

## # Kieran EGAN (1942-2022)

Kieran Egan (Philosopher of education, Historian, Educationalist) passed away from a respiratory ailment on May 12, 2022, just shy of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC, Canada. He leaves behind his wife Susanna, three children and 5 grandchildren.



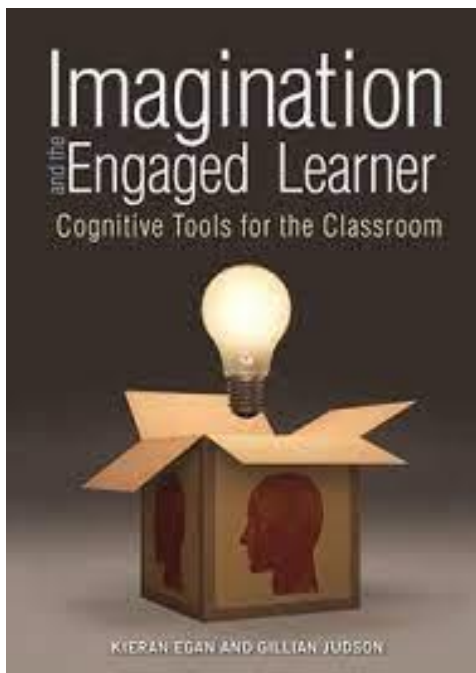
An internationally recognized educational scholar, winner of the prestigious Grawemeyer Award (in Education, 1991), he published over 100 papers and authored over 20 books (some translated into several languages). He was known for his incisive questioning and upending of many commonly held ideas within the educational system, including cutting critiques of the worth of educational psychology for education (especially Piaget) and of the detrimental impact of Dewey and progressivism, and forms of socialization, on education in general (2002; 1983; 1981). A creative and original thinker, he developed a novel theory of educational development and drew out its implications for teaching and curriculum. The central aim of this approach, often called *imaginative education (IE)*, is to make the learning experiences of children and teenagers more engaging, enjoyable and meaningful, predominately by stimulating their imaginations while acquiring a deeper acquisition of knowledge (2005a; 1997; 1979). He tied the issues and problems of modern education to an analysis of the philosophical backgrounds and psychological frameworks (inclusive of empirical research) which he had argued adversely affected learners and schooling.

Egan was born in 1942 in Clonmel, Ireland, and grew up in England. He became a Franciscan novice at the age of 18, but this did not last; later he confessed to being an atheist, albeit “a Catholic one”. From 1961-63 he taught high school in Warwick, before going on to study the classics, philosophy, anthropology, cognitive psychology and cultural history at the University of London, and received the A.B. in Honours History in 1966. Following graduation he enrolled in the teaching certificate program at Goldsmith College, where two major events shaped the further course of his life (Egan in Waks, 2008, p.53): one, a philosophy of education course taught by a young woman who had gained her PhD under Richard Peters; the other, a visit by a group from the “Centre for Structural Communication.” He was fascinated by the Centre’s pioneering work in “programmed learning” using the new technology of computing to guide the development of students’ higher intellectual processes when working through “study units”. The Centre offered him the chance to develop such a unit for the Humanities curriculum, and the result was his first book, *The Tudor Peace* (1969), for high school use. Through the Centre’s ties to IBM, Egan won a scholarship to study at Stanford while working one day a week at the computer giant’s San Jose and Los Gatos facilities. Some years later, his second book *Structural Communication* (1976) would present ideas based on his experiences and work there.

Unsatisfied with his Stanford experience, he left for Cornell where “Bob Gowin, Ken Strike, and Brian Crittenden provided a rich introduction to the culture of philosophy of education” (Egan in Waks, p.55). He completed a PhD in that field in 1972, and was immediately hired as an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, founded only a few years previously in Vancouver, BC. This became his permanent academic home, where he eventually became full professor and retired as Emeritus in 2015.

Along the way, in addition to the Grawemeyer Award, he won the Whitworth Award (Canadian Education Association), held a Tier I Canada Research Chair (2001-2015), and was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and a Foreign Associate member of the U.S. National Academy of Education.

Four key points characterize Egan’s unique contributions to educational studies: i) the importance of imagination; ii) challenging mistaken learning theories; iii) identifying clashing curriculum models as built upon incompatible educational philosophies, and iv) the eagerness to use philosophy of education to directly interrogate both tacit educational theories and popular, dominating psychological theories. It is to be understood these features are deeply intertwined. (These four issues actually represent fundamental aspects of his own unique *educational theory* of socio-cultural development which I have artificially separated out to focus on them individually). Unless these issues are appropriately tackled, he believed, the crises in modern education will only recycle (his book *The Future of Education* (2008) envisioned schooling across five decades: 2010 to 2060).



### **i) The significance of the imagination**

For educationalists, this is probably his most noteworthy contribution. Egan’s central concern echoed throughout his many books, is that education had largely neglected the value and role of student’s own imagination in the learning process: “The separation of emotion from intellect, I have argued already, has been educationally dysfunctional” (2007, p.19). Educational research for decades has been preoccupied with other topics (e.g. conceptual change, curricula design, teaching methods, student learning theories, etc.), while the significance of imagination has been underappreciated and little studied. He admits part of the problem lies with the challenging nature of its *meaning* (its complex Western history), and the problematic character of constructing measurable empirical tests. Also, it’s often seen as a mere “frill”, at best only relevant to Fine Arts and Arts courses, and incompatible with the drive to improve tests scores.

In an insightful chapter “A very short history of the imagination” (1992, pp.9-43, which serves as a *basis* for his own developmental theory) he investigated the topic starting with Biblical and early Greek sources (also Nordic myth) through to the Enlightenment, Romantic, and Modern periods, including contemporary psychological work. Generally, imagination was seen as dangerous, as rebellion against divine order, or undermining reason—this was in stark contrast to preceding oral cultures that relied heavily on myth, memory and emotion both as a source of knowledge and as cultural “glue” which held the tribe and society together. (Here the “great power of story” gave rise to the beginning of our literature as found in Homeric epics and Germanic sagas). From its beginnings as Greek “phantasma” to Latin “imaginatio” it was considered to be a weak form of the mind, needing strict control by reason, because of its distracting use of mental images and mimetic (copying) ability. While Descartes had a low opinion of it, with Kant, Herder and the Romantics emerged our modern conception, involved in perception and the emotions, as a positive power of creative insight and intuition, of generation of new ideas, images and future possibilities.

Though the Romantics held up the artist as its paragon and disparaged reason, it was Wordsworth’s view, repeatedly emphasized by Egan, that imagination and reason are not incompatible, rather it’s “Reason in her most exalted mood.” Modern philosophers (like Sartre) have even untied imagination from its customary association with *imagery* and visualization, and as a distinct faculty of mind, to instead *a way in which* the mind itself functions. Imagination as an intentional act of consciousness, rather than a thing *in* consciousness (Husserl). “If the mood of imagination is the subjunctive, its trope is metaphor” (1992, p.30). Hence a concept of mind away from being a kind of *mirror* to a *lamp*.

How these insights were to be worked out in practical, useful ways for learners in schools and classrooms is clarified by the bulk of his writings employing his theory of *Imaginative Education (IE)*. He consistently endeavored to write specific cross-curricular lesson frameworks for practical use by elementary and secondary teachers (2015; 2005a).

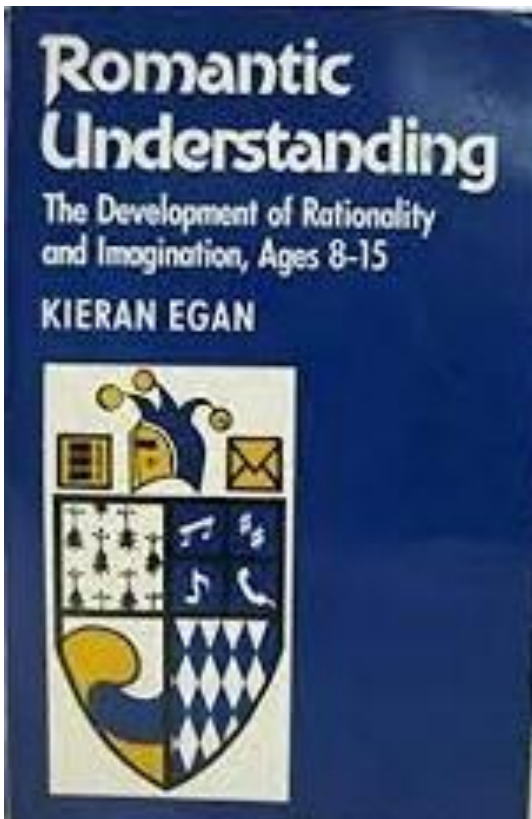
## ii) Learning Theory

With regard to *learning*, schooling worldwide has embraced ad hoc principles, such as, that learning proceeds “from the concrete to the abstract, from simple to complex, from the known to the unknown, from active manipulation to symbolic representation” (1986, p.28). To overturn such principles, including Piagetian ideas that “children learn best from concrete hands-on experiences” or that “abstract concepts in general are difficult for young children”, he countered with the Cinderella story and children’s ability to understand such abstract and conflicting concepts as fear/hope, kindness/cruelty and good/evil.

Moreover, learning is mistakenly based on a kind of information processing model, analogous to recording symbols in the mind for later retrieval. (There are good reasons why such models refer to the problem of “cognitive load”). Indeed the *meaning* of learning in schools today is still taken to be how faithful the retrieval process occurs by using numerical values on quizzes and standardized tests at the end of a unit or course, in the technology-analogous sense of mechanical storage and repetition. Further, the *model of curriculum* planning assumes knowledge to be a static entity with little room for the role of the imagination in how it was originally created, or how it might be advanced or changed in the future. “Objectives [driven curriculum] models are products of a particular phase of industrialization. They are the result of attempts to technologize teaching in inappropriate ways.” On this last point he was of course, not an isolated critic, but took it in a wholly different and original direction.

For academic learning, the reliance on science textbooks is ubiquitous. Yet they clearly represent technical and encyclopedic storage devices, especially at the upper secondary and tertiary levels, and teaching can presume a storage–retrieval model. Worse, the structure and composition of “... textbooks presuppose that imagination and emotion are largely irrelevant ...” (2007, p.19). But “good education” (meaningful learning) should be about having such detailed knowledge come alive again in the living mind of the young—not as mere inert and isolated facts (decontextualized knowledge) soon forgotten, so typical in classrooms—rather through a process

only possible Egan argued, when engaging their emotions with the topics and ideas through personal meaning making (e.g. should the concept of gravity be approached solely with mathematical equations, or linking such equations with historical conceptual conflict and controversy? Should the story of calculus include the fact that “infinitesimals” were once considered heretical?)



Yet the human mind is not a mirror, nor acts like a computer, and memory of course does not generally function in such a storage-retrieval fashion, though occasionally it may with rote-memorization. Rather, memory acts more like a sorting and mixing mechanism for facts, images, ideas and values, imbued with emotion and meaning-making: “virtually nothing emerges from the human memory in the same form it was initially learned” (1992, p.50). Learning then is not about mirroring what is outside the mind, but fundamentally about *constructing* and *composing*—each mind with its own unique perspective—within students’ meaning-making structures already in place. “And it is in ... ascribing meaning that ... identifies one of the fundamental activities of the imagination” (ibid, p.51). It is recognized of course that constructivist researchers have for decades identified learning obstacles regarding student preconceptions and epistemology, but they have overall failed to link the cognitive with the affective domains in ways Egan described to resolve the issues.

It is these key convictions that had driven Egan to emphasize the value of “Teaching as story telling” (2005a, 1988, 1986), for which he is internationally most renowned. Here learning becomes pleasurable. Furthermore, with the discovery of the “Narrative mind” (by some psychologists, e.g. Bruner, and several educators), being essentially an involved cognitive and affective region of meaning making, brought Egan to the view that more attention can (should) now be placed on imagination “because the imagination is more evident in the composition of narratives and their construction of possibilities” (1992, p.63).

These aspects are today equally embraced by some science educators (Hadzigeorgiou and Schulz, 2019, 2014), especially those who emphasize the integration of history and philosophy of science (HPS) into curricular topics, using historical science stories (Clough, 2011) and/or a narrative approach (Metz et al, 2007; Norris et al, 2005).

### iii) Clashing curriculum models and lack of educational theory

Egan had argued (1997) that schools in the West as educational projects are ineffectual primarily because they are entangled by three chief objectives which effectively serve to check or undermine each other's intended educational aims: whether to teach science for i) intellectual development (of mind), or 2) for individual fulfillment (character, values), or 3) for socio-political (or /and socioeconomic) ends. These in turn, he has identified with corresponding, usually tacitly-held, educational-philosophical theories underlying such aims: the first with the "Platonic project" of knowledge accumulation as sole ends, the second with Rousseau (and its various modern guises in progressivism, i.e. "child-centered learning"), and the last with the cross-cultural expectation of society to socialize the young into its norms, values and beliefs for social utility (i.e. find jobs, serve the economy or democracy, etc).



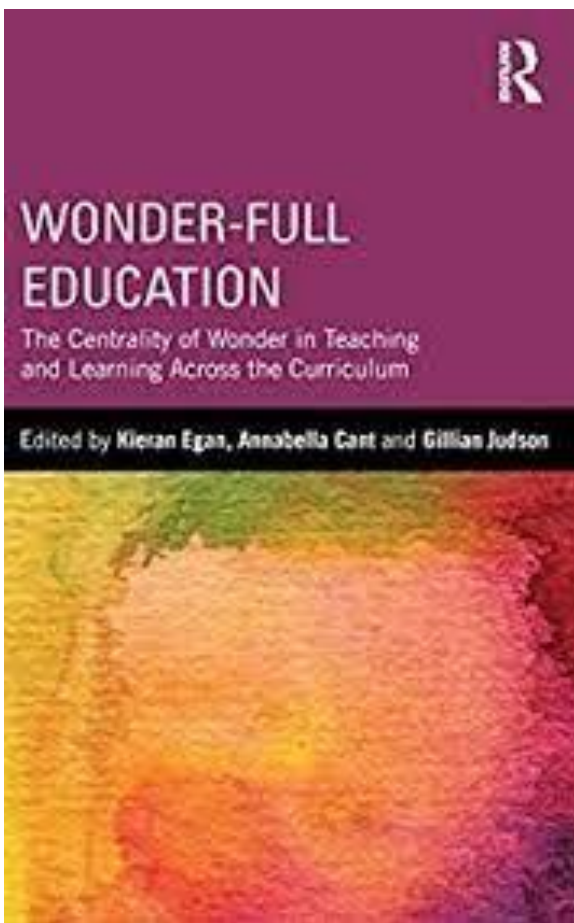
But a conundrum is created in schools because the three aims are largely incompatible, and the need to find a "balance", he argued, is an illusion. The incongruities result for different reasons: #3 conflicts with #1 because socialization seeks conformity to society's values and beliefs while the latter in the search for truth and knowledge encourages questioning of these; #3 conflicts with #2 because the "Rousseauian project" argues that personal growth requires its own pace for intense individualized child-centered development whose values may differ from society and the demands of institutionalized learning. Finally, #1 conflicts with #2 because the former assumes an epistemological model of learning and development, and the latter a psychological one. In the former mind is socio-culturally *created* and the aim is knowledge, in the latter it develops *naturally* (on its own), requiring proper guidance, and the aim is self-actualization.

Not only have curriculum models and developers failed to address these serious conflicts (if they've been acknowledged at all), they've usually defaulted to one or the other (or a combination of two over against a third), through various "reform waves" and by socio-economic pressures, or relied on inadequate psychological theories or had convinced themselves that some sort of "balance" was achievable (1997). Furthermore, none of the three theories had accounted for imagination, the generative feature of mind that actually drives learning (but has logical and psychological constraints).

Even worse, he insisted, they failed to recognize that what was truly needed to resolve the impasse was an *educational theory* (or metatheory—versus a psychological one; Schulz, 2009a; Aldridge, et al, 1992) shaped by and for educators to address the problems created in-house by the *discipline* of education itself. In other words, the field of *philosophy of education* needed to, and should have, come to their aid. In his capacity as a philosopher of education, Egan had developed exactly such a theory, as mentioned—*imaginative education* (1997; 1979). In it he tied educational means to educational ends, and not toward psychological or social utility ends.

#### iv) The role of philosophy of education

Egan held that what was currently missing in the field was a lack of original philosophizing on the “grand scale” as in the tradition of former great educational theorists like Plato, Rousseau and Dewey. He certainly saw himself as continuing in that tradition of creating “grand theories” or metatheories for the discipline. (The contrast between Dewey’s and Egan’s educational philosophies is provided by Polito, 2005). He vehemently rejected any talk that education was not a discipline in its own right and only a mere “field of interest” upon which other disciplines have rightful bearing (e.g. psychology, sociology, ethics, etc; Schulz, 2009a; Egan, 1983). In fact educational metatheory “shows how to realize in individuals a certain conception of education. Without some such conception, all research findings in the world are educationally blind, and with such a conception, it is unclear what research findings have to offer” (2002, p.181).



Egan as a thinker was among the few to help bridge the gap between philosophy of education and educational theory and practice. He showed by cogent and careful arguments that when education defaults to metatheories

whether in psychology directly via behaviorism or Piagetian theory (2005b, 1983), or indirectly via progressivism (2002), the debasement of practice and a wide-ranging impoverishment of the field must necessarily result. Against principles asserting that teachers should start from concrete operations (Piaget), or from learners' immediate experience and what they already know (Dewey and constructivism) he argued instead that they should start with what learners can *imagine* (2003).

Egan's theory was in part an argument to separate education from the influence of scientific psychology and its theories, with the claim that educational development and psychological development need not in fact align at all. This claim was based on two arguments: firstly, unlike the psychological premise, there exists no natural educational process to describe or explain, rather "an educational process exists only as we bring it into existence" (1983, p.3). Psychology must assume a natural process of some sort, that's why it claims to be a "science", it's descriptive and biological, but education is socio-culturally determined and hence educational theory is prescriptive and normative. In fact, Egan was suspicious of what psychology could offer and cautioned against "psychological description constraining educational prescription."

As an example, he attacked Piagetian influenced researchers who insisted that some abstract ideas (like "religion", or "science", or "history") should not be taught until the appropriate "stage" has been reached, what he called the "psychological fallacy." In his later works he seriously questioned the worth of empirical research studies emerging from psychology and its dependent daughter sub-discipline, educational psychology, pertaining to student learning, motivation and development (2005b). "We have suffered from tenuous inferences drawn from insecure psychological theories for generations now, without obvious benefit" (2002, p.100).

Even terms like "learning" and "development" could have completely different connotations in the two separate disciplines. His second argument focused on the age-old and mistaken quest for the "biologized mind" (beginning with Aristotle). Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development was postulated upon the view that a common human nature could be unearthed beneath the domineering layers of cultural influence, premised on the biological development of organisms, and hence would be common among all learners. Alternatively, his own IE-based theory was founded on Vygotsky's insights, the socio-cultural school in psychology (Bruner, Cole Kozulin), and a "strong culturalism" view of mind (Bakhurst, 2005). In sum, its hallmark is characterized by the function of three central ideas: imagination, the mediation of socio-culturally developed (and language-based) cognitive tools, and recapitulation. It seeks to better align curriculum with childrens' growth and age-specific imaginative stages through their ability (and guided by the teacher) to recognize and use their own developing language-based cognitive tools (somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic, ironic; Schulz, 2014a,b; 2009b).

Critiques of Egan's ideas and theory have been few, mostly in philosophy of education circles (Phillips, 2007, 2005). Heated disagreements and public debates have certainly occurred with at least one eminent educational psychologist at his university. Some had earlier cited the lack of empirical evidence to support the claims of his educational theory, though at least one data-based controlled school study in science education did show positive results (Hadzigeorgiou et al., 2011). Since then a wide range of research conducted in primary through to post-secondary level educational contexts, and across disciplines, has shown the incredible applicability of Egan's ideas, and has revealed how IE pedagogy emotionally engages learners (not only in science education; Hadzigeorgiou, 2016). From engineering and STEM (Ellis et al, 2020); to social studies (Egan and Judson, 2009a); to ecological and environmental education (Hadzigeorgiou and Judson, 2017; Judson, 2015; Hrennikoff, 2006), to educational leadership (Judson and Dougherty, 2023), and to language and literacy learning (Emjawer and Al-Jamal, 2016).

## **Concluding remarks**

As a graduate student in his PhD seminar on the "History of Education" the breadth of required books to read was extensive (Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Dewey—with excursions of readings from Aristotle,

Aquinas, Kant, Romanticism, Oakeshott). The seminar discussions were a fascinating display of intellectual gymnastics and one that deeply enriched me and was formative for my own intellectual development. His extensive knowledge on diverse subjects (classics, anthropology, language studies, philosophy, psychology, cognition, cultural history) and depth of understanding was remarkable. He personally came across as unassuming, loved to joke and relished the value of Socratic irony. Later in life he concerned himself with his Buddhist garden (2000) and wrote poetry. I once asked him why he mentioned the value of Latin in his 1997 book, and he laughed and said it was to poke progressivism in the eye, since they all happily believed they had buried this curriculum fossil, but had completely failed to grasp its value for creating mind.

Kieran was always civil in those public disputes I witnessed, and never appeared overbearing or dismissive of others. The actual experience in real school classrooms always remained a central priority, and he scolded educational academics who, while successful in the solitary halls of academia had lost the link to the classroom. He showed a real care and concern for his graduate students. He remained concerned for learners, especially young children, and worked steadily with classroom teachers, educators, philosophers of education (e.g. Robin Barrow), grad students and some administrators, during seminars, conferences, speaking engagements and international tours. These took place across Canada and the U.S., also U.K., Greece, Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Israel, Romania, Chile and Australia—if not to test and spread his ideas, then to encourage leaders and learners to seek a new approach to make education meaningful and enjoyable.

His awards and stature allowed him to establish a research institute at Simon Fraser University, *The Imaginative Education Research Group* (IERG), which organized a noteworthy series of international conferences on imagination and education (2003-2009, 2013-2014). After he later retired IERG transitioned into the *Centre for Imagination in Research, Culture and Education* (CIRCE), which continues to develop and spread his ideas, work and theory.

**Roland M. Schulz, CIRCE, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver**

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**WEBSITES: CIRCE:** [www.circsfu.ca](http://www.circsfu.ca)

imaginED [www.educationthatinspires.ca](http://www.educationthatinspires.ca)

Kieran's posts: <https://www.educationthatinspires.ca/thoughts-on-education/kieran-egans-posts-on-teaching-learning-imagination-more/>

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