Celebrating collaboration, even in uncertain times

Yidan Prize Summit
7 December 2020
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Executive summary

On 7 December 2020, we held our annual awards presentation ceremony and summit – and for the first time, we held it virtually. Although we were physically separated, one idea came up again and again: the power of working together to build a brighter future.

Of course, COVID-19 was on everyone’s mind. Educators and students have faced extraordinary disruption this year, yet the conversations we had at the summit show there are still many reasons to be optimistic.

This year’s Yidan Prize laureates – Professor Carl Wieman of Stanford University, Ms Lucy Lake and Ms Angeline Murimirwa of CAMFED – talked about working as a team, embracing differences, using evidence and meeting the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world.

HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands joined us as our newest board member, and introduced our newly-formed Council of Luminaries. She spoke passionately about the possibility of change, and how it all begins from our mindset.

Former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard gave our closing keynote. She shared her proud support of CAMFED, and went through a few opportunities we can grasp in 2021 – if we keep hold of all the determination that’s seen us through a difficult 2020.

This summary gives you the highlights, but for the full picture, you can watch the summit online.
In conversation with our 2020 Yidan Prize laureates

Professor Carl Wieman,  
Education Research Laureate

Ms Lucy Lake and  
Ms Angeline Murimirwa,  
Education Development Laureates

Talking to  
Mr Andreas Schleicher and  
Ms Dorothy K. Gordon,  
Panel Heads of Yidan Prize Judging Committee

Creating a better world through education

Mr Schleicher opened with this: Dr Charles CHEN Yidan’s vision for the foundation – specifically, the Yidan Prize exists to champion education’s changemakers.

If you’re not familiar with this: there are two prizes, and they work together. The Education Research prize goes to the people helping the world understand what works in learning. And the Education Development prize is for putting great ideas into practice. For us, connecting these two worlds is crucial to creating change.

For our 2020 laureates, collaboration is key

Ms Lake and Ms Murimirwa of CAMFED (the Campaign for Female Education) are the first team to win a Yidan Prize. They say collaboration is vital to CAMFED’s success: it unlocks the potential of thousands of partnerships and supports their ambitious goals.

Every decision at CAMFED is taken with the girls they work with in mind. They call these young people clients, not beneficiaries, and believe CAMFED is there to help them create change – not to decide what that change should be on their behalf.

As for our Education Research laureate, Professor Wieman has always worked in small groups and can’t imagine doing things other way. But he notes that his approach isn’t the norm; it’s still all too common for his Stanford colleagues to have one student working on a problem by themselves. It’s an ingrained cultural habit – though one that’s slowly changing.
CAMFED believes we must recognize experiences – and differences

Young people are experts in their own needs, and we must do more than just consult with them. CAMFED surveys found one of the highest reasons for girls dropping out is low academic self-esteem – and it’s little wonder when you consider that most marginalized students are using textbooks that reflect wildly different lifestyles to their own.

To help with this, CAMFED brought on curriculum experts to design new ones, and used young people as their editorial committee in this process.

The organization also recognizes gender and cultural differences; although they mainly work with girls, they’re also helping boys address social issues with a whole program on the power of empathy.

All in all, they’re unlocking young people’s potential: when those let down by the system get the chance to succeed, the system becomes better for it.

“If we’re really serious about shifting girls’ prospects, we have to shift their context.”

Ms Lucy Lake
Chief Executive Officer, CAMFED
And all our laureates believe inclusion and debate will push us forward

Ms Gordon and Mr Schleicher summarized the key themes that our laureates – with their substantially different experiences and disciples – all agreed on. Education research can look at the big questions through different perspectives. And involving learners directly in practice can transform development.

“Together we have to embrace our diversity in order to address those systemic and structural deficiencies in our education. This is what the Yidan Prize is all about; this is what Dr Charles CHEN Yidan’s vision is all about.”

Dorothy K. Gordon
Head, Yidan Prize for Education Development Judging Panel;
Chair, UNESCO Information for All Programme
Starting with university physics classes, Professor Wieman ran studies to show how small changes in teaching can have a dramatic impact on learning: the evidence was so compelling, it directly changed practice.

He reflects that it’s easier to prove a point when you focus on a narrow field - like a single subject in higher education. If we look at the whole of primary education, we have more social or institutional barriers to tackle. But if we can demonstrate new ways of thinking about learning in a simpler setting, we can incrementally branch out to more complex areas.

And we must challenge our thinking. For example: we can teach creativity. But it means changing how we teach to give students the room to come up with new answers – rather than the answers the teacher expects.

In other words, what we think of as differences in ability are often just differences in privilege – the privilege to pay for more and better education. Because of this, we’re systematically disadvantaging the students that we’ve defined as less talented.

Research like Professor Wieman’s can reveal this inequity – and once we’re armed with the right information, we can improve access (and stop separating students based on what we assume they’ll achieve).

“Our research is concentrated on showing how much of what within the science community is considered talent... is actually just educational privilege.”

Professor Carl Wieman
Professor of Physics and Graduate School of Education, Stanford University
Announcing the Council of Luminaries

HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands
Board Director of Yidan Prize Foundation;
Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, UNESCO

Future of learning
Princess Laurentien believes that COVID-19 has shown us the biggest challenges and opportunities in education: the influence of the home, the importance of digital learning, the changing role of teachers – and both the vulnerability and resilience of young people.

It’s also shown that if we’re to meet the Sustainable Development Goal on education, we have to step up our efforts. In particular, we must work together to uncover new ideas.

That’s why the Council of Luminaries is so important.

It’s a group of outstanding men and women around the world – researchers and practitioners, driven by a passion for learning, curiosity and evidence.

They’ve come together to spot shared issues and collectively find ways around them; to use their collective voice and tremendous agenda-setting power to make education a political priority; to find gaps in our understanding of education and close them.

They’re all people who believe in putting learners at the center of policy and practice, just like Princess Laurentien. But that’s hard, she says, when the adults of today grew up very differently to the children of today – we’re using education systems built on worlds that no longer exist.

The luminaries can help create a new approach to teaching: one that nurtures a new generation of leaders. What could that look like? Princess Laurentien quoted 10 year old Saifeddine, who said: “leadership is daring to let go of thinking you have to be the best.”
You’re all optimists, original thinkers and disruptors in your own field. What an extraordinary force for change, by connecting you as individual changemakers.”

HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands
Board Director of Yidan Prize Foundation;
Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, UNESCO

We also introduced our Council of Luminaries with a short video – largely in their own words. This is a brief summary, but you can watch it in full online.

Quality education improves lives. We know that we need to change our education systems, and we know we can change them.

The majority of the world’s children are growing up in the most resource-constrained places. And in a globalized, inter-connected world, their education is everyone’s concern.

Our luminaries want to take a scientific approach. We need to determine which interventions are genuinely the most effective, and then adapt that work around the globe – starting with working with teachers.

We also know that education isn’t fair – yet. Many of our luminaries started their work to close a gap in provision. They engage stakeholders of different kinds in their work: governments, yes, but also private and public partners, to support quality and sustainability.

They’re also looking at the impact of the shift to online education – and how tomorrow’s technology can improve the schools of today.

The newly-formed council is keen to get together and tackle real problems, engage new audiences and speak out together for change.

Learn more about the Council of Luminaries at our website.
Inaugural Members of the Council of Luminaries
(listed alphabetically by surname)

The late Sir Fazle Hasan Abed
Founder and Chair Emeritus, BRAC

Professor Anant Agarwal
Founder and CEO, edX

Professor Carol Dweck
Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology, Stanford University

Professor Usha Goswami
Director, Center for Neuroscience in Education, University of Cambridge

Professor Thomas Kane
Walter H. Gale Professor of Education and Economics, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Mr Salman Khan
Founder and CEO, Khan Academy

Ms Lucy Lake
CEO, CAMFED

Ms Angeline Murimirwa
Executive Director—Africa, CAMFED
Mr Kamal Ahmad  
Founder, Asian University for Women

Ms Vicky Colbert  
Founder and Executive Director, Fundación Escuela Nueva

Professor Eric Hanushek  
Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow and Professor, Stanford University and Hoover Institution

Professor Larry Hedges  
Chairman, Department of Statistics, Northwestern University

Ms Wendy Kopp  
CEO and Co-founder, Teach For All

Professor Patricia Kuhl  
Co-Director, Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, University of Washington

Professor Carl Wieman  
Professor of Physics and Graduate School of Education, Stanford University

Professor Zhu Yong-xin  
Founder, New Education Experiment
Hard times and hopeful tomorrows

Ms Gillard warmly congratulated Professor Carl Wieman for his Education Research accolade, before turning to Ms Lucy Lake and Ms Angeline Murimirwa of CAMFED.

She noted that meeting virtually reminds us that 2020 has not been the year any of us expected or wanted: we’ve gone from a health crisis to an economic crisis to a learning crisis. COVID-19 has forced one billion students from their classrooms. It could even create a ‘lost’ generation.

In Ms Gillard’s home country of Australia, children turned to online learning. But that’s not an option everywhere. Only half of households in sub-Saharan Africa have electricity. Fewer than one in ten students has access to a home computer. And the longer school are closed, the greater the impact on all children – especially girls.

When Sierra Leone reopened schools after an eight month shutdown to combat Ebola, thousands of adolescent girls did not return: they’d been subjected to child marriage, become pregnant, or gone to work to support their families.

Ms Gillard knows that hard days lie ahead. The biggest economic recession in decades is forcing governments to make difficult choices. We must make sure education is at the center of recovery, she says – it’s an investment in the future, not a drain on current resources. Everyone must come together to play a part.

But in hard days, there is still hope. CAMFED has empowered young women to lead their communities through this crisis. The newly-announced Council of Luminaries can bridge the gap between research and quality evidence and on-the-ground action. And the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), which Ms Gillard chairs, is helping 355 million children in lower-income countries access learning.

With a sharp focus on those hit hardest – girls, children with disabilities and children from the poorest backgrounds – GPE is the single largest source of grants to education in the global pandemic response. Specifically, they’ve spent half a billion US dollars supporting children around the world.
For Ms Gillard, these organizations and individuals are unapologetic champions of change; they know we can build a better world by helping children seize and shape their future. Just look at Angeline and Lucy, she says: they show us what real leadership looks like – measuring yourself by empowering others.

And then there’s Professor Carl Wieman, who’s transforming STEM education. With the new vaccine hitting headlines, Ms Gillard believes that humanity’s debt to science has never been clearer; Professor Wieman is powering the next generation of thinkers to vanquish the challenges of tomorrow.

Next, she mentioned the Council of Luminaries: innovators and researchers who all believe in the power of education to build a better world.

And last but not least, there’s Dr Charles CHEN Yidan himself. Without his generosity and foresight, she says, we would not be joined in this celebration. His wise words and spirit of optimism and energy carry us into 2021 and beyond.

“Close collaborations among leaders in education have always been important, but will be ever more so as we build back better in the months and years to come.”

Ms Julia Gillard
Former Prime Minister of Australia;
Chair, Global Partnership for Education;
Patron, Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED)
About the Yidan Prize Foundation and Yidan Prize

Founded in 2016 by Dr Charles CHEN Yidan, a core founder of Tencent, the Yidan Prize Foundation has a mission of creating a better world through education. The Yidan Prize is an inclusive education award that recognizes individuals, or up to three-member teams, who have contributed significantly to education research and development. It consists of two awards, the Yidan Prize for Education Research and the Yidan Prize for Education Development. Yidan Prize Laureates each receive a gold medal. In addition, a total of HK$30 million (around US$3.9 million) of prize funds is awarded to the individual or team (shared equally) from each category, half of which is cash prize while the other half is project funds. To ensure transparency and sustainability, the prize is managed by the Yidan Prize Foundation and governed by an independent trust with an endowment of HK$2.5 billion (around US$323 million). Through a series of initiatives, the prize aims to establish a platform for the global community to engage in conversation around education and to play a role in education philanthropy.

In April 2020, the Yidan Prize Foundation joined UNESCO's Global Education Coalition for COVID-19 response to support countries in scaling up their best distance learning practices and reaching children and youth who are most at risk.
Watch the summit in full: yidanprize.org

Join the conversation on social media: @TheYidanPrize

Nominate our next laureate: yidanprize.org/the-prize/nominations