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Is it the end of the world if your child isn't academic? No

Sir Ken Robinson is the education guru who gave the most-viewed TED talk yet, in which he said that schools kill children's creativity. Helena de Bertodano meets him

Twelve years have passed since Sir Ken Robinson delivered his hilarious and eviscerating TED talk *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* It is the most viewed talk in TED's history, recently surpassing 50 million online views. No one is more surprised than Robinson, who hadn't even prepared a script. "It was improv," he says. "I was just speaking to the room."

A few weeks later the organisers asked if they could put it online, something TED had not done before. Robinson — knighted in 2003 for services to art — was in two minds: he asked them to send a copy and settled down to watch it with his wife, Terry. "Afterwards I said, 'What did you think?' She said, 'I wish you'd worn a different shirt.'"

So the video went online, touching a nerve that ran deep. Parents' latent fear that the education system was failing their children suddenly had a champion. The essence of Robinson's talk is a passionate argument to foster a system of education that nurtures creativity rather than deadens it.

His latest book, *You, Your Child and School*, is his first addressed directly at parents, offering practical advice on how to support your child through the system, however flawed that system is. "It's not a book on how to be a wonderful parent," he says. "I'm not lining up with Dr Spock and the tiger mums."

His aim is to "say something sensible and coherent" to parents and he does so in a way that is neither patronising nor critical. "Many parents are anxious, perplexed and worried: they recognise that kids today are under extraordinary amounts of pressure... [But] to some degree parents are part of the problem, adding to the intense pressure by assuming that the right thing is for all kids to go to university."

His critics say that he highlights genuine problems in the education system, but offers no solutions. "The idea that I am sitting in the Bodleian Library just venting at people is bollocks," Robinson scoffs when we meet at a restaurant in Los Angeles, where he has lived since 2001.

Indeed, he has been at the heart of education for decades, helping schools, universities, teacher-training programmes, even governments: he



Sir Ken Robinson: "Some people are pathologically opposed to what I say"

chaired a government commission in the UK on creativity, education and the economy. "It's not like I'm on the outside looking in. I've been kicking around education for over 40 years. And I'm a parent too."

Terry arrives at the restaurant first, while Robinson, 68, who had polio as a child and moves a little awkwardly, follows behind. He sits down and orders a cappuccino. Terry, petite and glamorous, sits opposite us, "keeping track of time". It quickly becomes clear that she is integral to everything he does. "I am his partner and muse. I even did the first drafts of the *Element* book," she says, referring to his work about finding one's passion.

They work and think as a team. As Terry says: "Our kids grew up overhearing us in the bedroom talking about [educational] issues." She turns to her husband: "It's been our life, hasn't it?"

"We talk about other things as well," says Robinson.

Terry, a published novelist under her pen name, Thérèse, looks doubtful. "Occasionally," she says.

They met more than four decades ago, when Terry, a teacher at the time, attended one of his lectures. Robinson was about to cancel it because hardly anyone had shown up, but then he clapped eyes on Terry. "She appeared in her jeans and white T-shirt and I thought, 'Wait a minute.' It was

9.30am and I thought, 'If I talk long enough, maybe coffee?'"

"He talked for an hour and a half," Terry says, "and I was in love by the end. I remember him saying, 'If you could describe a picture in words, there would be no need for a picture.' People say the lights go on when you hear a person speak, and that was definitely it for me."

He is an extraordinary speaker, which is why his first TED talk (he has done three) seduced so many. Taken apart, the talk is a work of comic genius and his sense of timing is impeccable.

Humour comes naturally to Robinson, who grew up in a large working-class family in Liverpool. "I find things funny. I'm one of seven [children] and my experience of Liverpool and the family is almost constant unbroken hysteria." This despite spending eight months in hospital with polio, aged four, followed a few years later by an industrial accident that felled his father, rendering him quadriplegic at 45.

Everyone Robinson meets is exposed to his wit. Posing for the picture that accompanies this article, he asks the photographer: "Is this in any sense the pinnacle of your career?" And when the photographer tells him he is awesome, Robinson says: "Could we stay in touch? All Terry tells me is I've got a blemish. It's been 40 years



“Parents are part of the problem. They add to the pressure on kids

now and I'm ready for the next thing."

If he had not contracted polio, he says he fondly imagines he might have become a professional footballer, like one of his brothers, who played for Everton's first team. "I was very strong and very quick. Even now I know intuitively what I would do if somebody kicked a ball towards me."

Ironically, perhaps, he credits his state school with the making of him. "They saw something in me I didn't see in myself and I rose to it." He started at a special school for the disabled, but after passing the 11-plus went to Liverpool Collegiate School, then Wade Deacon Grammar School, before studying English and drama at Bretton Hall College of Education. His parents, he says, were supportive, but — unlike many parents today — not overly involved. "They weren't at the school gate going, 'What's this? You got 75 per cent on the essay, but we read it and we think it's a clear 82 per cent.'"

In 1985 he became a director of the Arts in Schools Project, an initiative to develop arts education, then professor of education at the University of Warwick. In 2001 he received a call from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, asking him to become an adviser. "It was the third of January in the Midlands. It was raining. We left immediately."

However, he is keen to point out that, although he is based in California, his interest in education is worldwide; he works with governments and education systems in Europe, Asia and the US and is constantly on the move. I ask if he finds it hard to say no to things. There is an instant whoop of laughter from the other side of the table. Terry is leaning sideways out of her chair, in hysterics. He starts laughing too. "One

of the most time-consuming things in my life," Terry says, "is picking up the pieces of Ken saying yes to *everything*. It's a real issue — he needs to clone at least 100 of himself. He's always doing people favours, giving free talks, it drives me insane. I'm the bad cop, he's the good cop."

Yet Robinson is deeply driven. "Kids are being educated right now. We're putting them through these systems at the most vulnerable and formative points of their lives. We can't afford to throw kids under the bus like this..."

The need for change is particularly urgent in state schools, which have to follow a standardised teaching model. However, it is not just state schools that can get it wrong. "There is nothing in the nature of schools being state or private, charter or free, that guarantees anything."

Robinson and Terry struggled with schools for their children, switching between state and private, even homeschooling their daughter after watching "the light go out of her eyes" at her exclusive LA private girls' school.

The overriding message of his latest book is that every child is different and they should be encouraged to find their natural talents and not be forced to fit a template. Of his two children, one went to university, the other left school at 16. Both are doing equally well: his son, James, is an actor and writer; his daughter, Kate, is an international consultant in creativity and innovation in education. University, he says, can be "absolutely valuable and worthwhile", but it is not for everyone and with huge technological change sweeping the world it is hard to predict what degrees will be worthwhile and how the job market will look in the future.

"Higher education has a kind of hypnotic spell, and now it's not just

about getting to university, but getting to a particular university. But it should not be about the amount of ivy on the walls. I remember Michael Gove [when he was education secretary] saying that his aim was to make everybody eligible for Oxford or Cambridge — as if that style of academic work were the high-water mark of all forms of human endeavour. I thought, 'Has he lost his mind?' And even if we accepted that, how many people can possibly get in? Does everybody else become also-rans? It's a kind of intellectual apartheid, which I detest."

Robinson is optimistic — "an eternal optimist", according to Terry — that education will change. "I think quite convulsive changes are already afoot. There are plenty of great schools out there doing the things I'm talking about; I advise a number of them."

Often asked if he would start a school himself, Robinson says it would take up all his time at the expense of his larger mission. "It's not like I'm 38 now. I think my time is better spent this way, acting as a megaphone for the people who are already doing it."

After 17 years in LA, the Robinsons are planning to return home soon. Kate, who lives in London, is due to have their first grandchild next month and the rest of his family still live in Liverpool. "Nobody's getting any younger. Well I am obviously — but nobody else is."

Robinson is undaunted by his detractors. "I know there are some people who are pathologically opposed to what I say. That's fine. I come from a disputatious background."

Most of those who disagree with him have seen only his first TED talk and have not read his books. "I'm more than just a video," says Robinson drily. "I wasn't invented at TED."

You, Your Child and School by Ken Robinson is published by Allen Lane, £18.99