

Imagination in Education – the neglected dimension: the work of Kieran Egan

Sue Lyle introduces the ideas of Kieran Egan, one of the world's foremost thinkers on imaginative education, and considers the implications of his ideas for professional development.

Kieran Egan is widely regarded as one of the most original 'big thinkers' in education, yet his work has rarely been explored or discussed in the UK. Originally from Tipperary in Ireland and educated in Manchester, Stamford and Cornell, he has spent the last 38 years at Simon Fraser University in Canada. In a rare opportunity to hear him speak, I attended a seminar organised by IPDA (International Professional Development Association) at the headquarters of the NASUWT in London. A major philosopher, Egan's writings span three decades and together provide a critique of established educational ideas that we take for granted.

In this article, I consider some of Egan's key ideas and reflect on their implications for professional development of teachers as the focus of teaching and learning shifts from *what* to teach, to *how* to teach; from a curriculum-centred to a child-centred approach. As pedagogic principles, in particular thinking skills and emotional literacy grow in importance, as creativity is once again seen as an important educational goal, the ideas of Egan have significant implications for us all.

■ ■ ■ The big picture

In its White Paper on the 14-19 curriculum the DfES (DfES, 2005) reiterated its concern for the development of all children when it said:

Every young person has potential; the job of our education system is to develop and extent that potential.

Such a statement ought to invite us to consider what is meant by potential. I suggest that it is unlikely to include the development of children's imaginative potential. Egan would take issue with such omissions as his most passionate cry is for imagination to be taken seriously:

"We have allowed curricula and instruction aimed at producing measurable learning to suppress or depress ... imaginative activity... we have emphasised measurable 'products' over meaning, understanding, emotional significance, and generally, imagination."
(Egan 1983)

He highlights the lack of research into the affective and suggests this is because imagination is hard to measure. In fact, there has been a dearth of interest in the imagination for decades. One explanation for this may be that imagination is clearly associated in our minds with the non-cognitive and therefore not regarded as relevant to serious learning. As our understanding of the learning brain is growing through the work of neuroscientists, the importance of imagination is being revealed. This work has revived interest in imagination and creativity in general, which could mean that Egan's work, which seeks to place imagination as central to our understanding of children's learning, could become of interest to all educators, not just those associated with the arts. Such ideas are of critical importance at a time when the humanities and the arts in the general education of all young people are no longer a statutory requirement after 14. (Nuffield Review of 14-19, 2008)

Egan's call for imaginative approaches to learning challenges the current performance model of teaching and testing which sees education as 'a process of accumulating knowledge and skills uninvolved with emotions, intentions and human meaning'. (Egan, 1983) He stresses the difference between 'knowing a lot' and knowledge that is meaningful in the lives of learners.

Few educators I work with would disagree so far – the big question for professional development is to help teachers understand how we develop imagination in learning for all children. Egan argues that the key strategy for developing the imagination is narrative. He claims that any event or behaviour only becomes intelligible by finding its place in story:

"We are a storying animal: we make sense of things commonly in story forms; ours is a largely story-shaped world." (Egan, 1991)

Egan points out that our manner of making sense of our experience is profoundly mediated by our emotions. How we feel about, and feel during, the sequences of our lives is of central importance:

"So the affective connection is also the story connection. Whenever our emotions are involved, so too is a narrative, a story, or story fragment, that sets the context and the

meaning. The role of the story is fundamental to our sense-making, and in education where sense-making is of primary concern, it is still largely neglected." (Egan, 1992)

We should not assume from this that Egan wishes to replace the cognitive with the affective, the rational with the imaginative; rather, he sees them as interdependent. In fact, he believes imagination to be a necessary and neglected component of rational, cognitive activity; for Egan 'cognitive activity' that lacks imagination and affective components is 'desiccated and inadequate' (1992).

Egan (Egan, 1983; Egan, 1991) explores the distinction made between reason and imagination in education, pointing out how they are seen as discrete entities. This division is reflected in a curriculum in which science and mathematics are commonly taken to deal mainly with reason, and the arts with imagination, to the neglect of the latter. Egan argues passionately against this position and calls upon educators to take imagination seriously. However, he points out that to do so will entail having to question current procedures of deciding curriculum, and challenge current methods of teaching and testing. It would be a mistake to assume that Egan does not value knowledge, rather he wants us to recognise that there are a number of ways of 'knowing' the world. In education, knowledge is most often presented as secure, certain and unquestionable. Egan wants children to use their imaginations to understand there are different 'truths' in the world that depend on historical, social and cultural settings. Children need to develop their capacity to understand that other people are unique, distinct and autonomous, with lives and fears quite as real and important as their own.

Such an attitude towards knowledge, Egan maintains, will encourage open-mindedness and understanding of other views. Children will learn to reason and become reasonable, emphasizing cognitive development and emotional intelligence. Egan (1988, 1992) believes that the key strategy for developing the imagination is narrative. He claims that any event or behaviour only becomes intelligible by finding its place in story.

Challenge to 'received truths'

A central plank of Egan's assertions rest on a critique of cognitive psychology and the image of the child it has

spurned. He points out the conflict between the image of the child coming from theories of child development and our common observations of children's imaginativeness. He challenges the Piagetian-derived, received wisdom in theories of child development that assert that all learning proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, from 'hands on' to the symbolic. Let's consider some of his arguments:

From Concrete to Abstract

It is very common for teachers in the Foundation Stage (England, age 3-5), and Key Stage 1 (England 5-7), and Foundation Phase (Wales, age 3-7), to believe that children have to move from the concrete to the abstract. Egan wants to disrupt this 'regime of truth' and asks us to consider how every society in all cultures in all times and places induct its children into the culture by means of story: the traditional folk or fairy tale. He asks us to consider why would societies everywhere tell such tales to their youngest children if they can't understand them. If we can agree on this then we should consider the nature of such tales. All of them depend on abstract concepts to give sense to the actions in the stories. Consider the most well-known fairy tale in today's world, the story of Cinderella (I blame Walt Disney for this). To understand this tale the abstract concepts of fear/hope, kindness/cruelty, rich/poor, beauty/ugliness, truth/lies, magic/reality, indolence/diligence and others are used. Can we agree that children could not make sense of the actions of the story unless they understand the abstract concepts?

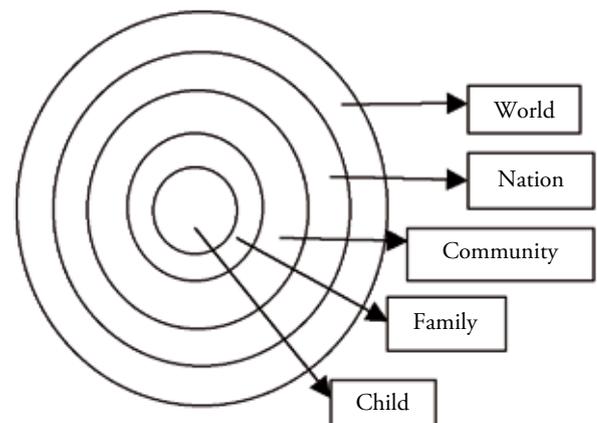
Children's appetite for the stuff of such stories is undiminished in our technological age. They are surrounded by modern day imaginative stories such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Dr. Who*. Popular authors such as Terry Pratchett, Roald Dahl and Philip Pullman bring the fantastic to life. Why are these fantasy worlds so engaging to our children? Egan (1988) would argue that they demonstrate the vivid imaginative creativity of the human mind which we ignore at our peril. As Egan (Egan & Nadamer 1988) points out, 'Frodo's journey to Mordor makes sense because we can fit all the new elements and events to our abstract categories of good/bad, courage/cowardice, honour/greed, and so on.' The implication of

this is that we do not have to make sure all our teaching connects with 'what the child knows already', or build on concrete experience, we can introduce any knowledge as long as we ensure that it fits the abstract conceptual structures the child has in place. The principle of moving from the concrete to the abstract is therefore a model of child development that needs problematising. This has profound implications when preparing teachers to teach children from 3-7.

Why then do we behave as if all learning for young children should proceed from the concrete to the abstract? Egan is not claiming that young children can articulate such abstractions, but that they can use them. The average five year old cannot define bravery or cruelty, but they use such concepts to make sense of the stories. If we accept this it has important implications for planning the curriculum. At the very least we should wonder whether we should start with the abstract and proceed to the concrete, rather than the other way round.

From the known to the unknown

Another shibboleth of child development is the idea that the curriculum should start with what the child is familiar with and gradually move to the unknown. This is an enormously influential principle that forms a bedrock of curriculum planning. This 'truth' about child development that insists we start with the known and gradually move to the unknown means we end up with a curriculum that starts with the child and gradually moves out as illustrated below:



In this widely accepted model, learning is deemed to start with the child and his/her immediate social world – the family and concrete experiences, and then progress to include the immediate community around the child (people who help us), from there to the wider community of nation, and finally to the distant and different – the rest of the world. I have often thought that asking a young child to consider its own world is rather like asking a fish what it's like to live in water – it can only begin to reflect on this when lifted out of the water. We have an innate understanding of our own world, but this can only be made an object of reflection when we contrast the known with the unknown.

Cognitive tools

The central proposition of Kieran Egan's thesis is that engaging children's imaginations is crucial to successful learning (Egan, 2005). In support of his proposition he outlines the cognitive tools they have available for the task. Egan claims that his approach is unique because it sets out to explain how children's imaginations work in learning, and he also suggests specific teaching approaches to engage their imaginations. He therefore doesn't only put forward a theory of imagination in learning; he provides practical suggestions for applying the theory in the classroom. This makes his work of interest to CPD providers.

As discussed above, a key argument Egan puts forward to support his thesis is the centrality of emotions in cognition. He points out that all knowledge is human knowledge and a product of human hopes, fears, and passions. It follows that the presentation of knowledge to students should be in the context of human emotions and that this is best done through the imagination.

A second proposition concerns three central cognitive tools, oracy, literacy and theoretical thinking. Egan points out that for the overwhelming majority of human existence communication has been dependent on speaking and listening. It is only relatively recently that humans have developed symbolic systems for storing their thoughts. Egan argues that without oracy we cannot develop literacy and without literacy we cannot develop theoretical thinking. Few would disagree with this argument, where Egan diverges from other thinkers is his argument that a focus on pupils' imaginations will lead to progress in all three areas.

Egan takes the cognitive tools of oracy, literacy and theoretical thinking and shows how each of them come with additional tools to support learning. Oracy starts to develop from birth and flowers between birth and seven. It is accompanied by a host of cognitive tools. The acquisition of literacy promotes a different set of cognitive tools and the development of theoretical thinking brings yet a third set of cognitive tools. Egan therefore puts forward the view that as we grow and develop we are able to add successive cognitive tools to our overall toolkit for learning.

To illustrate how these cognitive tools manifest themselves through the process of human development Egan talks of five different kinds of understanding which I go on to outline.

Five kinds of Understanding

I cannot do justice to Egan's proposal that there are five different kinds of understanding that human beings develop from birth to maturity. I will however, attempt to summarise them, but educators will need to read Egan to fully engage with the concepts and grasp their implications for professional development. (Egan, 1997; Egan, 2008). As discussed above, for Egan, the key driver of development is language: through the acquisition of oracy, literacy and theoretical thinking.

Egan describes the cognitive tools which accompany these drivers as linked to ages and stages in children's development. However, it would be a mistake to assume this is linked to a Piagetian 'ages and stages' approach as I hope my explanation will make clear. The first kind of understanding he calls *Somatic Understanding*. This refers to the physical, pre-linguistic way that a baby comes to know the world. The five senses provide information about the world through bodily communication. As the child grows and develops the ability to talk, she develops a second kind of understanding he calls *Mythic Understanding*. In this phase of life the child is no longer limited to making sense of the world through direct physical experience, instead language can be used to discuss and represent things that have not been directly experienced (for a more detailed discussion of Mythic Understanding and its implications for teachers see Lyle, 2008a).

Later as the child acquires literacy a third kind of understanding develops. *Romantic Understanding* is the time when the child begins to realise her independence and separateness from the world (for a discussion of Romantic Understanding see (Lyle, 2008b). She relates readily to

extremes of reality, associates with heroes and seeks to make sense of the world in human terms. As a teenager the young person begins to focus more on the connections between things. She begins to see that there are laws and theories that can bring together, and help her make sense of, what she originally thought were disconnected details and experiences. This stage of life is referred to as *Philosophic Understanding*. The fifth stage of understanding comes in early adulthood as the young person realises that the way she makes sense of the world depends on her unique historical, social and cultural experience. This is known as *Ironic Understanding*.

These different kinds of understanding are developed to provide teachers with planning tools. For examples of such tools and their application to curriculum planning, see the Imaginative Education Research Group website. (IERG, 2009)

■ ■ ■ Summary

A cornerstone of Egan's work is the availability of cognitive tools that we can use to build children's understanding and make the curriculum more engaging and meaningful. In a useful article on Egan, Cunningham (2008) summarises the cognitive tools for each of the stages. For practical ways to put these ideas into practice see (Egan, 2005).

Cognitive tools for the Mythic stage (The Foundation stage and Key Stage 1)

Story – a powerful tool for imaginatively engaging with knowledge

Metaphor – seeing one thing in terms of another

Binary opposites – elementary form of organising and categorising

Rhyme, rhythm, pattern – potent tools for giving meaning and memorable shape to any content

Jokes and humour – expose the basic ways language works

Mental imagery – space to generate one's own mental images

Gossip – a basic form of social interaction

Play – enables learners to distance themselves from reality and experiment

Mystery – builds fascination and interest.

Cognitive tools for the Romantic Stage (Key Stage 2 and 3)

A sense of reality – the development of disembedded, rational forms of thinking.

The extremes of experience and the limits of reality – exotic and bizarre examples

Association with heroes – imbue aspects of reality with heightened importance

Sense of wonder – key tool in initial explorations of reality

Collections and hobbies – the urge to collect and classify

Knowledge and human meaning – beyond the surface to the source of the knowledge in human emotion and endeavor

Narrative Understanding – making the best sense of things when the emotional impact is grasped (extended story-telling)

Capacities for revolt and idealism – beginning to see the limitations in the present

Changing the context – importance of varying the context to add variety

The literate eye – visual organisers

Cognitive tools for Theoretical Thinking (from about 15 years onwards)

The sense of abstract reality – making sense of the world in terms of ideas

The sense of agency – recognising oneself as related to the world via complex causal chains

Grasp of general ideas and their anomalies – ability to grasp more general theories and be aware of anomalies

The search for authority and truth – testing the validity of general ideas and being aware of their status

Meta-narrative understanding – shaping general ideas into ever higher-level theories

■ ■ ■ Implications for professional development

Egan's work raises some key questions for us to consider and challenges accepted theories of child development. Beliefs



about children influence how adults engage with them. The established theories of cognitive development from Plato to Piaget are challenged by Egan (Egan, 1983) who argues that we must not let the results of Piagetian experiments set our educational agenda, or define for us the capacity for thought and reflection of our children. Piaget’s model of childhood is essentially a deficit model that focus on what the child can’t do, rather than what she can do. Children’s claims to knowledge are dismissed; they are seen as proto-adults, not as people in their own right. Egan shows us that children live in conceptual worlds and in so doing gives us an insight into the possibility of seeing children differently. His work disrupts developmental psychology’s explanations of ‘normal’ child development. He problematises the established notions that children proceed from the concrete to the abstract, from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex. In challenging these officially sanctioned ‘truths’ about child development he asks us to question how we think, feel and act towards children. The

challenge for professional development is to help teachers see that the picture of the child produced in the discourses of development psychology has misunderstood the true nature of the child. Egan’s ideas lead us to question the way we do things with children and he offers us a way forward; his cognitive tools can help teachers disrupt the ‘truths’ of development psychology and open up a whole new way of looking at and being with the child.

Egan is a philosopher who invites us to recognise that children are reasoning agents able to interpret and comment on their world. They are not incomplete adults, but fully functioning human beings and should be respected as such. Cognitive psychology’s child has held sway for too long, it is time to explore a philosopher’s view of childhood. Egan is eminently qualified to show us the way forward.

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