Imagination at the Center: Identity on the Margins

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Perusing recent books on educational theory, I discovered that the subject of identity is foremost in many authors’ minds. Indices of these books show several entries on the subject of identity, including references to multiple and plural identities. These same indices rarely have an entry on imagination, and only occasionally on creativity. For a process thinker and educational theorist, this is troubling. Why have educators become preoccupied with identity, while moving imagination and creativity to the sidelines, or completely out of the picture?

The purpose of this essay is to re-imagine education, placing imagination at the center, and designating identity as a subcategory of the relational process of self-making. This shift of figure and ground is not to deny the substantive nature of identity discussions, but to resist the substantive nature of identity itself. This shift is based in process-relational assumptions that people are always in process. They are continuous with their pasts and continually changing as they move into the future. Educationally this is a sharp reminder that a human life “is never finished and that persons have opportunities for transformation at all points in their lives” (Moore, Education 111). Both individuals and societies are complexly related to past, present, and future, and to a myriad of influences (Many) that are integrated into One at each moment in time (Education 86–117; Bracken, “Continuity” 115–124). In regard to identity, this means that we will not find a substantive thing called identity residing in a person’s life, nor can a person ever expect to attain a substantive resting place. A person or community can indeed form enduring qualities, attitudes, values and patterns of behavior, as well as an enduring sense of self or communal definition; however, these are always open to renegotiation, transformation, and reconstruction.

In light of this anthropology, why would educational theorists focus so intensely on identity and pay little heed to imagination and creativity? Perhaps the reason lies in the persistence of substantive philosophies in public imagination. Perhaps it lies in the discomfort, even fear, evoked in times of rapid change, expanded migration, multicultural complexity, and global strain. Whatever the reasons, our present educational systems usually consign imagination to extracurricular movements and to the tertiary interests of teachers, administrators,
and educational theorists. The purpose of this essay is to consider the rationale for imagination at the center of education, and then to propose and develop educational approaches that cultivate imagination.

A Case for Imagination

Consider the role of imagination in ordinary life, and the power of imagination to inspire greatness. In two recent biographical movies, *Ray* and *Beyond the Sea*, the central characters (Ray Charles and Bobby Darin) were born into almost overwhelming economic and social hardship. Yet, each of these men was to become a musician of renown. The two men shared another commonality: they were each blessed with an imaginative mother! Their mothers imagined lives for them that far exceeded the limits of their childhood contexts. In *Ray*, Ray Charles discovered music by the side of a local pianist who stirred his musical imagination. Then, his mother promised him a life different from hers, eventually sending him away to follow a dream. Bobby Darin’s mother (later revealed as his grandmother) introduced him to music, which she was sure would be his salvation; it was. Her musical teaching and contagious musical spirit empowered his life, from childhood until long after her death. Both Ray Charles and Bobby Darin forged lives (identities) for themselves, and then re-invented themselves repeatedly over the ensuing years. Even their musical styles changed over time. Their stories thus point to the power of educational imagination, whether passed on by a visionary mother, a classroom teacher, or an educational culture.

In earlier work, I touted the value of a Whiteheadian cosmology to uncover the power of imagination for peace and peacemaking (“Imagine”). This power emerges from the process-relational nature of reality. As reality emerges, endless possibilities exist for rearranging the past and moving in radically new directions, even when heritage is strong and persistent. Indeed, heritage itself is complex, and the heritage that seems most monolithic and rigid holds seeds of novelty and change within itself. We can see this in the music of Ray Charles and Bobby Darin, which continued to emerge in new forms, always with echoes of the men’s pasts and frequently with daring adventure, even when their adventures led them to create music that people could not yet appreciate. Such is the work of imagination, stirring new images of self, new possibilities for one’s work, and endless variations in the music of life.

One might expect that imagination would draw people into it, but it is often more frightening than alluring. As people initially rejected Ray Charles’s new sound, so people are often suspicious or uneasy with change, or even the process of envisioning change. This uneasiness is challenging for educational systems. Primary and secondary schools compete for funding, sometimes struggle to remain open and viable, and almost always endure pressure from parents, local school boards, and state and federal governments (Riffert, “Process-Philosophy”). Similarly, colleges and universities are measured by academic traditions and popular values (Dianying, “Faraway”; Moore, “Relational”), which are often conservative about preserving past forms and reluctant to embrace novelty.
This can even be true for community colleges, however idealistic their mission statements may be about responding to local communities.

This discussion raises several persistent issues that also concerned Alfred North Whitehead in the early twentieth century. Thus, his reflections on education and cosmology contribute to the present analysis, with some limitations that will be noted. Three issues will be considered here: the educational necessity of imagination, multifarious ways of imagination, and contributions of imagination to a flourishing future. Analyzing these issues will highlight process-relational contributions. Some of these contributions are obvious for people familiar with process-relational literature; some are not. Some are easy to include in educational practice; some are not. Many of the contributions would lure educational institutions far beyond where most of us have been willing to travel thus far.

Educational Necessity of Imagination

The necessity of imagination is underscored in Whitehead’s rhythms of education—romance, precision, and generalization—which begin with imagination and end with integration (AE 15–28). It is also underscored by Whitehead’s attention to aesthetics as a central value, even defining education as “guidance of the individual towards a comprehension of the art of life” (AE 39). This aesthetic emphasis persisted throughout Whitehead’s life, from Cambridge days onward. In Science and the Modern World, he still argued for aesthetic education, describing the goal “to draw out habits of aesthetic apprehension,” or “the habit of enjoying vivid values” (199, 200).

This language is familiar to process-relational thinkers, but all too easy to ignore as a vision to be embodied. In the classroom, when I read a text with students and invite them to discern and appreciate the life history and social context out of which the text emerged and the peoples to whom it is addressed, I am inviting them to read deeply, to read through the words, and to use their imaginations to paint a picture of the realities behind and in front of the text. When we discuss a text by imitating the research method of the author—autobiographical sharing, enactment of folk narratives, interviewing a group of women about their religious faith and practice, or viewing a movie—I commonly discover that students see such reading of texts as less critical, less academically respectable, than a rush to critique the book’s omissions and failures. In both approaches (contextualizing and method-replication), I invite students to imagine—to imagine authors and their worlds, and to imagine the processes by which a book was birthed. I believe this deepens human knowing. Students fear it is frivolous. They soon discover, however, that they have encountered the text more deeply than they imagined possible.

The necessity of imagination comes forth in other ways as well. Again, process thinkers are familiar with Whitehead’s major critiques of education and philosophy, many of which imply the necessity of imagination as a counterpoint. In education, he critiques the “disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum” (AE 6–7). Similarly, he critiques specialization “in
particular regions of thought” and the focus on adding progressively “to the sum of knowledge” within those limited subject areas (SMW 196). The danger here is “minds in a groove,” which discourage “straying across country” (197). These themes flow through many years of Whiteheadian commentary on education, as well as his metaphysical works. One of his clearest summaries of these ideas is offered in *Science and the Modern World*:

My own criticism of our traditional educational methods is that they are far too much occupied with intellectual analysis, and with the acquirement of formalised information. . . . [W]e neglect to strengthen habits of concrete appreciation of the individual facts in their full interplay of emergent values. (198)

Whitehead is urging an aesthetic approach to education, placing an accent on aesthetic apprehension. He leaves for later theorists to analyze the social, political, and psychological barriers to aesthetic education and the philosophical constructs that need further development if aesthetics is to be fully claimed and embodied.

Imagination is a necessity in philosophy as it is in education. Whitehead decries the triviality of chaos in human theorizing, but also the triviality of certain kinds of order. What is needed, in his view, is for philosophers to embrace chaos, to seek order, and to entertain the tensions between them. Whitehead says, “Thus, if there is to be progress beyond limited ideals, the course of history by way of escape must venture along the borders of chaos in its substitution of higher for lower forms of order” (*PR* 111). This entire venture is peppered with imagination (*PR* 16–17, 274–75). Such a journey with imagination is an ongoing process; no order is ever final, and no chaos is ever the last word. Teachers and learners are all seekers—walking up to the abyss, touching the unknown, playing with new ideas, seeking explanations and theories, and remembering that the venture will never end.

I suggest that the exercise of imagination is like paddling a canoe, requiring different strategies at different moments in time. Sometimes we need smooth strokes that propel us down gently flowing creeks and rivers. On those days, aesthetic education may actually look graceful and beautiful. Sometimes, we need deep, powerful strokes because we are moving against the current. Sometimes, we need quick thinking and careful navigation through rapids. At other times, we simply have to lift the canoe and portage it to another part of the river. This paddling metaphor suggests that imagination is not one thing; it is an action, indeed a medley of actions, exercised in relation to a context and in a singular effort or a collaborative effort with others. The purpose of imagination is finally to move creation through time and space. In the case of human educational systems, its purpose is to move the learning community and the communities with whom they relate into the future.
Multifarious Ways of Imagination

Imagination inevitably stirs movement and transformation, however slight. Process-relational thought has been helpful in explaining that transformational process in micro- and meta-narratives, but less helpful in explaining the impediments to imagination and transformation, especially in systemic and social contexts. In a process-relational view, the combination of inheritance (continuity) and novelty (change) can be explained metaphysically. Each occasion of experience receives the whole of the past, plus the novelty that emerges from God’s initial aim, and, then, creates itself. In Whitehead’s language, “The many become one, and are increased by one” (PR 21; cf. 21–22, 40, 56–57). The manyness of the past enters into the present moment, but once the new occasion creates itself, it is added to the many. This description points to the multifarious ways of imagination, originating from past inheritance with its multitude of experiences and perspectives, from the lure of the future and the interjection of novelty, and from the unique decisions made in each moment. Educationally, this is suggestive, as I have developed in the past (Teaching 59–89; Education).

What strikes me here is the difficulty of teaching with imagination, even more the difficulty of designing educational systems permeated with imagination. Primary and secondary schools are expected to carry much of the public’s agenda for social stability and protection. Public schools are sites for offering free lunch programs, reporting suspected abuse, monitoring drugs and violence, and communicating the values of safe sex, to name a few. Many of these roles are also carried by private schools, which add other protections for constituents who want particular “goods” for their children. These protectionist roles are valuable and necessary in human communities where schools are the only social institutions that touch all children and youth. However, a protectionist mentality can obscure the lure to address social dangers in more visionary ways. The situation in higher education is parallel. Granting agencies and donors drive colleges and universities, as do governmental and religious bodies, boards of trustees, and administrators and faculties. Just as in primary and secondary education, these bodies can suffer from lack of imagination or fear of adventure, most often in the name of protection—protecting a popular social agenda, a deeply ingrained political or religious philosophy, economic security, or canons of knowledge. Further, the complex power relations among these bodies further undermine imagination, making transformation difficult.

In light of these challenges, people who pose alternative visions are wise to analyze and respect the dynamics of resistance and, also, to consider the multifarious ways of imagination. They best not function as visionaries in the sky, nor think of imagination as one simple thing to be named and enacted in one simple movement. Visionaries need to discern and uphold the protective roles of education that are justifiable. Further, they need to communicate their visions in ways that people with competing agenda will understand and find compelling, thus linking visions and building toward social knowing and social imagination. To
do this, many pathways of imagination need to be considered, whether focused on an institutional mission statement, a collaborative educational project, or the content and approach to teaching.

Consider two cases of imagination in higher education, each revealing different pathways of imagination. David Orr discovered that he could better communicate the need for an ecological conversion of Oberlin College by first building an environmental studies center in a newly designed building that exemplified the highest standards of ecological architecture, and then gathering people within the building to discuss further institutional change. He was concerned with organizational learning, which required multiple steps with multiple communities within the college. It also required a visual sign of the conversion he advocated. Indeed, in the time after the building was erected, Orr discovered that the Lewis Center “helped to stretch the ecological imagination and competence of Oberlin college students in fields of solar technologies, ecological engineering, horticulture, landscape management, and ecological design” (168). Orr thus applied his imagination to creating a stunning visual symbol, which was simultaneously a highly functional and environmentally responsible building.

In a different approach to institutional imagination, Peggy Barlett and her colleagues discovered that Emory University could best move forward ecologically by reshaping the University’s mission statement, discussing a proposed statement throughout the University, and gaining support from Emory’s various units (76–80). The process took several months, during which the team modified the proposed statement in relation to the gathered responses. At the end of this process, the statement was supported widely across the institution and passed almost unanimously by the Faculty Senate. In the years preceding the statement, considerable work had already been done, including the establishment of an Environmental Studies Program, sponsored hikes and ivy pulls, and advocacy for forest preservation. The statement (and the process that led to it) inspired further work, escalating into several more small and large projects, including an Environment Across the Curriculum Project that equips faculty to teach about the environment in their diverse fields.

Such approaches suggest pathways for institutional transformation: planting seeds, conducting bold visible experiments, and personifying visions through charismatic leadership, which eventually spreads through a community of leaders. These acts of imagination go beyond Whitehead’s earlier process visions, not merely by enactment, but also by surfacing the role of Whitehead’s societies in social change. The educational cases pose metaphysical questions regarding the possibility of a society’s making decisions that are more than the sum of individual occasions. Some process thinkers have already proposed ideas that develop these ontological constructs more fully. Joseph Bracken offers a “neo-Whiteheadian” proposal, arguing that the “interrelated agencies of actual occasions fuse into a collective agency operative at the level of the society as a whole” (“Continuity“
Bracken further explains:

[E]very society (both inorganic, organic and supraorganic) is more than an aggregate of analogously constituted actual occasions; it is a higher-level ontological totality with a collective agency proper to itself which, at the same time, is derivative from the interrelated agencies of its constituent actual occasions. (120; see also: Bracken, One)

Such a view is generative for educational theories of imagination, which require attention to social collectives as well as actual occasions.

Bracken's idea is philosophically bold, but it offers the kind of metaphysical middle principle that has been missing in explaining some aspects of reality, especially systemic realities of social, political, and educational contexts. In studying educational practice, wisdom emerges that challenges the more micro- and macro-foci of traditional process-relational thought. A neo-Whiteheadian wisdom is needed to fund aesthetic education that is alive with the multifarious ways of imagination.

**Contributions of Imagination to Flourishing**

Not only is imagination necessary and complex; it also bears teleological power. Most educational theories are explicit about their goal to contribute value to human life, even if few theorists extend their hopes to the cosmos. The enhancement of human life, however named and understood in diverse contexts, is important to education. Teachers often experience this particular goal with a sense of urgency, asking themselves what difference their teaching makes. As evil seemingly escalates in the world, and as people live under the threat of armed conflict, poverty, and bruising relationships, a sense of hope is sometimes difficult to sustain in education. Teachers and educational administrators ask disturbing questions. What difference does my teaching or leadership make? What does my life vocation contribute to human thriving, peace, justice, and ecological harmony? These are large questions, but they are not empty. Most people enter education with at least some idealism about making the world a better place. Imagination itself is attractive because of its potential to help learning communities contribute to the world’s flourishing.

For this agenda, process-relational thought is helpful. Whitehead understood the future as “fully and radically open,” believing further that progress was possible (PR 112). This view is easily misunderstood, either by emphasizing the determinism of past inheritance or by asserting the inevitability of progress. Neither is adequate to capture the cosmology of Whitehead. After many years as an agnostic, Whitehead posited the participation of God in the universe because his metaphysical analyses required a transcending explanation of the world’s movements. He came to the view that, through God, people encounter ideals and possibilities. People sense a rightness or goodness that is “attained or missed, with more or less completeness of attainment or omission” (RM 60–61). This early insight, developed with more fullness in later writing, reveals Whitehead’s hope for progress, devoid of naïve optimism or philosophical necessity. The future
is thus open to possibility, but without guarantees of global progress.

The possibility of progress combines with the possibility that people and other beings can actually contribute to positive movements by modifying their environments. Whitehead’s view here is interesting, though somewhat distorted and naïve. He said, “Those organisms are successful which modify their environments so as to assist each other” (SMW 205). The term “progress” is inadequate in light of the social critiques of so-called progress in the intervening eighty years. Further, Whitehead was naïve about what might constitute progress. In Science in the Modern World, for example, he disparaged the Native American willingness to accept their environment, and applauded the European settlers’ ability to modify their environment so that it can now accommodate more people (205–206). He did recognize the need for mutual cooperation, and he decried the use of force; however, he did not acknowledge the potential damage that beings can cause when they modify their environments to their own ends with inadequate awareness of the needs and contributions of others, including the animals and plants, land and air and water.

I propose that what is most needed now is a vision of flourishing, formed and continually reformed by a collaborative exercise of imagination. Imagination is needed first to discern the kinds of flourishing—past and present—that best contribute to the common good. It is further needed to envision alternative futures for local communities and beyond. These alternative futures will not likely be calmly chosen, easily implemented, or fully achieved visions. The very process of visioning can destabilize a community, and its instability can have salutary, negligible, or destructive consequences. On the other hand, destabilization is a necessary risk, for the closing of imagination and the failure to risk new ventures will likely destroy a community over time. Even Whitehead recognized that security is not the highest good. In the twentieth-first century political climate, with security escalating as a preferred value around the globe, I offer his challenge anew:

The middle class pessimism over the future of the world comes from a confusion between civilisation and security. In the immediate future there will be less security than in the immediate past, less stability. It must be admitted that there is a degree of instability which is inconsistent with civilisation. But, on the whole, the great ages have been unstable ages. (SMW 207)

As if the invitation to destabilization is not enough, Whitehead proceeded to chronicle how an epoch, “at its moment of supreme success,” opens into a critique of its limitations, which then calls “for a renewed exercise of the creative imagination” (208).

In sum, imagination can strengthen a community in its present form, destabilize it, or reshape it when destabilization has already occurred. This means that education requires a commitment to respond to the movements of particular times and places. Often education needs to respond to its time by promoting the kind of order that produces excellence (PR 338), building on the order
that is already present and the richness of the past. This kind of education can itself contribute to imagination; however, more is needed, for “imaginative zest is tinged with impulse,” which pushes the limits of most educational systems (338). In other times and places, the social order is more destructive than life giving. Education thus needs another kind of commitment, namely to embrace chaos, to risk destabilization, and to teach skills for living with the instability that emerges in the natural flow of life or in the intentional disruptions aimed at reshaping a stable but destructive situation. Such education will involve discerning, analyzing, and even provoking destabilization, while teaching knowledge and skills that help people to engage unstable social institutions with courage and wisdom, and to imagine new futures. In most times, education needs to be involved in all of these actions, thus stirring visions and teaching skills that foster some degree of stability and some degree of social change, with the higher goal of enhancing life that flourishes for all people and the entire earth.

*Cultivating Imaginative Knowing*

For imagination to be at the center of education does not mean that everything else is decentered. It simply means that teachers, learners, and subject matters are engaged in adventure—searching, yearning, expecting, and thus opening to images (visions) that arise in each encounter. Identity does not cease to be important in imaginative education, but it is not seen as the beginning or end. It is not an initiating reality to be passed on and enculturated in learners. Neither is it a teleological reality to be discovered or constructed in a final form. It is, rather, the culmination of many acts—passing on, enculturation, discovery, and social construction—and yet the culmination is inevitably a passing one. Education continues, as does identity formation, and future educative moments will likely yield a different mix of identities in the learner and learning community. Further, the identities will never be simple. They will likely resemble the “plural identities” discussed by Sissel Ostberg, negotiated and constructed from the several identities offered by plural cultures (93–108). The very formation of identity is an imaginative work, as it is a process-relational work.

In other writing on imagination, I reviewed some daring movements in education. The fruits of that work include increased attention to consciousness, human agency, and cultural action (“Imagine” 13–15). The dangers, however, are an occasional narrowing of focus to technological imagination or to critical thinking as the primary way of knowing. What is needed now is concentrated attention on imagination, which is exemplified but not exhausted by technological imagination and critical thinking and which promises to intensify other approaches to education, luring educational systems into a bolder future. Such an approach is necessitated by a cosmology emphasizing “the self-creative unity of the universe” (PR 47) and by recent developments in education. For this reason, we turn now to analyze diverse ways to cultivate imagination in education, creating a dialogue between Whiteheadian cosmology and recent works in progressive educational theory.
I will identify five complexes of educational practice. These do not exhaust the possibilities, but they expand earlier proposals (“Imagine” 15–22). The approaches are more than applications of Whiteheadian philosophy, and more than inventions of my mind. They emerge, as does imaginative education, from a complex interplay between discoveries in educational research and theory-building, discoveries in process-relational philosophy, and discoveries in my unique journey of educational-philosophical practice.

**Seeking Goodness**

The earlier discussion of flourishing points to one urgent complex of educational practices, namely those practices that enable people to discover and analyze forces of goodness and evil, and those practices that stir vision and equip people with skills to enhance common good. This entire complex of practice involves people in discerning and maximizing the nourishing powers that exist in the world, while decrying and reforming destructive powers. One finds this impulse in Alfred North Whitehead (described earlier), and also in ethicists who draw upon and reshape process-relational ideas. Consider Lois Gehr Livezey, who advocates Douglas Sturm’s “politics in the ‘community of life,’” as well as “politics of the public good” (214–220). In Livezey’s view, political action, especially in the face of violence, requires a recovery of imagination and a sense that change is possible (211–212). Douglas Sturm’s work informs Livezey and others, especially his communitarian ethic grounded in a relational social ontology, which he claims to illumine human rights and defy the claim made by some that process thought is “morally soft-hearted and politically irrelevant” (237). For him, the teleological ends of human action are critical. Further, human rights “is a moral requisite of the comprehensive purpose” of a relational social ontology (255). Even in this brief ethical commentary, one can see the practical value of human communities’ seeking goodness—a view that boldly challenges education.

The educational role of seeking goodness resonates with much educational literature. Paulo Freire, from his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* until his death, advocated education that equipped learners as agents of history, displaying an unwavering hope that education could contribute to good ends, beginning with the goal of human agency and enlarging to goals of social reform, made possible (though not guaranteed) through that agency. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire reflects back on his educational history, repeating earlier themes with personal annotations, and doing so with unabashed hope for the good that can emerge from educational practice. For him, the higher purposes of education hinge on human agency:

> I cannot understand human beings as simply living. I can understand them only as historically, culturally, and socially existing. I can understand them only as beings who are makers of their “way,” in the making of which they lay themselves open to or commit themselves to the “way” that they make and that therefore remakes them as well. (97)

Freire expresses several different goods for education, including joy (82); denunciation of present, intolerable realities and annunciation of “a future to be
created” (91); and active transformation of reality (102–103). These goods guide the educational process, which requires critical analysis of the present situation, dreams for the future, and tactics and strategies consonant with those dreams and effective in concrete history (90–91).

Such educative work is grounded in imagination, including both the imagination to see the world and the ability to dream alternative worlds. Freire is concerned with both. As to the first, he says, “We become capable of imaginatively, curiously, ‘stepping back’ from ourselves—from the life we lead—and of disposing ourselves to ‘know about it’” (98). This kind of knowing allows people to see that they can do more. Of dreaming, Freire says: “Dreaming is not only a necessary political act, it is an integral part of the historic-social manner of being a person. It is part of human nature, which, within history, is in permanent process of becoming” (90–91). Such a perspective echoes that of process-relational theorists. It underscores the significance of imagination, but it stands in sad contrast with much educational practice.

One discovers similar emphases in empirical studies of education, such as the ethnographic study of St. Francis High School in which students, mostly Black and middle class, were involved regularly in social service activities. Research findings suggest that meaningful activity and the sense of helping others were both important to these youth, as well as a sense of responsibility, a sense of being part of history, and other learnings (Youniss & Yates, Community 136–53). In a different kind of study, researchers found that teachers in Dutch Catholic primary schools reported that they combine autonomous and heteronomous approaches to moral education. Researchers concluded that, for children to think for themselves (autonomy), they need transmission of values (heteronomy). Identifying autonomy as “the ultimate goal of moral education,” they recognized that transmitting moral tradition actually enhances autonomy (Altena et al, 191). These two studies, taken together, reveal the significance of purposive action and purposive study in education. They echo process-relational views in which ethical enactments (e.g., social service), transmission of moral tradition, and encouragement of human agency enhance possibilities for people to decide and act for the common good. On the other hand, neither these studies, nor others like them, develop the ideas further. That is the work for future educators who practice imagination at the center of the educational enterprise.

Seeking Transcendence—Touching the Unknown

Closely related to the search for goodness is the search for transcendence, or touching the unknown. Whitehead recognized that ideals are never ends, for the “repetition of a perfected ideal” leads to staleness and anaesthesia (AI 286). The “creative urge of the universe” is enacted as each individual occasion enjoys the past that lives within it, and culminates in the joy of being “alive in the future” (193). This helps explain why adventure and art are “necessary elements in civilization” (274); they resonate with the movements of life, which themselves are artful and adventurous. Further, they fuel the ongoing movement of life,
which is vital in a world where “no static maintenance of perfection is possible” (274). The past is always perishing, which initiates a new process of becoming (237–38). Adventure and art enable people to function in such a world—a world that continually transcends itself.

These ideas have vast import for education. Bernard Meland, for example, encourages educators to probe beyond the obvious—to dive ever more deeply into facts, thus discovering the “deeper import” and stirring wonder (28). Hanan Alexander, philosopher of religious education, also argues for transcendence: “Transcendence is the wellspring of hope and creativity because it leaves open the possibility that there is always another, better way to consider any possible situation” (146). Such education requires far more than training and reproduction (186). It calls for inquiry and criticism, innovation and creativity, which “strengthen the moral agent within each person” (187–88). What is striking in these views from diverse social contexts is how they mirror the open-ended view of future found in Paulo Freire:

Indeed, whenever the future is considered as a pregiven—whether this be as the pure, mechanical repetition of the present, or simply because it ‘is what it has to be’—there is no room for utopia, nor therefore for the dream, the option, the decision, or expectancy in the struggle, which is the only way hope exists. There is no room for education. Only for training. (91)

Whether we attend to Meland, Alexander, or Freire, we are faced with the challenge of moving beyond repetition, rote learning, and training. We are encouraged to look beyond present reality to transcendent possibilities.

Lest this sound educationally naïve, consider the teachers in South Africa who taught under conditions of apartheid. Many of these teachers found ways to proclaim to themselves and their students that evil did not have to control people completely (Wieder, 5); they developed strategies to critique the practices of educational domination, revise their ways of teaching required curricula, and keep the future open for their students (13–21). Even telling their stories years later was a strategy by which they continued to teach, hoping “that their testimony had the possibility of educating and changing the world” (1).

Seeking transcendence takes multiple forms. First, in South Africa, teachers encouraged students to transcend the limits of an evil social system. Teachers resisted governmental acts of domination, strategized to teach subjects and perspectives that were denied in black and coloured schools, and helped students see themselves as precious, in spite of systems and rampant prejudices that insisted otherwise. A second form of transcendence is seen in St. Francis High School, discussed earlier for its emphasis on social service. There teachers encouraged youth to transcend their limited sense of identity by encouraging them to see people of diverse religious, social, and political affiliations as part of the “we” of humanity (Youniss and Yates 169–73). A third form of transcendence is enacted in rites of passage, when a person or community moves through a ritual process into a new way of being. For Nancy Frankenberry, the creative movement in a
rite of passage mirrors the creativity of reality and the creativity of every becoming occasion. People undergo a ternary movement from a past, through a “cooking” phase, and into a future (350–53). Frankenberry describes these movements as more relational, less abstractly universal, and more dynamic than the rites of passage theories of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner. For her, the logic of rites of passage inspires a dynamic sense of questing in the human journey—a form of transcendence (355).

With these three examples, we see three approaches to seeking transcendence: transcending limits of an evil social system, transcending narrow understandings of humanity (and “we-ness”), and transcending one way of living in order to dwell in transition and emerge in a new way. These three approaches are educationally relevant. The Cape Town and St. Francis teachers already demonstrate the first two. Educational systems sometimes include rites of passage as well, often in retreats, conferences, practice learning, and seminars that create space for transformation. These practices do not exhaust possibilities for seeking transcendence; however, they are sufficient to begin an educational movement that transcends our present educational systems and practices.

**Intimate Knowing**

The focus on transcendence, with its bold claims regarding human transformation, calls attention to another complex of educational practices—practices of intimate knowing. In intimate knowing, people engage deeply with the fullness of other individuals and communities, other parts of the cosmos, empirical data, and complex ideas. The purposes are to appreciate, understand, and even be transformed by what they encounter. Intimate knowing is Whitehead’s “concrete appreciation of the individual facts in their full interplay of emergent values” (SMW 198). In education, it is represented by the localizing moves of Ivan Illich (Deschooling), the involvement of St. Francis students with homeless people and one another as they do weekly social service, and the accent of South African teachers on appreciating each student and helping them to appreciate themselves. In the movies Ray and Beyond the Sea, intimate knowing is represented by the mothers of Ray Charles and Bobby Darin, who could see into their sons’ souls and open paths for their sons to travel with their talents and dreams. Intimate knowing requires far more than a limp theory of nurture; it requires attendance to particularity, to relationships within the web of life, and to the cultivation of appreciative consciousness (Moore, “Ethnic,” “Imagine”; Meland, Higher Education).

Such education requires attention to the person of students, the realities of a particular community in time, and the realities that students encounter in textbooks and daily life. All of these can be subjects of intimate knowing, though modernist educational systems often discourage the deepening moves of intimacy. According to Clive Erricker, modernism binds education with rationalism, subject centeredness, closed knowledge systems, and neglect of creativity and imagination (1–11). Jane and Clive Erricker thus propose that educators
move in radically new directions—ignoring pre-designed curricula; encouraging students to encounter others’ narratives (stories, works of art, and so forth); and engaging students in constructing knowledge for themselves. This is an ongoing artistic process, in which students may influence one another in constructing reality, but teachers and learning resources are suspect because of the dangers of imposing pre-constructed knowledge (136–48).

Another example of intimate knowing arose in South Africa’s apartheid era, when teachers stretched traditional educational practices and encouraged intimacy within the traditional system. Vivienne Carelse describes her experience with students after the 1985 school boycotts. Students had to repeat the year they missed, and the system was affected by their dramatic boycott experiences. Carelse notes, however:

> But the spirit of the school was generally very, very dynamic. It was really one of my most exciting periods as a teacher. Because as an art teacher, I saw the raw, kind of, blood and guts and gore of the whole process. Children came and unburdened themselves on paper. They just churned out artwork after artwork of the scenes that they saw around them. (Wieder 124)

These children had seen tires burning, shootings, and many violent acts. They had “known” moments of horror, and Carelse was able, as a teacher, to encourage a continuing expansion of that intimate knowing as children re-entered school. The purpose was not to domesticate, but to integrate the new knowledge with the whole of their lives.

As described in earlier work, intimate knowing requires the creation of safe spaces in which people can be honest and open, where they experiment with new ideas and activities, where they are assured of trust and confidencuality (Moore, “Imagine”). Such education may take many forms—building strong relations with local communities (Illich); encouraging community engagement through social service and social action (Youniss and Yates); respecting familial knowing, as in Ray and Beyond the Sea; experimenting with the radically relativistic approaches of the Errickers; and encouraging artistic expression, as Vivienne Carelse did in a post-boycott era. These approaches are not all the same; neither are they mutually exclusive. Most are radical, though some can be enacted within rather traditional schools. What is important in all of these practices, however, is that intimate knowing is respected and encouraged. This is a difficult challenge in modern educational systems, but it is critical if we are to cultivate imagination in education.

**Knowing the Stranger and the Unfamiliar**

A fourth complex of educational practices is encouraging people to know the stranger and the unfamiliar. Such practices stir imagination by helping people cross cultural, geographic, religious, age, and disciplinary boundaries. It is more than a crossing of boundaries, however; it is a relationship. Thus it cannot end with Meland’s “survey of experience” (26–30), nor with Whitehead’s encouragement of teachers “to eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects” (AE
These are worthy goals, but knowing the stranger and unfamiliar requires an intersubjective relationship. For Freire, this means that the relationship is reciprocal and democratic: “In other words, the knowledge relationship is not exclusively between a cognizing subject and a cogniscible object. It ‘bridges over’ to another subject, basically becoming a subject-object-subject relation” (119). Such a relationship is enhanced by dialogue, which opens people to others’ perspectives and protects people against withering isolation. It is also enhanced by knowledge of history, politics, socio-cultural patterns, and economics so that people will understand the complex social realities within which they live and act (132–33).

This discussion suggests a kind of encounter with the stranger and unfamiliar that questions or modifies some of the practices discussed earlier in this essay. It questions the relativism of the Errickers’ approaches, especially their advocacy for self-construction to the extent of potentially dismissing the kinds of cultural encounters and challenges that teachers and educational resources might introduce. It also questions the social service orientation of St. Francis High School, which might limit students’ encounters with homeless people to acts of charity. It also questions curriculum resources that avoid the particularities of diverse peoples by presenting complex issues in generalized ways. One recent example of this problem is identified by James Nelson, who found that religious education curriculum in Northern Ireland was imposing a “non-denominational Christian uniformity on pupils and teachers through its use of religious language, which encouraged avoidance of diversity” (249). The particular practices were different in “controlled schools” and Catholic schools (250–57), but both avoided some aspects of diversity, revealing the difficulty of embracing difference in educational systems, even when social and political attention has been directed to that end. The several educational cases in this essay suggest possibilities, limitations, and future challenges for knowing the stranger and unfamiliar.

In earlier work, I identified three issues that distort many efforts to know the stranger and unfamiliar (“Imagine”). One danger is collecting otherness as a thing to be accumulated, not recognizing the dynamic and complex nature of cultures. Another danger is engaging in boundary-crossing education without attending to power differentials. Concerned with this danger, Christine Sleeter insists that “empowerment and multicultural education are interwoven” (2). A third danger is treating differences as substantive, non-changing, and externally related realities, not recognizing how they affect the internal life of learners. In this regard, Carl Sterkens’s research on interreligious education reveals that religious pluralism exists within people as well as between them, and is expressed in polyphonic selves (76–85).

These three issues present educational challenges, which I believe require the exercise of imagination. In response to the first issue, educators need to create avenues for students to experience and imagine the complex and dynamic textures of other cultures. As to the second, educators need to engage students in a social
critique of power, alongside the study of difference. This requires imagination to see how power is presently exercised (even invisibly) and vision to see new options for power relations. As to the third issue, educators need to encourage people to ponder diversities within their polyphonic selves and draw upon imagination to construct and negotiate their complex and ever-changing identities.

**Imaging and Responding to the Possible**

The final complex of educational practices is imaging and responding to the possible. Because social change is always a real possibility, educators have a role to engage students in envisioning alternate futures. This is a significant theme in process-relational thought. Whitehead understands the very process of creativity as “the actualization of potentiality” (*AI* 179). Debates continue as to the nature of creativity and its relation with God and eternal objects (Whitehead’s term) or primordial objects (Lewis Ford’s term), but creativity is taken as a central quality of the universe. George Allan recognizes that, for both Whitehead and Ford: “God's primary character is to be the dynamic function of a *telos*. God's aim is to provide each new creature with the newly-made novel possibilities it needs in order to optimize value outcome” (71). Allan sees in this process “a moral grandeur”: a moral grandeur of “finite creatures fashioning values” of intrinsic worth; a moral grandeur of creatures’ recognizing the contribution of others to *their* achievements and their contribution to *others’* achievements; and a moral grandeur of God’s contribution to all of these achievements, “aiding in the deepening of harmonies” by luring creatures toward other harmonies (76).

What is gripping and also challenging in Allan’s discussion is not the existence of possibilities, but the reality of perishing. Possibilities are often filled with hope, but perishing is a frightening reality. A creature’s delight, in Allan’s perspective, comes from participating in a process (recognizing how values contribute to other values), rather than striving for static, non-perishing achievements. If we take this view seriously, educators need to equip people to participate in a lifelong process of receiving, making, and contributing to future values. This is radically different from modern educational assumptions about training people to accomplish defined and conclusive goals.

These process ideas seem impossible within existing educational systems; however, some examples do exist and these stir hope. In South Africa, the anti-apartheid teachers saw themselves as engaged in liberation education, a blend of politics and pedagogy (Wieder 6–7). They had some long visions for the future of South Africa, as well as more immediate visions. Their major focus, however, was to take one step at a time, contributing to liberation with each step, which they and others would follow with other steps. This involved teachers in critical reflection at every juncture, including critique of teachers’ internalized prejudices (8). It also involved them in concrete actions and collaborative strategies, which they enacted in diverse ways (13–16; cf: 17–50). Their oral histories thus add complexity to process-relational ideas. The South African teachers reveal the importance of pondering both short- and long-term possibilities; engaging
in practical actions, even within the limits of oppressive systems; interweaving politics and pedagogy; and collaborating with others to imagine and respond to the possible.

The sources for imaging alternative possibilities for human and earth communities are also richly textured. One source is music, which has been central to African-American communities for centuries and which continues to nourish hope (Parker, 75, 78–88). Another source is religious perspectives, such as the Jewish view of God’s self-limitation (tzimtzum) that invites people into the process of co-creation with God (Schuster, 149–69). A third source is intentional efforts to widen human experience and grasp new possibilities. We see this often in literary figures, such as the visionary mothers in Ray and Beyond the Sea. In the last novel of George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Daniel Deronda teaches Gwendolen his secret for imaging new possibilities when, in exasperation, she asks what she can do about her unhappy situation. He responds:

Many things. Look on other lives besides your own. See what their troubles are, and how they are borne. Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires. (493)

This advice was an invitation into wideness. In Eliot’s story, this was indeed the effect on Gwendolen, who saw a wider world, more positive options for her own actions, and hopes for a life of more intense value. Her expectations for an intimate relationship with Deronda did not materialize, but her future relationship with herself and the larger world did. The three sources of imaging named here are not exhaustive, but they are sufficient to show how educators can stir images for learners, enable learners to discover images in their own lives, and encourage them to respond to possibilities as they emerge.

Conclusion

This excursion into imagination at the center of education reveals that the ways of imagination are many, the possibilities are endless, and the hope that imagination inspires is far more satisfying and meaningful than clear definitions of identity or controlled curricula and patterns of education. Imagination leads to risk, and back to further imagination. In the process, hope rises, encouraging teachers and students to create, and equipping them to contribute to the creativity of the world.

Works Cited


