

Building Inclusive School Communities With Cognitive Tools

by

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Radical Inclusion. This is the compelling title of a report describing conditions of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) among female faculty at Simon Fraser University in B.C., Canada (Chenier, 2020). The report's message is clear: when it comes to achieving true inclusion, retrofitting current processes, procedures, and structures to 'include' marginalized people is insufficient. Rather, *radical inclusion*¹ requires transformation of the very structures that perpetuate inequality. While governments have a critical role to play in the creation and regulation of legal support for equality for all, *radical* change is needed; changing the *roots* of inequality is a process that begins on the ground: "Our willingness and capacity to re-imagine and re-invent relationships, institutional cultures, and social governance practices will be central to whether, how, and when inclusive equality emerges" (Sheppard, 2010, pp. 4-5).

This article acknowledges how moving from *what is* to *what if* — understanding, challenging, and reshaping norms and values — involves imagination. With the goal of situating imagination at the heart of leadership practices supporting equity, diversity and inclusion, I offer practical tools leaders can use in their school communities. Specifically, I explore the practical implications of applying Kieran Egan's theory and practice of Imaginative Education (2005, 1997; Egan & Judson, 2015), or IE, to the leadership

context. Currently, IE practices are mostly known in the context of teaching pre-K through graduate school. The application of cognitive tools to the field of leadership studies and leadership education is new (Judson, 2020). This article points at how cognitive tools can enable leaders to engage and grow imagination in schools in the pursuit of equity. In practical ways, leaders may engage imagination with 'cognitive tools' to both re-imagine what *is* and to build *inclusive equality* in their school communities. This is not a 'checklist' for equity; the work is too complex, too contextual, and too personal for that. It is a description of tools that may engage and cultivate imagination among members of communities dedicated to change.

Building With Imagination's Tools

In education, interest in imagination tends to be focused on learning and teaching, not leadership (Judson, 2020). However, many facets of leadership originate in imagination. In terms of the transformative work required to support EDI, we first *imagine* the change we want to see in our school communities. That is, new ways of being and doing find their roots in imagination; it is the *soil* out of which many leadership practices grow (Judson, accepted for publication).

Imaginative Education (IE) offers leaders powerful tools for guiding EDI work. Pedagogically speaking, IE is a practice that puts the engagement of learners first by tapping into unique features of their imaginative lives. At the heart of IE is the idea that effective teaching — teaching that emotionally connects learners with knowledge and supports meaning and memory — is like storytelling. When teachers are *storytellers* they employ certain 'cognitive tools' that engage and cultivate the imaginations

1 Chenier (2020) attributes the term Radical Inclusion to Wendy Harbour, a guest speaker at an EDI series at Simon Fraser University.

of learners. Examples of cognitive tools include identification of dramatic oppositions, vivid mental imagery, playfulness, evocation of heroic qualities, humanization of meaning, and a sense of agency.

Egan's theory is not only a theory for formal school-based education. It is a conception of how imagination develops and grows in human minds across cultures. So, cognitive tools are tools all human beings use all the time. What is new is consideration of how we can *intentionally* use cognitive tools to support leadership development.

This article looks specifically at how cognitive tools might engage imaginations in schools to cultivate inclusive equality. Using the tools *grows* the imagination (Egan, 1997). These tools can also help to create cultures of 'curiosity' and *humility* needed in the face of this challenging work (Pham, 2020). By using cognitive tools individually and collectively in schools, leaders may support the engagement of community imagination, enable active empathy, encourage solidarity, and create conditions for transformation.

(For more information on cognitive tools, visit [imaginED www.educationthathinspires](http://imaginEDwww.educationthathinspires) "Tips For Imaginative Educators" or the Centre for Imagination in Research, Culture and Education www.circesfu.ca)

Following a brief introduction of key features of *inclusive equality*, specific examples of cognitive tools are provided that might be used to engage imagination in service of leaders' ongoing EDI work.

On Inclusive Equality: Care and Active Empathy

Sheppard (2010) begins her book entitled *Inclusive Equality: The Relational Dimensions of Systemic Discrimination in Canada* with the observation that equality continues to be a goal rather than a reality in Canada and around the world. One need only glance at recent news to see that now, ten years after

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her book was published, equality has still not been realized. Systemic racism and discrimination persist. Key features of *inclusive equality* involve an ethic and practice of care paired with individual and collective agency in support of solidarity.

An ethic of care involves respect for someone's past, but also a dedication to support someone developing and flourishing. Through care, a leader works to replace inequitable relationships with equitable ones. At the heart of a practice of care is a *responsibility* to listen (Boler, 1997; Safir, 2017). It is through listening that we gain the *particular knowledge* needed to care in a way that respects difference (Boler, 1997; Safir, 2017; Sheppard, 2010). For many people, the act of *understanding the other's story* is where they see imagination playing a role. Imagination is required to *empathize*. As Maxine Greene (1995) famously said: "imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible" (p. 3). I want to draw attention, however, to what Boler (1997) calls the *risks* of empathy in an attempt to identify how we can better engage imagination for inclusion.

While acknowledging the value of empathy for social change, Boler (1997) warns of its risks. The ultimate risk of empathy, she states, is integrating the other's experience into one's own framework without taking action (Boler, 1997). She describes "passive empathy" as narrow, "flat" in terms of historical knowledge, and lacking action (p. 255). Passive empathy involves an "easy identification" with the other, a subsuming of the other's experience, and an abdication of a sense of responsibility for the inequitable situation (p. 255). Passive empathy is not paired with critical thinking about one's own positionality, power, or privilege, nor does it involve critical reflection of the nature of inequitable relationships in particular contexts. It does not strive for a transformation of consciousness

for both parties. Leaders must understand empathy as an action word.

As educational leaders, we can practice *active* empathy that inspires action and change, and, ultimately, shifts power relations. As listeners and learners, leaders can strive to identify with another person's experience without erasing the difference that might exist and with the intention to understand the needs and experiences of another person "as they define and articulate them" (Sheppard, 2010, p. 108). To practice *active* empathy in support of inclusion, leaders should critically question their responses to others' stories. Leaders must "confront the internal obstacles encountered as one's views are challenged" (Boler, 1997, p. 262). This involves recognizing challenges to practices and principles we may value and that may be firmly part of our worldview. Sitting with possible discomfort is part of the work inclusive equality requires.

Individual and collective *agency* is also required to address systemic constraints to inclusion. In Sheppard's words, we must ask: "How might we utilize our power as individuals or as members of social groups to challenge exclusion and marginalization? What power do we have to contest the inequitable treatment of those around us?" (2010, p. 136). *Solidarity* in this work is essential (Sheppard, 2010). It is not enough to support and act for those whose lives are most like our own. We participate in solidarity work when we engage our agency individually and collectively to work across differences and maintain diversity in pursuit of inclusion for all.

Educational leaders have a profound role to play in working for inclusive equality. They have a responsibility to use their power and privilege to actively "contest and resist exclusion and marginalization, either in [their] own lives or in the lives of those around [them]" (Sheppard, 2010, p. 4). This is the *radical* change — the root changes — that inclusion requires. Up next is consideration of the range of cognitive tools of imagination that leaders can employ to build and maintain radically inclusive communities. What emerges is a sense of how imagination can be actively engaged in the care, agency, and solidarity work required for inclusion.

The Tools

Consider how you might employ these tools in dialogue and reflection to build inclusion in your school communities:

Seeking Understanding: What's The Story Here?

What or whose 'story' dominates here? What or whose is missing? What limitations or constraints make it difficult to share experiences of ex/inclusion here? What are the rhythms or patterns of marginalization here? Be attentive to your emotional responses to the stories and experiences you hear about. How are you personally implicated in this story?

Feeling Comfortable With Discomfort: Body Forth

Listen and learn from all the stakeholders in your school community. Allow yourself to experience discomfort. Avoid the urge to escape this discomfort. What do you notice about your emotional response? How can you channel this emotion into acting to create equitable relationships?

Mental Images: Snapshots of Equity and Inequity

What does equity look like in this organization? What does inequity look like? Examine the similarities and differences of your community members' images of equity/inequity. What is missing? What procedures, processes or relationships are reproducing the inequity? Define measurable steps to address each inequity.

Extreme What If-ing

Engage in some collaborative and *extreme* brainstorming. What is your ideal image of this community? What would it look, sound, feel like? Who or what would be part of the conversation? What would not? Now create as many statements as possible to consider options for moving to action.

Humanize Equity/Diversity/Inclusion Work

What stories and examples of successful social justice work can guide you? What stories of school communities and leadership can you learn from?

Start With Equity and Inclusion

Imagine equity is a reality in your school community. This is your starting point. How different would your school look/feel for all community members if those who have been marginalized took a central position? What would that mean for different groups (get specific)? What procedures, processes or practices would need to change at the level of your school community to make this possible?

Nurture Storytelling

Start from a place of story-listening and story-telling—how is storytelling honoured in your school community? How is listening honoured? At an individual level, how do you listen? How do you honour the difference of the other in the stories you hear? How do you empower others who come with different experiences than your own?

Transcendent Qualities

What transcendent qualities currently define your community/organization and what qualities do you want to see enacted in everyday action? (e.g. loyalty, trust, respect)

Wonder

What is unique and inspiring about your school community? How does diversity enrich your community?

Agency

How is each and every person in your school community not only an ally, but an *accomplice* in the fight for equity, diversity, and inclusion for all? What actions do *accomplices* for inclusive equality take to support this goal in your school everyday?

Enact Care

Deep transformation to support EDI requires relationships based in *care* and the sharing of stories and experiences. Imagine an ethic of care infuses the organization. This is your starting place. What does it mean to work from a place of *care*? How does *care* frame all of the interactions in your school? Think about care as an *action* — what actions of care do you see in your school?

What Does it Mean to be 'Anti'?

In championing EDI, leaders need to be *anti*-racist, *anti*-sexist, *anti*-abelist, etc. Lean into the 'anti' — lean into the *action* implied in this way of being. How does anti-inequity sound, look, feel in your organization?

Metaphors Matter: Not Window Dressing/ Beyond Rhetoric

Genuine inclusion is not *window dressing* (Chenier, 2020, p. 28) — it isn't rhetoric with little change.

What analogy or metaphor describes EDI action in your organization?

It is _____ (*fill in the blank with your goal — your metaphor for genuine change*).

Fill in the blanks: In this organization we _____, we refuse to _____.
What if _____?



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Conclusion

A premise of this article has been that the roots of inclusive and socially just communities lie in imagination — not only the ability to *understand* the perspective of another person or group but also the ability to take action, and, guided by principles of EDI, build communities that support all people. If we are committed to EDI as leaders, then part of our work will be to put our imaginations to work in support of *new* structures that support equity, diversity and inclusion, rather than attempt to modify or tinker to 'retrofit'. This article has aimed to show how leaders might more routinely use imagination's tools to build inclusive communities.

In *Radical Inclusion*, Chenier (2020) speaks of the intentionality required to achieve inclusive equality: "We do have to cultivate it. We have to centre it, we have to hold ourselves accountable for building and sustaining it, and we have to undertake widespread systems change to enact, support, and sustain it" (p. 47). The same is true for building inclusion in schools. With imagination fueling our work, we may build communities for all. Moreover, if we can acknowledge imagination's role in equity work, we may cultivate cultures in which imagination and talking about imaginative leadership is the norm, rather than the exception.

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