

Creative schools: The grassroots revolution that's transforming education

**By Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica. Viking, New York, 2015, 320 pp.
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With so much focus on school reform, it is not surprising to find a book which furthers the conversation. Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica's *Creative schools: The grassroots revolution that's transforming education* offers specific suggestions for a balanced and individualised approach to learning which challenges readers to rethink how schools work. The authors invite all of us – students, educators, parents, administrators and policymakers – to be part of the change because “revolutions don't wait for legislation. They emerge from what people do at the ground level” (p. xxv). Robinson, with over 40 years of experience in various educational roles, expands on his popular TED Talk, “Do schools kill creativity?”¹ and furthers his argument for “more balanced and individualised, and creative approaches to education” (p. xix). He uses this book to showcase his vision for change and to provide examples of how this vision is being achieved in schools domestically and abroad.

¹ Originating in a 1984 conference, TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design and is now the name of a nonprofit organisation based in New York [<http://www.ted.com/>]. No longer confined to these three fields today, a TED Talk has a maximum length of 18 min and is posted online. Ken Robinson's lecture referred to here is available at https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity?language=en [accessed 29 December 2015].

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Although the standards movement² began because of legitimate concerns about schools, competition and corporatisation are now the driving forces behind educational reforms which favour direct instruction and formal assessments. Robinson and Aronica combat this doom and gloom by highlighting how ordinary citizens are making positive changes in particular contexts. In Chapter 1, we meet the principal of Smokey Road Middle School who altered the climate of her school by making students feel valued as individuals. The authors suggest this way of going “back to basics”, focusing on quality teaching and building relationships, is as important as meeting state mandates or federal standards. In Chapter 2, the authors suggest changing the metaphor we use to understand education. Mass education was established during the industrial revolution and was created to fit the principles of industrialism, conformity, compliance, linearity, market demand, and division of labour. Because of this, education was conceptualised like a machine with various working parts which could be tweaked to improve efficiency and productivity. Robinson and Aronica argue that education is not an industrial process at all, but is better understood as an organic process where the conditions of the system allow individuals to thrive or wither.

In Chapter 3, the authors remind us that changing schools is within our power, and the best place to begin is by reflecting on our current role in a school. Robinson and Aronica advocate that transforming education begins when schools adopt personalised approaches to learning which are customised to the students and the community. Often schools do things simply because they’ve always done them, but “opportunities for change exist within every school, even where the emphasis on high-stakes testing has become extreme” (p. 57). The argument that schools must provide different ways for students to explore opportunities which extend beyond their capabilities for conventional academic work is continued in Chapter 4. Children are natural learners, but as they progress through school, which is focused on academic ability, many young people experience issues of motivation. Some suggestions offered to foster motivation and increase individual student growth include: encouraging students to pursue their own interests and strengths, adapting the school schedule, and using assessments which support personal progress and achievement.

The people who are best placed to make change and can have the most impact on the quality of learning are teachers. Although the standards movement tends to focus on curriculum, assessment and teaching as a way of delivering the standards, Chapter 5 highlights the essential role of teacher expertise and provides examples of teachers and teaching practices which inspire students to learn. For example, flipped classrooms³ can engage, enable and empower students. However, teachers need

² The standards movement began in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and continues to shape educational reform in the United States. It is represented in a series of educational reforms that focus on improving education by raising academic standards (i.e. setting clear goals for what students should know and be able to do). In more recent years, the standards movement has become closely tied to accountability policies and practices.

³ The “flipped classroom” teaching method reverses the traditional order of a class lecture followed by homework. Students watch a video lecture at home and then go to school to engage with the material in exercises or discussions.

continued opportunities for professional development which refresh creative practices. In Chapter 6, the authors explore the role of curriculum in education. They outline a vision for curriculum which is structured around six disciplines: the arts, humanities, language arts, mathematics, physical education and science, with all disciplines receiving equal status and resources. Robinson and Aronica discuss potential modes for students to engage in the curriculum and address the ethos it conveys. In addition, they recommend three essential characteristics of curriculum: diversity (broad-based curriculum for what all students should know), depth (opportunities for choice so that students can explore their own interests in depth), and dynamism (designed to allow opportunities for collaboration between students and teachers, and with the larger community).

Chapter 7 examines the emphasis the standards movement has placed on testing as a means of holding teachers and schools accountable for student learning. Robinson and Aronica highlight the significant consequences of this overemphasis, from narrowing the curriculum to overlooking key skills such as creativity and entrepreneurial talents which cannot be measured by the limited forms of responses associated with high-stakes assessments. The authors do acknowledge the valuable role of assessment in teaching and learning, but they argue that assessment should support students' learning by motivating them to do well, by providing them with achievement information so that they understand their progress and potential, and by setting clear standards for learning.

Chapter 8 highlights the critical role school principals play in transforming schools through strong leadership and management. The authors argue that the task of principals is to provide a vision for change as well as the support, resources and skills necessary to consciously transform schools. The authors suggest that the principal, as the leader in the school, must create a school culture that has a strong sense of community, values the individuality of its students, and is a place of possibility which provides students with the hope and opportunity to meet their aspirations. The focus of Chapter 9 is the essential role parents and families play in supporting children in school. In this chapter, Robinson and Aronica discuss how parents can be advocates for their children in school as well as how schools can build productive relationships with the families of their students.

Robinson and Aronica conclude their book with Chapter 10, which looks at the role of policymakers in transforming education and the necessary ingredients for real changes to occur. Because education is part of culture and changing culture is difficult, changing education has many challenges. These challenges are explored along with policies which support and encourage change. This chapter includes stories from around the globe of educational systems engaging in the kinds of transformations advocated throughout the entire book. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the essential elements for change: vision, skills, incentives, resources and an action plan, as well as a final plea for readers to become agents of change in education, whether they are administrators, teachers, parents or policymakers.

Throughout the book, Robinson and Aronica reference the need to change the metaphor used to conceptualise education. The standards movement, which has dominated educational reform around the globe for the last several decades, depicts education as an industrial model where schools are run much like factory conveyor

belts. In this model the curriculum is constricted, testing and accountability have become overemphasised, and creativity has been depleted in schools. *Creative Schools* presents an alternative metaphor and view of what education could be. This alternative view conceptualises education as an organic process where the emphasis is placed on creating the conditions under which people thrive. In this alternative perspective, the curriculum is balanced and broad; student individuality is expected and valued; teacher expertise is required, fostered and respected; and positive teacher-student relationships are critical.

Creative Schools proposes quite drastic changes to the traditional educational system which is familiar to most readers. Initially these changes may seem both momentous and unattainable. However, the authors provide concrete recommendations for changes that teachers, administrators, parents and policymakers can take on board to enact the vision laid out in the book. In addition, the authors also provide a well-reasoned argument to support their vision of what education could be if we transform schools. The authors include stories from schools and educational systems around the world which are enacting the very changes articulated in this book. While Robinson and Aronica's argument is compelling, the reader may fail to see the forest through the trees due to the way the text is organised and the intricate path the authors take in laying out their message. Yet, transforming schools is a complex process that involves changes at all levels of the educational system. Therefore, it is understandable that the text explores these ideas in an equally complex manner.

Creative Schools takes on the formidable challenge of laying out a vision to change our current educational system. The authors' stated goal is "to offer a coherent overview of the changes that are urgently needed in and to schools" (pp. xxiv–xxv) and this goal is achieved. This book provides valuable ideas and a compelling argument for why change is needed and how to go about *transforming*, not *reforming*, our current educational system. We encourage anyone who has a vested interest in education to read and explore *Creative Schools* to learn what you can do to be part of *the grassroots revolution that's transforming education*.