

A Tribute to Kieran Egan

[Kieran Egan \(1942-2022\)](#), a professor of education at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, advocated imagination in all education. Over his career he developed a comprehensive theory of educational development in which imagination played a central role. Unusually for a philosopher, he also articulated and developed a rich set of pedagogical practices that all educators can use to bring imagination to the heart of their practice. Imagination—*the ability to envision the possible in all things*—was, according to Kieran, essential for all learning.

Kieran founded the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG) in 2001 as a means of further developing and popularizing his ideas about engaging children’s minds, emotions, and imaginations in learning. The IERG is now the Centre for Imagination in Research, Culture, and Education (CIRCE) and continues to research imagination’s wide impact on our lives. [Winner of the Grawemeyer Award in Education in 1991](#), a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada since 1993 and of the (US) National Academy of Education since 2000, holder of a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair from 2001, and 2016 winner of the [Cmolik Prize for the Enhancement of Public Education](#), Kieran built his academic career upon a highly original and insightful theory of “educational development” and its implications for teaching and curriculum.

This brief tribute to Kieran’s academic work outlines this educational theory and the practice of imagination-focused teaching he developed called *Imaginative Education*. A few of his many books are also listed, with annotations, for anyone who would like to learn more about the central role of imagination in all learning and how to grow imagination in education.

A Theory of Educational Development

In a number of works (see bibliography below), stretching from *Educational Development* (1979) to *The Educated Mind* (1997), Kieran proposed that we view human history as a process of coming to terms with the imaginative possibilities of language. He picked out, in particular, four dramatic cultural transformations: the development of oral language, the rise of literate societies, the establishment of communities of theoretic discourse and, most recently, the emergence of deep epistemic doubt. Each of these cultural discoveries, he argued, provided a new set of “cognitive tools” for engaging the imagination in making sense of the world; from the use of those tools, four distinctively languaged kinds of understanding emerged (in order: Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, and Ironic) that continue to shape our cultures and our minds today.

According to Kieran, this broad cultural-historical scheme is particularly helpful in thinking about child development. In his account, every child in a modern society can, at least in principle, recapitulate this process through the gradual, sequential appropriation of the relevant sets of cognitive tools. This implies a view of learning in which imaginative and emotional engagement are central and individual development is embedded within the meaning-making processes of a given society. In that respect his views are akin to those of the

Russian cultural psychologist Vygotsky, although there are also significant differences between their theories.

An Approach to Teaching and Learning: Imaginative Education

Kieran drew direct implications from his developmental theory for the organization of formal education. He was highly critical of the tacit and sometimes explicit assumptions that shape curriculum and teaching in modern school systems, among them the idea that learning proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, the understanding of curriculum as a collection of facts, concepts and procedures, and the tendency to treat thinking and understanding as separate from imaginations and emotion. In books such as *The Educated Mind* (1997), *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning* (2002) and *The Future of Education* (2008) he sought to replace these limiting assumptions with an inclusive vision of how schools could make wonder, story and meaning-making central to the learning process.

Imaginative Education (IE) is a unique way of teaching that taps into distinctive features of students' emotional and imaginative lives. This approach to teaching is for students of *all* ages in *all* contexts—PreK through graduate school, formal schooling, home education, and all kinds of alternative educational settings. IE is based on an understanding of how the human imagination works and the learning tools—or “**cognitive tools**”—that engage and develop imagination. IE resources show educators how to apply these tools in all subject areas to maximize student engagement and learning.

Learn more about Imaginative Education on the imaginED blog (www.educationthatinspires.ca) and the CIRCE website (www.circsfu.ca).

This 2009 lecture, from a series featuring SFU's Canada Research Chairs, offers a nice summary of some of Kieran's key ideas: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QFDzRkmiUE>

Or this article, an interview with Rob Hopkins:

<https://www.robhopkins.net/2018/03/26/kieran-egan-on-education-imagination-and-the-ability-to-think-about-the-possible/>

Some of Kieran Egan's Publications

Egan was a prolific writer. The range of his thought and interests is most clearly on display in his books. The following list includes most of them, organized by theme and then chronologically. To read some essays visit Kieran's [personal website](#) (academic) or to read his award-winning poetry and works of fiction visit his [poetry website](#).

Books on Theory

- 1979 **Educational Development**. Oxford University Press, New York. ISBN 0-19-502458-3
This is the earliest book on Egan's educational theory, where you can see him working out some of the key features of the “kinds of understanding” that feature in subsequent works

- 1983 **Education and Psychology: Plato, Piaget, and Scientific Psychology**. Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York ; London. ISBN 0-8077-2717-2
A sustained critique of the "psychologizing" of educational development
- 1988 **Primary Understanding: Education in Early Childhood**. Routledge, New York. ISBN 0-415-90003-4
The book that won the Grawemeyer Award, this exploration of young children's imaginations develops the theory of what Egan came to call Mythic understanding
- 1990 **Romantic Understanding: The Development of Rationality and Imagination, Ages 8-15**. Routledge, New York. ISBN 0-415-90050-6
A sequel to Primary Understanding, this book proposes a new way of looking at the imaginative engagement characteristic of literate cultures during the later childhood years
- 1997 **The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding**. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. ISBN 0-226-19036-6
The most comprehensive outline of Egan's theory, this book describes five "kinds of understanding" culminating in Ironic understanding

Books on Practice

- 1986 **Teaching as Story Telling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School**. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. ISBN 0-226-19031-5
A concise and inspiring argument for imaginative teaching, this book has had wide influence and been translated into several languages
- 1992 **Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years**. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. ISBN 0-226-19033-1
A practitioner's companion to "Romantic Understanding" and a kind of sequel to "Teaching as Storytelling"
- 2005 **An Imaginative Approach to Teaching**. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA. ISBN 0-7879-7157-X
A practitioner's companion to "The Educated Mind," focused on Mythic and Romantic understanding
- 2006 **Teaching Literacy: Engaging the Imagination of New Readers and Writers**. Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif. ISBN 1-4129-2788-9
A book that applies Egan's ideas in some detail to a core part of the school curriculum
- 2010 **Learning in Depth: A Simple Innovation that Can Transform Schooling**. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL. ISBN 978-0-226-19043-3
Egan's belief in the value of knowing things is at the heart of this argument for engaging students with an assigned topic for the length of their school career
- 2014 **Whole School Projects: Engaging Imaginations Through Interdisciplinary Inquiry**. Teachers College Press, New York. ISBN 978-0-807-75583-9
Where "Learning in Depth" emphasizes individual engagement, this book makes a case for whole schools exploring a selected topic for up to three years
- 2015 (with Gillian Judson) **Imagination and the Engaged Learner: Cognitive Tools for the Classroom**. Teachers College Press, New York. ISBN 978-0-807-75714-7
A practical introduction to imaginative education with a focus on cognitive tools

Other Educational Works

- 1988 (Ed. with Dan Nadaner) **Imagination and Education**. Teachers College Press, New York. ISBN 0-8077-2878-0
A wonderful edited collection of essays from notable writers
- 1999 **Children's Minds, Talking Rabbits & Clockwork Oranges: Essays on Education**. Teachers College Press, New York. ISBN 0-8077-3808-5
A collection of some of Egan's favourite short pieces
- 2002 **Getting it Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget**. Yale University Press, New Haven. ISBN 0-300-09433-7
A thought-provoking critique of some taken-for-granted ideas in education
- 2008 **The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up**. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. ISBN 978-0-300-11046-3
An exploration of how Egan's ideas might transform public education
- 2013 (Ed. with Annabella Cant and Gillian Judson). **Wonder-full education: The Centrality of Wonder in Teaching and Learning across the Curriculum**. Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-82029-5
Fifteen diverse essays by educators from a variety of countries and fields.

[By Mark Fettes & Gillian Judson]