

A Case Study of Educational Change:  
Egan's Framework and the Praxis of Teaching

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## Abstract

This case study examines the difficulties faced by eleven educators who have endeavored to incorporate Kieran Egan's framework of imaginative education into their work. The challenges experienced by these educators were found to include constraints such as time and resource availability, curriculum and evaluation requirements, and student differences; as well as impediments related more closely to the educators themselves, such as their understanding of Egan's framework, intellectual effort, engagement, and values. The deepest involvement with imaginative education as a distinctive pedagogical approach was found among those educators who seemed to have achieved a "state of praxis," in which their theoretical and practical understandings had become intertwined. The praxis exemplified by these educators seems to have been arrived at primarily through involvement in a "community of practice" and through engagement in ongoing intellectual effort. In all cases it also appears to include an understanding of the whole person as the focus of the educational process. The article makes recommendations for how educators might better be assisted in their efforts to incorporate theoretical perspectives, such as Egan's framework, into their teaching practice.

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For over two decades, Kieran Egan has made his ideas on imaginative education available to educators through books (Egan, 1979, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1997), articles (e.g. the selection in Egan, 1999), courses (primarily at Simon Fraser University), and workshops, both in Canada and overseas. Perhaps the most influential of these works is *Teaching as Storytelling* (1986), which highlights the importance of narrative in making the curriculum meaningful for children, and offers guidance to teachers on how to accomplish this in their everyday teaching practice. Egan's subsequent work locates the use of narrative within a broader conception of educational development in which the role of the imagination is central, but its focus changes as children acquire new cultural tools for thinking about the world. This framework is most fully developed in *The Educated Mind* (1997), which discusses education in terms of five "somewhat distinct" kinds of understanding, each building on but also, to some extent, conflicting with the kinds of understanding that have been previously acquired. In this article, we will use the term "imaginative education" to include all efforts to develop children's imaginative understanding through the use of narrative and other means.

Many educators around the world have been introduced to Egan's work and have endeavored to apply his ideas on imaginative education to classroom teaching. The range of contexts involved is considerable, including elementary and secondary school teachers, administrators, and teacher educators in Canada, the United States, Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Sweden, and Australia. However, correspondence with these educators suggests that, despite their enthusiasm and commitment, they encounter a number of obstacles in their attempts to integrate imaginative education in the everyday practice of schools. It was an interest in exploring what it is that is problematic for these educators that led us to initiate this research study. By interviewing

educators who have worked with Egan's ideas on imaginative education, we aimed to gain a better understanding of the challenges involved in incorporating these ideas in practice.

### Methods

The objectives of this study identify it as fitting within the parameters of an interpretive case study approach. According to Merriam (1991), the case study approach can be used

when description and explanation (rather than prediction based on cause and effect) are sought, when it is not possible or feasible to manipulate the potential causes of behavior, and when variables are not easily identified or are too embedded in the phenomenon to be extracted for study...A fourth and probably deciding factor is whether a *bounded system* (Smith, 1978) can be identified as the focus of the investigation. That is, a case study is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group. (pp. 7-9)

By classifying "the experiences of educators with Egan's framework of imaginative education" as the case, the boundaries of the research were identified. The description of this research as a case study was also helpful in ensuring the inclusion of "thick description" in the report. Denzin (1989) describes thick description as permitting

a willing reader to share vicariously in the experiences that have been captured. A thick description...goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. (p. 83)

Thick description can be viewed as being important in a case study for several reasons. First, it captures more of the meanings that are present in a sequence of experience than "thin description" does (Denzin, 1989). This can result in a heuristic study in which "previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge" (Stake, 1981, p. 47; cited in Merriam, 1991, p.13). Second, it enables "judgments of transferability" by providing sufficient information to allow the reader to make comparisons to another setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 359). Finally, it creates the conditions for thick interpretation in which a "system of analysis and understanding that is meaningful within the worlds of lived experience" is constructed (Denzin, 1989, p. 101).

Identifying this research as a case study was also helpful in justifying the inductive nature of the study. Merriam (1991) suggests that most case studies rely on inductive reasoning in that “generalizations, concepts, or hypotheses emerge from an examination of data” (p. 13). Using this method, theory is developed after collecting data, and is therefore “grounded” in the data (Neuman, 1997).

Research participants were sought out by contacting twenty educators identified as working with Kieran Egan’s imaginative education framework. Of these, eleven were available for an interview either in-person or by e-mail. Out of the eleven educators interviewed, five were located locally and three of these were available for an in-person interview. The six educators located outside of the local area (five of whom were outside of Canada), as well as the two local educators who were not available for in-person interviews, participated in e-mail interviews. These interviews consisted of the same general questions as the in-person interviews, but did not allow for follow-up questions.

The analysis of the collected data was conducted in several stages. First, a number of coding categories were deductively chosen through a review of various sources. These sources included tape recorded discussions between Egan and several teachers from a number of years ago, a masters thesis written by a school administrator on her experiences working with teachers attempting to implement Egan’s ideas (Fleming, 1987), and several of Egan’s books (1986, 1992, 1997). Through this review process we identified a variety of categories that could be used to code the data (other categories that arose during the data coding were added to the list of categories and then also used to code subsequent data). The data were then divided into units of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and sorted according to content. The final organization of the units of information resulted in a number of themes, many of which contained sub-themes. These salient themes and the data contained therein provide the substance of our findings and were used in generating theory based on this research.

## Results

The findings of our research on educators' experiences with Egan's work can loosely be divided into four sections, each of which is comprised of at least one theme and, in some cases, sub-themes. These sections are: i) research participants, ii) outcomes of imaginative education, iii) possible external constraints to imaginative education, and iv) the educator and imaginative education. Although some of these sections are more directly related than others to the primary focus on the problems that inhibit the implementation of Egan's ideas in practice, all four are pertinent to the present inquiry.

### The Research Participants

Certain information about the research participants made evident through the interviews appears to be potentially linked to these educators' use of Egan's ideas in their practice, including their specific occupations and the nature of their exposure to Egan's ideas. Pseudonyms will be used to refer to the educators throughout this article to simplify discussion. There was a range of occupations among the eleven educators, with five being teachers (Monica, Elyse, Careen, Graeme, & Alice), four being school administrators (i.e., principals) (Aaron, Patrick, Teo, & Helen), and three being teacher educators at universities or colleges (Katarina, Vera, & Careen – who works primarily as a teacher). All of the teachers and administrators worked at the elementary school level.

Of the teachers, Alice indicated that her exposure to Egan's ideas had been through the administrators she had worked with; Graeme reported that he had read an article of Egan's; and the three others indicated they had read parts of the book *Teaching as Storytelling* (1986), with Elyse also having read parts of Egan's "subsequent books" as well as having worked with Egan while he was visiting her school. All of the four administrators reported having read some of Egan's books, although they did not specify which ones. Monica, Aaron, Patrick, and Helen had also worked as

teachers with administrators familiar with Egan's ideas, as well as with Egan during visits to their school. Of the three teacher educators, Vera and Careen had read Egan's book, *Teaching as Storytelling*, and Katarina indicated having read some of Egan's books, but did not specify which ones. Throughout the data set, the only books of Egan's to be mentioned by name were (multiple references to) *Teaching as Storytelling* (1986) and (one reference to a review read of) *Primary Understanding* (1988).

### Outcomes of Imaginative Education

The educators in the study were unanimously supportive of Egan's ideas and all of the teachers, and administrators who had previously worked with the ideas as teachers, discussed its benefits for students. Several comments focused on the richness of an imaginative education curriculum and how this results in "students responding more richly," or in a "classroom environment that is permeated with imagination." Graeme explained,

I have had a very positive response from the children in my class to my work using Kieran's ideas. I believe this is because it respects their ideas and builds understanding from their own imagination...I will continue to look for ways to incorporate Kieran's ideas into my work because I believe it is the way forward for education in a world that is changing so fast, that we can not even imagine what it will be like for the children we are teaching in primary schools.

A number of other educators commented directly on how an imaginative curriculum is more engaging, and hence more educational, for students. Monica explained, "I spend as much time in my teaching trying to get people interested as I do in making them more knowledgeable. If I only make them more knowledgeable, then they'll go back to class with half a dozen ideas, but never really have the idea of what the subject is about." Aaron suggested, "Students get pretty connected. They start to see their own experience of school in very strategic and practical ways...Kids come into grade 7 using plot lines and having so much fun with it." Helen wrote, "I feel that students are more engaged when curriculum is presented using Kieran's ideas – it becomes 'theirs' – they own

it. They complete assignments.” Finally, when asked whether she foresaw herself using these ideas in the future, Alice wrote, “Definitely. It’s what works.”

### Possible External Constraints to Imaginative Education

This section begins to more specifically address the primary focus of this research – what has been problematic in educators’ experiences with Kieran Egan’s work – by examining several themes found in the data set relating to possible constraints to imaginative education often viewed as being external to the educator. These themes, or possible constraints, include time availability, curriculum requirements, evaluation requirements, student differences, and resource availability.

#### Time availability.

The theme of time availability received double the number of comments of any other themes in this section, including comments from all but the one administrator who had not worked with Egan’s ideas as a teacher and one teacher educator. Out of the nine educators who commented on time availability, four suggested that time was a constraint for educators using Egan’s ideas in practice. For some, this involved a lack of time for planning curriculum units; whereas for others (i.e., teacher educators), it was the lack of time to read Egan’s work. Teacher/teacher educator Careen wrote, “Time is always an issue. I have wanted to rewrite one of my units and make it more adaptable to a variety of topics. Until I retire in a couple of years this is not likely to happen.” As an administrator, Patrick addressed the issue of effort, which seems closely linked to that of time. He explained,

When I mention Kieran Egan’s name some pretty good teachers will say, ‘Yeah, I’ve heard his name.’ But what happens tomorrow morning is more important than what happens over the next two months, you know, overall...If these ideas are going to happen, teachers need to experience them more directly, have them mapped out...It’s just too much work [as it is]...In the current climate, it is very difficult for principals to ask for extra effort from staff.



Monica lamented, “There used to be planning time. With that came relationship. [Another teacher] and I would have dinner, plan an amazing unit...I do feel there’s a lack of purpose in what I’m doing lately, and that’s to do with planning.” Monica also suggested, “Time is not a good excuse. It’s more about having a community of people to share units and ideas with.”

Five educators indicated that time was not a constraint in putting Egan’s ideas into practice. Elyse expressed the view that although, “It takes much longer to plan and maintain an ‘Egan’ unit...the learning outcomes for students, and the personal satisfaction for teachers is so much greater than with other planning frameworks, the input is welcome.” Four other educators suggested that using Egan’s ideas did not ultimately require greater time on the part of the educator than other practices. While Helen suggested that, “all planning takes time;” others indicated that once the initial planning is complete, the process of implementing the unit is straightforward and not highly time consuming. Alice wrote, “After my initial planning where I’ve made grids and outlines and actual lesson books, the time is really irrelevant. I just get to watch my students interpret what I teach.” Patrick commented, “One of the things story can do is to enable a teacher to reconstitute the same curriculum over and over again.”

#### Curriculum requirements.

Only five educators made comments specifically pertaining to the relationship between curriculum requirements and the implementation of Egan’s ideas (all of the teachers). Of these, two teachers indicated that using Egan’s ideas made meeting curriculum related requirements at their school more difficult. Graeme wrote that a challenge was “finding ways to incorporate Kieran’s ideas with the demands of the content heavy National Curriculum,” while Monica spoke of having difficulties meeting the curriculum requirements of her school district.

The other three teachers suggested that they found that using Egan’s ideas either had no impact on their ability to meet curriculum requirements or was, in fact, helpful in this regard. While Alice indicated that using Egan’s ideas meant curriculum requirements were, “more easily met!”,

Elyse wrote, “I think the model allow the planning of integrated units that are far more vital and meaningful. With an increasingly crowded curriculum it is essential to have planning structures that allow units to be planned and implemented holistically.”

#### Evaluation requirements.

The data on the theme of evaluation requirements was again from the five teachers. Graeme alone indicated that using Egan’s ideas had resulted in no changes in his methods of evaluation. The other four teachers suggested that the ideas of imaginative education had affected their methods of evaluation. When asked about this, Alice responded, “I tend to look more at the whole child and take account into account so much more than straight factual knowledge.” Careen explained, “I have learned to make my evaluation strategies directly link to the goals of each lesson. Kieran’s theories have helped me to clarify a topic and therefore leave a clearer path to what needs to be evaluated.”

Monica and Elyse, on the other hand, seemed to be struggling with how to evaluate in a way that is consistent with Egan’s ideas. Monica commented, “I’ve never given a social studies test. It’s not something you can assess – it’s a way of being. I wish there were no marks for anything.” Elyse explained,

Evaluation is probably the greatest challenge and certainly one I have not yet solved. This is because much of what we are trying to evaluate is abstract and subjective. I can’t really talk about evaluation because I need help with it!...I have used these methods in three schools – two private schools and one government school. I gave up using the model in the government school since it caused so much angst amongst parents who could not see how teaching in this way met government standards. In the private schools I have been supported. But there is always a lot of pressure on being accountable – especially in the upper primary years, and Egan’s model leads us into teaching that isn’t easily assessable. Designing meaningful and authentic assessment tools for Egan-based units will be a big breakthrough.

#### Student differences.

Many of the comments pertaining to the theme of student differences were in response to a question asking about any variations in the ways students respond to the use of Egan's ideas, although a few comments also arose in discussion of the types of challenges encountered in putting Egan's ideas into practice.

A couple of general comments were made pertaining to student differences, including Monica's remark that "there are differences among every child," and Aaron's suggestion that there is a danger in generalizing about children. He explained that as a teacher, one of the administrators he worked with "was wonderful at keeping that in mind – keeping a space open for every child to experience the collective story in their own way." When asked whether she noticed any variations in the way students respond to her use of Egan's ideas, Alice remarked, "It depends on their backgrounds. Sometimes I assume more than I should."

Others were more specific in their comments regarding student difference. Two educators discussed culturally based differences among students and their impact on putting Egan's ideas into practice. Monica indicated increasing problems with language in her classrooms due to a higher proportion of ESL students, while Helen suggested that student response to imaginative education "may depend on cultural background and language ability." Alice discussed a different sort of problem resulting from student difference. She wrote, "The main challenge I've had is having students who come from more rigid classroom environments. At first they can see [the Egan] method as a time to play around. Once they understand it's effective though, they are hooked." Another perspective on student difference was expressed by Elyse, who responded to the question on noticing any variations in the ways students respond to Egan's ideas with,

Yes, definitely. But I would expect this. The planning framework is meant to stimulate and nurture imagination and imaginative thinking. Individuals will come to this with many and varied predispositions to imaginative functioning. Looked at in the whole-brain context, students with more green/blue functioning brains may not be so willing or comfortable to step into an "imaginative" unit. However, all students have imaginative potential and these units will help nurture this part of every student. The variation seems to be the level of passion students bring to the unit – the more affectively engaged, the more long-term the learning.

Resource availability.

The final theme discerned in the data set relating to this section was that of resource availability. A number of resources were mentioned in the data set including, in order of number of comments: collaboration, summarized reading material, online resources, and workshops.

A number of educators emphasized the importance of opportunities for collaboration in their efforts to work with Egan's ideas. The comments of the educators suggest that the collaborative relationship could be with fellow teachers, with administrators, or with people external to their school. In some cases, the relationship was more of an equal partnership or working group; where in others it was more of a mentoring relationship with one of the partners having greater experience in working with the ideas. A consistent characteristic emphasized by educators, however, was the ongoing and collaborative nature of the relationship, rather than as a "this is how you do it, and then walk away" type of mentorship, as described by Monica. This may help explain why almost all of the educators in the study indicated that they had never sought help in using these ideas from Egan or his colleagues.

Comments from educators such as Monica, Patrick, and Aaron, help flesh out the type of collaboration that they have found to be helpful. After having her teaching partner and mentor leave her school, Monica expressed feeling that her abilities to work with Egan's ideas were more limited. She explained,

Now I plan alone. When [my teaching partner] left, it was difficult to work with new ideas. There was no one to inspire and be inspired by - there was no supportive environment... I miss the team planning and teaching that we did together... It is important to find a soul mate. So much planning seems activity-based, it is great to have help to figure out how to bring the imagination in.

Patrick also commented on the importance of collaboration. He explained,

At [my previous school], [the vice-principal] was unique and the [principal] was unique and the school was unique... I think at one time just about everyone in that school was working on their master's... We were constantly sharing articles and things... The collaboration that

went on was, “I’ve gotta tell you what went on in my classroom this morning – it was amazing. Let me share the moment with you.” And there would be a chat about that. That doesn’t go on in the typical staff room.

The importance of working together was also emphasized by Aaron, who commented,

I think we really have to shift our focus. Do I know as a grade four teacher what my kids experienced in reading in grade three and what they will be experiencing in grade five? One teacher might have a strong focus on literature, another on reading; one on answering questions, another on being read to. If we start to ask what children experience, are we working together? Dialogue is necessary. Some really deep conversations need to happen... [This way of teaching] is only going to work if you have the whole staff involved, but that won’t happen often or spread easily.

Several other educators expressed an interest in working collaboratively on integrating Egan’s ideas into their teaching. Graeme indicated that he would be “very interested” in collaborating with other teachers or administrators, Teo indicated he would “like to hear about how other administrators are incorporating Kieran’s ideas in their schools,” while Helen suggested that her understanding of Egan’s ideas could be improved through “conversation, dialogue, greater exploration and depth, planning with others.” Elyse, who had previously worked collaboratively with colleagues and mentors wrote, “I feel it would be very useful to have face to face interaction with people who use Egan methods. Correspondence is useful, but I think these ideas need to be discussed in person, to captivate ideas imaginatively and capitalize on the power of synergy.”

A number of educators indicated that the difficulty and time involved in reading Egan’s books were inhibiting to themselves and other educators they had attempted to work with in incorporating Egan’s ideas into their teaching. When asked about the types of resources that would be of assistance to them in their work, a number of educators indicated that resources that summarize Egan’s ideas would be helpful. Monica explained, “A summary would be very helpful. I feel I should read more of his books, but I have so much to do.”

Several educators suggested that online resources would be helpful in enabling them to work more successfully with Egan’s ideas. Careen wrote, “E-mail chatrooms would be an excellent opportunity for teachers to work with experts to plan any unit. Great idea! Brainstorming the

questions posed in Kieran's ideas is a challenging process." Teo also commented that "a website with a "questions and answers" page would be helpful."

Finally, there seemed to be a range of views on whether workshops are valuable resources for those wanting to work with Egan's ideas. Aaron's view was,

You gotta get on the Pro-D circuit. Some teachers are hooked on Pro-D material – "Just let me know - Just give me a unit plan." You gotta give them a taste. Just feed them ready made units. I don't think there have ever been any good integrated studies distributed.

On the other hand, Patrick commented, "My staff is fed up now with one-shot deals. The question is whether this is the sort of thing they might like to hang on to for a year or so. It hinges on felt need by teachers – shared desire." Monica also indicated that workshops are of little appeal to her. She explained, "I'm not necessarily interested in a workshop. Relationship is more important than a quick fix." Teacher educator Careen was also skeptical of one-shot workshops. She wrote,

The concept of working through the Story Telling Format is challenging. When presenting my issue based unit to teachers it is usually the first time they have heard of this format for planning and in one workshop session it is difficult to explore these concepts thoroughly.

One educator, Graeme, indicated an interest in taking a course related to incorporating Egan's ideas into practice, if that was possible from his international location.

### The Educator and Imaginative Education

The themes in this section were the focus of approximately one third of the comments in the entire data set. These themes include educators' understanding of Egan's ideas, intellectual effort, engagement, and values.

#### Understanding of Egan's framework.

When asked to undertake the challenging task of summarizing their understanding of Egan's ideas, most of the educators in the study seemed quite clear on what these ideas meant for them. However, the responses and examples provided suggest a range of depth and breadth in the

educators' understanding, as would be expected given the limitations of time and resources many of them have experienced. A number of comments also explicitly indicated problems in knowing how to translate theoretical comprehension into practical application, while other comments suggested a felt need to "modify" Egan's ideas for practical use. These associated issues can all be considered to be different facets of the theme of educators' understanding.

The range of depth and breadth in the understandings of Egan's ideas represented in the educators who participated in the study is evident in their explanations of Egan's ideas and in the examples of their practice. With one of the most comprehensive understandings of Egan's ideas articulated by the study participants, Elyse describes her understanding as follows:

[Egan] believes that all children come with the innate ability to make meaning from narratives; with the innate ability to play and imagine; and with the innate ability to construct meaning using the form of "story" (narrative) as a scaffold. This story form means that children perceive any event or experience as having a beginning, a middle, and an end – and each of these stages has predictable features that make them accessible and understandable. "Stories" (or events, etc.) also have characters, plots, and settings. By measuring new stories against our recollection of old stories, we move forward in developing new understandings and making new meanings... Egan is saying to educators that if children already come to school with such sophisticated ways of making meaning from things, we should capitalize on this and use these innate abilities as planning tools for curriculum and lesson plans. Of crucial importance is the affective engagement this allows children to develop.

Elyse goes on to describe Egan's proposed Mythic and Romantic Understandings and the implications they have for teaching. An example she gives of a unit on Thailand for grade three students also establishes her thorough understanding of many of Egan's ideas. Elyse explains that the unit was called "King of the River" and was organized around the story of Sand Tong Sawat, a 12 year old Buddhist monk traveling through Thailand and on to Australia to visit family. The success of the unit is attributed to the students being "totally immersed in their [story] characters for all day, every day;" by the classroom being turned into a Thai village with the students "living and breathing their journey;" and by children knowing the story from the start, but being able to make changes to the journey by bringing their own passions and interests to the unit.

Most of the other teachers and administrators had a similar general understanding of Egan's ideas to that which Elyse demonstrates, however, in many cases, they had less practice with using the ideas and fewer opportunities to clarify the theoretical bases of the work. For example, Patrick articulated how with a social studies class he chose the beaver as the center of his curriculum planning to enable him to bring together pre-contact North American history with that of the European explorers. He commented, "It became more and more useful to us as teachers to begin to organize curriculum as a story. The whole was there, you could pull out a part, look at it, and plug it back in... A story, in a very exciting way, starts to build a kind of truth." Similarly, Monica explained, "I do one unit a year. There's a huge buildup. It's almost like a circle, that comes round again at the end. I start with a vision, not a plotline – I don't like plotlines. Without a vision [for the whole unit], I feel like I'm just floating." Alice, although seeming to have a reasonably strong practical grasp of the possibilities of working with Egan's ideas, appears to have a less strong understanding of their theoretical underpinnings (as indicated by the second line below, which seems to be in direct opposition to Egan's framework). She writes,

It is through story that curriculum has meaning. We all learn more effectively when what is taught is meaningful and connected with what we already know. For example, in teaching a grade 7 social studies class, I've looked at Ancient Civilizations using the elements of a story. Students have retold, for example, the story of the Middle Ages through character, plot and setting.

Caren's perspective on how to integrate "teaching as storytelling" into practice is quite different from those expressed above. She reports starting each of her units "using the story telling format," by providing information on the unit in a lecture format to give students "a framework for the activities to come." This information is based on the steps of Egan's teaching as storytelling model (i.e., what is importance about this topic?, what binary opposites best catch the importance of this topic?, what content most dramatically embodies the binary opposites and articulates the topic into a developing story form?, and what is the best way of resolving the dramatic conflict inherent in the binary opposites?) Once students have a sense of possible answers to these questions and



have had an opportunity for discussion, the unit gets underway with various activities such as interviews, journal writing, and debates; which are intended to “organize the content into story form.” Careen explains that the students use the story telling format to analyze stories, as well as to “write their own stories making the reader aware of opposing forces. My students learn to write in role in their Socials’ assignments. They are encouraged to make their writing a narrative, where they become part of the action.”

The three study participants without classroom teaching experience using Egan’s ideas, understandably, seemed to have the most limited understanding of what those ideas might look like in practice. As example, teacher educator, Vera, relayed the following experience when asked about the a successful unit in which she tried to incorporate Egan’s ideas:

In two different kindergarten classes, we narrated the same Aesop fable of the greedy dog and his reflection in the water. The children did not realize that it was only his reflection and thought it was another dog with another bone. We did not say anything to either of the classes. In the first class, the teacher read, without any explanation or discussion, over a period of two weeks, six stories that had a scene concerning reflection (for example, the tale of Narcissus who saw his reflection on the water and fell in love with himself). The pupils in the second class did not have any of these stories read to them. One month after the first reading of the fable, both classes were read the original fable. Following this, all the children were asked what the dog saw in the water. Nearly all the children in the first class responded, “His reflection;” while the children in the second class still insisted that there was another dog.

The other two educators without classroom teaching experience both made explicit comments regarding the difficulty of translating theory into practice. Katarina wrote, “Sometimes teachers want help in finding concrete ways of using [these ideas] within the curriculum. [I have found it difficult to try] and make a connection between the theory and the practice.” Teo, the only one of the educators who referred to Egan’s later work on cognitive tools, was articulate about his confusion over how to incorporate imaginative education into the school of which he is principal. He explained,

I am very much interested in Kieran’s ideas. How to create a fit between those ideas and my school is a very daunting task, to say the least. The idea of dedicating our work with children to the facile use of cognitive tools is a wonderful goal and theory, but I do not know really how to begin, other than to talk about those tools when there seems to be an opening

in conversation with a teacher or other colleague... I believe that I do understand Kieran's ideas; I don't believe that I have the knowledge or skill to implement those ideas in an organized and sustained way in my school or figure out how to "fit" them in. Administering schools is a complicated task. I don't feel confident enough to ask teachers to think differently about their work with children. Quite frankly, I don't know what else to do besides what I'm doing/not doing now.

A few other educators also commented on a specific problem of incorporating "imaginative education" into the teaching of specific subjects; some expressing understandings that seem somewhat at odds with Egan's framework. Helen writes, "Math is difficult to teach through using Kieran's ideas. They lend themselves more to Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science – the "rich" curriculum areas." Similarly, Alice explains her position that "Some curricular areas do not lend themselves to "story." I haven't been able, yet, to use these ideas for math." Teo commented, "I would be interested in learning how Egan's ideas relate to writing instruction. Writing might prove a valuable window for introducing more of Kieran's ideas."

Elyse offers insight into the difficulties of putting Egan's ideas into practice in speaking about her experiences in learning to work with the ideas. She writes,

One of the greatest challenges early on was trying to convert Kieran's fairly theoretical writing into something practical. Kieran writes in a deferring manner and he is rather meandering in his thoughts. Ideas become convoluted and you need to persevere to read his texts word for word – and extrapolate something from the text for your own purpose. So, initially I think the biggest barrier is Kieran's writing style. By being deferential and accommodating, he never commits himself to a "definitive" thought. He wants each of us to be our own agents for constructing our own meaning from the text. This for some (myself included) is suitably intellectually challenging. But when trying to work with other staff who express an interest in his work the greatest barrier is that Kieran's work is theoretical and non-prescriptive. Many teachers just want prescriptive structures and frameworks that can be picked up and implemented in the classroom. Kieran's suggested planning model (cited in *Teaching as Storytelling* and known as the Storyform Model) is as prescriptive as it gets. What educators have to understand is that when dealing with planning to stimulate/harness imaginative energy/potential, no two units/lessons could ever be the same. This is because the unit must/will change once the work is implemented and the students begin to interact with the unit.

Finally, a few educators made comments relating to the modification of Egan's ideas to better fit their practice. Monica explained how she and her teacher partner "modified Kieran's ideas. We went with our sense of what works, although I now don't remember specifically what we changed." Elyse also indicated that she "modified some of what Egan suggests and expanded other

areas.” As an example, she indicates she longer reveals the binary opposites to her students, but instead just uses them to begin to think about how to plan each unit. She also wonders “whether now, in this day and age, the stages of development haven’t shifted and whether we aren’t seeing younger students operating at the Romantic stage of development rather than the Mythic (which has significance for planning).” She indicates that her current work with eight and nine years olds leans towards the Romantic “stage of development.” Other of the educators discussed the incorporation of Egan’s work with that of other educational theorists. Graeme indicated at he has been “looking at ways to incorporate the ideas of Dorothy Heathcote and Kieran Egan, through drama as a medium for story telling and learning;” while Teo commented, “I see that many of the most recent curriculum innovations, like process writing or differentiated instruction, are progressivist practices - I don’t know how to relate Kieran’s ideas to these innovations.”

#### Intellectual effort.

The previous discussion focused on the depth and breadth of educators’ understandings of Egan’s ideas and, in the process, touched on suggestions made in the data that educators’ level of intellectual effort can influence those understandings. This second theme, the effects of educators’ intellectual effort in the implementation of imaginative education, will be the focus of the current discussion. Although there was not a great deal of data on this issue, there were a number of comments which address the issues of educators’ own levels of “Understanding,” (e.g., Romantic, Philosophic, Ironic) (Egan, 1997); subject knowledge; flexibility and willingness to take risks, and ability to think across disciplines or boundaries.

Although not couched in terms of Egan’s “Understandings,” a few of educators’ comments suggested that the “intellectual challenge” or “philosophical demands” of these ideas meant “they are not for everyone” (at least not in dense book format). For the ideas to be more digestible for a greater number of educators, Aaron recommended, “On a practical level, you have to get some of these ideas slipped into the [mandated] curriculum, tied to performance indicators, to the

technology of teaching.” Aaron, an administrator, also commented that “What mitigates against these ideas is that teachers need to know their subjects so well, and I don’t think they really have a handle on it.” With regards to educator flexibility and willingness to take risks, Katarina commented that “Changing mind sets always takes time. Teachers need encouragement to take risks;” while Elyse suggested,

A teacher who is more interested in getting the documentation done and having everything “nicely” organized is often going to miss the whole point of the unit. Serendipity and synergy are important components to Egan-style learning, and these only happen if children are given time to play and explore. So traditional timetables have to be rethought and teachers have to be very flexible about rolling with the importance of the moment.

#### Educator engagement.

All of the teachers and one of the previous-teacher administrators suggested that teaching with Egan’s ideas is highly engaging and makes teaching more meaningful. In response to a question on whether she has been emotionally engaged by the units in which she has incorporated Egan’s ideas, Careen responded, “For sure! The kids often tell me how much more they learn from my lessons because I am passionate about what I am teaching. Through Kieran’s theories I have been able to find the great stories in so many topics.” Graeme answered, “Yes. I believe this is the power of the method;” while Monica commented that the teacher has to find their passions in order for their lessons to work. Elyse explained,

The more emotionally involved the students become, the more I get involved. There are definitely units which I hold dear to my heart since they deal with issues which I believe in greatly. But these are not always the units that take off. It’s the children’s responses that make them magic...[Kieran’s ideas] work and make education exciting and meaningful. I’ve found nothing better and the framework allows me to be in constant evolution.

Alice and Helen echo this with their comments that using Egan’s ideas causes them to be more passionate about teaching and enables teaching to be more meaningful for them.

#### Educators’ values.

The final theme that we found in the data set relating directly to the educator and imaginative education was that of educators' values. As a result of two questions around values, there was considerable data on this topic. The first of these questions was, "What kind of values do you try to communicate in your educational practice?"; while the second was "Do you think that using Kieran's ideas has helped you communicate these values more effectively?"

The responses to these questions (as well as some additional data) can be divided into three varieties of responses. In the first group were the comments of four educators who mainly listed, for lack of a better term, "academic values" as those that they tried to communicate in their practice. For example, the values Alice listed were "Development of rigor to achieve good results, learning is a continuous process, good questioning skills, effective communication." Katarina similarly responded, "Reflection, critical understanding, openness to creative possibilities, listening to the ideas of others, finding one's own voice through dialogue, building a community of learning. All four of these educators felt that Egan's ideas helped them to communicate these values, although they did not elaborate on how.

The second group of comments of four other educators focused on, again for lack of a better term, "non-academic values." Elyse's list included "Principles of Ecoliteracy, basic Social Justice, Inclusive attitudes, fundamental Christian mores, environmental ethics;" Graemes' included "Creativity, imagination, inquiry, understanding, representation, freedom of thought, argument without prejudice, community, respect;" and Monica's included "A sense of gentleness, acceptance of self and others, literature, love of learning, empathy, becoming human." These educators also indicated that Egan's ideas helped them communicate these values to students more effectively, and all elaborated on how. Elyse explained, "[Egan's ideas] allow me to explore tough issues at deep and layered levels. [They] allow students to genuinely see different perspectives. Units planned this way are meaningful and values based."

The third group of comments pertain to the way in which the implementation of Egan's ideas relate to coming to know and personal meaning. Elyse wrote, "By measuring new stories against our recollection of old stories, we move forward in developing new understandings and making new meanings. Our memory bank of how life's stories unfold is what enables us to create personal as well as collective meaning of the world in which we live." Aaron commented,

Story is a way of coming to know. Story is an opening to knowing – when kids are writing their own lives. Kid would write vignettes about life in a Medieval village. One little girl wrote a very powerful story in which she listed all the reasons she wanted a cooking pot instead of beads... Teaching that way seemed more real.

### Discussion

The educators interviewed for this study displayed considerable diversity in their interpretations and uses of Egan's work. The deepest engagement with imaginative education as a distinctive pedagogical approach was found among those who seemed to have achieved a "state of praxis," in which their theoretical and practical understandings had become intertwined. Elyse, Monica, Aaron, and Patrick all gave evidence of this merging of theory and practice, while it was only partially evident in the cases of Alice, Careen and Helen, less so in the interviews with Graeme and Vera, and frankly acknowledged as problematic by Teo and Katarina. The state of praxis exemplified by the first four educators seems to have been arrived at primarily through involvement in a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1999), and through engagement in ongoing intellectual effort. In all cases it also appears to include an understanding of the whole person as the focus of the educational process. In this section we will begin to explore these conclusions and to make some recommendations for how educators might better be assisted in their efforts to undertake imaginative education.

### Making Imaginative Education Work

The notion of situated learning through involvement in a community of practice, as outlined by Lave and Wenger (2000), corresponds with a key means through which the educators in this study achieved a state of praxis. Three of the educators in the “praxis group” (Monica, Aaron, and Patrick) began working with Egan's ideas at the same school in the early 1980s. All teachers at the time, these educators had the benefit both of strong support from an administrative staff working with them to incorporate Egan's ideas and of personal contact with Egan himself during a 2-3 year period. The fourth, Elyse, worked closely with colleagues in her own school and developed a correspondence with Egan that eventually took on features of a collaboration. As made evident by their comments regarding the importance of collaborative practice, for these educators, learning to work with Egan's ideas was clearly related to the combination of opportunities for practice within their teaching and for planning and debriefing with others who had an equal or greater understanding of Egan's ideas. This participation in a community of practice seemed to be a crucial factor in enabling the construction of these educators' theoretical understandings of Egan's ideas and, indeed, in fostering the “dialogue” between practice and theory that seems to have enabled these educators to successfully undertake imaginative education.

A second major factor in achieving this state of imaginative education as praxis for the educators in this study seemed to be ongoing intellectual effort. All four educators in the “praxis group,” as well as most of the other participants, commented on the intellectual effort required for sustained engagement with Egan's ideas. Although all of the educators had read at least part of one or more of Egan's books, a number commented on the difficulties involved in making sense of the complicated ideas and in finding the time and energy for this process. Elyse and Aaron also observed that the demands of Egan's framework run counter to most teachers' desire for “prescriptive structures and frameworks,” making it a tough sell. At the same time the challenge of working with imaginative education was clearly an attractive quality for many of the educators we

interviewed. In the state of praxis we discerned behind the most thoughtful responses, there seemed to be a creative tension between the need to adapt Egan's ideas to specific situations and the desire to explore his theories in greater depth. This contrasted with those responses that focused simply on the use of storytelling in the classroom and in which neither practical nor theoretical issues appeared to arouse much concern. It seems likely, therefore, that the most successful imaginative educators will be those who respond positively to creative tension in the planning process, who enjoy "rolling with the importance of the moment," using Elyse's phrase, and who relish an open-ended intellectual challenge.

The four educators engaged with imaginative education as praxis expressed strikingly similar perspectives on several fronts. Monica's remark that real learning is "a way of being", Elyse's reference to children "living and breathing their journey", and Aaron's comment on "kids writing their own lives" indicate how much importance these educators attach to involving the whole person in the process of education. It is noteworthy that this orientation towards students was not explicitly emphasized in Egan's initial work, although many passages in his writings can be read as supportive of a holistic pedagogy; and also that these educators did not seem to be familiar with the vision of integrated intellectual development presented Egan's recent book, *The Educated Mind*. We have not explored this issue further, but two possible interpretations present themselves. First, it may be that educators with a broad vision of what education should entail are more likely to persevere with the challenges involved in imaginative education, and more likely to value the affective and intellectual engagement it offers to students. Alternatively, it may be that a focus on imaginative development itself reconfigures the pedagogical relationship towards the co-construction of meaning and thereby fosters deeper contact and understanding between teacher and learner. In either case, our observations suggest that a deep commitment to imaginative education tends to be accompanied by a significantly different understanding of the nature and purpose of



education itself, with implications that may extend to administration, policy, and assessment, among others.

This conclusion is supported by the similar concerns expressed by the “praxis group” regarding the institutionalization of Egan’s ideas. They identified two principal obstacles, the first of which was the difficulty of persuading teachers to invest time and energy in a new approach. Proposed remedies included the cultivation of long-term mentorships and partnerships, both within and outside the school, and the development of ready-made units based on Egan’s ideas, allowing teachers to acquire some familiarity with the approach with relatively little personal investment. It is noteworthy that all of the administrators in the study (including the two in the “praxis group”) expressed frustration at knowing how to work with Egan’s ideas now that they had largely moved out of classroom teaching and into roles as school principals. Given the importance of “communities of practice” previously noted, it seems essential to find ways to facilitate administrators’ involvement in imaginative education.

The second major difficulty was in the area of assessment, which Elyse suggested “might be the greatest challenge.” While all of the teachers who had worked with Egan’s ideas in the classroom were convinced of their effectiveness, none offered concrete suggestions for how such effectiveness might be assessed and reported in a reliable and accessible way. Although some concerns were expressed about planning time and the constraining effect of external curricular standards, there was no consensus on their overall impact.

### Next Steps

Based on the findings of this study, we have made a number of recommendations for working to reduce the challenges faced by educators interested in Egan’s imaginative education framework. First, we suggest initiating one or more long-term collaborations between theorists working in this area and a school or group of schools. Among the aspects of imaginative education

that should be explored in such settings are (a) teachers' journey towards praxis, including the importance of their participation in a "community of practice" and changes in their educational values and understanding of child development, (b) the authentic assessment of imaginative development, including such non-academic capacities as moral reasoning and creativity, and (c) integrated student-centered approaches to curriculum planning, professional development, and school administration (e.g. Clark, 1997). The theory of imaginative education should be further developed in these areas in the course of such collaborations.

Second, it would seem to be helpful to develop a variety of materials designed for and pre-tested by practicing educators to facilitate their process of engaging intellectually with imaginative education. These materials would include concise and accessible presentations of the key ideas, planning aids, unit "frameworks" to be adapted by teachers, ready-made units, and videos that illustrate teachers working with students on developing different levels of understanding.

Third, we recommend the development of teacher education programs using Egan's ideas, both as subject matter and as a guide to program design. Where possible, the practical component of such programs should be located in schools where teachers have worked with imaginative education for at least one or two years within a community of practice. Descriptions of such programs and materials used in them should be made available to teacher educators at other institutions, and efforts should be made to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach to teacher education.

Finally, this research needs to be extended into secondary education. All the educators interviewed for this study were involved in elementary schools, hence our data do not address the implementation of Egan's ideas in other settings, with older children, or at the Philosophic and Ironic levels of understanding.

## Conclusions

This case study of educational change provides a close look at the challenges involved in working with educators to incorporate a proposed framework into teaching practice. It highlights how such incorporation is not a matter of outsider-advocated “implementation,” but instead relies on the passion, commitment, and intellectual effort of the educators involved. Encouraging praxis entails fostering circumstances where educators have the time, resources, and freedom from constraints that allow them to follow-up on their educational interests. Taking steps such as those listed above at least provide support in enabling these circumstances and in helping open the door to teaching as praxis.

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