

WHAT MAKES A CHILD A CHANGEMAKER



What Makes a Child a Changemaker?

Imagine if change was the only constant in the world our children inherited, what skills would we want them to have so they can thrive in such a world?

Would we wish for them to stay in denial and be caught off guard or be prepared for what comes their way?

Every parent and every educator wishes for children under their care to be prepared for the world they will face in the future.

But, what if the world we are preparing our children for is already here. Already robbing them of their childhood and already throwing uncertainty at them that they are experiencing and coping with in their own unique ways.

They see extreme anxiety about AI and the changing world of work alongside the extreme convenience and power they experience with the technology. They see growing awareness and alarm around climate change alongside delayed action. They experience hyperconnection through digital platforms, yet experience loneliness, isolation, divisiveness, and weakening trust.

We see symptoms of how this is affecting our children and youth in rising rates of addictions, depression, mental health issues, behavioural challenges and suicide rates. In India these rates are alarmingly higher than the world average.

Given this context, what is the role of parents and educators in preparing children for the uncertain world they are already facing? What needs to change and what needs to remain the same? What are some of the ways that build the muscle to navigate change early on? What, when nourished over the years, creates a sense of hope and agency vs. apathy or despair in children?

These are the difficult questions facing education and humanity at large today.

What needs to change in education?

Our children are growing up inside a polycrisis where ecological instability, AI-led disruption, mental-health pressures, inequality and fragmented communities reinforce one another.

If children repeatedly encounter these problems without activating their own agency, they can feel hopeless and if they are taught that success means competing against others and somehow minding their own business, they will learn to ‘other’ the world, steel themselves from its pain instead of learning to see their role in co-creating a better world.

In the world today, children need more than the ability to recall correct answers. They need to learn to make sense of the complexity, recognise their relationship with others and collaborate in shaping what comes next.

The need of the hour today, then, is to raise children to become aware, active citizens of this world who grow up knowing that their voice and choice matters and shapes what the world around them becomes.

The OECD Learning Compass 2030 describes students as purposeful, reflective and responsible agents capable of creating value, reconciling tensions and taking responsibility. It also emphasises co-agency: our capacity to create change through relationships rather than in isolation.

This is the heart of changemaking.

What are Changemaker Skills?

As changemakers they need to learn to stay present to what moves and frustrates them about the world around them, to see with empathy that the problems are not theirs alone, to dig deeper and develop knowledge that helps them differentiate between symptoms and root cause. At this point, they attempt to define a problem within their locus of control to work on, comforted in the knowledge that even if they can't change everything, they can do something about it. And, that is the beginning of agency in children.

As children embark on the path of changemaking they now learn to imagine alternatives and possibilities that didn't exist before and realize that they need to collaborate to bring multiple perspectives together while constantly iterating and reflecting to identify when their actions need to change.

Ashoka describes changemakers as people who take creative action to address social problems, beginning with empathy and continuing through initiative and persistence. It also challenges the lone-hero idea and emphasizes that lasting change depends on collaborative teams and strong communities.

Changemaking, in today's world, is therefore no longer something “additional” or “elite”, it is going to be the way of life for our children and hence, needs to be embedded as the core of their learning process in a way that translates into their lives.

Children become changemakers when they have had repeated opportunities to practise hope, agency, empathy, reflection, and purposeful action as part of their learning journey and not merely learnt these in theory.

How Does Changemaking Begin?

Often, it begins with frustration borne out of a lived experience.

A child is disturbed by plastic in a neighbourhood lake, an excluded classmate, an unsafe road, or food being wasted.

Instead of distracting them from the discomfort or rushing in with an adult-designed solution, what if we helped them stay with it?

They can ask: Why does this frustrate me? Who else is affected? What created this situation? What might I do about it?

This is the movement from self to one more person, a community, and, eventually, the systems shaping the problem.

Frustration becomes empathy in action and the drive towards changemaking begins.

What is the role of Hope, Purpose and Values in building Children as Changemakers?

When faced with a world in polycrisis filled with uncertainty, complexity and chaos - a changemaker navigates their way to hope without denying the prevailing sense of despair.

Hope is not passive optimism or the denial of difficulty. Psychologist C. R. Snyder's research frames hope through two capacities: believing we can act and finding possible pathways towards a goal. In other words, hope can be learned and practised as part of changemaker skills. American Psychological Association.

Purpose gives that action direction. The Stanford Center on Adolescence defines purpose as pursuing goals that are meaningful to the self and consequential beyond the self. Research associates purpose with resilience, achievement, health, and wellbeing. Stanford Center on Adolescence.

Children also need values that help them trust their inner compass and the courage to walk a road others may not yet understand. Learning to trust one's gut means listening deeply, examining assumptions, questioning the evidence and acting from values rather than convenience or approval.

How can schools nurture children as changemakers?

One-off campaigns cannot develop changemakers or develop a sense of hope amidst despair or empower children to trust their gut to follow a road less travelled rooted in their values. Children need safe ecosystems in which they can make choices, take risks, collaborate, prototype, fail, reflect, and try again. In short, practice the skills of changemaking in action.

A changemaker is someone who is taking creative action to solve a social problem. And changemaking involves empathy, thoughtfulness, creativity, taking action and collaborative leadership. But although these skills are essential to our thriving, they are almost entirely absent from the educational experience of most young people, with often a narrowing focus on reading, maths and the acquisition of academic grades. Ashoka

At Sparkling Mindz, we have built in the mechanism to convert their frustration into action through P2P Labs (Problems to Projects Labs) where children learn to create change through gathering information, mapping systems, empathising, defining problems, ideating, testing and iterating. They learn that their frustrations matter and that they can do something about it. This is the seed of becoming a changemaker.

The child does not immediately jump to a solution. They ask questions, understand different experiences, investigate causes, collaborate, experiment and reflect. They recognise that good intentions are insufficient unless those affected are included in creating the response.

These capacities develop through widening domains of relationship at Sparkling Mindz.

Self: “What is happening within me?”

Through LIFE classes and in their Year of Discovery (post 10th grade) children explore their frustrations, identities, interests, strengths and values. LIFE Tools help them recognise emotions, assumptions and habitual responses.

Children practice self-empathy and learn to stay with their emotions. So, what begins with frustration gets acknowledged and explored deeply with wonder and empathy beyond self

This develops the self-awareness required to distinguish between acting from ego and acting from purpose. Children discover that agency begins with the ability to make conscious choices.

Community: “How do we live and create together?”

Through Empathy House, learning agreements, whole-school connects and genuine collaboration, children practise listening, negotiation, accountability and repair.

They learn to see peers as human beings whose perspectives can change the quality of a collective response. It starts to go beyond someone they need to outcompete or compare themselves against. Changemaking becomes “me and the world”, not “me versus the world”.

City: “How do systems affect people’s lives?”

City as a Learning Lab allows children to encounter neighbourhoods, public spaces, professionals and unresolved contemporary issues.

Learning Sprints provide the mathematics, science, language and disciplinary knowledge needed to investigate these realities. P2P Labs help children gather

information, empathise, map systems, define problems, ideate, prototype and evaluate impact.

World: “What is my contribution to the larger network?”

Through Changemaker Missions, local enquiries become visible, child-led action. Children connect what they observe in their city with wider ecological, technological, economic and cultural patterns. They experience themselves as contributors within an interconnected world.

A child changemaker does not need to save the world. They need to experience that the world is not fixed, and that their thoughtful, empathetic action can help change it.

Does Changemaking Mean Activism?

They are not synonymous. Activism often involves advocacy and mobilisation to challenge a condition. It can be one courageous form of changemaking.

Changemaking is broader. A child may create change by redesigning a process, building a tool, opening a dialogue, caring for a shared space or enabling others to participate.

Children need safe ecosystems in which they can notice, question, understand, choose, act and reflect. Children's participation in changemaking must be informed, voluntary, safe and developmentally appropriate. Hence, it cannot sit on adults' careabouts, it always starts with something they care about deeply enough and when there is a desire to do something about it.

The deepest sign of a child changemaker is never a mere placard or a project. It is the emerging belief that says, “I am connected to this world, and I can help shape it with others”.