Egan, Kieran. (1992). *Imagination in teaching and learning: The middle school years.* London, ON: Althouse Press, 178 pp., $16.95 (softcover).

Beginning with the ground-breaking *Educational Development* in 1979, Kieran Egan has articulated a theory of education that is characterized by four developmental stages — mythic, romantic, philosophic, and ironic. At each stage children make sense of the world and experience in significantly different ways (p. 7). Egan emphasizes that his is not a theory of learning with its roots in behaviorism or psychology. Rather, he has developed a theory of *education* that keeps children, content, and curriculum together and is viewed through the ways that children make sense of the world. So, rather than using content-based approaches such as the "expanding horizons curriculum" or a child-centered approach which suggests a content based on children's needs, Egan's educational theory sets out a curriculum that begins with the stories and storying that engage children's interests and then structures activities that try "to see 'through' their content to the main mental categories children use in making sense of them" (p. 10).

Egan elaborates on his theory of education in *Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years*. He outlines his goals in this book as wanting to help educators get "a grasp on what imagination is" and he hopes to provide "some practical help for the teacher who wants to engage, stimulate and develop students' imaginations" (p. 1). While he successfully clarifies the reader's understanding of his theory of education, several concerns arise with the use of narrative structures for organizing content and with an overemphasis on the early stages of the Planning Framework which he proposes as a guide for building imagination into the curriculum.

I have little argument with Egan's rationale for including more "affective connections" in our curriculum planning; in fact, I celebrate his call for more balance between affective and effective teaching strategies. I am excited by what he says about how we must engage children's imaginations. While reading his books I react with a certain feeling that

this all makes perfect sense. He writes with a certain quality of *déjà vu*, weaving back and forth the points he wants to make so that it's like hearing a familiar story, one that has the ring of an old favorite and at the same time is laced with good common sense. He is quite articulate as he traces the history of imagination and very persuasive in describing the meaning of imagination. He does this in a clear and robust style that is neither didactic nor verbose.

However, I do have some difficulty with the format Egan outlines for developing the narrative structure for organizing the content. The Planning Framework itself does follow naturally from the characteristics of students' imaginative lives that he outlines but when we get to the stage of developing the narrative structure I wonder whose story gets told.

In the examples Egan provides most of the stories come from classical literature, that body of fairytales, folktales, myths, legends, and other genres which contain stories steeped in the traditional values of Western civilization. These examples are culturally restricted in three ways. First of all, there is a gender bias inherent in most of these stories that as educators we must be careful not to perpetuate in the stories we create. Most of the heroes of these classics were males and *they* had all the adventures, rebelled against authority with their sense of idealism, and defined many of the romantic qualities associated with human experience. Females on the other hand simply provided the motivation for many of the heroic adventures or became the "booty" claimed by the hero at the end of the story. As we structure the narratives that will help organize the content, we have to be careful that we are not perpetuating values no longer relevant to contemporary society.

My second concern, which may provide a partial solution to the first problem, is the apparent unwillingness to look at contemporary literature as inspiration that will help develop concepts and convey content meaningfully. Why recreate new stories if there are quality examples already in existence? Many contemporary stories are extremely valuable in stimulating the imagination and in helping to engage students in meaningful experiences with content. Is it necessary to always present

content in the historical context in which it originally developed? In his unit on "Trees" Egan suggests that Jean Giono's excellent book, *The Man Who Planted Trees* (1990), could be used as a closure to the unit. Perhaps it could have been used as the beginning for study around which the same concepts of destruction and survival, exploitation, beauty, etc. could be developed. *The People Who Hugged Trees* (1990), a contemporary retelling of an ancient East Indian tale, could also help develop the concept that even ancient societies over-logged their trees and faced devastating consequences. The point is that we don't necessarily have to create our own narrative to fit the content when there are many excellent stories available in children's literature.

Third, it is also important to ensure that the stories we choose or that we create ourselves represent examples from many cultures and are not constantly being drawn from those of Western civilization. Stories from First Nations peoples and those of new immigrants who come to Canada need to be balanced with the classic stories from our largely European tradition. Taken together these factors of gender-bias, contemporary versus traditional literature, and multi-culturalism caution educators to consider carefully the stories they choose or create when they attempt to organize the content of their study into a narrative structure.

Egan warns against the mechanistic application of his Planning Framework by educators. However, the very act of designing such a framework implies that there is a process involved here and that critical factors along the way will ensure success. He advocates a greater change than just adding a few imaginative lessons to the already existing curriculum. Recognizing the power of imagination and how it is best engaged through the narrative mode will, when fully understood and visible in "real" classroom situations, provide a truly meaningful educational experience for students.

In *Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years* Egan shows that his theory holds through this romantic stage. As a theory of education however, it cries out to be investigated in authentic classroom situations. I recommend that educators read this book because of the

challenge it presents to our traditional beliefs about the role imagination plays in our educational lives and because of the possibilities it advances for enriching our curriculum. Egan has balanced his arguments with the logic of reason and "the logic of the heart" (p. 166) and has presented convincing evidence that educators need to "take imagination more seriously" (p. 167).

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