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Book Review: *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education.*

Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica. New York: Viking Press, 2015. 292 pages.

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A decade ago, Sir Ken Robinson's "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" appeared on the Internet and became the most watched in the history of the organization with more than 37 million views to date. Robinson outlined how school systems across the world all value the same kind of learning: "As children grow up, we start to educate them progressively from the waist up. And then we focus on their heads. And slightly to one side" (Robinson, 2006).

In *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education* Robinson revisits the themes of education that he touched on in that now iconic speech: the development of creativity, the definition of intelligence, and the diversity of human capacity that education should develop in kids. As Robinson outlines in Chapter 1: "Back to Basics", the standards movement in education has spread across the world without consideration for borders:

The modern standards movement is global. Pasi Sahlberg, a leading commentator on international trends in education, deftly refers to it as the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM. It certainly does seem to be contagious, to judge by how many

countries are catching the bug. National education policies used to be mainly domestic affairs. These days, governments scrutinize each other's education systems as earnestly as their defense policies. (p. 6)

With this globalization of education, countries across the world are "yanking firmly on the reins of public education, telling schools what to teach, imposing systems of testing to hold them accountable and levying penalties if they don't make the grade" (p. 9).

Robinson's belief is that to reform education for the better, we must go in the exact opposite direction, away from standardization of curricula, teaching, and assessment. Throughout the rest of the book, Robinson intersperses a variety of examples where educators have thought differently about education, allowing students to tap into the motivation of students to raise student achievement and honor the diversity of students. As Robinson writes, "People do not come in standard sizes or shapes, nor do their abilities and personalities" (p. 25).

In Chapter 2, "Changing Metaphors", to illustrate this movement away from standardization, Robinson draws on a metaphor he uses in a 2010 TED Talk

speech, “Changing Education Paradigms,” one of industrialization. Robinson challenges us to think about education as something different than “a mechanistic process that’s just not working as well as it used to” (p. 38): “It’s easy to make false assumptions about how it can be fixed; that if it can just be tweaked and standardized in the right way it will work efficiently in perpetuity. The fact is that it won’t, because it’s not that sort of process at all” (p. 38-39).

Instead, a different sort of education, one that harnesses the intrinsic motivation and creativity of students is required. Much of Chapters 2 and 3, “Changing Schools”, are dedicated to providing examples of such places. Minddrive, a non-profit born out of DeLaSalle Education Center in Kansas City, gives students the opportunity to build cars, and learn about mechanics, technology and teamwork in the process (p. 28). Grange Primary School in central England has students participate in “Grangeton, a working ‘town’ within the school where every ‘job’ was done by students” (p. 39). North Star Self-Directed Learning for Teens in Hadley, Massachusetts, allows students to choose what they want to learn and embrace their natural intellectual curiosity (p. 54-57). These and other schools- Everton Free School in Liverpool, England (p. 81-82), Room 56 at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles (p. 97-100), High Tech High in San Diego (p. 128-130), Matthew Moss High School in Rochdale, England (p. 150-152), democratic schools around the world (p. 152-154), and Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts (p. 198-200) - are examples of what Robinson believes is right in education. These interspersed real-world examples of the “grassroots revolution” that Robinson envisions demonstrate time and again the positive aspect of moving away from standardization toward a vision

that includes a reform movement focused on “improv[ing] the quality of teaching, hav[ing] a rich and balanced curriculum, and hav[ing] supportive, informative systems of assessment” (p. 24). Through these case study examples, Robinson’s major points in the later chapters of his book come alive. Chapters 4 through 10 are organized around how Robinson envisions the work of the five principal actors in schools: students, teachers, principals, families, and policymakers.

What is the role for students? One of many noteworthy examples comes in Chapter 4, entitled “Natural Born Learners.” There, Robinson describes a variety of innovations and experiments which various educators use to demonstrate the great capacity that children have to learn “if given effective tools” (p. 75). Robinson argues that conventional educational structures built into schools, systems like dividing the day into blocks of time, and the teacher as the focal point of the classroom, impede students’ natural abilities to learn on their own. He draws on his previous work from his 2001 book *Out of Our Minds* and from the ideas of the aforementioned TED Talks. Indeed, if there’s any significant critique of Robinson’s work here, it is that many of the points that he draws upon in *Creative Schools* are ones that he has made previously in other forums. That said, each is worth revisiting, particularly for those not familiar with Robinson’s previous work. Here, too, Robinson demonstrates thoughtfully why students need to be allowed to pursue their own interests and strengths (p. 88-89), on a schedule that allows for flexibility and play.

One might ask, through all of these examples, what exactly Robinson means by “creativity”: “Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value”

(p. 118). In his discussion of teachers' roles, Robinson explores this very idea, positing that great teachers understand that they must adapt with and individualize their instruction to their students. It is the role of a teacher to inspire passion, instill confidence, and spur creativity among his or her students (p. 127). Chapters 6 and 7 then build on this very idea that content is less significant. While not focused on any particular stakeholder, the two chapters ask the epistemological questions of "What's Worth Knowing" (p. 128) and how to assess such knowledge. As Robinson outlines, curricula follows the important principles of diversity, depth, and dynamism (p. 157). When assessments narrow the curriculum afforded by these three principles, problems arise, which in Robinson's view has occurred in the age of increased emphasis on standardized testing.

In the final chapters, Robinson explores the role of principals, parents, and policymakers. In each, a variety of examples and studies underscore a larger point of community building. Principals and policymakers each have the responsibility to bring a community together toward a common goal, drawing on various stakeholders with a common vision that extends beyond raising standardized test scores. Parents can and should be part of that vision, "supplement[ing] what the school is offering, [so] everyone wins" (p. 213).

In the end, Robinson underscores his larger point in the *Afterword*, one that is an important reminder in an age of calls for standardization: "Personalizing education might sound revolutionary, but this revolution is not new" (p. 254). It is a revolution that will take time; it is one that we should pay attention to.

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