

# WHAT I LEARNED THIS WEEK

Excerpt from November 23, 2017

## 3 What China's fascination with Waldorf education portends about innovation and global entrepreneurship.

A dear friend of ours is a lifelong educator and a leading expert on Waldorf, a model of child-centered education founded by Rudolf Steiner in 1919 in Stuttgart. These days she is in huge demand lecturing and organizing Waldorf workshops across China. As the U.S. and other Western countries are standardizing curriculums to boost international test scores, China is moving in the other direction. Chinese education is authoritarian in nature and it has been for centuries—flowing from a 2,000-year history of imperial exams. But Beijing understands that this model will not suffice going forward. **To propel economic and sustainable growth, countries need to promote education that produces good entrepreneurs, not good employees.**

Few have written as thoughtfully on this subject as Yong Zhao, a Foundation Distinguished Professor in the School of Education at the University of Kansas. Born in Sichuan Province, Zhao has published over **100 articles on the implications of globalization and technology on education** and has written 30 books, two of which we have just finished, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon: Why China had the Best (and Worst) Education System in the World* and *World Class Learners: Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students*.

A life-long educator and parent of two, Zhao works from the premise that human beings are born with the desire and potential to create and innovate, to dream and imagine, and to challenge and improve the status quo. We are also born with the propensity to be social, to communicate and to collaborate. These potentials, just like genetic predispositions, can be suppressed or amplified by our experiences. Some experiences enhance creativity while others dampen it. Outside of our family, school is the primary place that sets the experiences we have—twelve of our most formative years of development. **When we sign our**

**children up for school, we are placing an enormous bet on their future self. So we need to ask ourselves, are we placing the right bet?**

While there is no definite research to show to what degree school experiences in general increase or decrease creativity and entrepreneurial capacity, Zhao reminds us of a well-known longitudinal study that hits very close to home. In their 1992 book, *Breakpoint and Beyond: Mastering the Future—Today*, George Land and Beth Jarman recount their long-term study on creativity. The authors administered eight tests of divergent thinking which measures an individual's ability to envision multiple solutions to a problem. **When the tests were first given to 1,600 three- to five-year olds, Land found that 98% of them scored at a "creative genius" level.**

But, five years later when the same group of children took the test, only 32% scored at this level and after another five years, the percentage of geniuses declined to 10%. **By 1992, some 200,000 adults had taken the same test and only 2% scored at the genius level.**

One way to interpret this is that the longer our children are in school, the less curious they become. (We experienced this first hand with our son. When we had him tested when he was 4 years old, his IQ was 155. The psychologist told us our biggest problem would be keeping him from becoming bored in the classroom. Two years later, his teachers were complaining about his distractibility and lack of focus. Testing at age 8 placed his IQ at 110.)

While every child has his story, few among us would dispute that the innate curiosity each of us arrive with at birth is a tender thread, easily frayed by systematic instruction, parental expectations and peers. **All schools squelch creativity and entrepreneurship to a degree, but some do so more effectively than others.** Teachers claim to value creativity in children, but in fact it is proven that they generally dislike creative behaviors and characteristics in the classroom because they are inconvenient and difficult to control. The more teachers are accountable to standards and test scores the less tolerant they can be. A critical data point related to the impact of America's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act: **high school students that exhibit creative personalities are more likely to drop out than other students.** Not all dropouts will redefine computing or social media, but most great innovators succeed in spite of their education, not because of it.

A central part of Zhao's more recent research is focused on **the inverse correlation between international test scores and entrepreneurship capabilities**. Countries that perform well on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), such as Singapore, Taiwan and Korea, do not evidence strong entrepreneurial capacities. By contrast, countries that do not rank high on PISA scores, such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S., show higher levels of entrepreneurial capabilities per the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Survey.

Test-driven education does not appear to be enhancing creativity, if anything, quite the reverse. Furthermore, international assessment programs are homogenizing the learning experience. At a time when we need more diverse talents and mindsets, we are imposing the same content on students the world over.

The illusion is that higher PISA scores will make a country more competitive, but **the reality is that the entrepreneurial spirit is being dampened and children are being educated for an outdated future**. As Zhao observes: "If all children are asked to master the same knowledge and skills, those who cost less will be much more competitive than those who cost more. For those in the developed countries to be globally competitive, they must offer something qualitatively different—not great test scores in a few subjects or the so-called basic skills."

If creativity and entrepreneurship are the desired skill set for the 21st century, Zhao argues that **child-centric, not test-driven, education is the necessary model**. Child-centric education, like Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio, are based on following and supporting a child's interest, not imposing a system or inculcating a STEM curriculum. Everyone knows that children learn more and better when they are interested and engaged. Driven by passion and empowered with freedom, children can construct their resources to enhance what they are good at rather than wasting efforts to become like others. The child seeks out the basics—reading, writing and arithmetic—in pursuit of her interest; the basics are not imposed. In the absence of external standards, children are not driven to please others, just themselves. Confidence is left intact.

As Zhao writes in *World Class Learners*:

*In a globalized world crowded by more than seven billion individuals, we cannot all have the same talents and compete for the same jobs. None of us are good at everything. Thus knowing what one is good at or wants to be good at is essential to being successful. In a world where human needs are diverse, a standardized set of talents cannot possibly meet all the needs. Furthermore, **in a world that is changing constantly and rapidly, a predetermined set of standardized skills and talents is not a good bet for jobs that have not yet been invented.***

*...While the agricultural and mass production industrial economy needed millions of workers with similar skills, **what the world needs now are creators—creators of more jobs, better products, more sensible politics, more effective business models and more meaningful human services.** Creators cannot be planned, predetermined or standardized by homogenized curriculums or standardized tests. They must be allowed the freedom to wonder and wander to explore fail and experiment. They must not be judged against others, a standard norm or external assessment. They need autonomy to learn.*

**As we try to see the way forward, we know one thing for certain—our children will never be able to out-sequence a machine.** Therefore, we are committed to helping them do what humans do best—collaborate, communicate, create and empathize.

Around the world, **the smartest people we know are pursuing child-centric education, in essence entrusting their children to the eternal powers of nature herself.**

As Rousseau wrote in the preface to *Emile: Or, On Education*: “We know nothing of childhood, and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray. The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child without considering what he is before he becomes a man.”