



Education

Schools should grow children's creativity, not stifle it

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What with the glories of spring's awakening the daffodils and scilla, and the stark winter forest suddenly gone, all fuzzy with life quickening on the branches, education had begun to seem a little lifeless. So I indulged myself in a marathon of YouTube lectures on creativity by Sir Ken Robinson. The Queen of England knighted the man for his warrior-like battles against forces that kill imagination, intuition and our innate appetite for solving puzzles.

He says, "An aesthetic experience is when you're fully alive. The opposite is 'anesthetic,' which dulls down the senses."

Surely you've seen kids alive with learning in schools, while others are slumped over desks, disengaged or misbehaving, their senses dulled by the piecework of absorbing facts to regurgitate on tests. Robinson argues that cultivating imagination is every bit as important as cultivating literacy. And to my mind, schools would be far more successful even with literacy if they also nourished imagination, creativity and appetite for what the brain does best — collecting information and skills to solve problems.

Robinson notes that it's not really a matter of changing schools so much as changing the way we think about schools from a mechanical mindset to an agricultural one. Instead of thinking we can die-press the right answers into students, we could create conditions that help kids yearn after learning. Kids are organic, after all.

As he puts it, "A healthy organism lives reciprocally in its environment. What farmers and gardeners know is that they cannot MAKE plants grow. Plants grow themselves. But farmers and gardeners know there are certain conditions that make this more likely to happen. If the conditions are harsh, people get protective and hostile. If you change the conditions, they flourish."

By all means, set high academic standards. But let kids and teachers alike be creative about how to meet them. And don't let right answers be all there is. Robinson says plainly, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original."

Robinson often tells the story of a girl who sits at the back of the class, usually disengaged, unless she's drawing. One day the teacher stops by her desk to ask what she's drawing. "I'm drawing a picture of God,"

says the girl. The teacher remonstrates that no one knows what God looks like. “Well,” the girl says, “they will in a minute.”

Robinson relishes the child’s confidence in her imagination’s power. “All kids have talents, and we squander them pretty ruthlessly.”

Ironically, economists and pundits laud the virtues of the creative economy even as schools “steer children benignly away from what they like.” Instead, Robinson would have us “be very careful to use the gift of human imagination to educate their whole being. Our job is to get them ready for a future we can’t see.” How dare we prescribe so narrowly what their capabilities ought to be in that unknown future.

He scoffs, “The purpose of public education is to produce professors. Typically professors live in their heads. They look upon their body as a sort of transport for their heads. It’s a way of getting their heads to a meeting.”

Even so, employers are turning away people with multiple, fancy academic degrees because they don’t have what employers really want: the ability to think creatively, to work in teams and to communicate effectively.

When the growing conditions for schools are right, children can use their imaginations “to DO something and apply them to cuisine, to math, to re-building a relationship.” Life consists of big dilemmas and little puzzles that the brain loves solving. Playing the right note on an instrument, communicating convincingly, and executing a perfect buck-and-wing dance feel good. The brain is hardwired to lust after learning and mastery. There’s no reason to create schools kids hate.

Except, as Robinson notes, when we’re training them to feed the needs of the economy. As humans, “we exploited the earth for certain resources and put the whole operation at risk. Now we’re taking bits of children, educating them, but never finding out what they want to be because no one was looking for it.”

The industrial mode of education has no way of caring about each child as an individual. Research has proven repeatedly that factory-model schooling only works well for a relatively small subset of children and even they don’t enjoy it. It doesn’t even work for the teachers. It can’t inspire creativity or bring out their best. Because, as Robinson says, “If it can’t be counted, it doesn’t count.”

This is not to say kids shouldn’t score well on standardized tests. They should. Surely 98 percent of all children can acquire at least 10th-grade skills, the threshold to most diplomas and entry to community college. But that should happen as a byproduct of helping kids relish the glories of the life they’ve been given.

Creativity can’t take place in a school bowed under the oppression of top-down authoritarianism, buried under state and district policy, union contracts and micromanaging officials.

All children will learn when teachers and the public look at them with the same grateful joy we feel when we see new green sprouting out of the winter landscape. Kids are organic. They will bloom and flourish and even ace the silly tests if only we develop nurturing conditions for them. Industrial schooling is not it. There is no springtime in a factory.

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