

State school system cries out for creativity

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Sir Ken Robinson, the education expert, says that we need to give teachers space to be professional and to inspire children. Carol Lewis reports

If you woke up this morning thanking your lucky stars that it is Friday — then it is probably a good bet to say that you don't adore your job.

"I constantly meet lots of adults who don't really know what their true talents might be or what they might be really good at, who don't much enjoy what they do, they just do it... with no great sense of fulfilment or exhilaration," Sir Ken Robinson, an education expert, says.

"Yet I also meet people who absolutely love what they do and couldn't imagine doing anything else — who are, so to speak, in their element — and I've long been interested in what the difference is and what makes the difference."

The difference, Sir Ken says, is great teaching. "The quality of education is so much to do with the quality of teaching," he said. "The quality of teaching is so much about having people who



Sir Ken Robinson: "The quality of education is to do with the quality of teaching"

are passionate about it and who have room to do their job properly."

In 1998 Sir Ken led a national commission on creativity, education and the economy for the Tony Blair Government, producing the report, *All Our Future: Creativity, Culture and Education* (also known as the the Robinson Report). However he is probably now better known for his humorous TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) lecture "Do Schools Kill Creativity?", which has acquired cult status among parents — his delivery is more like that of a professional comedian rather than an academic (www.ted.com).

Sir Ken passionately believes that we need to rethink fundamentally the

way in which we educate children and in his new book, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*, he explores this idea through the stories of people who have achieved success through discovering their element — the thing that they are good at and enjoy doing.

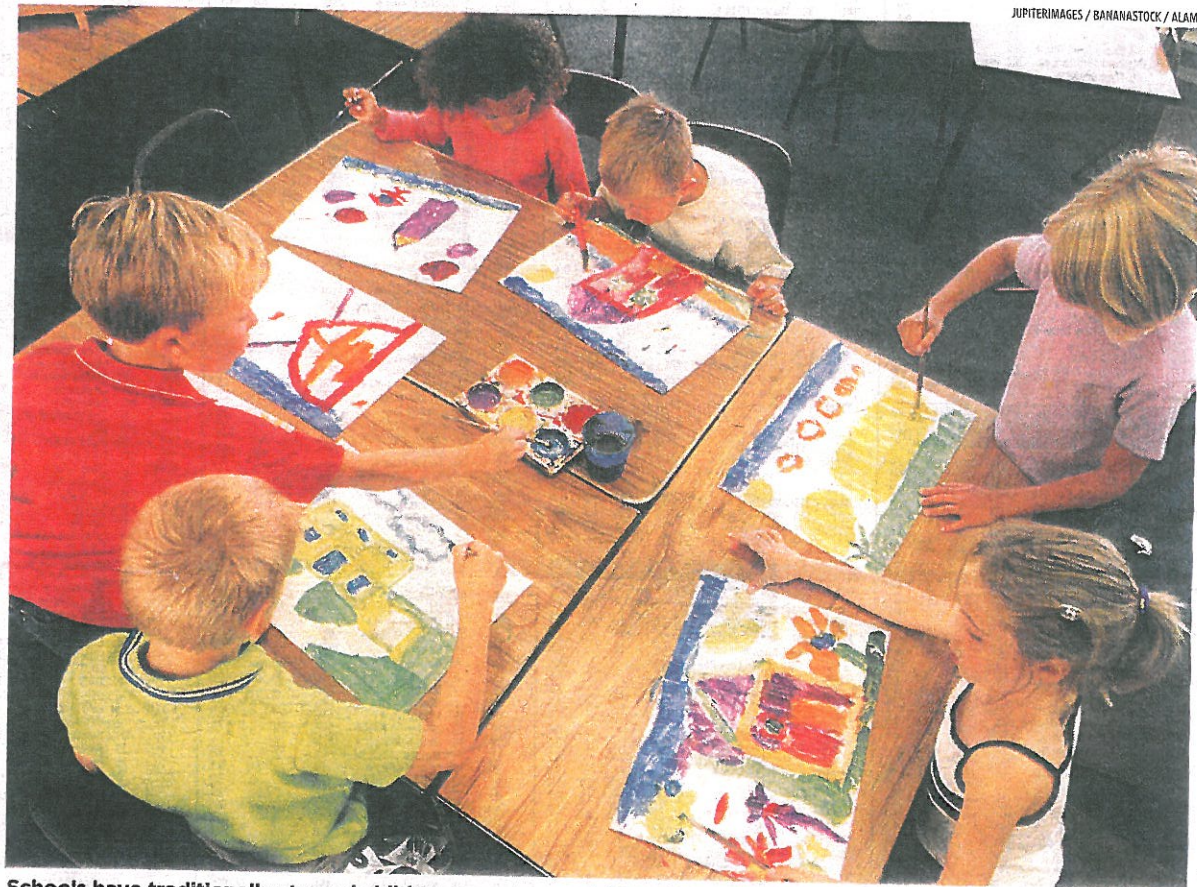
In the book he proposes an "elemental education". In this education system, all subjects are considered equal, there is more linking of subjects (rather than treating them as distinct topics) and curriculums and teaching methods are personalised to inspire children. Finally teachers are given the freedom to teach in a way that excites and motivates them.

However, the former professor of arts education isn't advocating that schools adopt whacky practices. "I think it is useful to have a national curriculum — there needs to be some basic agreement about the sort of things that all children are entitled to learn about and we need core thresholds in literacy, numeracy and so on," he said.

"It's about giving schools and teachers the space they need to be professional and creative in the way they engage kids with the material. My anxiety is that governments get over-prescriptive when they need to leave room for professional judgment."

However, Sir Ken emphasises that there is room for more creativity in the British state school system and that there are plenty of examples of schools that have taken the initiative. He points to Grange Primary in Nottinghamshire, where the head teacher has created Grangeton, a town — complete with town council, television studio, market and museum — all run by the pupils. The curriculum is taught by relating subjects to practical applications — for example, maths is related to running a town business and literacy to writing for the town newspaper.

Sir Ken said: "There is nothing to stop a head teacher or school from



Schools have traditionally steered children away from subjects they are good at, according to Sir Ken Robinson

agreeing to do something completely differently and saying 'We are going to have a whole day when we do nothing but science and then tomorrow we are going to do music.'

Yet many schools insist on carving the day into 40-minute lessons and valuing maths and science above all else, Sir Ken says. "We have to celebrate all the talents of our kids — Britain needs great scientists and mathematicians, but it also needs great designers, great architects, great everything," he said.

Sir Ken says that traditionally the academic system has steered children away from the subjects that they are good at because they were not perceived as promoting good employ-

ment prospects. However, he points out that we don't know what jobs we will need in the future but we do know we will need some creative thinking to get out of current economic problems.

"The irony is that narrow curriculums and standardised tests are often put into place because that is what politicians perceive is wanted by business, but when you speak to businesses they almost always want the opposite," he said. "They are saying: 'We are getting all these kids through, who have gone through the education mill, but they don't have a creative thought in their heads — they can't innovate, they can't work in teams and they can't communicate properly. But what we

need urgently are people who can contribute to change and innovation."

The same is true for teachers. Sir Ken says that teacher training needs to be innovative and to inspire teachers, because they, too, are better at their jobs when they enjoy what they are doing. What we need is more people, including teachers, who enthusiastically look forward to Monday morning.

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