

## 4.4 Developing Imagination – Nurturing Ambition

**Leaders in education are shaped by visionary imagination, evaluating the present accurately, and energising their teams towards a hope-filled future. Imagination is at the heart of pedagogy, bringing creativity to the classroom and nurturing possibility in every learner. Ambitious leaders pursue broad and deep outcomes, developing character in children, equity in community and social justice in curriculum. They seek the flourishing of adults, with patience, compassion and courage.**

### Developing Imagination

In his study of the biblical prophets, Walter Brueggemann writes: “The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and imagine almost nothing. It is our vocation to keep alive the ministry of imagination” (Brueggemann 2001:40). The Bible understands God as inherently creative: “...he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.” (Jeremiah 10:12), and imaginative: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:19)

Jesus constantly reconceives the expected notions of the saviour the people of Israel were awaiting, and shows himself to be an imaginative and observant teacher, storyteller and question-poser. The New Testament heightens and broadens the Christian imagination through a concentrated attention on rich symbols such as light and darkness, water and wine, wind and breath, bread and fish, stench and fragrance, seeing and blindness, and more. Above all, it focuses on life-giving images and stories which point to the God who is love, and Jesus as God’s self-expression and self-giving, breathing his Spirit of love into those who trust him. Its practical impact is to stimulate us to imagine living in line with who Jesus is and what he does, and to improvise ways of continuing his work of teaching and service in love.

Brueggemann builds his notion of imagination around two core concepts –

*to criticise* and *to energise*. Prophetic leaders offer a wise and evaluative critique of the current situation, and then energise their teams to pursue a future that cannot yet be seen. The prophets do this in their context, and Jesus’ ministry does the same, reimagining the past, present and future. God-centred imagination sometimes defies what currently seems plausible or realistic. Leaders who develop this imagination in their teams, like teachers who do the same with their children, not only enable hope but also build resilience for challenging moments.

Imagination is an expression of the heart’s treasure, an orientation of desire, a trajectory of intent: “All my longings lie open before you Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.” (Psalm 38:9). It defines our behaviour and communications, including our communication with God, who transcends our imagining. The Letter to the Ephesians encourages us to stretch all our capacities in order to comprehend “what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God...” But then it goes even further, opening our imaginations, no matter how daring, to the ever greater possibilities and surprises of God: “Now to him, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:18-21)

While it is easily squeezed out of the pedagogical craft, when lost to the narrow pursuit of productivity, the

1. What could it mean in your school to ‘keep alive the ministry of imagination’? What aspects need to ‘criticised’ and ‘energised’?

2. When you think about your community, to what extent do you resonate with Isaiah’s picture of ‘making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.’?

3. How can a sense of faith change our view as to what is actually possible for our community?

4. To what extent does imagination stand at the heart of great pedagogy – how can it be squeezed out, celebrated or resourced in our planning?

imagination of a child has immense potential for good or ill, and it is a raw force present in children, there for the teacher to encourage, refine, and cheer on. It can lead not only into worship and empathy with other people, but also into appreciating and sometimes creating music, art, poetry, fiction, drama, dance, and many other forms and media of communication. Other spheres of activity vital to society also thrive on imagination, such as innovative science and

technology, entrepreneurial business, politics that serves the common good, creativity in organisations and institutions, and the shaping of homes, neighbourhoods and the natural environment. Imaginative teachers can open their pupils to the significance and fascination of beauty and quality in such fields, so that they become able to envisage themselves making some contributions to them.

## Nurturing Ambition

The apostle Paul was a supremely ambitious leader, leading an action-packed, geographically expansive international network which catalysed the establishment of the early Jesus movement in a string of urban centres. There were many outward signs of success and growth, yet he consistently re-defines ambition in an upside-down way. The main criterion of success is building a community that has “the same mind... that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5), centred on humble service. Not only is each person valued, but the least attractive and able are seen as of special worth in God’s eyes – “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... If one member suffers, then all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:22, 26) Above all, this is ambitious love. In his hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13 he relativises all other criteria – he says that, whatever his abilities, gifts, faith, generosity, and even self-sacrifice, “I am nothing... I gain nothing without love” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). This love is described very differently from most ideas of ambition (it is patient and kind, it does not insist on its own way, and more), and crucially, it involves a process of learning and maturing: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when

I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” (1 Corinthians 13:11)

What is ambition for? Leaders are tasked with nurturing expansive ambition – which includes excellence in key subjects, designing curricula for social justice, loving the most vulnerable, broadening the definition of educational success and flourishing, and tenaciously removing barriers (including those relating to self-esteem, disability, attachment, support, resources, geography, economics) for the children in their care. Many architects of great cathedrals knew for certain, on completing their design, that they would never see the final building built. Yet they still chose to design the cathedral with creativity and humility, ambitious not their own glory, but to serve others (as outlined Paul’s description of Jesus in Philippians 2:5-11).

Leaders recognise the factors that stifle positive ambition (including fear of failure, lack of trust, loss of momentum, absence of self-esteem, breaking of relationship), and therefore recognise that the nurture of this broader sense of ambition takes time and patience, and can rarely be achieved by force or instruction. They protect and water emerging green shoots, and teach their teams to do the same, creating learning cultures and classrooms that enable a shift in the ambition of children.

**1. What are you ambitious for as a leader, as a team? How would people know what motivates you and your hopes for your organisation’s future?**

**2. What could it mean for your team to ‘protect and water emerging green shoots’? What role might patience play in nurturing ambition?**

**3. How might education feel like designing and building a cathedral you might never see?**

**4. What factors have tended to stifle ambition in your context? What resources and relationships could you draw on to re-build that which is broken?**