



Leoarna Mathias continues her series on education's original thinkers by introducing Ken Robinson, Charles Leadbeater and Pasi Sahlberg...

Reinventing education

SO FAR IN THIS SERIES OF ARTICLES I have considered the work of thinkers and practitioners, past and present. Sugata Mitra, Lev Vygotsky and Susan Isaacs, while separated by time, geography and discipline, all share a passion for understanding the true nature of how children learn. In this latest instalment I will share with you the thinking of three further educationalists, whose collective focus is on how the systems and processes of current education and care provision across the Western world have the potential to do harm, while nevertheless professing to promote children's development.

Professor Ken Robinson has been a teacher and educationalist all his life, but his status as a global commentator on the state of the world's schooling was truly established when he gave a TED talk in 2006, 'Do Schools Kill Creativity?' – now the most watched TED talk of all time, the counter on the TED site at the time of writing declaring 33,409,037 views so far. A further talk, animated by the RSA in 2010 and entitled 'Changing Education Paradigms' has had 12,970,012 views on YouTube alone.

The author of many titles, in his own words, Ken's abiding mission is to "to transform the culture of education... with a richer conception of human creativity and intelligence". His fundamental argument is that our school systems were designed by the Victorians to meet the needs of an agrarian economy, and to get children out of poverty-stricken homes and turn them into good little workers. In the 21st century, the logic and intentions of the Victorians no longer apply, and we lay waste to vast numbers of pupils and their inherent potential; by squeezing them through the sausage machine of a narrow educational programme, and organising them by the blunt instrument of their "year of production", we fail our children.

If as a practitioner you sometimes feel your vocational drive to treat children as

individuals is at odds with the prevailing culture of education and care in the UK, I can think of no better antidote than watching Ken's TED talks; they will genuinely help you feel less alone.

Fresh approaches

Staying with TED, after watching Ken you could hover a little longer and find Charles Leadbeater's talk, 'Education Innovation in the Slums'. Charles eloquently focuses on the need to reinvent, utterly, the way in which we educate the world's population, given that access to the kind of classroom teaching that has typified Western schooling is simply not sustainable for millions of the world's children.

As a former advisor to Tony Blair on the topic of the knowledge economy, Charles is an award-winning journalist and think-tank contributor who considers the role technology can play in shaping society and its educational needs. Like Mitra, Leadbeater has the kind of mind that can think a long way outside of the box when it comes to envisaging a future for education, and like Robinson, he believes current educational paradigms "stratify as much as they liberate". Charles's refreshing preoccupation with social mobility and cohesion as an essential element of any meaningful education will ring true for many in the early years sector.

Inspection-free

Turning to my final educationalist this time round, Pasi Sahlberg has become a true giant in the world of education. A Finnish professor now based at Harvard, Sahlberg has found a way to eloquently describe the impact of allowing excessive free market ideology to determine the course of national education policy. He describes the journey of the GERM (Global Education Reform Movement)

as it infects school systems with excessive – as he see it – focus upon testing, accountability and the need to ensure children are prepared for the employment market.

Being Finnish, he speaks with authority about the success of his home nation in rejecting the GERM foci, while still succeeding in international league table measures. The refreshing absence of any kind of inspection system in Finland is a particular discussion point for him, as he states "accountability is something that is left when responsibility is taken away". As Ofsted often serves as a worrying distraction instead of a supportive underpinning of our work in early years, I would predict that, as with Robinson and Leadbeater, Sahlberg's words here will ring true for many.

