

The Ideas That Run Schools

Most of the time, we do what we do because of what we think. The choices we make and the things we argue and struggle for in education are also the result of what we think. Sometimes educators talk as though the world of practice is somehow separated from the world of theory. They think of themselves as practical people, and are usually unconscious of the way theories influence their practice. In fact, there is a gulf between the practical world of education and commonly held educational theories that bear little relationship to that practical world. As a result of these “bad” theories, much educational research is similarly bad – not because of methodological flaws, but because both the research and the commonly held theories bypass the everyday concerns of educators.

There are really just three prominent “theories” in education. Each one is about how children arrive at the peculiar condition we call “educated.” Although we constantly argue about what we should be doing to children in the name of education – and you, dear reader, no doubt think you have worked out your own educational ideas through reading and hard thinking – what really determines our beliefs about what ought to be done in education is a set of old theories formulated long ago. Most of the difficulties we have in education today stem from the fact that these theories – corrupted fragments of which you almost certainly hold dear – are completely inadequate. And since the ideas from the different theories are incompatible with one another, what you’re left with is unmanageable confusion. No wonder education is hard!

First – and oldest – is the theory that you look at the society around you, make an inventory of the skills, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that make it work, and teach those to children. According to this theory, becoming educated means learning whatever is needed to fit into



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society as it is, or is likely to become. If children will need computing skills and good literacy and numeracy, then those are the items that will be prominent in the curriculum. If history is a part of the curriculum, for example, it will be because it is thought important that students understand how their current society and current world conditions came about.

Second – and about two and a half thousand years old – is the theory that to educate someone you must teach particular kinds of knowledge – regardless of their

utility and relevance to current social needs – in order to shape the mind to perceive the truth. We call this the academic enterprise, because it was mainly Plato’s idea, and the school he set up was in a small park on the outskirts of Athens sacred to the hero Academus. (It did all right as schools go, surviving for about 900 years until dissolved by the emperor Justinian.) The academic curriculum is made up of those privileged kinds of knowledge that can show the truth about things. History, to use the same example, will be in an

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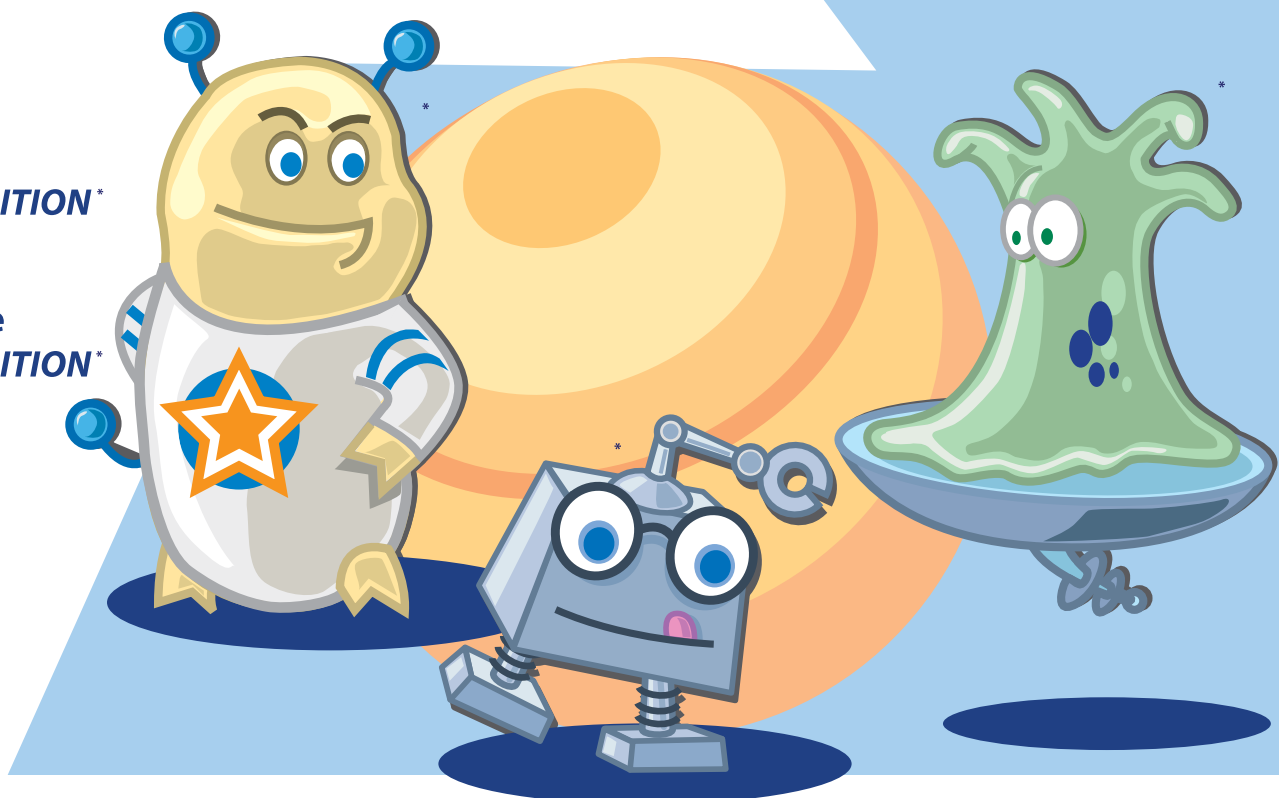
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EN BREF

L'obstacle le plus important auquel nous faisons face en tant qu'éducateur est la confusion théorique qui existe au cœur de notre entreprise. De temps à autre, nous inventons un nouveau terme, mais en réalité nous ne faisons que recycler l'une ou l'autre de trois théories fondamentales de l'enseignement, lesquelles ont été formulées il y a bien des années et qui n'ont pas une grande pertinence pour la réalité pratique actuelle de l'éducation. Or, les concepts qui sous-tendent ces différentes théories sont incompatibles; c'est ce qui explique pourquoi nous sommes empêtrés dans un chaos inimaginable.

That's it. All the ideas about education we read, and those you almost certainly hold, are made up of a combination of those old theories. We come up with new terms now and then (e.g. "constructivism"; see Herbert Spencer's elaboration of this idea in the 1850s), but we haven't come up with any new ideas. We simply keep shuffling these three. Look at the "mission statement" of your school. I'll bet it offers a bit of all these three old theories. It will promise to give students the skills they will need to succeed in the society of the near future, to provide academic excellence, and to give each student the opportunity to develop her or his particular potential.

they can recall the proof that interior opposite angles are congruent, and an endless amount of similar stuff that ought to be fascinating. We have managed to confuse the first educational theory (sorting students according to the requirements of the society for certain skills) with the second (discovering the truth about the world they are a part of). By confusing the two, we ensure we do neither well, just as, by confusing the entertainment of the cinema with determining salaries, we do neither sensibly. And so, it seems we are spending our time and energy on an institution that is fundamentally confused about both its aims and its means of achieving those aims.

Our job is to make schools work better. The main barriers to that great aim are not the usual suspects of family breakdown, drugs, too many students in classes, and under-funding. Even if those problems were all miraculously solved, we would still be struggling with incompatible ideas. If we turn from the suspects who are usually lined up to explain the relative lack of success of our schools, and instead focus on the basic confusion of ideas that inhabits the system and the minds of those in it, we might find ways to make the current suspects less burdensome on our daily practice.

I believe that our greatest problem is a theoretical confusion at the heart of our enterprise, and that most educational research and theorizing today pass educational practice by. The books mentioned below are my attempt to clarify the problem and suggest a solution, and are among the work for which I am one of the grateful recipients of the CEA-Whitworth Award for 2002. 

Kieran Egan is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, and the Director of the Imaginative Education Research Group (www.ierg.net). His recent books include *The educated mind: How cognitive tools shape our understanding* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press) and *Getting it wrong from the beginning* (New Haven: Yale University Press). He can be contacted at egan@sfu.ca or through his [www Home Page](http://www.HomePage) at www.educ.sfu.ca/faculty/people/kegan.

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academic curriculum so that students will come to understand how and why the world has changed, our own society's role in this being of no particular importance.

Third – and around two hundred and fifty years old – is the theory that to educate people you need to understand their individual capacities and facilitate their fullest development. Each student is different, has particular potentials, and should be given the opportunity to develop them as fully as possible. Schooling, then, should not be a business of pushing predetermined curricula on students, but rather students' own interests and needs should be allowed to shape the curriculum. Students should be allowed to explore the world of knowledge at their own pace and in the style best suited to their individual ways of learning, because by giving them this opportunity, they will learn much more than by any forceful methods. The history learned in this curriculum would be selected according to how well it could support the students' individual intellectual and psychological development at any time; its relevance to the student's needs would be crucial.

The problem is that each of these theories undercuts the others. I can't show this in detail here, but let me give a single example to indicate the problem. Imagine that the government has introduced a new means of distributing financial rewards for work. To implement the new scheme, you have to go to the cinema once each week. As you come out from the movie, you are required to sit at a small desk in the foyer and answer a multiple-choice test based on the movie you have just seen. (e.g. "Was the car in the third chase scene a. red; b. blue; c. brown; d. white.") Depending on your score on the test, your salary will be determined for the following week. Then the next week, you go through the same routine, and your salary is again determined for a further week based on your score. What happens to the pleasure of going to the cinema? Well, that activity becomes fraught with anxiety because so much turns on your getting the right answers on the test. You don't need me to spell out the moral of this tale, but I will anyway: What institution does this absurd scenario remind you of? Yes, we call it "school". The future chances of students are determined by how well