



Access and Equity

Thoughts from Ymasumac Marañón Davis



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Introduction

It's important that each member of a learning community accepts the mission of promoting student success for all. This shared commitment is the rallying point for educators—administrators, teachers, professors, parents, facilities staff, and IT.

The vision: a robust community of passionate learners developing holistically and taking the initiative to create, collaborate, invent, and give back. Good citizens. Empathetic humans. Lifelong learners. Inspired innovators. This vision unites our educators, the champions of growth for the next generation.

The most foundational and elemental stage in the journey toward advancing this vision is providing access to resources and instruction. Equitably. For all.

In today's hyperconnected world, delivering educational access overwhelmingly means providing access to the internet.

Yet, one step forward in online resources can often mean two steps backward in equity. As more and more learning goes online, those students who are better connected to the web are disproportionately well positioned to capitalize on the benefits these improved and expanded resources offer.

So, how do we ensure equitable access for all? How do we bring all stakeholders into the conversation, truly driving change? And, once students have technology and access, how do we guarantee that educators are trained to leverage it correctly?

In this eBook, educational consultant and author Ymasumac Marañón Davis shares her thoughts on how to bring access equitably to all.



Shifting Perceptions in Technology to Drive Change in Learning

The cloud and mobility in our devices have caused industries the world over to rethink how they conduct business. Education is no exception to this shift in culture. How does a public service industry tasked with the education of minors and often an extremely limited budget create access to the technological revolution for their students?

Addressing access requires a two-pronged approach of technical and cultural change. Both of these require a new mindset where we question our preconceived notions, adapt our perceptions, and reexamine our biases.



When schools begin discussing access, they often begin with devices. Students need them, so how do we get them? And once they have them, how do they get internet access in the classroom, at school, and at home? I don't start here. I start with perceptions.

To drive change, you must first look at how others perceive the area you want to change and the emotional charge connected to this area. The stronger the charge, the stronger the perceptions they have that will drive their decisions. Whether their perceptions are true or false, it doesn't matter; the perception will drive the decision making. So we need to engage everyone's perceptions.

All stakeholders need to be included in this conversation. When engaging people's perceptions, we need to look at where they are most emotionally charged, because that's their biggest belief system – right or wrong, this is often where they will stake their flag.

With technology, I have found that the biggest emotional charge is fear. Fear of technology taking over. Fear of losing jobs to technology. Fear of people not “communicating” anymore. Fear everywhere.

The problem is that the world today demands a skill set aligned with a 21st-century work and learning culture. We cannot afford to have students spend twelve formative years in a learning culture that is quickly dying. This new learning culture requires all participants to have certain skill sets. Students today need to be innovative, strong virtual collaborators with social intelligence, and insatiably curious with (at minimum) rudimentary coding skills. (More on our learning culture shift to come in a later post.)

I was visiting a cousin recently in Brooklyn, New York. She co-founded a cooperative of small organic farms. Over the years, they have branched out and now collaborate with other small organic farms and cooperatives throughout the world. While visiting my cousin, she informed me she would be on a phone conference at 4:00 a.m. I was surprised by the time. She said it was because the team she was on came from 5 different continents and finding a time-zone that works for everyone has been a challenge. This, I thought, is the 21st-century team – international, from 5 different continents, facing similar challenges and working together to solve them! How, I wondered, are we preparing our students for this?

We know the need is there, so how can we shift perception to give access to all students anytime and anywhere? By alleviating the fears of stakeholders.

I begin many of my presentations and workshops with images of exactly what stakeholders fear the most: kids on their phones “not talking” to each other. We then dive into the perceptions of what the stakeholders think is happening. Usually, this opens up all their fears and concerns about why technology is a detriment to learning. And this is where I get to shift their perceptions. I tell them a story.

I tell them a story of a time when my fifteen-year-old son and I were grocery shopping and he wanted chocolate milk. Being health conscious, I quickly looked at him like he had lost his mind and then said, “Uh, no, we've never bought chocolate milk in this home!” I'm holding my phone up with a collaborative list app that has my grocery list on it. My son quickly whips out his phone and says, “I'm pulling up 3 research articles right now that prove chocolate milk is good for runners.”

In that moment anyone walking by is looking at us and thinking: How sad, even in the grocery store they can't put their phones away! No one talks to each other anymore! Look at them, they can't even go grocery shopping without their phones out. And of course nothing could be further from the truth

All of us have a story of how we have used our devices in powerful ways.



Engaging all stakeholders in recognizing how their devices can make their lives easier and ultimately allow them to participate in the global discourse is key to changing our learning cultures and addressing access.

The sooner we enable stakeholders to leverage their devices, the sooner they will see this as true for students.

Shifting perceptions about technology is important for all stakeholders, especially families. Families are our learning partners in educating the next generation, and we need to be aligned on the kind of learning culture we want to create. If families are not intimately connected to the profound changes happening at school, they can neither support them nor be a part of them. If we want to ensure access for all students, we have to ensure that all stakeholders believe access is truly necessary.

Often, people do not believe technology is necessary because they just see it as an addition, as opposed to a powerful tool for learning; failing to see how technology is able to amplify learning and connect learners in ways not otherwise possible. Yet, when talking about using devices in learning, devices are secondary – they amplify what is happening in the classroom. All of it. If dynamic and innovative teaching and learning is happening, technology will take it to the next level. If low-level teaching and learning is happening, that will also be amplified. Learning drives the classroom culture and technology augments its impact.

If stakeholders don't understand what students are accessing and how powerful a learning tool devices connected to the internet can be, they will not advocate for access to them. Once stakeholders see that the value of technology equals (and even surpasses) that of paper and pen, they will support purchasing and implementing these learning tools.

Creating equity in access isn't monetary; at its core, it's a belief. It's understanding the why. When teachers, administrators and parents understand why a device connected to the internet will give greater access to developing 21st-century learning skills, they're in! Of course, just the device and internet do not create the magic, but without them, the magic of learning is fundamentally limited.



Equity and Access: How to Bring All Voices to the Table

Recently, a local school asked me to assess their climate in preparation for implementing new professional development methods that would have a profound impact on the pedagogy they employ.

I walked the campus, spent time with teachers, observed lessons and students, and most importantly, listened to the language being used. What were the word choices of the adults? What beliefs did it convey about learning and, more importantly, the students they were serving?

It was apparent love was present and there was little hostility between teachers and students. That is, until the lesson on social media came up, and then the tone shifted. Teachers were condescending toward students for how they used social media. The adults chided the students for not knowing how to communicate anymore and for being attached to their devices.

Conversation stopped and communication turned one-way as teachers became the dominant voice in the classroom and students sat silently, taking in the obviously biased view of them as incompetent in communication.



Communication is key to strong human relationships. And with the rise of technology and social media, communication styles have shifted drastically for everyone.

Technology is the perfect amplifier. One that has uncovered many voices. The voices of our deepest fears and thoughts have now been exposed. These sentiments have always existed, just under the surface. Technology is changing this and bringing up opportunities for difficult conversations. Stepping up to this opportunity will create great shifts in our society; doing this globally is a challenge.

Education is no exception to this shift in culture. Schools are shapers of culture, and in an ever advancing civilization, this shift is both necessary and deeply challenging. Schools not only react to the cultural shifts happening around them, but actively drive the culture forward.

In an attempt to embrace the profound shifts happening in society, educators far and wide have made technology one of the central pillars in learning. This also inadvertently brings in all the issues with which society is trying to grapple by amplifying these voices in the classroom. This, in turn, brings up the issue of access and voice. Who gets access to technology and whose voices are heard? The discussion on access is broad and long with many players and entry points. In this article, my focus will be on providing access through a lens of equity. How do we address access with equity in mind?



Addressing access requires a two-pronged approach focused on technical and cultural change. Both of these require a new mindset where we question our preconceived notions, adapt our perceptions, and reexamine our biases.

Questions we need to ask ourselves: When we work with students who are low income, do we see their lack of resources as a deficit and their families unable to provide for them? When we work with diverse ethnicities, how do subconscious biases show up in our expectation of student learning and behavior? How do our perceptions of different student groups get in the way of serving our students equitably? Are our assumptions of their use of devices congruent with our biases?

Do we draw unfair conclusions about students of a particular socioeconomic status or ethnicity or family structure – and do these conclusions impede our ability to act fairly and effectively to increase access?

Biases and perceptions drive decision-making. They impact the opportunities we give our students to engage with technology and inhibit how we prepare them with skills for the 21st century.

For those of us in education, checking our perceptions is key; we hold the lives of children in our hands. Often, in working with districts, I am told that the population they serve is low-income, and therefore there is no way they can afford to buy their students devices or get high-speed internet connectivity. Again, perceptions drive behavior and decision making.

I come from a strong communal immigrant background on my father's side of the family. I remember that when one of my cousins needed something for school my aunt would call my father, who would then call my uncle, and so on until all the adults had been consulted and it was agreed who would contribute what. Whatever it was that my cousin needed, it was purchased by everyone.

Surely, my family was below the poverty line, but it didn't matter. Education was a priority, and when any of us needed something, the family (and community) would come together. While my family was perceived as unable to pay for educational materials, they found a way, because they understood the urgency and the need for these materials. Had the school invited my family to the decision-making table about materials students needed and why they needed them, they would find that low-income families are more than willing to step up to the opportunity to participate and support schools in the decision-making process. We continue to miss these opportunities in education because of our perceptions and biases.

Often, in education, we solve problems through the dominant culture of our schools. In the United States, this is predominantly a white, middle-class lens. But when applied to situations where communities solve problems differently, that lens may give a distorted picture. What looks like a below-the-poverty-line income in one family actually is not when all family members ally forces, as mine did. Every community is unique and it's important to make sure we check our perceptions at the door and include community members in the decision-making process.



We cannot afford to miss these opportunities for empowering student voices and their families in schools.

We must learn to have brave conversations about race, gender, income disparities and the false perceptions we carry about each other. Where else should we have these conversations but in our schools, where learning is core to its existence?

Creating equity in access isn't monetary; at its core, it's a belief.



Professional Development for Educators is about Creating Magic

I am often invited to visit schools that have received awards because of high ratings in their use of educational technology and as innovative learning centers. This always excites me; a place where creative learning takes place for kids? Yes, sign me up! And from an initial glance they are definitely different learning environments. New, flexible furniture, colorful walls and decor, excited adults – awesome! It is apparent, that there is an effort to change the learning environment; whether or not it’s actually happening at the core level of values and belief systems remains to be seen. What eventually unfolds is something we are accustomed to: Some children are eager to share their projects with you, while the majority sit back and quietly share when prompted. What is most striking, is the projects are all vastly similar, if not starkly the same. Where, then, is the innovation and more importantly, what was the professional development like?

Innovation is a big buzzword right now in education. We need our kids to innovate – we want them to be creative thinkers – they need to think outside the box. The question then becomes, how do we do this?

In an effort to be innovative, schools often latch on to big ideas, like “maker spaces” (classrooms with Legos and art materials whose intention is to allow students to be creative and innovative in their thinking). Many schools are looking towards creating robotics or Lego clubs. All of these intentions are laudable. Unfortunately, these efforts alone do not impact learning for everyone. To do this, we must consider our learning environment.



Bringing in new furniture or programs without shifting the learning culture results in reverting to familiar classroom arrangements and teaching new programs with traditional, teacher-driven pedagogy.

When exploring questions around access in education, we have to consider the learning culture of the classroom and school. Although many of the aforementioned efforts may intend to impact the learning culture, they often generate excitement among a small minority of teachers and students. How, then, do we impact all students to truly think in creative and innovative ways?

Our starting point most likely is misplaced. Rather than look at students, we need to start with adults. Students are born ready for change and innovation, innately curious about the world around them. By middle school, this inherent drive to learn is minimized so drastically, it is troubling. That this happens in adolescence, when students' brains once again have become as active as when they were toddlers undergoing an incredible transformative process, tells us that the learning culture surrounding them, rather than any innate characteristics, is what impedes innovative learning. We adults need to be willing to reflect on whether our learning culture truly allows all students to learn.

The good news is that there are adults who are very willing to take these risks and try something new, fail miserably, reflect, and try again! Every campus has at least one of these teachers who is ready to create change and try new things. It is these teachers who create magic in our classrooms and from whom we can learn to do the same. How can we scale what they have mastered? First, start with the willing and then have them coach peer to peer. These risk-taking teachers are often more than willing to share. They have not just latched onto the tools but also the learning culture that is required to go with the new tools and programs.

Being willing to reimagine our learning culture requires us to examine the skills we hope our students achieve, and to assess, whether the characteristics and qualities of the environments support these skills. If we desire to cultivate the skill of curiosity in our students, then we need to ask ourselves what corresponding change in the learning culture is required. A quality that complements curiosity is risk taking. However, many react to the prospect of risk-taking with fear: What if our students fail? What if our school doesn't do well in state testing? These fears often stifle the risk taking that enables innovation.

My son, a freshman in college, recently described to me the frustration he sees from his college teachers, who want their students to speak up and take risks in the classroom through problem-solving. He said none of his peers ever volunteered or spoke up, even though his teacher encouraged them to try, even if it results in mistakes. "Why?", I asked. His response: "Because they're afraid to fail."

“Where does this come from?” I asked.

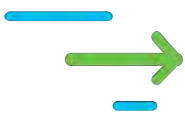
“It starts in middle school and solidifies in high school. If we make mistakes it affects our grades, and if our grades aren’t good, we know it’ll affect our college prospects or even passing a class. So we don’t like making mistakes, because it means we aren’t doing well and the consequences are too severe.”

In one swift response to the question, “Why don’t students take risks?” my son summarized our educational system’s culture that ties student performance to their grades, which are tied to school ratings, college entrance, prestige, etc.

I realize this asks us to reexamine our entire system, including our grading practices. Many schools are doing just this. Hampshire College in Massachusetts has dropped standardized testing as a requirement for admission. According to the school’s president Jonathan Nash, in an article published by [The Independent](#), “Our applicants collectively were more motivated, mature, disciplined and consistent in their high school years than past applicants.”

Although many of us cannot make sweeping decisions like this, we can begin by examining the very area where students will spend a good part of their day – our classrooms.

How will students feel when they walk in? Will they, for that brief period, feel encouraged to stretch their limits and take risks? Will they know this is a space where they can tackle tough questions? Learning asks all of us to be present – not just our intellect, but our full selves, which includes our emotions and spirit. What will drive students through problem-solving, if not the inner spirit to know, the gnashing of emotions to pull through the unknowns of questioning?



So when it comes to teacher buy-in and scaling up, start small. Good learning practices can catch like wildfire.

Professional development should not just consist of learning new programs and using new tools and furniture. It should also be a space where educators have an opportunity for deep reflection on their own learning practices. Asking big questions. Educators need time to wrestle with these questions, and then the freedom to begin cultivating a new culture in their classrooms. To do this once is not enough. Professional development is more effective if it models coaching. Ultimately, good professional development should open up more questions and offer an opportunity to continue honing in on these questions throughout the year.

In the end, we have to ask ourselves, what drives us, what keeps us moving through? And then, with an honest lens, open up to the risks that enable innovation – creating magic in the classroom.



Disruption in Our Learning Cultures Develops Families as Learning Partners

Today, technology is a bullet train rapidly transforming every sector in society. Disruption is evident in companies like Airbnb and Lyft that have completely rearranged how we vacation and commute. This disruption not only shifts what we do, but impacts our mindset, as well. We think differently about lodging when we vacation now. Our boundaries and expectations change when we order a ride. So, when we think of the disruption technology has caused in education, we must ask ourselves: What is the mind shift that accompanies this change?

What often makes this feel uncertain is how new these learning spaces are to us – we have never had such a strong disruption in our learning culture before in formal education. This disruption asks us to rethink the role of the teacher, students, administrators, the tools that we use, the space we learn in, the time when we learn – everything has been upended and is being reevaluated to best serve the needs of the 21st century. What makes this shift unique is that the impact is not just on the school environment, but it impacts the home learning culture, as well. How do we engage parents in a learning shift that we are still unsure of how to navigate ourselves?

Every major learning shift requiring professional development for teachers also necessitates training for parents. It does not have to be the same kind of training, but should be relevant to the person receiving it – from teachers to parents to bus drivers. This is not something district personnel need to figure out for everyone. We just need to create an opportunity for these different groups to come together to reflect on these new learning opportunities.

Research shows that asking open-ended questions foments curiosity, and curiosity leads to new ideas. So, we should ask parents where there are opportunities to support learning in their homes, their learning spaces. The same is true for every person that comes into contact with students – bus drivers, office staff, etc. When I bring this up, I often hear, “That’s not their role, we are asking them to do something that belongs to teachers.” This is a false dichotomy based assumptions that learning happens in silos and that the community supporting the child is unable to nurture the academic learning that happens in the classroom.



Including all members of the learning community in this training creates meaning that serves students in a very direct and profound way! We have to give all participants in the life of a child an opportunity to understand the shifts in learning that impact the child.

Here’s why this is important work and why it is imperative we include families in our learning spaces at schools: Kids go home somewhere! And wherever that home is, there is a learning space there. If it doesn’t mirror the learning space students experience in school, then they don’t know whom to listen to – their parents or their teachers?

This conundrum has practical implications. As educators, we know that students need to think critically, and, in order to do this, they need to learn to question and to dig deep into a problem or idea and try to uncover the why. It is an incredible skill to develop and will help the world uncover truths that are sorely needed.

So, where do families come in? Developing any new skill requires two components in order to develop strong brain patterns and synapses: repetition and emotional connection. Time spent learning a new skill in school is never enough – they need to keep practicing in diverse learning spaces, including home. However, traditional methods of authoritative parenting often do not support this style of learning:

I want to go to my friend’s house tonight. You can’t go. Why not. Because I said so.

Whoa, why are your grades so bad?! I don’t know. That’s just an excuse. You need to try harder.

When we don’t include families in the conversation of learning that we are having, they will not know the powerful impact these types of answers can have on their child’s brain and thinking patterns.

If we shared with families the learning we are having around the power of questions and the importance of repetition and emotion in developing strong brain patterns and synapses, their conversations could be more meaningful:

I want to go to my friend's house tonight.

Tell me about your plan, why is tonight so important?

Whoa, why are your grades so bad?!

I don't know.

Let's look at each one and tell me more about the class and what is making it a challenge.

These are not new ideas, yet framing them in the context of learning gives them added urgency and a deeper layer of understanding. It also gives parents one of the most powerful roles in parent involvement, according to Johns Hopkins researcher Joyce Epstein's "[There are Six Types of Parent Involvement.](#)" According to Dr. Epstein's research, learning at home is the type of parent involvement that most strongly correlates with student achievement. No wonder! This is where parents get to engage on a profound and meaningful level with their kids as they learn. This doesn't require them to have formal education, it just requires them to participate more effectively in their child's learning environment - including the one they create at home.

When you integrate technology into the learning culture, it is imperative to involve families in this conversation. They, too, wonder how these new tools support learning and often believe that technology is just for playing. So, when kids come home with school-assigned devices and are watching videos for homework, parents don't understand that this is part of the flipped classroom. Or, when kids come home with their school devices and are chatting in online classrooms, parents don't understand that this is a powerful way to develop academic discourse. Including families in relevant training about the disruptions happening in our learning cultures empowers them to be active participants in this learning shift.

Now, we can begin to truly talk about equity. When we include families as equal learning partners in our schools' learning cultures we will ultimately begin to explore this question: How do learning cultures in our students' homes impact our schools, and what can we learn from their families? This is another powerful path that further supports the dramatic shifts in learning.

About the Author



Ymasumac Marañón Davis is an educational consultant, intuitive life coach and author. Like her name, her life reflects the unique perspectives she brings to the important work of highlighting social justice issues of our time, bringing individuals to reflect on their unique gifts applied to their life's purpose and writing the stories of truth that swirl around her as she moves between worlds. Her ancestry is from the Quechua people of Bolivia and the pilgrims of New England.

Ymasumac, also known as Yma, spent part of her childhood in the United States learning the experiences of being an immigrant's daughter on the one hand and on the other the daughter of a mother of European descent. Her formative years were spent in a small village in the Yucatán Peninsula in Southern Mexico, where she honed her second language and her Latino roots took hold. Upon her return to the United States, with a perceptive eye for culture, she became aware of the racial tensions that existed in schools and set out to find a way to bring together her duality: Indigenous and White.

Through her late teens and into her twenties, Yma sought out her own healing and eventually became an intuitive life coach. Deeply invested in children and creating an environment for them that recognized their gifts, she also became a bilingual teacher. She was soon drawn to coordinate parent involvement programs at a district office. This powerful work engaged a diverse community of parents, systematically developing capacity in both families and schools to collaborate effectively and serve student needs.

And then, the iPad came out, and everything changed. Yma explored using her personal iPad to teach English Learners and At-Risk students. At a time when few were engaged in this work, Yma was excited to see how such devices could empower parents and students. This exploration led Yma to take a position as Educational Technology Coordinator at the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools. Yma and her team were on the cutting edge of thoughtful technological integration, shifting the learning culture in the classroom to embrace technology and to continue with a strong pedagogical position of learning. Yma brought her understanding of bilingual education, parent involvement and her intuitive understanding of how culture impacts change to the evolving K-12 landscape.

Today, Yma is an educational consultant with her own business: Limitless Learning Lab. She employs all of her gifts, including being an intuitive coach, in her work. She continues to explore the profound shifts in our learning cultures and to investigate how we can best serve students of all backgrounds. She has a keen eye and passion for issues of equity and whether students of color are being empowered fairly in their school environment. She's an international speaker addressing issues such as: changing perceptions in learning cultures, embracing families as learning partners, creating our personal healing cultures, and addressing equity by empowering student voices. Projects Yma is currently exploring and researching: how technology stresses the dominant culture, our shifting learning spaces, and how to create a mindset characterized by humility. As well as several writing projects, including the books: "Our Shifting Learning Cultures" and "In-tu-it: Intuitively Creating Your Own Healing Culture". Yma is married to a fabulous partner and friend, Tod Davis, and has four children.

Want to hear more from Ymasumac? Read more on [her blog](#), then follow her on [Twitter](#), and visit her website, [Limitless Learning Lab](#).

