

The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools From the Ground Up

BY KIERAN EGAN. YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008. ISBN: 9780300110463.

The dust jacket describes this book as a “frontal attack on current forms of schooling” and the imagined ‘future history’ that consumes the majority of the text declares that “the massive enterprise of schooling from the mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century [preceding the rise of “imaginative education”] now seems just another of history’s cruel jokes” (p. 180).

The author acknowledges that his book will seem “somewhat polemical” (p. ix), but states his intention to “work with the assumption that teachers on the whole are a remarkably dedicated and skilled group of professionals” and that “the villain is a bad idea”, which he will reveal and replace (p. x). For the most part, he succeeds in taking that high road, seeking to achieve the “ideals of both progressivists and traditionalists, in a form both might sign on to” (p. 86).

However, he does lapse into an unfortunate number of pejorative comments, such as the judgment that current educational theory and practice reveal “an astonishingly restricted sense of ‘learning,’ [which amounts to] little more than memorizing the knowledge content of the curriculum” (p. 96). This tendency to harsh categorical commentary may weaken both the credibility and palatability of an otherwise worthy and engaging thesis.

The book begins with the assertion that “the problem with our modern idea of the school is not fixable by the array of remedies currently on offer. The problem lies elsewhere, and fixing it requires of us the tougher task of rethinking the idea of education we have inherited from ancient and more modern Europe and its tangled history” (p. 8).

Why, asks Egan, has education remained “a contentious activity” and why has the school “been a largely unsatisfactory institution” (p. ix)? His answer: “Most people today use three big ideas when they think about education... socialization, Plato’s academic idea, and Rousseau’s developmental idea” (p. 9). The underlying assumption, that “the flaws in each idea would be compensated for by the other ideas – that is, that three wrong ideas would make a right idea... doesn’t work.”

Next, Egan describes “a more adequate notion of the mind than has so far been common in the field of education, and... a set of prescriptions for properly educating such minds” (p. 38). This prescription is based on a combination of Vygotsky’s metaphor of “our accumulated store of external symbols as a kind of tool kit for the brain” (p. 39) and Egan’s conception of “five major cognitive tool kits that are available for downloading from our cultural storehouse” (p. 42): somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic, and ironic.

Thus, the first part of the book, which amounts to just under half of its volume, is a summary review of the essence of Egan’s earlier work.

The second part of the book is told as a ‘future history’ from the perspective of a historian on the fifth planet in the Sirius system two and a half thousand years hence. “The first premise on which this fantasy is based is that the analysis of the modern school’s problems... is generally correct. The second premise is that the outline of how minds can be better educated... is also generally correct” (p. 87). It is laid out in five sections, each covering a decade from 2010 to 2060.

The stated purpose of this section of the book is “to demonstrate the practical implications of the ideas sketched in Part 1” (p. 88). However, while engaging, insightful, and often entertaining, it is much more conceptual than practical. This is not to say that it lacks merit, but only that its merit is in the examination of ideas rather than methods. In this discussion, the imagined historian from the future comments on a wide variety of alleged ills, for which imaginative education is proposed as

the solution. These ills include, among others, the trivialization of the primary curriculum, low standards of literacy and numeracy, the absence of deep engagement, a focus on socializing children of the working classes for industry, failure to address the gross disparities within society, and teachers who are mainly engaged in social engineering and indoctrination.

In this book, Egan asserts that “the issues that exercise many educators today seem to be off to the side of what really matters educationally” (p. 181) and that imaginative education addresses those while providing “even more emphasis on teaching a lot of knowledge than the traditionalist theory... [and also being] more child-centered than progressivism in its understanding of how knowledge grows in children’s minds” (p. 181). Whether or not you accept either the premise or the prescription, there is a great deal in it worth reading, considering, and debating. |

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