Recapitulating?

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Kieran Egan's essay offers only a tantalizing preview of his thoughtful and provocative new grand narrative of development, *The Educated Mind.*[1] All of us who are engaged in teacher education know well the historic tensions between that enterprise's philosophical and psychological foundations. Within this professional context, I heartily welcome both Egan's essay and his book as much needed pretexts and foci for interdisciplinary discussions that could prove vital to our field's continuing significant contribution to teacher education. I propose to accept provisionally the general theory that Egan's essay has broadly sketched and try to understand it as clearly as possible within a particular cultural context. Given his Vygotskyan premise that those "mediators" which a social context makes available are developmentally constitutive, this move seems reasonable. Precisely as he recommends to his critics in *The Educated Mind,* I will ask that you look with me at the development of Precious Jones "through" the broad outline his essay his given of his theory and to look at his theory "through" her developmental narrative (EM, 200).

Precious Jones is the courageous, resilient teenage hero-narrator of a contemporary urban bildungsroman, *Push*, by an African-American performance poet, Sapphire. This 1996 novel which aims "to make sense and tell the truth" clearly reflects Sapphire's experience teaching reading and writing to teenagers and adults in New York City for eight years.[2] *Push,* whose epigraph quotes William Wordsworth, seems an especially fitting selection to illustrate some apparent insights into and possible amendments to Egan's theory, which derives from his own reading of Wordsworth's educational thought in *Intimations of Immortality (EM,* 101, 279). Obviously I commend and share Egan's disposition to regard literary texts as sources of educational wisdom. Rather than developing an argument, I will explore the sense that his theory can indeed make of Precious Jones's development. In so doing, I will be ever mindful of Deanne Bogdan's insights into "why the educated imagination needs to be re-educated," into reading itself as an embodied experience, into the critical and pedagogical significance of pluralism, need, feeling, power, and location.[3]

Precious does not learn her ABC's until she is sixteen years old. As a preliterate ninth grader in Harlem, she has exploited those mediators which her untutored oral language makes available to her. She develops a talent for shaping dramatic events of insubordination and peer leadership that express her resilient orientation to the society and to its schools that have neglected her (*Push*, 5). When her school expels her for pregnancy, one teacher's favorable testimony for her "aptitude" does seem to play a part in prompting a counselor to refer her to an alternative school, where in just two years she finally learns to read almost as well as a test-standard eighth grader. At home, she fears sexual exploitation by her father and brutal violence from

her jealous mother, who uses her and her first baby to increase AFDC benefits without caring for either one. There, Precious makes strategic use of silence, refusing to tell her mother about her life or answer her mother's questions whenever silence seems prudent — which is most of the time. There, however, she does hang a picture of Farrakhan on the wall of her room because he is her hero, a man who gives her pride in her identity (*Push*, 34). I am not a developmental theorist myself. But I wonder how Egan would make sense of these preliterate tools that Precious has developed — for example, tools for dramatizing multiple identities, for angry back-talk, for judicious deployment of silence and outspokenness in different contexts, even for shifting consciousness from one perception of her social reality to another. These tools are not exactly the same as those more formalistic tools that he has listed as specific likely consequences of oral language acquisition. Would he consider her peculiar developed talents as examples of mediators "common" to anyone who develops oral language "in whatever social or historical conditions?" In a constructive critique of the developmental theory proposed in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, psychologist Aida Hurtado argues that women of color living in poverty are apt to develop mental capacities or "tools" of precisely the sort that Precious demonstrates. White middle-class folks like Egan and myself are apt to mistake such tools for craziness, Hurtado explains, but Precious has more sense than most adults around her. Hurtado does not link these capacities or tools, which she quite reasonably considers "tactical" and "political," specifically to oral language, although clearly Precious develops them well before she ever develops literacy, and they do depend on her power to speak.[4]

Is the political character of the particular mediators that Precious develops during her overextended confinement to oral language developmentally inconsequential? Will it have no effect, for example, on w*hat* tools can and must be recapitulated for intellectual development to occur in a context where love is scarce or even altogether absent and where survival itself is at stake? I do not quite understand what Egan means by "cognitive tools." But Ms. Rain's teaching at the alternative school where Precious finally learns to read and write suggests that she does conceive as inextricably intertwined the development of literacy and the development of capacities for mature love and survival against great and unjust odds. Sapphire's *Push* renders suspect any notion of education or development reduced to oral language, literacy, theoretic understanding, and irony — even though such development clearly does have central importance for the development of the Harlem alternative school girls' mature capacities for love and survival. I am not sure Egan does advocate such a reduction, but if he does, his developmental theory will be seriously vulnerable to critique from teachers like Ms. Rain.

Ms. Rain conceives language as a tool for coping with harsh realities. Precious already lives in "the extremes of experience" as she becomes literate, a becoming which for her itself belongs in the category of "greatest achievements." So she has no apparent appetite for the extremes or exoticism that Egan asserts is a universal characteristic of the newly literate.[5] However, she does hunger for presently unavailable better living conditions that both Egan and I may take too much for granted as ordinary: for example, for assurances that she can love, she can survive,

she can go on learning, and so can her baby son, Abdul. Ms. Rain gives Precious pictures of Harriet Tubman and Alice Walker to hang next to Farrakhan — important cultural reminders to Precious that she can, she can, she can. Ms. Rain engages Precious and her classmates in critical analysis of their lives and situations, and directs them to many other sources of education and help: for example, museums, recovery and support groups, prenatal and family literacy classes, half-way houses, and counselors. Thus situated, Precious's quickly developing literacy gives her new and vital tools for critical and imaginative autopoiesis, for thinking about how she lives, wants to live, could live, and should live. Her literacy development amends the insubordinate talents of her oral language development to include even the active claiming of knowledge forcefully withheld from her. Egan's essay seems to imply that he conceives development as an affair of the individual mind preoccupied with fantasies and formalisms. In contrast, Ms. Rain integrates cultural practices of caring collectivity into her different conception of development. She invites Precious and her classmates to work together on remaking their classroom at the alternative school into what Jane Roland Martin might call a "schoolhome" (*Push*, 107).[6]

If you have only read Egan's essay and not yet read his new book, you could be thinking that he is offering just another rendition of the development of disembodied minds, minds which would scoff at such pedagogical aims and practices of literacy development. But his book's working title had been "The Body's Mind"(*EM*, 5). He is aware that, given his "references to language, intellectual tools, and cultural innovations, one may ask why the body figures so prominently." Reading that, I wondered why he changed his book's title, and why he excluded from his essay his explanation that all the different sorts of "cognitive" understanding that he has theorized in this work are premised on his acknowledgment that "We had, as a species, and have, as individuals, bodies before language.…Somatic understanding refers to the understanding of the world that is possible for human beings given the kind of body we have"(EM, 5). In light of Precious's developmental narrative, this premise seems to me too important to omit from any account of Egan's theory, however brief. Her father's sexual abuse in early girlhood plunges Precious into that Silence which *Women's Ways of Knowing* has identified, named, and so carefully formulated from extensive interview data.[7] Egan's summary of his developmental theory does not acknowledge the developmental significance of either silenced cultures or silenced individuals. Thus Precious would in girlhood have been a developmental anomaly to a school system founded upon that theory *sans* his notion of Somatic understanding. The utility of Egan's reconception of developmental theory in such a cultural context utterly depends upon critical attention to the bewildering multiplicity of possible Somatic Understandings and their possible effects on oral language, literacy, and so forth, if it is to escape the trap of false universalism. By what criteria should he evaluate the educational significance of diverse Somatic Understandings, if not by their imaginative promptings away from, or toward, learning love and survival?

Neither the Platonist nor the Rousseauian understandings of development that Egan has critically glossed and perhaps quite rightly rejected as incompatible can describe Precious Jones's development accurately. Her city schooling has utterly

failed her, but Sapphire's novel offers no evidence that it fails her *because* it has taken seriously the two traditionally favored developmental purposes that Egan has cited as incompatible. Those developmental approaches are not so much incompatible in her schooling as they are apparently absent. No one has really cared about what Precious Jones should know, and no one has effectively cared about how she might best fulfill her potential. She has had access neither to privileged forms of knowledge nor to any instruction that has attempted to take her own internal psychological nature into account. Would either developmental approach have made her schooling more educative? Perhaps, even if incompatible as Egan argues, the mere attention signified by such approaches could have made some improvement over the outright neglect that was her lot for ten years in city schools. Nonetheless, I would argue that "teaching in a different sense" which claimed as its purpose her *developing capacities for love and survival against great and unjust odds* would be far more to the point, as Ms. Rain's brilliant teaching of Precious demonstrates.[8] The extreme challenges and limitations of the social context in and for which she has been raised in girlhood — welfare motherhood in mid-1980s Harlem — are integral to her developmental processes. Developing linguistic power is central to her growth insofar as it enables her to resist abuse and to develop mature loving relationships with others who can help her sustain both herself and her baby son, Abdul.

Egan has not in this essay considered a theoretical conception of development in my "different sense" of "developing capacities for mature love and survival against great and unjust odds." Why should he? Such an alternative conception might serve not only the educational aim of *individual* development that he claims for his revised recapitulation theory, but also the educational aim of further *cultural* development beyond the "ironic understanding" that Kathryn Pauly Morgan's famous "bearded mothers" experience as a practical impasse fraught with perils.[9] Precious Jones's delayed development reflects not just personal hard luck and bad schools, but woefully inadequate cultural development for which philosophers of education can share some responsibility. Development of social and physical well-being and of ecological sustainability will require, along with many other cultural transformations, developing *cultural* habits and attitudes fundamental to love and survival. Egan seems in this essay not yet to have considered the possibility of such an alternative conception of development, a conception implicit in *Push* and in other women's and African-Americans' bildungsromans. Such a criticism cannot reasonably warrant a dismissive response to his theory, however. For he makes clear in *The Educated Mind* that his overarching aim is to "enable people to deal more effectively with the complex demands of modern changing social conditions"(E*M*, 274). Could his re-theorizing of development as recapitulation still substantially contribute to the elaboration of that different conception of development which Precious so fervently wants and works for?

The story that Precious tells does seem ironically to recapitulate the multiply varied form of a familiar African-American cultural text canonized in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and dating back to the first African-American novel, *Our Nig*.[10] This cultural text's recapitulation-with-variation seems far more than just

the black literary device that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has named "formal revision."[11] For oral language and literacy development within this cultural text is a *sine qua non* of emancipation from enslavement. Within this context, Egan's notion of development as recapitulation, as centered neither on "forms of knowledge" nor on internal psychology, but on language and literacy development, seems possibly quite useful. In his essay, Egan has not fully explained his distinction between development and learning, nor has he made clear what he means by language and literacy. His redefinition of development as recapitulated phases of language-centered intellectual development is, however, sufficiently distinct from development as recapitulated phases of political or economic development, to suggest that he could not have in mind the African Americans' eternal recapitulation of slavery and emancipation. Nonetheless, in basic outline at least, Sapphire's *Push* narrates that recapitulation as a culturally inflected version of Egan's peculiar recapitulation narrative, in which Precious develops oral language, literacy, some theoretic even if not quite abstract understanding, and a profound sense of irony. In Sapphire's fiction, which is so poignant as to make my theory-driven abridgment of it seem inexcusably dispassionate, each of these mediators does seem to yield particular imaginative capacities and kinds of understanding upon which her developing capacities for mature love and survival depend. I think Egan's conception of development holds promise of contributing to the cultural development of that education in love and survival which schools and families too often neglect. So that it can realize that promise, I would push him and his followers to give careful attention to those cultures whose development highbrow cultures like our own at PES have neglected, denigrated, and suppressed.[12]

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1. Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). This book will be cited as *EM* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 4. This book will be cited as *Push* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references. I am indebted to Linda Steet, a former University of Oklahoma colleague now at the University of Michigan-Flint, for introducing me to this deeply moving novel.

3. Deanne Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement* (Toronto: Irwin, 1992), 133. Although Bogdan here specifically theorizes *literary* response, I find her theorizing applicable to encounters with almost any sort of text. PES space limitations preclude my explaining here how helpful I think her feminist critique of Northrop Frye might prove to Egan's project, clearly indebted to Frye. Also worthy of his attention are Carol Gilligan, Nona Lyons, Blythe Clinchy, Janie Victoria Ward, Mary Belenky, Lyn Mikel Brown, and other feminist developmental theorists in whose work some philosophers of education have found both substantial value and some controversy.

4. Aida Hurtado, "Strategic Suspensions: Feminists of Color Theorize the Production of Knowledge," in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing,* ed. Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, Blythe Clinchy, and Mary Belenky (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 372-92, 387.

5. I myself never shared my brother's fascination for the *Guinness Book of World Records* and tales of heroic victories over mighty enemies. *Anne of Green Gables* was more my thing at that age!

6. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

7. Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

8. For conceptual inquiry on this "teaching in a different sense," see Susan Laird, "The Concept of Teaching: *Betsey Brown* vs. Philosophy of Education?" in *Philosophy of Education 1988*, ed. James Giarelli (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1989), 32-45; Susan Laird, "Learning from Marmee's Teaching: Alcott's Response to Girls' Miseducation," in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, ed. Jan Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland, in press).

9. Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "The Perils and Paradoxes of Bearded Mothers," in *The Gender Question in Education*, ed. Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Kathryn Pauly Morgan, Maryann Ayim (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), chap. 9.

10. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1983).

11. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Criticism in the Jungle," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Methuen, 1984), 1-24.

12. Sapphire's epigraph presents a similar, but far more eloquent caveat to readers in the words of Professor Egan's own favorite, William Wordsworth.