Little Red Riding Hood meets Superman: Kieran Egan’s Imaginative Education and the Playful Child

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Abstract

Egan’s model of imaginative development details five stages—the somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic and ironic; this paper will focus particularly on earlier periods where children’s literature and games offers insight into the relationship children develop with their world. In what ways do fairy tales, fantasy stories and make-believe reveal the deep well of human creativity and serve as a focus for child play? How can our interactions with children, both in the classroom and in life, nurture the modalities of mythic and romantic understandings that are vital for the child’s intellectual and creative growth through play? What educational theory and forms of children’s entertainment threaten to foreclose the child’s imaginative visioning of the world and which ones strengthen and nurture it? How vital is the connection between adult cognition and childhood play? This paper will offer some substantive descriptions of Egan’s model of imagination and explore some examples of children’s literature as paradigms of playful reflection. Our goal is to invite the reader/participant to reconsider how children construct their world through imaginative and perhaps rediscover their own wonderment at the world as well.

Key Words: Childhood, intelligence, myth, play, story.

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1. Introduction

While much attention within educational theory is paid to cognitive development, learning styles, multiple intelligences, the roles of imagination and play are too often seen as a poor cousin to cognition. Kieran Egan, a Canadian philosopher and educator, has developed a powerful but little recognized schema of child development that focuses upon the role of the imagination in children’s lives. In his recent texts, The Educated Mind and The Future of Education, he reconsiders how children experience their world through “playing with” stories, images, and ideas. Using children’s literature, Egan invites us to reconsider how children best learn and to respect the critical role of imagination and play in human development.

2. Searching for a new model of education
Kieran Egan opens his text *The Educated Mind* with the claim that contemporary education is at war with itself. It is struggling with three models of education which cannot ultimately cooperate together:

1. Education should socialize the young, inculcate them into the ways of the society;
2. Education should teach the truth and equip students with vital knowledge;
3. Education should help each child develop their unique potential as Individuals.

We witness these clashing when we see the educational wars which pit the claims that education should be to prepare for a career, and be relevant (#1) against the claims that education should prepare students to be knowledgeable in world wisdom (#2) or that education should be individualize to meet each student’s special needs for self-actualization (#3).¹

Egan’s proposal² is to explore the types of understand that young children exhibit as they mature, thereby discovering that their capabilities are far richer and nuanced than the straight developmental models tend to assume. While he proposes five types of understanding—the somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic and ironic—we will focus on the early two stages of mythic and romantic thinking.

3. Mythic Understanding: how language reveals our encounter with the world when we are 2-5

Egan links the development of oral language with that of myth. As language appears, the mind expands beyond the present moment and the simple symbolizing of events to a "wholly human experience of the world without literacy."³ The power of the physical given diminishes and the cultural/human comes to the fore in terms of shaping our experiences.

Some characteristics/tools of the mythic understanding are:

- Stories
- metaphors
- images
- jokes

To further elucidate, Egan outlines aspects of early childhood (from the age of language, 2, up through 6/7) as exhibiting a number of key revelations. Firstly, **Binary Structuring** allows us to make sense of things by setting up opposites: X and ~X: male/female, good/bad, right/left, black/white. The basics of logical structures are realized within a linguistic framework. Linguist Claude Levi-Strauss traced the role of binary concepts in primitive cultures as present in their myths; for him, the essence of myth is the juxtaposition of these opposites as organizational tools of experience. If you look at children's stories you will easily find binary opposites functioning: the fight between good and evil, children and parents, young and old, rich and poor, the beautiful and the ugly. How does this connect up to education? Egan presents the current curricular model of progressivism as
cautioning against introducing history as too remote and distant from a child's immediate experience. Rather than eliminating such aspects of the curriculum as too sophisticated, Egan suggests that they be presented through the medium of mythic understanding. For example, introduce in first grade "a narrative history of the world, structured on the opposition between freedom and oppression, knowledge and ignorance, or security and fear." Here the story makes allegedly remote and foreign content accessible and meaningful by presenting the material in this x vs. ~x modality.

Secondly, Egan highlights children’s natural affinity for fantasy and make-believe; fantasy gives us control over a chaotic or binary world. Far from seeking out the familiar, children gravitate to magic kingdoms, aliens, fabulous creatures and indeed, adults retain that fascination with the borders of reality represented by the possibilities of the fantastical.

Young children directly employ abstract concepts to mediate their experiences: indeed, "only by the deployment of abstractions do concrete objects become recognizable." Egan critiques the generally accepted notion that children are concrete thinkers. A quick perusal of the stories that appeal to children clearly reveal that the appeal of those stories extends beyond the concrete events into the meanings conveyed. Despite the power of the Piagetian model of children as “concrete thinkers”, beings immersed in the here and now of objects present, Egan points out that children frequently display highly abstract thinking of metaphysical and philosophic note. By shunning material as "too abstract' we may be impoverishing classrooms; by overemphasizing "hands-on, concrete activity" we may be missing rich opportunities to educate the child's mythic understanding. Concrete events only make sense within an abstract web of meaning. This is an interesting critique of commonly held educational principles of children's learning capabilities. He does make it clear, however, that “young children do not usually use theoretic abstractions, but their thinking is constantly suffused with abstractions.”

Metaphor represents a forging of creative connections among disparate ideas and images. Egan asks us to deconstruct the meaning of "metaphor:" why are they so effective in poetry, art, and even science? Here children tend to excel beyond adults in creating and celebrating metaphors for their experiences. We call this colorful language and often treat it as an amusing error. But metaphor expands one's understanding of an idea and in doing so, opens up new avenues for connection, for exploration, indeed for play. So often we see intellectual development as a one-way trajectory from less to more competent. This may not be true when we examine metaphorical thinking. Young children tend to perform much better at metaphor creation than adults.
Next, Egan highlights the presence of Rhythm and Rhyme in narratives, from early mythic oral traditions to children today. Oral cultures used rhythm and rhyming to assist in remembering. In such acts of remembering, the whole must be taken in and uttered before the parts can be known. (Try singing a song or reciting a poem piece by piece-- it is almost impossible to do!) Ancient bards could recall vast tracks of poetry through the presence of rhythm, rhyme, and refrain. Finally, let us consider images. Images likewise assist oral cultures in the aiding of remembering; "the task is to imaginatively incorporate the world". Mythic understanding is far more imagistic and picture oriented than later forms. Note the dominance of illustration in children's literature-- that is not purely coincidental!

In linking children’s stories to world myth, Egan reminds us that myths function not only to assist people to remember their past, but also as social charters, messages of self-improvement, social tolerance and self-identity. Teachers are seen as the storytellers in the young child's culture. Egan mentions the Waldorf Schools that clearly place narrative and poetry as central to the educative experience. But let us not ignore the basic nature of the story as play.

In the Educated Mind Egan ends this examination of the Mythic Understanding by summarizing three main educational tasks:
1. help children learn fluid and flexible language as the key to self-expression and exploration;
2. help the child understanding the power that language has on its own;
3. teach children the varied conventions for using language effectively.

With these in mind we see that young children's mythic understanding must both be nourished and cultivated through story telling. "The poetic world... is the foundation of our cultural life." Start with stories, poems, songs that invite children to consider and build themes of mythic proportion. We will return to this in our section below on the value of play.

4. Romantic Understanding: the explorations to the extremes of the 5-10 year old

With the advent of literacy, children enter a new phase of imagination and thinking. For this form of understanding he details the following cognitive tools:
- a new sense of reality with more objectivity, rules and laws
- an interest in the borders or extent of reality
- an interest in heroes, as representing the extreme borders of being human
- a sense of wonder

Egan begins by citing a familiar shift: from uncritical acceptance of fairy tales to a passionate attention for detail and realistic explanations (even if still in fantasy). Now the child has joined the literate community and Egan emphasizes that such a move represents a major shift in the way the child understands the world.

5. Role of language and script
Egan invites us to think about how the way we write influences how we think. How does the use of the alphabet differ from the use of pictograms? Do we assume that simply teaching someone to write and read automatically produces a more sophisticated type of thinking? Egan cautions us against this conclusion on two grounds: a polarization of orality and literacy can be politicized (primitive vs. "civilized" cultures) and inducing literacy does not always produce the cognitive advancements or social transformations. Consider ancient Greece as a counter example—scarce literacy but incredible advances in thinking. While such a development is thereby not a given, we can discern real changes that can follow the introduction of literacy. As with any gain, there are also losses to note. This is an important point and one that distinguishes his theory from a strictly developmental one. Egan refers to the early Greek Pre-Socratic thinkers who first questioned the mythic view of the world and offered what would later be called a scientific worldview: the natural world can be investigated, explored and a comprehensive explanation for why things are the way they are can be found. Nevertheless, the mythic is not completely absent in the Romantic Understanding. The interest\textsuperscript{11} in narrative and binary extremes persists.

Romantic Understanding is characterized by a dedicated focus in the limits of Reality, the extremes of experience. We are interested in the weirdest, and most radical of whatever we are considering. The Guinness Book of World Records is the prime example of a fascinating source for the elementary age child. "By discovering the real limits of the world and of human experience, we form a context that enables us to establish some security and to establish proportionate meaning within it."\textsuperscript{12} Egan suggests that this points to opportunities in education to explore the far away and exotic (not limit the young child to the near and familiar) and to present learning as more a process of bringing into focus rather than adding bits and pieces together. Another interesting characteristic of this period is the fascination with hobbies and collections. Such activities represent an engagement with the strange and wonderful at the same time that the child is trying to rope in, to get a hold on, reality as encapsulated in a collection.

The archetype Romantic figure is the Hero. The Hero "bodys forth"\textsuperscript{13} the characteristics of virtue, power, being human. He (usually a he-- but we do have women heroes) transcends or fights reality at the same time he secures a place within it. (Think of Star Wars.) There is an excitement with novelty, a playing with possibilities, the beginnings of spiritual development—not in the religious sense per se but as a sense of selfhood.

Finally, the rationality we find in this type of understanding borders poetry and prose. Herodotus is between the poet who wants to simply evoke an emotional response and the rational critic who desires to describe the world the way it really is. We want to know the world but we want to know it in its strangeness and wonder. Egan describes this as post-mythic but pre-scientific.
Think of typical journalism today: some theory may be conveyed but always within the (usually flamboyant) story of a real person.

6. The Educational conundrum: what is in danger of being lost

With each gain in understanding, Egan reminds us that loss occurs. While literacy supports and stimulates romantic understanding, it also alienates us from mythic understanding. A child's intuitive relationship with the world is destroyed through the mediation of language. Abstraction brings with it a distancing from the immediacy of living. Egan notes the decrease in metaphorical fluency as children progress. Egan does not advocate a return to "illiterate" way of thinking but urges us to note that education must be aware of the important and rich aspects of mythic understanding and not simply delete them as unimportant. “Imagination is crucial to preserving the capacities of Mythic understanding, but imagination is not in any sense in conflict with developing rationality and its view of reality…”

We begin to see reality as autonomous, as independent of me and yet still quite wondrously familiar. The educational implications are important: We are making a mistake if we push a degree of theoretical comprehension and mastery of scientific facts to the detriment of celebrating the human nature of knowledge. By this we mean that all knowledge is human knowledge; that is, all knowledge is related to us. Knowledge should be re-embedded into its makers or discoverers rather than taken out and treated as separate facts/data. Who discovered something and how is the fulcrum of involvement for the Romantic mind. For this stage we should emphasize who invented, discovered, observed the events; we can roam freely around the world and history, looking for the wildest and most excessive aspects. Fantasies are still enjoyed but are now treated as subject to the rules and structures of reality: elaborate kingdoms and theories can be invented to explain such fantastical events.

7. The Implications for Play: Stories, Images, Ideas

We are not proposing the Rousseauian solution of letting children determine their own learning trajectory nor are we dismissing education as stifling the child’s creativity. Instead, we suggest that, following the lead of Egan’s charting of early childhood, we can find the origins of education in play.

The rituals of expectation and satisfaction become stories; the pretend games become metaphors; our sense of humor becomes jokes; sequences and patterns become mathematics and rhymes, and so on.

Playing with stories may play a far more important role than is generally acknowledged or encouraged. Stories are not mere entertainment, “play” in the sense of unserious time, leisure, non-educative experiences. Rather, stories and imaginative play may offer key building blocks to establishing sustained learning, which can evolve into the more theoretical learning that we expect of our students as they mature. Let us examine how our three notions of stories/images/ideas may
offer playful encounters for children with profound humanizing force. To enter into this project, I have chosen three paradigmatic examples for us to consider.

8. The Story: Little Red Riding Hood
Most people from Western cultures are familiar with the old European tale, first written down by Charles Perrault, which tells the story of the little girl charged with taking her grandmother some food, only to meet the big bad wolf on her way through the forest. The wolf ends up hurrying to her grandmother’s house before the girl, eats the grandmother, and replaces her in the bed. The ritual repetition of “My Grandmother, what big eyes you have!” evokes a delicious fear and expectation in the child’s hearing and when the wolf jumps out of the bed, delighted screams. Of course, the huntsman comes and saves little Red Riding Hood and in killing the wolf, also frees her grandmother. All live happily ever after, as a fairy tale properly ends. While the story familiar to most children today ends happily and is fairly sanitized, there exist a range of versions much darker and more sexualized. Here we see the child who is both trusting victim but ultimately triumphant over the bad wolf. The adults in her life are good ones and keep her safe, even though she must go out into the dark and foreboding forest, the edge of civilization, of safety. Her mother trusts her with an adult responsibility (always a welcome sense of belonging, of maturing into full personhood for the young child) and the girl gamely carries out her task. In the end, despite the dangers encountered and the disasters befalling her family, an adult male rescues them and all ends well.

9. The Image: from children’s image to Kiki Smith’s illustration

Classic illustration from Little Red Riding Hood
Kiki Smith
There are a myriad of versions of this story, ranging across the centuries. These two illustrations capture the tensions here between man and beast, woman and wolf, civilization and nature. In the classic illustration the wolf is dressed as a man, a human being—a common image in children’s stories where animals walk, talk, and act so much like people. Occasionally their animal nature peeks out, like the wolf’s tail and his hanging tongue. He may be dressed as a human but we all know that he is not. He threatens us even as he pretends to be one of us. The child gazes at the other, safeguarding her basket of goodies, but also being polite enough to the stranger. Children are caught in that trap: respecting one’s elders and too often victims thereof.

In Kiki Smith’s illustration—which represents her meditation on the story—we find the grandmother and girl arising out of the wolf. The wolf dies but his blood transforms into the deep red of their capes. They are one with the wolf even as they appear to be triumphant over the animal. Blood joins the women to the animal—a theme that runs throughout history as a way in which men have expressed a disgust and rejection of a woman’s cycle. But the girl and her grand/mother are in a close embrace, a loving connection that affirms their animal nature as ultimately transforming and transcending that nature. Women (and men) emerge from animality in ways which remind us of our deepest connection to nature even as we separate ourselves from it.


Young children do not conceptualize the deep binary concepts that run throughout this story of Red Riding Hood. But they grasp the import of these vast fundamental divides: self/other, human/animal, safe/dangerous, order/transgression of order, life/death, honesty-truth/dishonesty-falsehood. They delight in these ways of charting the world and their own experiences. At times they are the wolf, at times the girl, and perhaps the huntsman as well. After all, the huntsman is the “Superman” of this story, the savior of the situation. They will play at being the characters and create variations on the story which situate the narrative within their own experience but which also take them far away from the ordinary day to day world. Fantasy, role-playing, the delicious fear and exultation of conquest come to the fore in the story for the young child. It is the power of the narrative that gives meaning to the series of events; without the context, there is no meaning at all. Do we like the wolf? Is the huntsman a killer or savior? Only within the context of the story can we determine the meanings therein. But as we reach out to grasp meaning it is the playful art of the story that makes this possible.

Notes
1 See Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind*, chapter 1 for a full explication of the three models as well as how it proposes to move beyond the stalemate by reconnecting how children learn with what they learn.

2 Egan’s goal is to offer a new model of education; “The task of education, given the analogy, is to ensure the fullest downloading from our culture of the five main “O.S.” cognitive tool kits in proper sequence, and also to ensure the downloading of the maximum range of “programs”, or cognitive tools for each.” *The Future of Education*, p. 43.


4 Ibid., p. 42.


6 Egan does allow that this may be true in certain areas such as mathematics and science.


8 Ibid., p. 61.

9 Ibid., p. 64.

10 Ibid., p. 69.

11 Consider the example of Herodotus’ *Histories*, written around 490 B.C.E.


13 Ibid., p. 89.

14 Ibid., p. 101.


16 According to the original telling by Charles Perrault, the tale ends with this cautionary note: “Moral: Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say "wolf," but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all”, as found at http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0333.html/perrault

17 For more information on the artist Kiki Smith, visit this page from MOMA, http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2003/kikismith/flash.html

**Bibliography**

