



01

## The Journey from “Can I?” to “I CAN!”

Gauri Mirashi &  
Parul Patel

*In October 2009, eight 10 year-old children from a small village named Lordi Dejgara near Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India, stopped sixteen child marriages.*

*In 2010, a few 11 year-old students from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, U.S.A partnered with the local government to design bicycling paths in their city to tackle obesity.*

*In 2011, five 13 year-old students from Taipei, Taiwan revisited and preserved their culture by rejuvenating a heritage song that no-one knew about.*

These are three out of thousands of such stories from different cultures and countries. The one thing that runs through all of them is the power of children to change their communities. Or in the words of Kiran Bir Sethi, founder of Design For Change, “The spirit of ‘I CAN’.”

Kiran is a designer who became a teacher, a principal who grew into an education reformer, an advocate who morphed into a social entrepreneur. A trained graphic designer from National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, she comfortably uses the language of



The “I CAN” spirit!

design — iteration, prototype, design specs — to develop not only curriculum innovation, but also community-based social programs.

Her reasoning is simple. If children are told, for the formative fifteen years of their life, that they have NO choice, that they must do as they are told, it is ridiculous to expect them to be ‘prepared to face the real world’. If all a school does is manage children efficiently **in school**, it would serve no meaningful purpose. Surely **common sense** suggests that school is about preparing students to engage with thoughtful action in life? Such a purpose **must** involve making sense of the world, interrogating its contradictions and negotiating its challenges.

With the aim of translating common sense into common practice, Kiran Bir Sethi started the Riverside School- as a laboratory to prototype design processes that enable “exceptional” teaching and “transformative” student participation. At the school, all curriculum is custom-developed year-by-year, tested with student feedback and then modified. Both processes and outcomes are captured on paper, documented for future use and refined.

What the common sense approach has demonstrated is that you can get children to care about quadratic equations, photosynthesis and poetry **AND** also be concerned and sensitized to child abuse or democracy. It is no longer just about being the best at math or science or even the strongest or fastest, it is becoming increasingly important to recognize our children for attitudes such as empathy, collaboration, adaptability and skills such as team work, problem solving, digital literacy and design thinking. These skills and attitudes are recognized by leading educationists as the ‘21st century’ skills!

In response to the felt need of including children in the spirit of giving and believing in their ability to make change, the Riverside Team launched **Design For Change** in 2009. In the first year itself, DFC reached out to 30,000 schools in India, encouraging

students to create change around them. Today the movement has spread to over 35 countries and is inspiring millions of children to **be the change they wish to see in the world**.

Design for Change (DFC) asks students to do four very simple things –Feel, Imagine, Do and Share (FIDS). Using this easy framework, children of all ages are coming forward, speaking out their minds, designing and implementing projects that really touch the heart of their communities- from tackling age old social problems like caste discrimination and female infanticide to reducing the weight of school bags, from vaccinating girls against a dangerous virus to helping the unemployed get a job, from creating a better learning environment at school to taking charge in local communities to teach their grandparents, children are proving that they have what it takes to design a future that is desired.



FIDS Process

The first step of the process is to **FEEL** – anything that bothers the children, anything they want to change. This involves analysing why this specific problem bothers them, observing the human patterns that underlie the problem and interacting with the various stakeholders involved in it.

The next step is to **IMAGINE** the best-case scenario. It encourages children to think about what the situation would look like if they were given the power to re-design it! At this point, it is not necessary to think about the feasibility of the solution. What is important is that they let their imagination go wild and actually **visualize** the desired solution.

The next step is **DO** – implementing their imagination. Keeping in consideration all the resources available the students develop a plan of action to actualize their best-case scenario. Once the strategy is in place, they go out and implement it!

And the last step - **SHARE** – encourages students to reflect upon and share their experience with the wider school community, with parents, and with the world! This allows other people to replicate their solution if they face a similar problem and also delivers the message – if we can, so can you! It also allows for public scrutiny and suggestions that can enrich their story of change.

The classic example to demonstrate the effectiveness of Design Thinking and FIDS narrated at Riverside involves the 3rd grade students who wanted to tackle the pile of garbage that sat outside their school gate. The obvious solution for the children was to go out and clean it and so they did. A week later, the garbage was back. The students realized that they had jumped to the first solution that came to their mind. They had skipped the essential steps to question why, to observe and to identify the human patterns that created the problem in the first place. Using the FIDS process they were then able to develop a more sustainable solution involving the people who put the garbage out in the first place.

The role of the mentor is critical to the success of this process. From the very beginning, the environment must be conducive to student ownership, collaboration and creativity. Students must be made to feel in-charge and accountable. The problem they choose does not have to be of global importance –

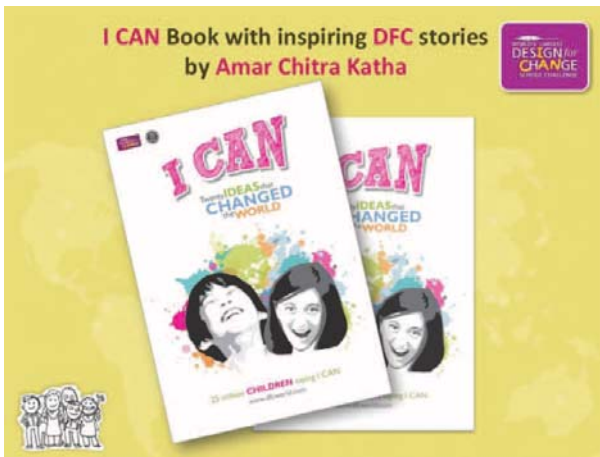
climate change or poverty or unemployment – but one that the students experience and care about themselves. The mentor must also push the students to understand the cause rather than the symptoms of the problem, allow them to prototype, make mistakes, refine and perfect their process and product. It is also the mentor’s responsibility to help the children see that to solve and even understand the problem they need to interact with the wider community. Facilitating meaningful community interaction allows students to step out of the classroom and present, defend and experiment with their ideas in front of a wider audience.

Design For Change is available for teachers and students to be used in two formats.

The Design For Change School Challenge is a one-week challenge that asks children to identify anything that bothers them and provide a solution to it. This is the first step where children learn to say I CAN instead of CAN I? All the DFC resource material is available online in 9 Indian languages and 6 Global languages – free for anyone to download! The DFC website ([www.dfcworld.com](http://www.dfcworld.com)) has become a great platform for sharing stories of change where students from across the world find inspiration in each other’s work.

The other format is the DFC Curriculum, which can be implemented by the teachers for an entire academic year allowing the students to work on more long-term solutions. For schools that have “Value Education” or “Socially Useful Productive Work” period, the DFC Curriculum serves as a great framework for these sessions. The publishing house Pearson Longman has even included the DFC Curriculum in their middle school value education textbook series titled “A Beautiful Life”.

In addition, Amar Chitra Katha (ACK), the leading publisher of children’s books in India, has captured these student-led stories in an entire book titled “I CAN – 20 ways in which children are changing



In 2012, Design for Change hosted the very first of its kind 'Be the Change Conference' wherein designers, performers, students and teachers from across the world came together to share their DFC experiences. The average age of the speakers at this conference was just 14 years! The success of the event made it clear that if we just give children the opportunity, they will surprise us!

Four years since its launch and in over 35 countries our DFC experience has only strengthened our belief that EVERY CHILD CAN!

the world". This book contains 20 stories of change all implemented by young citizens around the world! ACK also turned a few DFC stories into comics to be printed in Tinkle Magazine- the celebrated comic magazine in India. Through ACK and Pearson Longman, students are reading about and finding inspiration in heroes their own age!



BTC Conference



PARUL PATEL is the administrative backbone of the Design for Change (DFC) Initiative. Associated with Riverside School since 2011, she has been actively involved with Design for Change since its inception in 2009.

GAURI MIRASHI is the coordinator for DFC India. She looks forward to hearing from you at [india@dfcworld.com](mailto:india@dfcworld.com)