

Our New Global Empowered Kids

and how educators can help them

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It is no exaggeration to say that the world's kids, from roughly 6-18, are the most disrespected, underappreciated, underestimated, and yet — potentially — the most powerful group in the world for our future.

Why do I say that?

The “disrespected” part is easy. In most places, including, certainly the United States, we treat our kids with almost no respect at all. We hardly listen to them, or even try to. We give them goals to reach that are almost exclusively our goals, not theirs. We tell them where to go and what to do, pretty much exactly. We reward them not for being independent, or individuals, but for conforming to our “standards.” Around the world, in the student panels I conduct, the number one request from students — universally — is for more respect.

The “underappreciated” part is also not very hard to see. Whenever a choice is to be made between kid's doing something they want to and know they can, and something we want them to, the choice is clear. We rarely give them credit for all the organizational and other tasks they can accomplish with their new technologies, or even opportunities to use them. Any initiative they take, outside of the strict confines of the classroom and curriculum, is generally not expected, and rarely rewarded. We expect their whole educational life to be in the classroom and school-related activities. Very occasionally they may be asked to do a real-world “service project” (more often in private than public schools) over which they may have some minor degree of control, but mostly we care

about, and reward, only their academic achievement. We rarely evaluate or reward real-world accomplishment, because it is so rare in our system.

I call today's kids "underestimated" because we hardly ever let them realize the full potential of what they can do, particularly to improve the world. Rarely do we ask our kids to find real problems and fix or solve them — mostly because we think this is a job for adults. Only the very best teachers have the courage to say to their kids "surprise me" and give them really open parameters to do so.

Although there are certainly exceptions, what I say applies to the vast majority of kids in the world — almost all of them, in fact. Even in our "best" schools, kids often grow up disrespected, underappreciated and undervalued by their educators, except in the narrowest of ways. I know this because they tell me so.

Another Way

It doesn't have to be like that. In this new technological age we are starting to see, around the world, the emergent beginnings of a new kind of empowered young person, with a new relationship to their educators, and to their own educations. For now it may be only glimmers here and there, but the cumulative effect is very powerful. It will, I predict, become stronger and, eventually, the norm — *if* the kids learn to believe in and use their new power, and *if* we don't continue to do our best to — and succeed at — squashing it (although I think it's too late for that.)

The "Global Empowered Kid" I am talking about is the one who has realized that when he or she sees a problem in their world, they don't have to wait — or get permission — to begin fixing it. They can take matters into their own hands and do something about it. They are the young people who, using technology, now fix broken infrastructure, redistribute used products, teach each other skills, build networks, design parks, repair the environment, write official reports. They refuse to just play the old school game. Sometimes they drop out, but often they just change course and priorities. Many of them are currently balancing between doing the old and being empowered, just waiting for the scales to tip.

How Educators Can Help

Empowering these kids is almost all about giving rein to their individual passions, and guiding those passions in positive ways, powerfully using the new tools now available. One of the best teachers I know, asks kids "What are the problems you see in your world? What skills do you have that will help fix them? and What do you love to do? In doing so, she wakes up the passions in young people, and inspires them not only to learn, but to act. She calls the kids she empowers in this way "solutionaries." (Her name is Zoe Weil — find her talks online.)

As these newly empowered “solutionaries” emerge around the globe, and begin, through the Internet, games, and social media, to connect more and more with each other and with the world, how else can we, as adults and as educators, help them? I see at least three big ways.

The first is to help move the focus of kids’ education away from our current insistence on their “learning” a set curriculum of knowledge and skills which are old, over-directed and terribly narrow. We must put the focus on **becoming**. Helping our kids become the people they want to be — and the adults we want in our society — is the real education today’s kids need. We need to help them incorporate into their belief systems — early on — the goals of **becoming good, capable, world-improving people, and becoming individuals who do so in their own unique way and with their own unique passion.**

Second, we need to help our kids deeply understand that what they should be working to acquire when they are in school is not just good math, language arts, science and social studies skills, but rather the deeper and more comprehensive skills of **effective thinking, effective action, effective relationships and effective accomplishment**, both in general and in their areas of personal interest. This, and not mastering the old disciplines, is what will help them succeed in life in their future world.

And third, we need to give our newly empowered kids not just permission, but also the *time, means, and inspiration* to **accomplish real things** that improve the real world — from the earliest beginnings of their education. For the new global empowered kids, “education” should be about **accomplishing positive things in the real world** (and not just “learning” or even “learning how to learn.”) Accomplishment is something that our young people — as they become increasingly empowered by their new technological capabilities and connections — are incredibly eager do — our young people are, literally the world’s most underutilized resource. But when we push them too far in the directions much of our education is now going, (i.e. pressure to achieve within our old curriculum, and to do well at high-stakes testing) some kids, literally, prefer to die.

Is that what our young people deserve? Is that the kind of education we want and they need? We can do so much better.

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