



*The Future of Education:
Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up*
By Kieran Egan.

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People reading this review of Kieran Egan's book *The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up* will be old enough and experienced enough with the ways of American public schooling to have some opinion about the state of our schools—about the problems they face and what they do well or poorly. At the end of Egan's provocative book, by way of a history of education he imagines being written about public schools in the first half of the 21st century, Egan offers the following general description of schooling from the mid-nineteenth century until now. Do you think this description rings true?

...and the massive enterprise of schooling from mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century seems now just another of history's cruel jokes on our human forebears. All that boredom and pain, that half-learned and barely understood knowledge, which engaged the imaginations of the tiniest minority of people, the ill-directed energy of teachers, and the resentment of so many students. After more than a decade of their lives spent in these schools, most students could recall pitifully little of what they had been taught and had read; they knew by heart nothing more than the clichéd words of some pop song. The wonder of the world around them, the passion of their history, the possibilities of human experience were things of which they glimpsed only the most fleeting sense. After they left school most students never read anything but mental pabulum again. Schooling during this time seems to have been a massive and clumsy industry poorly designed to carry the experience of life and the accumulation of technological skills across the generations. (p. 180)

An unfavorable picture of our schools, to say the least, and one we might prefer to reject. But even the greatest enthusiasts of the public schools might, in a pensive moment, fear that much of what Egan describes is too often true of the public schools. If Egan is even a little bit right in how he sees schools (and I think he is much more than a little right), then we have a problem to diagnose and solve.

This is where Egan's *The Future of Education* becomes a provocative book—because he does not diagnose and solve the problems of teaching and learning in schools in the usual ways. One set of diagnoses and solutions we're used to hearing (because we offer them ourselves) comes from what Egan calls "traditionalists;" another set comes from "progressivists." Progressivists might agree with Egan's description of schooling, above, though only nervously. Like Egan, progressivists see school as dreary, full of students bored by useless, lifeless, and disconnected tasks. The complaint often made by progressivists is that we have ignored what we

have known at least since Rousseau—that children have a good and vibrant and trustworthy nature, and that following the dictates of that nature through its development is the way to success for the educator. The intellectual debt of progressivism extends from Rousseau through Piaget and Dewey, who argued that “Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child’s capacities, interests, and habits” (quoted in Egan, p. 85). Progressivists maintain that schools, especially when they are test-driven, do not allow freedom or time enough for students to explore and learn in their own ways (p. 91). They argue for more child-centered programs and more attention to research that exposes the nature of the child’s development (p. 135). Knowledge as an isolated bit of cultural history is inert, progressivists maintain. Instead of insisting students acquire a limited and superficial collection of knowledge bits, the argument goes, teachers should help students focus on *how* to learn. Teaching and learning in schools should shift toward procedures—toward how to do things, how to find information, and learning how to learn (p. 150). Teacher educators—most of whom are evangelists in the progressivist cause—are eager to baptize their new teacher education students into the overlapping tenets of their faith: differentiated teaching, multiple intelligence theory, teaching in accord with students’ differing learning styles, and constructivism. The school and its curriculum are to be made more relevant to students’ actual lives and should respond to the problems people face in the real world.

Where progressivists get nervous in Egan’s description of school is precisely where traditionalists take heart in it. “Yes!” the traditionalist is likely to exclaim: barely understood knowledge, students having no memory of what they have learned, a taste for pop songs and mental pabulum, and no experience of the intellectual glories offered by one’s culture—these are precisely the awful failures of our public schools. But the traditionalist’s solution to these problems is not a return to the dictates of the child’s nature and the practices of the progressivists. In most traditionalist accounts these progressivist ideas and practices are the cause of the problem. The traditionalist sees the task of the public school primarily in intellectual terms—as an opportunity to make the best education and cultural life available to all children (p. 113). Important always is the curriculum that consists of canonical works, important cultural knowledge, art forms, and so on. Traditionalists argue that the basic building block of the educated mind is formed by familiarity with particular kinds of knowledge (pp. 85, 142, & 143). What is needed, now, in the public schools is not a retreat from important curriculum in the face of recalcitrant students (and teachers) who prefer Lady Gaga to Faulkner, but a renewed cultural battle to hold to standards and justify a rigorous curriculum (p. 113).

In his portrayal of the traditionalist argument Egan does not make the distinction that is often helpful in exploring educational ideas commonly seen as “traditional”—the distinction between the “perennialist” who sees value in a curriculum that emphasizes canonical works that explore enduring human questions and our pursuit of knowledge and certainty, and the “essentialist” whose educational ends are more prosaic, having to do with the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills necessary to effective civic and economic life. The essentialist position is the one that has, for a long time, influenced the agenda and focused complaint about the public schools: the schools are supposed to give students the knowledge and skills essential to economic productivity and civic life, and they are not doing this very well. High-stakes educational testing is designed to enforce that agenda—an agenda also enforced by our decade-long tumultuous romance with No Child Left Behind, and now Obama’s Race to the Top with its emphasis on



preparation for college and career. Egan is right to point out that this aspect of the “traditionalist” program muddles intellectual ends and socializing ends of education. For an essentialist, knowledge and the acquisition of intellectual skills and abilities are but means to an end—a means to properly socialize the young into social and economic roles most needed by the governing society.

The “history of education” Egan fabricates in *The Future of Education*, from 2010—2050, reveals the tenacity with which progressivists and traditionalists have attacked, and are likely to continue to attack, one another in the battle over the public schools. More than that, however, the history provides Egan with a way to expose the failures of these two ideas as he proposes his own idea—a third way to conceive of the purposes and practices of the public schools (p. 143). By 2050, in Egan’s educational history, neither the progressivist nor the traditionalist agendas have won the hearts and minds of educators, politicians, and citizens—Egan’s own ideas, the ideas of Imaginative Education (IE), have won them. Readers of Egan’s previous books—especially *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005) might be able to predict how and why IE prevails in this history. It prevails because it is decisively different than the other two, even as it has some “residual sympathies” with both progressivism and traditionalism (p. 137). And it prevails because it succeeds in doing what the other two ideas cannot—it revitalizes and reinvigorates the act of knowing for the learner, connecting the learner to sources of wonder and imagination dead to the essentialist-leaning traditionalist and unavailable to the progressivist.

We begin to understand Egan’s third way by means of one “residual sympathy” with progressivism—the need for a language of “stages of development.” One cannot deny that the adult can know and do things that a child simply cannot, and in recounting those differences it is natural to speak in terms of “stages” of development. But it matters a great deal how we conceive these stages, and Egan would *not* have us think of stages of development like Piaget-inspired progressivists tend to do. In Egan’s conception—following the thinking of Leo Vygotsky and, before him, Herbert Spencer—there are “regularities in human mental development, but they are so tied up with our social experience, our culture, and the kinds of intellectual tools we pick up that we can’t tell whether the regularities are due to our nature, to our society, to our culture, to our intellectual tools, or what” (p. 26). For Egan, stages are more accurately described as kinds of understanding acquired by an increasingly complex way that we learn to use language. With each kind of understanding comes a different set of “cognitive tools” we use to think about and understand the world.

Here is a question that might reveal Egan’s idea: Does a new-born baby have the same cognitive tools to think with as does Stephen Hawking? If we agree the baby is absent some of the tools Hawking can think with, then how shall we name the difference, and where do those tools come from? What “stages” does the baby go through? Egan finds five different ways of understanding ideally accomplished in a certain order—the somatic, the mythic, the romantic, the philosophic, and the ironic. Somatic tools are those basic tools given us by the body, especially the five senses. These are the tools the baby “thinks with” in seeking to find what he or she needs most. Mythic tools come with the acquisition of oral language, and romantic tools come with the acquisition of literacy. Philosophic tools come later—and to some they come

partially, if at all. These are the tools by which we are able to create abstract theories about things. Ironic understanding comes to still fewer and involves, among other things, a kind of intellectual playfulness—a sense of the great game of ideas and the delights this game can yield (p. 83).

Stephen Hawking has acquired all these cognitive tools, not simply from within himself, as it were, but precisely as Egan has suggested—as a gift Hawking’s society and culture had potentially to give him, and as he earned in his interactions and encounters with that society and culture. It is no accident that these “stages” come in some sort of order—body first, then oral language, then literacy, then abstract thinking, then intellectual playfulness. It is no accident that culture itself progressed through these stages: In the west, Homer’s oral epics came before Herodotus’ romantic histories, and Herodotus’ histories came before Thucydides’ interpretive history or Plato’s full-blown philosophical inquiries. One could not come before the other, though each might have been anticipated before it was achieved. This will be true for our new baby, too, as he or she uses the cognitive tools given him or her to come to understand his or her world. Each learner, as it turns out, has to “recapitulate” the cognitive advances of the culture in which he or she lives if he or she is to be fully educated.

We do not discard the somatic way of understanding when we achieve oral language, or discard the mythic way of understanding when we achieve literacy—and so on with the rest. As we enter each way of understanding the world we are provided with what Egan calls a different set “cognitive tools” for us to think with. When we begin to acquire oral language (mythic stage), for instance, we acquire the cognitive tool of the story that we didn’t have before, and we begin to try to organize or categorize the world according to binary opposites we learn about—hot and cold, good and evil, fear and security. We learn how language works and begin to have the tool of metaphor at our disposal. We appreciate and learn to tell jokes—something we couldn’t do before. When we begin to read (romantic stage), we are able to shape a greater sense of what is “really real,” and we have access to a heightened sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. We become interested in extremes and become avid collectors of things. Cognitive tools at the philosophic stage include a sense of abstract reality, a grasp of general ideas and their anomalies, a sense of agency (a need to play a social role), the search for authority and truth, and more.

Neither the progressivist nor the traditionalist takes full advantage of and attempts to develop these cognitive tools in the ways they should, according to Egan. That’s because advocates of the two camps miss the point—the one in favor of “development” and with a healthy distrust of “knowledge,” the other in favor of “knowledge” and with a faith that only acquired knowledge breeds cognitive “development.” Neither camp has paid much attention to the “cognitive tools” learners, though interaction with their society and culture, come “naturally” to have.

The object of education, Egan maintains, is to master cognitive tools (p. 142). What Egan hopes the schools can learn to do, as the decades of the 21st century begin to unwind and the history of public schools is truly written, is to learn to exercise those cognitive tools in the service of the five ways of understanding. Egan hopes the schools will “just say no” to anyone—progressivist, traditionalist, or anyone else—who tries to see the school “as appropriately



involved in activities other than stimulating, elaborating, and developing the cognitive tools and kinds of understanding of students” (p. 173).

Egan’s 1997 book, *The Educated Mind*, offers a more detailed theoretical underpinning of Egan’s ideas about recapitulation theory and the nature of cognitive tools than does this new book, and his *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching* (2005) offers more practical examples of how these ideas look in classrooms. But there is theory enough in *The Future of Education* to connect Egan’s ideas to existing conversations about teaching and learning, and there are practical examples enough to show how this might work and why we should take his ideas seriously.

I do not think Egan, in writing this book, was really much interested in predicting the future of education in the 21st century, even when that imagined history enabled him to outline how IE would become the transcendent educational idea for the public schools. The history, I think, is a rhetorical ploy aimed right at the reader—the reader who might be a progressivist, or the reader who might be a traditionalist—at any rate, the reader who is no doubt married to his long-held, precious ideological position. The book is less about how IE will win the ideological battle in the public arena in the next 40 years than a challenge for us, now, to reconsider our own private understandings. Is it time for me to challenge my own traditionalist (perennialist) preconceptions? Is it time for you to reconsider your preconceptions? Are either of us so sure we’re right in the face of the failures we now see in the public schools—the kinds of failures mentioned in the opening passage of this review? Are there better ways to restore wonder and imagination in the minds, hearts, and souls of the students we’re teaching?

Egan’s book suggests how and why we ought to reconsider our ideas. Progressivism fails, just as does traditionalism, because neither captures the wonderful drama that happens when students take on knowledge (the comfortable home of the traditionalist) with the appropriate cognitive tools the student’s nature and culture (a developmental-like idea comfortable enough for the progressivist) give him or her to use. Egan repeats in *The Future of Education* what I think is his favorite passage from his earlier book (2005) on imaginative teaching. This passage captures the intellectual vitality he believes we can create (and recreate) in teaching and learning when we, traditionalists, stop seeing “knowledge” as mere background for social productivity and we, progressivists, decide to forego the moral high-ground we gain by defending the nature of the child at the cost of cultural knowledge. Knowledge doesn’t have to be deadly and it doesn’t have to be contrary to the nature of the child. Egan’s third way promises a more sure grasp of knowledge attained with real pleasure when the imagination of the learner is allowed a full play in his or her use of cognitive tools. Egan’s “signature” passage, then:

All knowledge is human knowledge and all knowledge is a product of human hopes, fears, and passions. To bring knowledge to life in students’ minds we must introduce it to students in the context of the human hopes, fears, and passions in which it finds its fullest meaning. The best tool for doing this is the imagination. (2005, p. xii, xiii)

Both the progressivist and traditionalist might find rest if Egan is right about this. But first we’ll have to lay aside our war-making arguments for awhile and do some reading and thinking.