

Children's Minds, Talking Rabbits, and Clockwork Oranges: Essays on Education

Kieran Egan. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1999, 200 pp.

Children's Minds, Talking Rabbits is a very well written and very readable collection of essays by Kieran Egan exploring the nature of children's minds, the processes involved in the acquisition of literacy, and curriculum processes that might enhance the development of children's literacy processes. Each essay had a life of its own, having been previously published in a journal or as a chapter in a book. The collection includes three sections, "Children's Mind", "Curriculum Issues," and "Clockwork Oranges." Since the articles grouped under each heading frequently converse with those of other sections, thereby complementing or enhancing particular aspects, these sections are by no means autonomous entities.

The first set of essays are best characterized as, to borrow from Jung, archetypes of literacy processes in which Egan offers an analysis of the processes that children undergo to acquire literacy. In these essays, the existing dichotomy between the rational and irrational, between orality and literacy, is challenged; the interconnection between each pair is unveiled and its implication for the education of young children addressed. In this set of essays, orality and the imagination are central concepts that bind all arguments. Egan describes how, in western communities, the acquisition of literacy sadly leads to the death of orality, a sad occurrence because of the many techniques that oral cultures have that can inform literacy. In this regard, Egan fully argues that education should be about maximizing (knowledge) gains and minimizing losses, such as the loss of orality. Egan traces the techniques used by oral cultures to preserve knowledge and draws attention to their important relevance in the teaching of literacy to children. Elements of orality such as poetics, participation and conservation, classification and explanation are described as key elements in the acquisition of literacy.

Through analyzing the role of the imagination in literacy acquisition, the essays challenge the long-held educational belief that students learn better when they are immersed in what they know. In fact, after reading these essays one is compelled to revisit some post-structural and post-modern expressions of literacy instruction. Post-structural and post-modern expressions have demonstrated how schools promote and privilege communicative practices and cultural experiences of White mainstream students. In this sense, the curriculum is said to draw mainly from the primary

discourses of White middle-class students (see, for example, Gee, 1992). Accordingly, such an assertion puts emphasis on the "real" world of the students, and not on the "imagined". While these expressions hold validity in educational scholarship, Egan convincingly argues that the "imagined" should be equally accredited in literacy learning as is the "real/lived". Such an assertion forcefully calls for a rethinking of some of the deterministic stances found in post-modern and post-structural theories, even if determinism was not the originally intended outcome. Without directly stating it, Egan's analysis of the role of the imagination in the literacy process reveals how, through the use of their imaginations, students from traditionally marginalized groups can, and do succeed in school environments not necessarily designed for them. The imagination makes it possible for these students to access distant but school-valued discourses.

The next two sections, "Curriculum Issues" and "Clockwork Oranges", are mainly about the practice of educating. These sections are full of powerful assertions that force the reader to see long-held beliefs through different lenses. For instance, one reads about how curriculum decisions are shaped by the presuppositions educators hold about the world. In examining these presuppositions, Egan brings to the core the usefulness of binary opposites as foundational tools for the analysis of these presuppositions. Presuppositions are said to be the tools to "think with", more so if we are to understand how and why curriculum is designed, for curriculum constructors are said to be philosophers engaged in the structuring of tools that will produce people like themselves. In the author's view, "our philosophers are writing about themselves-stating aims or principles for curriculum construction that are a kind of covert autobiography, projecting outward...from an idealized image of themselves" (p. 80). In addition to examining the manner in which presuppositions shape teacher practices and curriculum decision making, the sections call for an examination of the relevancy of analogies used in educational settings and offer the "story" as a powerful analogue in teaching any subject matter.

Most of the essays in these two sections question long held beliefs about education from a broad spectrum. For instance, the role of education as preparing children for jobs is questioned; so is the role of the objective-centred framework in the role of educating children. Moreover, some chapters, for example chapter 10, are enjoyable mind teasers, offering pros and cons to theoretical arguments, commenting on them and still leaving it to the reader to answer questions posed in the course of the commentary.

The collection's greatest strength-its critique of modernist approaches to literacy acquisition and instruction-is also its greatest weakness. The collection successfully questions the modernist assertion that the eye and therefore, reading, is the primary instrument of knowing for it asserts that

the ear, and therefore listening and hearing, as is the case in oral cultures, is an equally important instrument of knowing. It challenges the modernist view that linear reasoning is the primary way to process meaning. Rather, the collection argues that Euclidean and concatenation also lead to process meaning. And finally, it challenges Greek classical norms as constituting the criteria for accessing and valuing knowledge. Yet, one cannot help but note that the book itself is characteristic of canon-based essays. The mythologies and fairytales of the "classical" world provide the themes that the book is founded upon. Similarly, examples of children's stories, rhymes, and jokes, for instance, are drawn from the same cultural space. Examples from/of the other, not surprisingly, feature only in sections where oral cultures are discussed and serve as comparisons with (as opposed to standing on their own) western literacy traditions and beliefs. The theories and philosophers (Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, Spencer, Piaget, etc.) on which the author bases his arguments, perhaps, may account for the Eurocentric nature of the book. Nonetheless, one would expect that a book that seeks to challenge modernist views and to offer alternative possibilities within literacy would take into account the numerous works on post-structuralist literature and reading by people of colour such as Delpit (1988), Gates (1985), and Morrison (1992) to mention a few.

In conclusion, *Children's Minds, Talking Rabbits* is an enjoyable and thoroughly accessible book. It offers a fresh look at prevailing literacy theories and forces us to examine our own teaching practices and long held literacy beliefs. It is a book that brings together theory and practice, and offers tangible classroom lessons that teachers can utilize or adopt for their situations.

References

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