

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON TODAY'S KIDS

The first ever i CAN Children's Global Summit in Rome, 2019

By Marc Prensky

I BELIEVE THE WORLD'S PERSPECTIVE ON YOUNG PEOPLE IS BEGINNING TO SHIFT, in ways that may now seem small and insignificant but will be seen in the future as huge changes. People are slowly beginning, in the language of historian Thomas Kuhn, to “put on a new set of lenses” which shift their perspective from seeing kids from the point of view of the adults currently in charge, to the point of view of the kids now arising, phones in hand, to run the world in the coming decades and beyond. This emerging generational change in perspective is already beginning to disrupt things everywhere.

We have all just seen this shift in the selection of Greta Thunberg as Time magazine's person of the year for 2019. Another, instance, just as important, is The First Ever iCAN Global Children's Summit I recently attended in Rome.

A New and Different World

Today adults, around the world, are in a state of confusion—the future is no longer just a continuation of the past, but rather an unknown frontier. There is again, as in some previous eras, an “old world” (the past) and a “new world” (the future). Every one of today's adults is from the old world—part of the Last Pre-Internet Generation the world will ever know. All our kids, on the other hand, have been born into the new world, and are fast becoming empowered, able to do much more than kids could in previous times.

These changes from the old world to the new world are challenging us all. The first generation of Internet (or Cyber, or Digital Native) kids are now being educated only by those who grew up the very different past. What should we preserve from that past? What should we do differently? No one knows. We are all searching and inventing.

The Last Pre-Internet Generation's “Education Reforms” Don't Appeal

In this time of confusion, opinions on how to educate kids for the future range widely, from going back to the basics to adding new 21st century skills. Yet few of the adults' solutions, seemingly, appeal to the kids. Today what kids mostly feel from their schools is stress and lack of engagement. While adults are obsessed with preserving the world of the past, kids are intent on changing it.

The world's educators are desperately trying to figure out what to do—the world is now awash in education reforms and initiatives. On every continent you'll find conferences with an audience of several hundred to several thousand adults seated in some kind of auditorium, listening to a series of speakers who supposedly have something to tell them about how to make kids' education better for the future. Speakers present what they think are new, innovative ideas for dealing with the kids. Attendees, almost all teachers and administrators at various levels, all desperate for new ideas, sit and furiously take notes.

Where are the Kids?

But although the *subject* of these conferences is what to do for our kids, rarely do you find a kid participating in the proceedings, asked for their opinion, or even in sight—kids are not considered to have meaningful things to say about their own education. What the attendees at all these “reform” conferences hear, almost exclusively, is the thinking of other Pre-Internet Generation adults. Even though a few conferences have introduced a so-called “student voice,” at one I attended the student group was mostly kept in a separate room, away from the adults. At another, a terrific 11-year-old emcee mostly read a script off his iPad and introduced adult speakers (although he did show, in a fine interview of a 10-year-old refugee, that he could do much more). I have always been frustrated that kids—the very reason we have education at all—are so rarely heard, or in attendance, at education conferences. I have tried to introduce kids into the picture by hosting, after my talks, panels of local kids who get to express their thoughts and dialog with the adults in the audience. Yet I felt very much alone in bringing in the unscripted true voice of the kids into the world—until I found Design for Change.

“I CAN” — A Breath of Fresh Air

Last month I travelled to the eternal city of Rome to attend something very new—an education conference *by, and for, kids*. There were almost 3,000 of these kids in attendance, in teams, from 40 countries. They had been brought to Rome by a group called Design for Change, for something called **“The First Ever iCAN Global Children’s Summit.”** This “iCAN” conference of kids from all over the planet, was like no other education conference I have ever been to — probably like no other in the world. It was truly remarkable—a breath of fresh air for kids and adults alike.

The organizer of the first iCAN Summit is Design for Change (DFC), a worldwide organization with activities in over 60 countries. The group was started 10 years ago by a remarkable woman named Kiran bir Sethi who, frustrated with the education that was available in the part of India where she lived, created first a school (The Riverside School), then a philosophy (“I CAN”), then a methodology (Feel, Imagine, Do, Share), and then a movement (Design for Change) to spread a better kind of education around the world.

Design for Change takes a very different approach from most of the world’s education -- it starts not with a curriculum, but with kids—and their desire to better their world. DFC believes that all kids all over the world are far more powerful and can do much more that is positive than most of today’s educators give them opportunity or credit for. DFC’s goal is to help all kids understand their new power, by injecting a metaphorical “I can” virus into each one of them—through real, world-improving projects, inside and outside their schools.

The Conference

I showed up at Rome’s large Palazzo dei Congressi, on the morning of Day 1 (of 4), to find almost 3,000 kids dancing in the courtyard, singing about how powerful they are. “I can, you can, we can change the world,” they joyfully chanted in unison. Later inside, all sitting on the floor, they shared via student emcees all the places they were from and many of the things they had accomplished. The kids then spent days 2 and 3 in schools around Rome, sharing with

each other more details of the projects they had done. At the schools each project team of accomplishees was interviewed by student moderators—with almost no adults in the mix.

The intensity of the kids was huge and palpable. Ranging in age from 6 to 16, with most in middle school, the kids didn't just sit hours at a time as adults typically do at conferences. Periods of listening and questioning were interspersed with frequent periods of activity and doing—origami, dancing, games and more—which helped unleash some of the enormous energy in kids of this age—energy which they so rarely, other than here, get to employ for the good of the world.

The final day of the conference was a unique experience, as all 3,000 kids and their teacher/volunteer chaperones were invited into a huge, beautiful auditorium inside the Vatican. There, after more celebratory songs, dances and repeated assertions of “I can, you can, we can change the world” by the kids, Pope Francis himself walked on stage to address all the kids directly, in a huge show of support for what they were doing.

Kids Running the Show

What made this event so different—and so special in the education world—was that, quite uniquely, it put kids—and only kids—front and center. I was not asked to speak to the kids. Neither were most of the adults who organized or attended the conference. Adult voices were kept to a minimum. Even the short video comments from world experts that were presented seemed irrelevant. *The kids wanted to speak to each other about what they had done and what they could do.*

When I do get to speak to adults, I try to help them understand the implications of being the Last Pre-Internet Generation in the world—i.e. to help them see that their core ideas and beliefs were formed in another time. This message is often hard for the adults to understand and accept, but it is particularly important when it comes to raising and educating kids for the future.

Already, much of our kids' thinking and behavior is quite different from the way Pre-Internet adults were raised, and too many of today's adults interpret the changes in kids' behavior negatively. Although many adults think they are helping kids prepare for the future by taking away their devices in class and giving them more “STEM” (science, technology, engineering and math) courses, more “social/emotional learning” and more “21st century. skills”—most of them miss, almost entirely, all the ways in which today's kids have become enormously more powerful than in the past. That is what this iCan conference was about.

In pre-Internet times kids could do very little to help the world without a lot of preparation, so it made sense for them to spend their childhood years learning things that they could some day use to accomplish useful things in the world. Now, however, the material from the past is increasingly irrelevant. Today's kids are capable of doing enormously complex and positive projects that benefit their world *while they are kids*. This is partly because of new technology tools, but also because of this new, “I can” attitude. Most of the adults in charge of our kids' education have no idea of what to do with the kids' new empowerment—or even that it exists. But kids increasingly know there is no longer need to wait before starting these projects—which leaves them largely frustrated with school.

What kids now need

Much of the “learning in advance” that we make kids do for multiple years, although perhaps once useful, is today largely a waste of the kids’, and our, time. This has, in fact, been true for a while—ask yourself how much of what you learned in school you actually use compared to material you acquired later. The reason few in the past cared is because beyond providing basic literacy and math, and keeping kids safe while their parents work, *school success has served for decades as our means of signaling to future employers that the graduates were capable of complex thinking, persistence, and doing things that they didn’t want to do but that others wanted them to.* Almost all of us were forced to go through this “signaling” process. (For more, on signaling see Professor Bryan Caplan’s book “*The Case Against Education.*”)

But now we need to signal different things—particularly that, in their new, largely unknown world, kids can get useful things done. Education no longer means just re-learning what people already know, it is about *becoming able to accomplish new, creative and useful things in the world.* We now must understand that preserving and extending our positive human heritage ultimately depends more on supporting each individual’s unique dreams, interests, strengths and passions, than on our trying to teach what we know to all.

Real-world Accomplishment

That is precisely what groups like Design for Change (along with more and more individual teachers and truly kid-centered movements in the world) are now beginning to understand. The universal “academic” education of today, based on kids’ learning, in advance of accomplishing anything, a detailed curriculum of Math, English (or the local language) Science and Social studies—what I call the “MESS”—no longer prepares most of the world’s kids for their future. The world’s kids now need, for their new times, an alternative education that values their uniqueness and their new integration with technology over any pre-determined content. That new and better alternative is finally beginning to emerge in the world, thanks to groups like Design for Change,

Because of their and others’ efforts, more and more people in the world are discovering that what works today for educating kids is ***continuous, real-world accomplishment.*** This is something kids in the Pre-Internet generations just couldn’t do—the means didn’t exist. But now kids can, as new attitudes and tools come—unevenly, but inexorably—to kids everywhere. ***All kids*** can now see problems and act in positive ways to solve them, starting locally, at very early ages and becoming increasingly broad, complex and sophisticated as kids grow up. Kindergarten and primary school kids are already making positive changes in their schools and communities. Middle school kids are already providing their disabled peers with improvements like 3D-printed prosthetic hands, and finding ways to fight environmental pollution. High school and university kids are already creating useful apps for their peers to use against racism, bullying and disease, and are having an impact on the world’s biggest problems, such as reaching the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. ***You can see many of these completed projects at <https://dfcworld.com/VIDEO/ViewAllVideo>.***

A First of Many

The World’s First iCAN Children’s Global Summit is a huge harbinger of things to come. Happily, Pope Francis is among the first world leaders to formally recognize these changes—

but he will not be the last. The new, emerging Internet-linked generation—the first to be empowered from the start by digital technology and a new world-view—is just learning of its new capabilities. Their power is spreading, inexorably to every corner of the globe.

As yet, relatively few in the Last Pre-Internet Generation truly understand our kids' new power for good, or how to help them positively unleash it. Today, most adults are stuck in an old, pre-Internet model of what the world, kids, and education should be. Too many are frightened by the changes and behaviors they see in kids, and don't realize that these children are already living in a new world. Most adults have no idea of all the positive things today's kids are capable of doing for the world—even at very young ages—and are in desperate need of better ways to help the new generations. That is why the work of Design for Change is so important for the world.

You can learn much more about the Design for Change organization, the 3,000 kids in Rome, and the great work DFC is doing in over 60 countries [here](#). Watching the many videos in which these kids unleash all their energy and power in enormously positive ways will almost certainly inspire you—about both our future kids, and our kids' future.

It certainly inspired me.

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