Societal Barriers to Equity in Education

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This young man doesn’t talk yet, doesn’t walk yet, but he and his friends will be in classrooms across the United States in just a few short years. They will arrive familiar with how to use a smartphone and a tablet. They will likely look at desktop computers with interest at such a novel item. Will every classroom, every teacher, every lesson be prepared to engage him and his classmates with an education that uses the tools and technology of their generation? The tools that they are growing up with and that are already fully integrated into their personal lives?

Despite the fact, that the smartphone and similar technology are as commonplace, if not more so, than the crayon and pencil to today’s toddler and incoming kindergarten student, there continues to be significant debate about the integration of modern technology in the educational process. Nevertheless, the technological shift that is part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution is moving forward. Unsettling is the fact that education lags far behind private industry in its adaptation.

The full implementation of digital and cloud-based curriculum that is in alignment with the required shift in pedagogy to keep pace, not to mention a full grasp of the skills today’s student needs to be successful for a career that will take them through 2080, continues to elude much of the policy, legislation, and pedagogical practice designed to prepare students for life as a contributing national and global citizen. It is with this in mind that discussions about the much-needed education revolution takes on increasing urgency. The required systemic shift lags too far behind what the workforce requires as evidenced by the World Economic Forum’s 2018 Future of Jobs Report. It is predicted that in as early as 2022 as part of the New Economy and New Society of the Fourth Industrial Revolution up to 54% of the workforce will require significant reskilling and upskilling in order to remain relevant. While automation will increasingly take over more mundane tasks, 38% of companies report that they expect to grow their workforce with new positions that correspond with the creativity and support that will be required to underpin new products and industry growth.

All the while a disparity continues to exist among gender and race as well as equitable access to educational opportunities, career entry and salary.
In 2016, before equity became a buzzword, a leader in the education community was preparing to facilitate a workshop that would explore tools and discussions around a district’s vision for modern instruments in education. The participants would be district and site leaders of a predominantly Hispanic community. In conducting a Google search for images of “Mexican toddler using technology.” Here’s what popped:

Now full disclosure, the author of this article was the leader of this workshop. As both an educator and the parent of a mixed race, Hispanic son, I was shocked! The educator in me in 2016 was stunned, the parent in me could hardly breathe.

The same search in 2019, yielded this result:

As both an educator and the parent of a mixed race, Hispanic son, I was shocked again!

A 2016 search for “white toddler using technology” yielded these images. Notice the distinct differences.
“Okay,” I thought to myself, “be politically correct with your search term and see what happens with ‘Hispanic toddler using technology.’”

I’m thinking, “Better, but do my eyes deceive me or are most of these images still of white children?” A 2019 search shows some improvement. However, notice the age of the children, the number of non-Hispanic children, the outdated television set and image without any device present.

The next set of images of the same search bring real concern. Notice the activities, ages, race and captions that pop for “Hispanic toddler using technology.”
My next thought in 2016 was, “Well, as long as I’ve started down this path…” black toddler using technology.”
The 2019 search added gender. Male toddler using technology.

Two of fifteen images clearly depict girls and there is a clear bias in race.
Female toddler using technology.

The first three images are of boys using technology. Seven of fourteen, 50%, of the images clearly include boys. Again, there is a clear bias towards race.

What began as quick Google search in 2016 turned out to have a far more profound impact on an already strong belief regarding the importance of the work educators do in breaking down stereotypes and providing equity in education. The images in the Google search speak loudly. Societal perceptions and expectations are clearly captured.

This “quick Google search” brings light to the call to action to support equity in both education and society as a whole. The cultural biases embedded in the everyday task of “googling” information continues to build on traditional stereotypes, reinforcing cultural biases that place clear limits not just on equitable opportunity but ensuring that society is empowering the intellect and skills that will allow for successful navigation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.