

Sir Ken Robinson begins by drawing our attention to the extraordinary capacity/evidence for human creativity and the sheer, staggering range and variety of it.

In addition, he also acknowledges the acute sense of uncertainty that we all have regarding our future despite our expertise and proficiency in various disciplines.

There is a kind of contradiction or paradox that one often finds or notices in the way in which people who have an interest in education are often looked down upon on the one hand, but on the other hand the one who are disrespectful of these people, they are quite proud and vain about their own academic accomplishments and educational qualifications.

And these educational qualifications go deep with people like religion or money.

Our vested interest in education, according to Robinson, is partly because it is one of the weapons or means through which one is supposed to make sense of the ungraspable or impossible to comprehend future.

In the face of an unknowable future, a future that one simply cannot predict, the one thing that we have in hand is education and therefore we try and prepare kids for it through teaching and pedagogy.

And yet, all is not lost or dull or bleak because of the fact that children exhibit an extraordinary capacity for imagination, creativity, and alternative ways of perceiving the world.

Ken's contention is that when we are kids, we never have a scenario in which just one child is extraordinary or exceptional. Rather, all of us have remarkable skills and talents but most of these are squandered or wasted in a fairly mercilessly by the education system.

In other words, literacy and creativity are never given the same importance in schools even though that is how it should be.

Robinson recounts the story of a little girl who was in a drawing lesson. This girl was six years old, sitting at the back, drawing and the one thing that the teacher constantly complained about was that this little girl barely paid any attention in the class.

The only thing that interested her was the drawing class. This aroused the curiosity of the teacher and she goes over to her and says, 'What are you drawing?' to which the girl replies, 'I am drawing a picture of God'.

The teacher's response to this was, 'But nobody knows what God looks like' to which the girl once again replies, 'They will in a minute'. The point of the story is that whenever kids find an opportunity or a chance, they will grab it, they will never miss it.

There is an inherent tendency in kids to be creative, experimental, and fearless before they are exposed to the grinding and uninspired processes of education systems. As Ken rightly points out, 'If they don't know, they'll have a go'.

This indicates a certain ability to fill the gaps whenever an opportunity presents itself. In other words, they are not afraid of being wrong. A word of caution here is that being wrong is not the same as being creative.

But obviously, if we do not have a venturesome or daring spirit, a certain kind of readiness or preparedness to be wrong, if you like, then chances are that creativity and innovation will be the first casualty.

The tragedy is that through the schooling system or the education system, by the time these wonderful, fantastic, imaginative kids get to be adults, most of them have already lost that ability or capacity.

So, people who as kids were adventurous, unafraid, and enterprising, they over a period of time end up feeling fearful of being wrong. This is a paradigm shift in terms of attitude and mindset.

Ken also says that this stigmatisation of mistakes goes right up to the corporate houses and companies that hire these people. In fact, our entire national education systems are programmed in such a way that mistakes are seen as possibly the worst thing that you could ever make.

The fallout of this is that we are educating people out of our creative capacities. Robinson says that all across the world we have the same hierarchy of subjects.

So, at the top of the food chain, is mathematics and languages, followed by humanities and the last position is invariably reserved for the arts. The buck does not stop there because even within the arts there is an internal hierarchy.

So, schools place a greater premium on art and music as opposed to theatre and dance. One of the things that really baffles us is that why should dance be not given the same importance as let's say mathematics?

In Robinson's opinion, public education is predicated (in terms of output, standards, and who really succeeds by it) on the idea of academic ability or competence.

The speaker also makes a brutally honest remark about university professors that they more often than not live inside their heads or in other words are deeply caught, entangled, trapped in their own worlds.

It is also curious that before the 19th century, there were no public education systems. They were all created to meet the demands of industrialism. So, the way in which a particular skill, ability, or talent is ranked is really contingent upon two factors.

The first one is the subjects that have the maximum utility are often ranked the highest. So, one gradually gets discouraged from doing things that one is quite great at or is quite interested in, precisely because it does not guarantee you a job.

This applies to music or art perhaps. And this advice may be coming from a good place but we also can see how utterly mistaken it is in today's world.

The second factor pertains to the question of academic ability which makes sure that we have a very limited and singular definition of intelligence. The whole system of schools is always geared toward university entrance.

What is irreparably unfortunate is that many brilliant, exceptional, and imaginative minds think that they are probably not intelligent because the things that they excelled at in schools is either devalued in universities or is actually stigmatised.

The way in which technology has affected how we look at work is also directly related to demography and population explosion. So even as we have more and more people graduating, what we also realise is suddenly degrees are not worth much.

There is an irreversible process of academic inflation which means that we have to reconsider our understanding of intelligence which is diverse and multi-faceted.

We think about the world in different terms based on the way in which we experience it – visuals, sounds, movements, abstract terms etc. A related point to this is about the dynamism of intelligence.

This basically means that it is a product of an interactive and pluralistic way of seeing, understanding, and interpreting the world around us. Finally, identifying, embracing, appreciating, and nurturing the uniqueness of intelligence is the way forward.

Robinson cites the example of Gillian Lynne, a renowned ballet dancer, a choreographer famous for 'Cats' and 'Phantom of the Opera'. In her school (and this is in the 1930s), the authorities complained that she had a learning disorder.

In today's world, we better know it as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). Thanks to her doctor who advised her mother on sending her to a dance school, she was able to accomplish so much in her life while also enjoying what she actually felt like doing naturally.

Her success also by the way made her a multimillionaire so the utility value is also taken care of as we can see. Imagine if she would have just been given medication and told to just calm down.

The only hope for our future is to develop a sense of appreciation for the richness and diversity of human capacity and potential. Robinson suggests a fundamental rethinking of the principles based on which we are educating our children.

So, it really boils down to having a holistic system of education so that the children of today's world are better equipped to face the uncertainties and the challenges of the future with a more definite sense of meaning, purpose, and direction.