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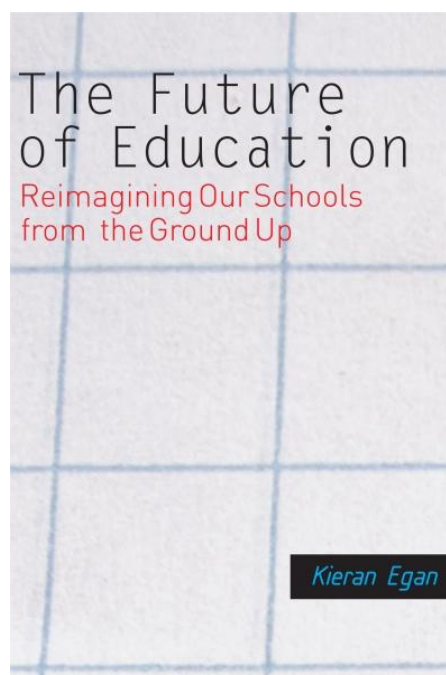


Egan, Kieran. (2008) *The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Pp. x + 191 ISBN 0300164596

Reviewed by Annie McMahon Whitlock
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Attempts to fix the education system in the United States have been going on for nearly the entire duration of this country's history. Accountability policies like No Child Left Behind and increased funding for education through Race to the Top grants have been the most recent stabs at education fixes. Now popular culture has jumped on the bandwagon, with Oprah Winfrey and the popular documentary *Waiting for Superman* offering up their solutions. *Waiting for Superman* suggests that reform can be achieved by simply hiring better teachers (or firing bad ones) and adopting rigorous standards. The immense popularity of this movie today makes these solutions seem viable, but Kieran Egan has

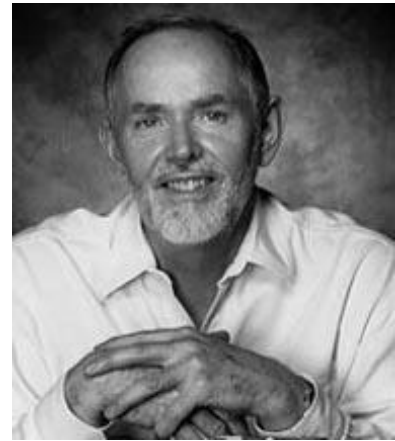


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a different take.

In *The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up*, Egan claims that “the villain is a bad idea” in the current conversation about reform (p. ix). It is not the fault of teachers, administrators, or even policy makers. The problem is how we *think* about the problem. According to Egan, the problem with our education system is “confusion at the root of the system” (p. x) and the incompatible views between those who believe the purpose of education is to develop the individual and those who believe it is to impart academic knowledge, otherwise known as the debate between “progressives” and “traditionalists.” Egan’s argument is that the constant debate between these two camps is restricting our ability to imagine that there might be a new way to look at the purpose of education. Egan claims to have a solution that has not yet been offered by policymakers or popular culture—to change the conversation around the theoretical purpose of education. The first half of the book is a polemical, academic argument about education reform; the second half is a narrative illustrating what the conversation about education reform might look like in the next fifty years.

Egan believes that our minds are developed through an intake of cultural symbols. He believes that education should be thought of as a way to maximize what he calls “cognitive tools” in order for us to do the cultural work of understanding. The first half of the book describes five kinds of understanding, or “cognitive tools”—somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic, and ironic. Consistent with his argument that we need a new way of looking at incompatible views of education, Egan suggests that these cognitive tools represent the best of both the traditionalist and progressive worlds without having them compete with each other. For example, the more “progressive” cognitive tools are somatic, philosophic, and ironic. Somatic understanding involves developing emotions (especially humor) through exposure to the natural environment and the senses. Those who have philosophic and ironic understanding are able to understand how their world works, their role in changing society, and their own progression of learning and understanding. The development of the individual is



Kieran Egan is professor of education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. He is a former American Educational Research Association Fellow, Kappa Delta Pi laureate and Grawemeyer Award in Education winner. He was named a foreign associate of the National Academy of Education in 2000.

important in these cognitive tools, but mythic and romantic understandings are also cognitive tools that require a significant amount of what could be considered traditional academic knowledge. Mythic understanding requires one to develop a story and see larger themes and patterns within topics. Romantic understanding requires a development of one's own sense of reality by learning a topic deeply and engaging in its human qualities. Mastering these cognitive tools would require an intense study of academic material.

After describing these cognitive tools, Egan tries to lay out "how we can get from here to there" (p. 87), where young minds become educated with these modes of understanding. However, the second half of the book is not the practical guide some might hope for. Instead, the book becomes a fictional narrative of "future history" that is extraordinarily detailed, like a novel version of a utopian fantasy. Nonetheless, his outlook on the next fifty years of the evolution of education is engaging and intriguing.

For the purpose of his narrative, Egan packages his cognitive tools into something called "imaginative education," otherwise known as IE. He traces the development of IE through fifty years as it becomes a part of teacher education programs, gains popularity in classrooms by 2040, and ends up being so ingrained in lifelong education that people stop referring to it as a separate IE movement. This utopia is achieved because of how IE positions itself in the classic debate between traditionalists and progressives. According to Egan's story, by 2030, IE will gain in popularity because it offers the best of both of these worlds at the same time since the two camps are currently fighting a losing battle against each other. IE becomes the ideal alternative to the debate by 2040, and by 2060, the traditionalist versus progressive debate will have disappeared completely.

This scenario certainly is consistent with his argument that changing education requires looking at education through a different theoretical lens. However, this narrative means little if the reader doesn't buy in to IE as being the proper alternative lens. Fortunately for Egan, his choice to use the style of a narrative is engaging enough to immerse the reader fully into a world where IE becomes an appealing landscape. His attention to detail (he cites papers "written"

in 2036 and conference presentations given by specific people in 2014), as well as “first person accounts” from a teacher education student in 2016, IE students in the 2020s, a debate at an educational conference in 2033, and professional development in 2049 help to give the reader a clear picture of his vision. This keeps the reader right alongside Egan for the entire book as participants in the utopian fantasy.

However compelling his futuristic fantasy is, Egan never describes how we change the conversation toward his cognitive tools. Reading the narrative gives the reader a false sense of simplicity. It’s easy to read about and to write about a fictional conference in Vancouver where the Salernoists (traditionalists named for a movement started at a Salerno, Italy conference in 2017) debate the top IE scholars of the day (“the day” being 2033). It’s harder to outline how we organize this debate. How does IE get incorporated into K-12 reading textbooks, history textbooks, and math textbooks? What needs to happen so that IE becomes a part of teacher preparation programs? How do we get more researchers to become IE scholars? Egan never tackles these questions. His failure to address this problem of the practicalities of implementation of his vision is frustrating; but, as he points out, changing the conversation has to start somewhere. This book could be the impetus and the model that is needed to get the right people moving in the right direction—especially because Egan is so convinced that his concepts are right. It is disappointing that he thinks it will take as long as fifty years.

About the Reviewer

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