

# Where Are We Headed?

Our country seems obsessed with increasing math and literacy scores. Terms such as “tougher standards”, “higher expectations”, “raising the bar” and “accountability” have been thrown around by politicians in recent years. Teachers have been besieged with new initiatives and terms such as the Common Core Standards, Educator Effectiveness, Danielson Framework, SLO’s, Smart Goals, and Data. All of this has caused me to ponder the following: What is the intent of all of these changes? Why are we so focused on the data collected from standardized tests? Why do these tests focus on a narrow area of the curriculum? Is what is most important about learning found on a standardized test? Can a single number represent a child, a teacher, a school, or a school district? Is it truly a Race To The Top? Can we afford to have winners and losers in education? What is the affect surrounding school for our students? Does it matter if kids love learning? Does it matter if teachers love teaching?



Those who have attended a CMP Workshop the past few years know my opinion of Sir Ken Robinson. I have found great wisdom in his books, TED talks, and podcasts. His ideas seem to help me sort through all of the chaos in education today and to keep my attention on what is most important - the students. Below are a few excerpts from various authors including Sir Ken Robinson focusing on many of the questions raised above.

## Our Narrow Focus Of Academic Ability And Certain Disciplines.

We have learned that intelligence is diverse, dynamic and distinct. So why are we so focused on math and reading? “All over the world, governments are pouring vast resources into education reform. In the process, policy makers typically narrow the curriculum to emphasize a small group of subjects, tie schools up in a culture of standardized testing and limit the discretion of educators to make professional judgments about how and what to teach. These reforms are typically stifling the very skills and qualities that are essential to meet the challenges we face: creativity, cultural understanding, communication, collaboration, and problem solving. Many people are diverted from their natural paths in life by the preoccupation in education with academic intelligence and the hierarchy of disciplines. It shows itself especially in the distinction between academic and vocational programs and the idea that doing practical work or studying for a trade is lower grade than taking an academic degree (Robinson 339)

“One of the consequences of standardization is that the curriculum has become increasingly narrow” says Sir Ken Robinson in his book “Out Of Our Minds” (710). “In many school systems the emphasis is on languages and the so-called STEM disciplines - science, technology, mathematics and engineering -- at the expense of the arts, humanities and physical education. It is essential that there is an equal balance between these areas of the curriculum because each reflects major areas of cultural knowledge and experience, to which we all should have equal access” (710-711). Our narrow focus on academic ability and certain elevated disciplines in schools clearly alienate students whose real interests and abilities are found elsewhere.

## Standardized Tests Measure What Matters Least

Companies continue to ask for more creative and innovative employees yet this is not shown on standardized tests. “National assessments emphasize ‘measurable outcomes’ and focus on testing students’ recall of factual knowledge and skills that can be measured comparatively. They generally take little account of

experimentation, original thinking and innovation. The focus of teaching narrows and so does students' learning and achievement" (Robinson 722).

Another real consequence of these tests is the effect it has on kids self-confidence. Kids are ranked, sorted and labeled. Being one of those kids who scored low on my ACT I thought for many years that I was not intelligent. As Einstein put it, "Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

However, there are many other flaws with standardized testing as pointed out in Alfie Kohn's book *The Case Against Standardized Testing*. "The quest for objectivity may lead us to measure students on the basis of criteria that are a lot less important" (Kohn 4) Why? Because the tests "don't assess the skills and dispositions that matter most. Even the exceptions--questions that test the ability to reason--generally fail to offer students the opportunity "to carry out extended analyses, to solve open-ended problems, or to display command of complex relationships, although these abilities are at the heart of higher-order competence" (Kohn 7). "Most standardized tests ignore the process by which students arrive at an answer, so a miss is as good as a mile and a minor calculation error is interchangeable with a major failure of reasoning" (Kohn 8). Moreover, the "more a test is made to 'count' -- in terms of being the basis for promoting or retaining students, for funding or closing down schools--the more that anxiety is likely to rise and the less valid the scores become" (Kohn 5).

### What Is In A Number?

I'm troubled by how little information is conveyed by a single number, but how much weight and importance we are giving numbers when review our school and district report cards. "Any aspect of learning (or life) that appears in numerical form seems reassuringly scientific; if the numbers are getting larger over time, we must be making progress. Concepts such as intrinsic motivation and intellectual exploration are difficult for some minds to grasp, whereas test scores, like sales figures or votes, can be calculated and tracked and used to define success and failure. Broadly speaking, it is easier to measure efficiency than effectiveness, easier to rate how well we're doing something than to ask whether what we're doing makes sense. Not everyone realizes that the process of coming to understand ideas in a classroom is not always linear or quantifiable - or, in fact, that measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning." (Kohn 4) Sir Ken Robinson states it like this "Not everything we know can be put into words and numbers, nor are words and numbers all that we know" (710). Einstein's view is "Not everything important is measurable and not everything measurable is important." However, the quote that puts it best is "Institutional assessment efforts should not be concerned about valuing what can be measured, but instead, about measuring that which is valued." (T.W. Banta, J.P. Lunch, K.E. Black, F.W. Oblander)

### Loss Of Curiosity And The Love Of Learning

So what...all of this reform stuff is here to stay--just deal with it right? We need to be concerned about the "affect" in education. Kids come to school with curiosity and love for learning. I have seen this begin to wane with my own children who are in elementary school. Do they grow out of this curiosity and love for learning or are they educated out of it? According to Chris Wink, founder/performer of the Blue Man Group, "on a metaphorical level, the traditional model of education is that children are freight cars and the school is a grain silo. It fills each of the kids up and then moves them down the track. We [The Blue School, NY] are creating a launch pad where kids are the rockets and we're just trying to find the fuse." (Robinson 733). We as educators need to shift our focus from trying to raise scores on bad tests to finding the fuse that will ignite each child's love of learning.

I see politicians and administrators working harder than ever to get our school “machine” to run better and more efficiently. The problem though is that the “system” is outdated and will no longer meet the needs of our rapidly changing world. We need to embrace the concept that intelligence is broader than our current views. We need to realize that standardized tests do not give us definitive numbers in which we can solely base major decisions. We need to realize that “the task of education is not to teach subjects: it is to teach students. No school is better than its teachers” (Robinson 697). We need to see educators as professionals and give them the tools they need to make the best decisions for their students. We need to support educators with highly developed professional development which encourages collaboration and not competition. We need to make decisions based on data from multiple sources and look to research to find best practices. We need to take a vested interest in each of our students and realize that “at the heart of education is the relationship between teachers and students. If students are not learning, education is not happening” (Robinson 647). “We’ve bought into the idea that education is about training and “success”, defined monetarily, rather than learning to think critically and to challenge. We should not forget that the true purpose of education is to make minds, not careers” (Hedges 16). I’m not sure where we are headed in education. It is important for us all to ask questions and to continue to find wisdom as we navigate these uncharted waters. “Farmers and gardeners know you cannot make a plant grow...The plant grows itself. What you do is provide the conditions for growth. And great farmers know what the conditions are and bad ones don’t. Great teachers know what the conditions for growth are and bad ones don’t” (Robinson 2008).

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