

From Teacher-centric to Student-centric

A Design Thinking-based Education that Empowers children to design and change their own life



A designer-turned-educator successfully sparked a transformation in education of India by giving children the freedom to choose what they want to learn and do at schools. The trend is becoming a norm in the country's education sector, changing the lives of millions of children with Design Thinking playing a key role in it.

Originally a graphic designer, Kiran Bir Sethi started her own design studio after graduating from National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad in 1989. She later became a mother, and it was her son that inspired her to be something different. When her son started going to school, she was surprised by how quickly children had learnt the ability to refuse challenges and say no. Sethi found that dispiriting as she believed children shouldn't become too risk-avoidant, compliant and appeasing at such a young age.

Learning is not about following the rules

Sethi believes that everyone is intrinsically born with an "I CAN" attitude — "we learn to crawl, sit, walk, and to speak and think. This is how we demonstrate to the world that 'I CAN'." But as children enter schools, they became less creative as they are told to be quiet, to behave, to follow rules and not to challenge the authority. "Such an unforgiving education system suffocates children and takes faith out of them," she says.

Determined to get her son and other children out of such system, Sethi founded The Riverside School in Ahmedabad, her home city, in 2001, which itself was an

experiment of applying Design Thinking to education with the hope of transforming students' learning experiences.

One of the key characteristics of Design Thinking is that it requires one to think about and understand the needs of the users and the difficulties that a user may potentially face. It requires one to identify the root cause of an issue before thinking of a solution. Therefore, when applying Design Thinking to education, Sethi always thinks from students' perspective, and identify what's wrong at the core of the matter.

"If what children learn in classrooms relates to their daily life, then the children will know what change they can bring and see the change," she said. "That in turn empowers them to lead the change."



The Riverside School, launched by Kiran Bir Sethi (fifth from the right at the back row), has nurtured a lot of outstanding students. Sethi hopes the graduates could do their bits to help the society getting better with a positive social value.

Cultivating citizen leaders

The Riverside School, according to Sethi, was her first avenue to help children retrieve their self-confidence and "to make it clear that children need to have a way to believe that they can make the world a better place."

Instead of regarding herself as a teacher to the children, Sethi said she has learnt a lot from the children. "The children are the real teachers to me," she said. "The students, most of them six to eight years old, were keen learners. They have been candid about what they wanted to learn. They expressed they wanted somebody to speak to and listen to them. They wanted to have a voice." Such anticipations inspired Sethi to study pedagogy and start a workshop to train other teachers.

"Listening to the children's voice enables us to design programmes and curriculums that respond to their needs... just like a designer must think about the users and a good product has to be 'user-friendly'," Sethi continued. "The children know what they want. They were telling us, 'Listen to me. I'm not young. I'm not defined by my gender or where I come from. I'm a whole person. I have ideas. I need trust. I need love'." That woke Sethi up to the fact that trust, belief and love make up the soil for doing anything." She compared the idea to gardening – seeds can't grow and bear fruits if the soil is not nutritious. At Riverside, teachers and students collectively create their own curriculum rather than being dictated by teachers.

They even created a programme planning board that includes students as members. The board hosts sessions to involve all stakeholders, including the students, in discussions and idea exchanges. "Instead of me coming to you and telling you 'please learn this or that for tests and exams'," Sethi said. "By involving students in the conversation, they will spontaneously latch on to 'why learning mathematics, numeracy, languages, and other fundamental subjects that are important to one's future'." Sethi believes school education is all about paving the way for the youth to navigate the world and preparing them to march into their adulthood and career. "Children are at the centre of education, so they should be the ultimate beneficiary," Sethi emphasised. "Educators must always put children's needs and interests at their heart."

That is in fact the user-centric principle at the core of Design Thinking. Sethi pinpointed that children put under a conventional education model received too many instructions, disciplines and being boxed into a rigid definition of being a good student. Instead of having lots of rules for students and teachers to follow, Sethi initiated the "Client Project" at Riverside. In the project, students are challenged to act as expert designers and innovators and face real clients, who are representatives from different industries, companies, professional fields and ordinary citizens invited by the school. The clients' requests can be producing a brochure for tourists, designing an audio tour, renewing a menu of a restaurant, etc. In another example, a group of 9th grade students were brought to visit a low-income community and learnt about the poor quality of drinking water there. Then they returned to their classroom to build prototypes of water filtration machines to improve the water condition. From these fruitful learning experiences, Sethi said: "The children are showing me that 'I'm growing up'."

Sethi herself does not have a definition for "good students" and she said her simple intent is to foster a young cohort of "good citizen leaders" and resourceful problem solvers. "Only if we provide them an opportunity to seek what is possible, then they will marvel at the wealth of possibilities that could turn their lives around."

Global education movement to brave the change

This liberal, open-minded and student-centric education has not only thrived children's resourcefulness, but also improved their academic performance. The Riverside School has been consistently ranked the No. 1 International Day School in the City of Ahmedabad and State of Gujarat by EducationWorld India School Rankings.

This accomplishment inspired Sethi to further the Riverside experience and launched "Design for Change" in 2009, which encompasses four key elements in Design Thinking Education — feel, imagine, do, and share. "Feel" alludes to empathy, "imagine" points to brainstorm and innovate, "do" means action and time management, and "share" signals the importance of sharing ideas to influence others. The initiative has impacted over 25 million children and 65,000 teachers from 40 countries. In 2017, "Design for Change" was recognised by as one of the 100 most innovative educational programmes by Finland-based HundrED, an organisation that focuses on children education. "When something works, it cannot only serve a group of people. We tend to make more people to be benefited from it," said Sethi.



Sethi (third from the right) signs agreement with the Vatican, the City of Rome, to introduce and promote the Feel, Imagine, Do, Share (FIDS) — four steps of Design for Change framework across all Catholic schools on a global scale. The ultimate goal is to advance innovation and moral education.

Making “I CAN” belief “contagious”

The Design Thinking emphasises “optimism” — a firm belief that “there’s always something bigger,” notes Sethi. The fruit of a wholesome teacher-student relationship is “a culture of optimism”, “a culture of empathy” and “a culture of change”, she reckons. “Design for Change is a collective effort. By design, you create a culture, you ensure there's a shared vision (between teachers and students),” contends Sethi. “If a school just has, for example, a few fantastic teachers and a number of excellent students, that's not by design, but by chance,” she argues. “By design, nobody is left out.”

The key to open children’s vision and mind is to have them embrace that “they are the stakeholder of their life. Let them know their life is in their control, they are the initiator, not receiver, of change,” Sethi said. And now the “I CAN” mindset has struck a chord among children from around the world.

Sethi fondly recalled another anecdote about a group of children from Singapore. They were saddened by a scene they saw on TV where an elderly cleaner was harassed by strangers. So these children decided to reach out to cleaners at their schools whom they found to be barely noticed by anyone even with their hard work. They befriended the cleaners and even had lunches with them. “Suddenly, there’s respect,” recalls Sethi. “This is not a dramatic story, but it manifests the children’s power and empathy.” The “I CAN” bug, as she calls it, has proven to be contagious.



Sethi (fourth from the right at the front row) activity engages in seminars organised by a Taiwan partner in 2014, in a bid to propel the innovation of local education. She initiated Design for Change movement in 2009, and since then she has promoted the "I CAN" mindset in schools all across the world.

Design thinking, to Sethi, serves as a reminder of the fundamental principle of school education — children are the focal stakeholder and dominant initiator. "It's not unusual, not a rocket science, in my opinion. But we just forgot to make it a common practice in school... because it takes time, a lot of conversations, and extra efforts. In the end, we may just give up and settle for 'Let's give them more tests' just because that is easier. Gradually, children are cast out of the story," Sethi said.

Sethi's crusade to transform the conventional school education of passive and rote learning will never end. "I will continue to help schools transform and deepen their impact on students' wellbeing and to help more children cultivate the "I CAN" belief with Design for Change," Sethi said. She also expects more schools in Hong Kong will jump on the bandwagon.

"We need to build a generation of citizens who believe in kindness, generosity and love, so that the world will be far more humane and beautiful. This is the need of the hour."