honour diverse stories and understanding).
- cultivate a growth mindset in collaboration with key stakeholders (educators, families, and community members) by seeking to find shared interests and values amongst parties with differing perspectives and beliefs.
- strive to create a culture founded in trust, understanding, and empathy in order to create a safe space for meaningful collaboration and learning to occur.
- grow and maintain a sense of belonging and pride to build pathways within the community in hopes of creating authentic and meaningful relationships.
- take risks in forging authentic relationships with local communities and in building an imagination-centered school culture.

Imaginative Schools and the BC Curriculum

Symposium Discussion Questions

How do imaginative schools ensure the development of the core competencies in all students?

How do imaginative schools support equity and social justice?

What is the role of imagination in integrating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge across subject areas?



Imaginative schools are able to get to the human core of curricular and social justice issue. ~Sound Bite, Session #3

Photo source: pixabay.com

Imaginative Schools and the BC Curriculum

Imaginative Schools in BC

The core competencies at the heart of BC's curriculum focus on teaching learners *how* to communicate, think critically and creatively, and explore and engage with personal and social identities. BC educators create diverse learning environments in which all learners connect with themselves, others, and the communities in which they live as they develop essential skills. The imagination is the connective thread that weaves these competencies together.

Communication Competency

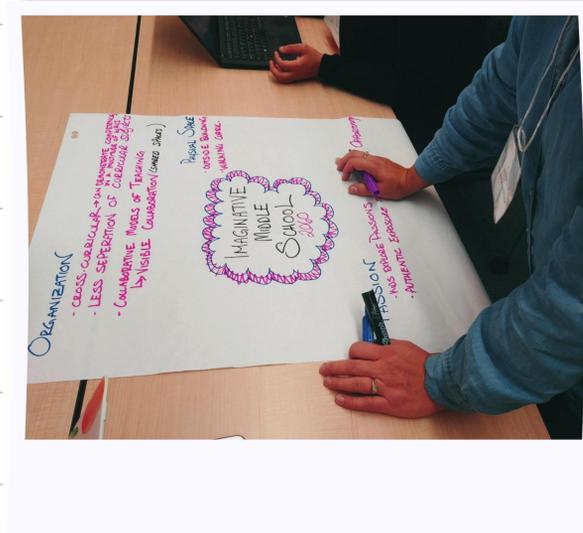
In imaginative schools, educators...

- value storytelling as a way to develop agency, to foster understanding, and to collaboratively seek healing and solutions to real-world problems.
- explore where learners come from and where they are going in order to understand diverse learner strengths and needs.

Thinking Competency

In imaginative schools, educators...

- see social justice issues through different “lenses” and therefore allow stakeholders a way to understand situations through the eyes of others.
- encourage critical reflection, embracing thoughts and feelings, and in-depth learning.



Imaginative Schools and the BC Curriculum

Personal/Social Competency

In imaginative schools, educators...

- provide safe environments for students to understand their sense of self in place and in time.
- create spaces for student voice and choice which then lead to the development of adults who are empowered to continue the work of social justice.
- support learners' understanding of equity and social justice by highlighting the human aspects within social justice issues.
- engage imagination to intentionally develop *empathy* in all learners and create communities that are *empathy-rich*.

First Peoples Principles of Learning

In imaginative schools, educators...

- nurture learning communities where educators and Indigenous leaders and community members collaborate to embed Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing in the development of the Core Competencies.
- develop empathy for Indigenous perspectives by using learning tools that cultivate an effective understanding of First Peoples (his)stories.

Thus, all curricular content has the opportunity to be explored through an understanding of learning as developing connectedness and reciprocal relationships. Relationships that reveal themselves, over time and with patience, through memory, story, and history. (FNESC, 2008/2014).

Imaginative Schools and Reconcile-Action

While the IS series consisted of a culturally diverse group of participants, no Indigenous people have co-authored this report. The IS discussions and our interpretation of them represent, therefore, a settler perspective. Moving forward, this work should include First Peoples in order to create authentic space for including Indigenous knowledge and history in the work of meaningful reconciliation

How do imaginative schools engage in reconciliation?

The original discussion question posed to the group was, “How do imaginative schools support reconciliation?” Through conversation and reflection some groups decided to change the wording of the question to represent the active role all educators and educational leaders must play in reconciliation. One example of this re-wording is replacing the word “support” with the word “engage”. This connects to the idea of imaginative schools and “reconcile-action”.

Imaginative schools...

- amplify Indigenous voices, decisions, and influence.
- create safe access and opportunity for First Peoples students and community members.
- promote advocacy to build awareness and acknowledge the experiences and differences of Indigenous perspectives.
- foster connection to Elders and community members.
- weave elements of traditional practices into school-based practices and curriculum.
- embrace connection to Place, land and each other.
- learn through story and embrace counter-narratives.
- build a sense of self to facilitate strong relationships.
- are accountable for educational decisions to mitigate the long-standing effects of residential schools.
- value the time necessary for meaningful reflection on experience, process, and ways of knowing.

Imaginative Schools and Reconcile-Action

Reconciliation is knowing our stories from the past, connecting to the present and considering how to embody it and move forward in a more equitable future.

Sound Bite, Symposium #3

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The real role of leadership in education...is not and should not be command and control. The real role of leadership is climate control. Creating a climate of possibility. -Sir Ken Robinson

The Imaginative Schools Symposium Series was a place where professionals from across various fields came together to share their stories and passion for imagination. It enabled participants to learn more about what imagination and [Imaginative Education](#) look like in practice and how they apply to leadership. Many key insights emerged from each symposium session.

For example, we have learned that when imagination and leadership come together there are endless possibilities. The combination allows leaders to look at problems from different perspectives and to find innovative solutions. Imagination empowers school leaders to create school cultures that value storytelling and shared narratives. By understanding others' stories, leaders can see things from different points of view and make meaningful connections. Imagination fuels change. With the world transforming rapidly, imagination allows leaders to come up with new solutions to problems that are occurring inside and outside of schools. This is the reason why we need imagination and imaginative leaders in schools today, tomorrow and always. Ultimately, we believe that imaginative leaders are critical in the creation of school communities that foster imagination for all.

We have learned that the key for meaningful collaboration and community engagement is imagination. Imagination allows multiple stakeholders to be present and for their voices to be heard. Creating space where different perspectives are included and valued allows for imagination to grow. Schools where imagination is a guiding principle will have diverse opportunities for all staff, students and the community to have their hearts and minds engaged in learning.

Conclusion

Imaginative schools will be spaces where relationships are valued and fostered through shared experiences and collaboration. In imaginative schools learners are encouraged to pursue their passions and are given space to think differently and shape their own understanding of the world around them. This allows learners the opportunity to reach their full potential. With imagination there is space for every student to flourish and to be their authentic self. When imagination is at the heart of schools--and the empathy imagination allows--meaningful inclusion and reconciliation are possible. One of the goals of imaginative schools may be for learners to leave school being more passionate about the world around them than they were in Kindergarten. *What if graduates of B.C. schools were more curious than when they started?*

If we hope to create and sustain imagination-rich schools, there is still much work that needs to be done. For example, it would be beneficial to establish an Imaginative Schools Network. An Imaginative Schools Network would be a place where leaders could connect with each other and share their stories, experiences, resources and curiosities about imagination. It would be important for an Imaginative Schools Network to create a shared vision and mission for imaginative schools. Another important next step for creating and sustaining imagination-rich schools would be to include understanding of Indigenous conceptions of imagination and inclusion of these perspectives in school culture, pedagogy, and leadership. Finally, it is important to create learning opportunities for all stakeholders. We need to create opportunities where educators, leaders and community members can learn more about imagination and how it benefits all education.

To close, we hope this resource can be used to ignite more conversations about the value of imagination and the many possibilities it offers learning and leadership.

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CIRCE / Centre for Imagination in Research, Culture, and Education
Website: www.circesfu.ca

CSELP / Centre for the Study of Educational Leadership and Policy
Website: <https://www.sfu.ca/education/cselp.html>

imaginED: education that inspires
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