

# Are Schools Killing Creativity?



*The only way to avoid making mistakes is to have no new ideas –Albert Einstein*

What does a can opener and a pea pod have in common? How about a pine cone and an alphabet? Making a connection between pairs of dissimilar objects has led to many great inventions. American Ermal Fraze was inspired by the action of stringing a pea pod to create ring-top soft drink cans. Frenchman Louise Braille’s sensory connection to the ridges of a pine cone became the source of his idea for the Braille alphabet.

Drawing disparate ideas together is the foundation of creative thinking, but according to Sir Ken Robinson, a leading thinker in education and creativity, schools are killing creativity. He explains:

“Creativity is as important in education as literacy and we should treat it with the same status. Kids will take a chance. If they don’t know, they’ll have a go...they are not frightened to be wrong. Now I don’t mean to say that being wrong is the same as being creative. What we do know is that if you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original” (1).

Sir Ken argues that the problem with our education system is that it is too narrow and outdated. Based on the nineteenth century system that was formed during the industrial

revolution to select academic students for university entrance, it has created an unfair hierarchical ranking of subjects, so the more academic subjects are perceived as more important than the creative ones. Academic domination of the school curriculum means that the spontaneous and creative thinking that children are born with is suppressed by a culture of standardized testing, where mistakes are the worst thing you can do. He is advocating that education should be about what it is that drives people to learn and harnessing the individual’s passions and talents (2).

The concerns voiced by Sir Ken have been felt in the corridors of Parisian universities. The French education system is known for its rigidity and emphasis on analytical thought and rote learning; there is little room for creativity. There are few electives on offer and even less extra-curricular activities; and it is fiercely competitive and results-driven. But a whiff of change is in the air. Girolamo Ramunni, a lecturer at the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts (specializing in science and industry) in Paris organized a week long “festival of errors” to encourage young people to reject always having to be right and instead come up with original thoughts, work on the process of problems, to take risks and be wrong (3).

Here in Australia our education system has

become more and more preoccupied with testing students and comparing them. As a result the focus has been taken away from play. A recent visitor to our shores, British Professor Stephen Heppell who is part of the movement to create “classrooms of tomorrow”, says “playfulness gets squashed out of school but (it’s) a really important part of confronting (students) with unexpected problems” and ultimately equipping them to live in a world of the unexpected (4).

So the question is this: after years of being tied to the shackles of a test driven education system, can Australian students retain the qualities of inquisitiveness and playfulness? Can the light bulb turn on and the birth of fresh ideas and innovations come to play?

1. Highly recommended viewing on YouTube, TED, Sir Ken Robinson “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” 6/01/2007.
2. The 7:30 Report ‘Education System too Narrow’: Sir Ken Robinson, reporter Kerry O’Brien, 16 June, 2009.
3. ‘The Sydney Morning Herald’, Lizzy Davies, “French Students taught to Find Success in Failure”, July 24, 2010.
4. ‘National Curriculum Means Lack of State Competition’ by Jewel Topsfield, Education Editor, ‘The Age’, 14 Nov 2011.

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