

WHEN WILL OUR EMPOWERED KIDS ARISE?

With their new power and connectedness, our kids could be doing far more to positively impact their world

By Marc Prensky

“Our kids’ new power has taken us by surprise.”

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Today, more and more young people feel stressed by the damage humans have done to their planet, by the growing number of deadly shootings in their schools, and by many other negative things happening in their world. Courageously, many of these young people are raising their voices in protest.

But as we applaud these kids and their efforts, we need to consider this: Almost all of what they are doing could be done, and was done, in the past. Young people have been striking, protesting, and urging change at the voting booths for some time. Although perhaps on a broader scale, today’s kids are still using the change methods of an earlier time.

In my view today’s kids, living in the digital age, ought to be doing much more. Every kid with a smartphone has an “extended brain” and now those brains are networked together. Many kids, in many places, have in their pockets what used to be called supercomputers—technology more powerful than all the world’s governments had

when we landed on the moon. And all the world's kids are, at various speeds, acquiring these capabilities.

This new power has, in a sense, taken us by surprise. The only people who have, up till now, exploited the full possibilities of these new technologies are the game and social media makers — people whose motives are, generously, less than altruistic. While we all see the technologies' powerful effects on kids, we have no real idea as yet of how to harness this new power positively to make a better world.

But one would certainly expect that hundreds of millions of kids around the world with “extended brains all networked together” will come up with ideas and solutions for producing change beyond the protests, marching and voting of the past. It is time for this to happen.

The empowerment of the world's young people has already started — school-age kids have created new tests for cancer, new ways to test water for lead, and thousands of apps: to use facial recognition to help Alzheimer's patients, to rate police encounters, to combat bullying, and more. (*You can view 100+ examples at btwdatabase.org.*) As the world begins to question some of what the new technology can do — from surveillance to distributing personal information — the positive ideas we need ought to be emerging from the natives who have been exposed to technology from birth. And this will happen far more quickly if adults encourage them to use their new power to accomplish things that make a real, “measurable positive impact” on their world.

Today's Kids Can Do New, More Powerful, Things

In the past school kids couldn't easily do powerful things outside their immediate environment (or even inside it.) Today it is incredibly easy for technology-enabled kids of school age to survey a million people, to build and distribute an app, or to work in teams with members on every continent. Given the new capabilities available to them, this generation ought to be innovating — and arising — far more quickly. By powerfully applying today's new technology every single kid — and more importantly every team of kids — has the capacity to make an immediate positive impact on their local and global world. Those kids who don't yet have the technologies in their hands should at least be thinking about how they will use them. Sadly, the biggest reason they are not is that our education from the past does not encourage this, trapping them in the past and too often holding them back.

While many of this generation's educators and parents still view emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, social networking, simulation, real-time connectivity and big data analysis with skepticism, the world's kids are already seeing their new capabilities as opportunities to create positive change — something their generation is eager to do. Hackathons, design thinking, maker spaces and other new methodologies offer kids growing opportunities to apply their power — power that will, in their

lifetimes, increase more than a billionfold and spread everywhere on the globe. These awesome new capabilities need to be quickly unleashed positively, in world-improving ways.

An Education to Do This

For the moment, kids who want to unleash their empowerment to create positive change in the world are very much on their own — there is little for them beyond a few highly-competitive adult-organized competitions. Most of today’s real-world accomplishments by ordinary kids come mostly to adults’ surprise. We need more opportunity for all kids, and it is coming.

A new accomplishment-based education is now in the process of emerging in the world — at all levels from primary to university — to meet the needs of the young people who want to create positive change. This new kind of education is specifically designed to unleash the power of our world’s newly empowered kids.

Instead of sitting in classes listening, discussing or taking notes, kids in this new kind of education design and complete project after project with measurable positive impact on their communities and world — learning whatever they need as they go. This new kind of education is now sprouting as an alternative for kids and parents on every continent. High Tech High & Elementary in the U.S, Riverside School and Design for Change in India, Ecole 42 and CGI in France, and Escola Concept in Brazil already offer versions of this new emerging education. Forward-thinking universities such as Aalto in Finland and WPI in the U.S. have started accomplishment-based programs. Because the world’s businesses are moving increasingly from jobs to projects, students who take this new, alternative path — developing their accomplishment abilities over all their school years — will be far better prepared for the future world of work than will their traditionally-educated peers.

A Push from Kids

As yet, no place has made this “real-world accomplishment education” a universal, alternative option — but it would be greatly in every place’s interest to do so. Students who follow this alternative education path leave school not with a transcript of grades but with a resume of real-world accomplishments. They are able to say “Before, that was a problem. Now, because of what I and my team did, it no longer is. We know how to not just solve problems on paper, but to get things done!”

Our kids should be pushing hard for this educational change. Everyone knows moving systems in a new direction is not easy. But the ability to “get things done” is critical for our kids’ success in their coming technology-filled world. To avoid becoming victims of rapidly arriving automation, future kids will need to be able to combine their individual

dreams, concerns, strengths and passions with the exponentially increasing power of technology to accomplish world-improving tasks in unique ways.

“The best predictor of future accomplishment is past accomplishment,” says one IBMer. Today we still judge kids not by what they can accomplish, but by what was expected, in an earlier era, from unempowered kids. Rather than today’s kids becoming “addicted” to technology, they are becoming symbiotic with it —learning how to use it to their long-term benefit. Instead of leaving too many kids feeling under-respected, under-valued and under-appreciated by being berated for their new connections to technology, we should be asking them to surprise us with their new power to accomplish positively in the world. Suppose we, and schools, encouraged kids from the beginning to use their new power and capabilities to do useful things, to help others, and to better their world?

Meanwhile, Kids, Invent and Arise!

Because this generation has a new and more comfortable relationship with technology, they are the ones who will push the envelope and find the solutions we need. Today’s young people have the power to become the most powerful change agents in history — in completely new ways. Over time, more and more kids will have access to an education that encourages them to positively use all their new powers — powers that grow daily. But while they wait our kids will have to accomplish on their own, as they have in many cases begun to do.

We need much more of this. I encourage all our newly empowered kids to use their new power to collaborate deeply and find new ways to address the problems and issues they deeply care about. I fully expect today’s young people will figure out new ways to save the planet, stop the shootings, and more. And they’ll do it much sooner if we encourage them on their way.

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