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Events

TITLE: RSGlobal
Changing Education Paradigms

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NB

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Ken Robinson: Every country on earth at the moment is reforming public education. There are two reasons for this. The first of them is economic. People are trying to work out how do we educate our children to take their place in the economies of the 21st century? How do we do that given that we can't anticipate what the economy will look like at the end of next week, as the recent turmoil is demonstrated. How do we do that?

The second is cultural. Every country on earth is trying to figure out how do we educate our children so they have a sense of cultural identity so that we can pass on the cultural genes of our communities while being part of the process of globalisation? How do we square that circle?

The problem is they're trying to meet the future by doing what they did in the past. And on the way they're alienating millions of kids who don't see any purpose in going to school. When we went to school we were kept there with a story which is if you work hard and did well and got a college degree you would have a job. Our kids don't believe that. And they're right not to, by the way. You're better having a degree than not but it's not a guarantee anymore. And particularly not if the route to it marginalises most of the things that you think are important about yourself.

So people say we have to raise standards if this is a breakthrough, you know, really, yes we should; why would you lower them? I haven't come across an argument that persuades me of lowering them. But raising them of course we should raise them. The problem is that the current system of education was designed and conceived and structured for a different age. It was conceived in the intellectual, culture of the enlightenment. And in the economic circumstances of the industrial revolution.

Before the middle of the 19th century there were no systems of public education, not really. I mean you could get educated by Jesuits if you had the money. But public education paid for from taxation, compulsory to everybody and free at the point of delivery - that was a revolutionary idea. And many people objected to it - they said it's not possible for many street kids and working class children to benefit from public education, they're incapable of learning to read and write and why are we spending time on this? So there's also built into it a whole series of assumptions about social structure and capacity.

It was driven by an economic imperative of the time but running right through it was an intellectual model of the mind, which was essentially the enlightenment view of intelligence; that real intelligence consists in this capacity for a certain type of deductive reasoning and a knowledge of the classics originally, what we come to think of as academic ability.

And this is deep in the gene pool of public education; there are only two types of people - academic and non-academic; smart people and non smart people. And the consequence of that is that many brilliant people think they're not because they've been judged against this particular view of the mind. So we have twin pillars - economic and intellectual. And my view is that this model has caused chaos in many people's lives; it's been great for some, there have been people who have benefitted wonderfully from it. But most people have not. Instead they suffer this; this is the modern epidemic and it's as misplaced and as it's fictitious. This is the plague of ADHD.

Now this is a map of the instance that ADHD in America or prescriptions for ADHD. Don't mistake me, I don't mean to say there is no such thing as Attention Deficit Disorder. I'm not qualified to say if there is such a thing. I know that a great majority of psychologists and paediatricians think there is such a thing, but it's still a matter of debate. What I do know for a fact is it's not an epidemic. These kids are being medicated as routinely as we had our tonsils taken out. And on the same whimsical basis and for the same reason - medical fashion.

Our children are living in the most intensely stimulating period in the history of the earth. They're being besieged with information and calls for their attention from every platform - computers, from iPhones, from advertising hoardings, from hundreds of television channels and we're penalising them now for getting distracted. From what? Boring stuff at school, for the most part.

It seems to me it's not a coincidence totally that the incidence of ADHD has risen in parallel with the growth of standardised testing. Now these kids are being given Ritalin and Adderall and all manner of things, often quite dangerous drugs, to get them focused and calm them down. But according to this

Attention Deficit Disorder increases as you travel east across the country. People start losing interest in Oklahoma, they can hardly think straight in Arkansas and by the time they get to Washington they've lost it completely. And there are separate reasons for that I believe. It's a fictitious epidemic.

If you think of it the arts, and I don't say this exclusively, the arts, I think it's also true of science and of maths, but I say about the arts particularly because they are the victims of this mentality currently - particularly. The arts especially address the idea of aesthetic experience. And aesthetic experience is one in which your senses are operating at their peak, when you're present in the current moment, when you're resonating with the excitement of this thing that you're experiencing, when you're fully alive. An anaesthetic is when you shut your senses off and deaden yourself to what's happening. And a lot of these drugs are that. We're getting our children through education by anaesthetising them. And I think we should be doing the exact opposite. We shouldn't be putting them asleep we should be waking them up to what they have inside of themselves.

But the model we have is this. I believe we have a system of education that is modelled on the interests of industrialism and in the image of it. I'll give you a couple of examples. Schools are still pretty much organised on factory lines; ringing bells, separate facilities, specialised into separate subjects. We still educate children by batches; we put them through the system by age group - why do we do that? Why is there this assumption that the most important thing kids have in common is how old they are. It's like the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture. Well I know kids who are much better than other kids at the same age in different disciplines, or at different times of the day, or better in smaller groups than in large groups, or sometimes they want to be on their own. If you're interested in the model of learning you don't start from this production line mentality.

It's essentially about conformity and increasingly it's about that if you look at the growth of standardised testing and standardised curricula and it's about standardisation. I believe we've got to go in the exact opposite direction. That's what I mean about changing the paradigm.

There was a great study done recently of divergent thinking. It was published a couple of

years ago. Divergent thinking isn't the same thing as creativity. I define creativity as the process of having original ideas that have value. Divergent thinking isn't a synonym but it's an essential capacity for creativity. It's the ability to see lots of possible answers to a question, lots of possible ways of interpreting a question to think what Edward de Bono would probably call laterally - to think not just in linear or convergent ways. To seek multiple answers, not one.

So there are tests for this, I mean, one kind of cod example would be people might be asked to say how many uses can you think of for a paper clip; one of those routine questions. Most people might come up with ten or fifteen. People who are good at this might come up with 200. And they'd do that by saying, "Well could the paperclip be 200 foot tall and made out of foam rubber?" "Does it have to be a paperclip as we know it, Jim?" Now they tested this and they gave them to 1,500 people in a book called *Break Point and Beyond*, and on the protocol of the test if you scored above a certain level you'd be considered to be a genius at divergent thinking.

So my question to you is what percentage of the people tested of the 1,500 scored at genius level for divergent thinking. Now you need to know one more thing about them - these were kindergarten children. So what do you think? What percentage at genius level? 80? 98%. Now the thing about this was it was a longitudinal study, so they retested the same children five years later aged 8 to 10. What do you think? 50? They retested them again five years later, ages 13 to 15. You can see a trend here can't you?

Now this tells an interesting story because you could have imagined it going the other way could you? You start off not being very good but you get better as you get older. But this shows two things: one is we all have this capacity and; two, it mostly deteriorates. Now a lot of things have happened to these kids as they've grown up, a lot. But one of the most important things that has happened to them I'm convinced is that by now they've become educated. They've spent ten years at school being told there's one answer it's at the back and don't look. And don't copy because that's cheating. Outside school that's called collaboration no but inside schools... This isn't because teachers want it this way it's just

because it happens that way. It's because it's in the gene pool of education. They have to think differently about human capacity. We have to get over this old conception of academic, non-academic, abstract, theoretical, vocational and see it for what it is - a myth.

Second, you have to recognise that most great learning happens in groups, that collaboration is the stuff of growth. If we atomise people and separate them and judge them separately we form a kind of disjunction between them and their natural learning environment. And thirdly, it's crucially about the culture of our institutions, the habits of the institution and the habitats that they occupy.