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—Linda Darling-Hammond, president, Learning Policy Institute

LEARNER CENTERED INNOVATION



Katie Martin

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Spark Curiosity
Ignite Passion and
Unleash Genius

Katie Martin

Learner-Centered Innovation

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Published by IMPress,
a division of Dave Burgess Consulting, Inc.

ImpressBooks.org
daveburgessconsulting.com

Editing and Interior Design by My Writers' Connection
Cover Design by Genesis Kohler

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017961689

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-948334-00-6

eBook ISBN: 978-1-948334-01-3

First Printing: February 2018





For Abby and Zack

*May you always know that you are loved
and feel supported to find your
place in this world.*



*Culture is not the
most important thing,
it's the only thing.*

—Jim Sinegal



Designing the Culture for Learning and Innovation

IN THE 2013–2014 SCHOOL YEAR, I was on Washington Middle School’s campus regularly. I was supervising teacher candidates at a local university, and as the newest member of the team, I ended up being placed at Washington—the most challenging of schools.

I vividly remember walking down the halls marked with yellow caution lines to indicate on which side the kids were expected to walk. I immediately felt anxious about following the rules about where I should be walking, and I could only imagine how the students felt. I watched students navigate the cold halls as teachers yelled at them to stay in line. In the majority of the classrooms,

rows of desks and compliance-based structures were the norm. The teachers followed the textbooks that few students had the skills (or desire) to read independently. Staff expressed to me that they were stressed and burned out, which, frankly, was evident from their actions. The kids were well below grade level; most were disengaged, and some acted out as a result. It was heartbreaking, and it is an all-too-common example of under-performing schools.

Toward the end of the school year, I noticed a change in the tone of some of the teachers. The teacher candidates and those on campus had a slightly different level of excitement and energy as they began to share with me about a committee that was working on the magnet-school petition. As I observed classes and debriefed with teachers, I asked about the magnet school and tried to learn more about the change happening at Washington Middle School and the new guy I kept seeing on campus sporting orange sunglasses and Vans. What I uncovered was that under the leadership of the new principal, Dr. Eric Chagala, Washington Middle, a Title 1 school, with 98 percent of its students receiving free or reduced lunches, and about 80 percent of its students in the ESL program, was closing its doors at the end of the year. The following year, Vista Innovation and Design Academy (VIDA) was born.

We can't change who we serve, but we can change how we serve them.

Dr. Chagala and the staff opened VIDA's doors. The facility was the same but with an entirely new approach. All of the teachers were given the choice to leave, but because they had worked collaboratively to develop the new school model and created a shared understanding of the vision, all but one of the teachers opted to stay. (That teacher also eventually asked to return.) Now this rate of

retention is rare for schools that aren't going through such a radical change, but for a school experiencing a complete transformation, it is unheard of. But the staff members believed in what they were doing and wanted to come together to create a new culture that valued learning, supported innovation, and met the needs of their community. Remember, these were the same teachers who couldn't reach their students and who were tired and burned out. They chose to stay and be part of a new school with the same students because they believed in the mission that they had helped create.

Redefining the School Culture

As a dynamic leader, Dr. Chagala has worked tirelessly to ensure that VIDA, which translated means *life* in Spanish, is not only a name. His desire and that of his team is to create a campus culture that breathes life into everyone it serves. He will also be the first to tell you that this endeavor isn't a one-man job. He has leveraged community and business partnerships to learn and help shape the culture. The school is rooted in caring and nurturing an environment that utilizes design thinking as a core strategy for learning and improvement. Teachers, parents, students, and community members are all integral members in shaping and upholding the culture.

Their website states:

We dare to ignite the creative genius in each student by kindling their unique strengths, interests, and values as we utilize the Design Thinking process as a common framework to solve problems across all disciplines.²⁸

What makes this school unique is that its mission highlights a focus on individuals finding their passions through an interdisciplinary approach, and its programs align to the mission. To ensure

28 Vista Unified School District, "VIDA," *Vista Innovation Design Academy*, Nov. 30, 2017, <http://vida.vistausd.org>.

teachers have the expertise and mindsets to “ignite creative genius” in their students, they have opportunities to learn and model these same values offered to students. The staff and community learn and solve problems together. The VIDA community of staff and families came together to determine the core values, known as their GILLS, that drive them. (Their mascot is a shark, and the GILLS allow them to breathe and give them life.)

G—Grit to Persevere. *We never give up.*

I—Innovating through Design. *We create solutions.*

L—Learning about Empathy. *We seek to understand the viewpoints of others.*

L—Leading with Integrity. *We make a positive impact.*

S—Sparking Creativity. *We honor imagination.*

I visited VIDA shortly after it opened, and I stay connected to the work it does by following VIDA social media (@vidasharks). The yellow caution lines are gone, and in their place are halls that lead to such inspiring places as design studios where students have opportunities to make and create based on a variety of challenges. Today, students share ideas in their classes, and teachers experiment with a variety of new strategies. Artwork covers the walls, and students meet in classrooms, courtyards, and hallways to work with each other on various projects. When I last toured the school, students gladly shared what they were working on and what they were learning. I couldn't help but smile at the dramatic change I saw on campus as Dr. Chagala, who has since become a dear friend, proudly shared what his staff and students were doing.

In the first months of school, their attendance was up compared with previous years; referrals were down, and smiles permeated

the building. During the summer, the teachers had partnered with community members to paint the building, resulting in a learning environment that matched VIDA's newfound philosophy and culture. The teachers didn't change everything overnight or even over the course of the full year. They freely admit it is a work in progress, but they continue to work together and focus on learning new approaches and improving to meet the needs of their unique population. Four years after VIDA opened, attendance is still up, scores continue to increase, and, more importantly, the people (students, staff, and community) know they matter. It's a place where learners are fighting to get in rather than out. The example and the work happening at VIDA highlights that, although we can't change who we serve, we can change how we serve them.

If our schools aren't working for those we serve, we can no longer accept that *they* need to change. We must consider how we can change to best serve them. Professors Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton²⁹ explain that intelligence is made up of a number of complex attributes that are shaped by how and what we learn. Teachers who actively cultivate broader definitions of *smart* and strive for better opportunities to learn for both themselves and their students have demonstrated dramatic successes with teaching the diversity of students they have responsibility for educating. The staff at VIDA learned and continues to learn how to better meet the needs of those they serve because their principal believes in them and has worked to create an environment where they feel valued and are empowered to do better for their students. This team has created a culture of learning for everyone that is not just about a shared purpose, but one that is truly owned and moved forward by everyone.

29 Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton, "School as a Foundation for Lifelong Learning: The Implications of a Lifelong Learning Perspective for the Re-imagining of School-Age Education," *IFLL: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*, University of Winchester, 2009, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=B6971BA924D6CE00B46DCFE4E8F04DC6?doi=10.1.1.539.8759&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

As Shelley Burgess and Beth Houf share in their book, *Lead Like a PIRATE*, “People are less likely to tear down what they have helped build.”³⁰

Culture Is Everything in Schools

Nothing is more inspiring than working toward a common goal with people who share your passion and commitment. This collaboration creates a contagious vibe. Working with such a team motivates us to be better and makes us want to provide similar passion-filled experiences for others. In short, our behaviors are impacted by the cultures where we work. When schools or districts focus on compliance and mandates to implement programs and procedures, voice and choice are limited, which squashes creativity and innovation. On the flipside, an environment that honors the expertise of the educators can empower those in our schools who are working with the students every day so that they make informed decisions based on the needs of the learners.

In many conversations about curriculum and instruction in schools, I still hear the focus on implementing programs with “fidelity” to cover the curriculum. At the district level, however, the vision is about developing critical and creative thinkers and problem solvers. If you have policies about fidelity and expect compliance in your classroom, school, or district, I would challenge you to consider whether fidelity and compliance are really the goal. Do you expect everyone to be on the same page at the same time? Or do you want to create authentic learning experiences? It’s hard to do both. This doesn’t mean that the standards and the curriculum are irrelevant; it means they are used to meet the needs of the learner and in service of meaningful learning outcomes rather than expecting the learner to adapt to the curriculum. Personal

30 Shelley Burgess and Beth Houf, *Lead Like a PIRATE: Make School Amazing for Your Students and Staff*, (San Diego, CA: Dave Burgess Consulting, Inc., 2017).

and authentic learning experiences require knowing the learners in the classroom.

We can change policies and implement new programs, but if we don't empower teachers and create school cultures where people feel valued and free to take risks, we will miss out on our greatest opportunity to change how students learn. Creating an environment where teachers are supported and empowered to take risks in pursuit of learning and growth rather than perfection is absolutely foundational to shifting practices. To see the changes that we know are necessary in education, we must trust teachers—and they must also trust themselves—to make decisions and design learning experiences in ways that meet the needs of those in their classrooms.

We can change policies and implement new programs, but if we don't empower teachers and create school cultures where people feel valued and free to take risks, we will miss out on our greatest opportunity to change how students learn.

We know that kids and adults learn better when learning has an authentic purpose, subjects are integrated, and the learner has agency and choice in the process. Because of this, many approaches like project-based learning and personalized learning are all methods that educators are trying in schools. You might wonder, *Is there professional learning to support these new approaches? Are there programs that provide resources? Are there models that teachers can see and use?* The answer to all of these questions is yes. Yes, you can

provide these things *and* support teachers in the process to develop great projects, and you should, but these steps are not enough.

I have seen some amazing examples where educators embrace integrated, authentic ways of learning in school for diverse groups of students. I have also seen these ideal methods tacked on to traditional methods or used as a project at the end of the unit that rarely changes how kids learn. Too often in education we tend to focus on the programs, procedures, and policies. In reality, the culture that values relationships and what is best for the learners they serve is what is foundational to making a meaningful impact on student outcomes.

As schools and districts move toward a new vision, it is critical to examine the culture: What is valued, celebrated, and expected? How do the systems and expectations align to support the vision? In your own school or district, look at your goals and question your practices and expectations of others. Are they in service of your vision or impeding it?

Developing Academic Mindsets That Foster Belonging, Growth, and Innovation

Why do some students willingly engage in academic tasks? What makes learners persist in challenging tasks? What compels learners to want to learn more and improve? These questions are on the tops of minds for researchers and practitioners alike.

Camille Farrington, who has done extensive research and made the case for creating a culture that develops academic mindsets for deeper learning, found that students with positive academic mindsets work harder, engage in more productive academic behaviors, and persevere to overcome obstacles to success. Conversely, students with negative mindsets about school or about themselves as learners are likely to withdraw from the behaviors essential for academic success and to give up easily when they encounter setbacks or difficulty.

According to her research, the following mindsets have been identified as critical to student motivation and willingness to persist in academically challenging work.

- I belong in this community
- I can succeed at this
- My ability and competence grow with effort
- My work has value to me

These mindsets can be seen as both motivators and outcomes of engaging in authentic learning experiences. I would also argue that although Farrington's findings here are focused on students, the mindsets apply to all of us as learners. As learners, teachers, and leaders, we must cultivate and model these mindsets too. Here are some examples and ideas for how to cultivate these four key academic mindsets for a culture that supports learner-centered innovation.

I belong in this academic community.

As a first-year teacher, I was handed a book of policies and procedures to cover each day for the first week of school, but I knew in my heart that no significant learning was possible without first developing relationships. Even though I was a new teacher, I made the decision to minimize the policies and maximize the time I spent building relationships, and I am so glad I did. I was reminded recently of how powerful that choice was when I received a message from a former student on Facebook. She wrote to tell me I was "one of the few teachers that genuinely cared about students." It was an amazing compliment, but I know it isn't true. I worked with many great people in that school who truly care about the students. I suppose the difference is perception: The kids must *feel* like you care about them. As educators, we work to help learners develop

knowledge and skills and to reach their goals. Foundational to this, however, is creating a community where people feel valued and that they belong. No matter the curriculum, my priorities in the first few weeks of school and throughout the year were to learn names, get to know students as individuals, co-create community guidelines, and encourage a community of learners.

Learn and use names right away—Throughout my life, I have made it a point to remember people's names because I appreciate it when people remember mine. It makes me feel like they care and helps to establish a connection. In my teacher-education program, this practice was reaffirmed as essential. So I challenged myself to learn names on the first day. As a middle-school teacher, learning almost 150 names presented quite a challenge, but I was committed because I knew that knowing my students' names would be a step toward building relationships with them. I took pictures of each student and wrote out their names and studied them a lot. The next day, I knew and used my students' names when greeting them or calling on them in class. This one practice proved to be foundational to building relationships that have lasted to this day.

Get to know your students' interests and strengths—While I was taking pictures, I had the students write to me so I could get to know who they were. I asked about their family and their interests, and I asked questions about how they like to learn, what they enjoyed doing, what they were good at, and what their goals were for the year and beyond. I created cards for each student that included the picture I had taken and put each class on a ring that I used all year to create groups and reflect on how to best support them. The interest inventory helped students share who they were

and allowed me to gain a better understanding of them as individuals. As the year went on and things changed and I learned more, I added notes to the cards.

Co-create community guidelines—From day one, I wanted my students to feel that the classroom was ours, not mine. The process of co-creating the community guidelines was modeled in my teacher-education program, so it was only natural to do the same for my students. I asked them to think about how they wanted to be treated and how they wanted to treat others in our community. Students first independently reflected, then they shared in small groups, and finally, we condensed the big ideas into four to six community guidelines. Each class made a poster with the final guidelines. Just like the kids, they varied across the five classes, but ultimately, these co-created guidelines helped establish the culture for each group. We all signed the class poster and hung it up on the wall to remind us of our agreements to one another.

Establish classroom jobs—Within the first week or two of school, I created a list of classroom jobs and had students apply for the ones that appealed to them. The jobs consisted of roles, such as classroom photographer, greeter (for guests), birthday celebrator, historian, and others. I tried to match the kids and the jobs, so they typically got one of their top three choices. These jobs created a sense of ownership for the students and empowered them to take on responsibilities to help make the classroom community function.

Greet them at the door—No matter how much I needed to get done in that five-minute break between classes, I prioritized greeting my students at the door. Creating jobs for

the students allowed me to do this because they could take care of the logistics of setting up class while I focused on the learners and their disposition as they walked in the door. This investment helped me connect with my students and see who was having a particularly good or bad day. I believe that greeting them each day made our time together more productive because they knew they were cared about and therefore were mostly willing to try their best and work to meet our learning goals.

Although what happens in the rest of the school, district, and world impacts our classrooms, teachers have the power and obligation to create an environment that ensures their students have a place in the world where they feel safe, valued, and cared about. If we truly want to see different outcomes for learners in our education system and develop the whole child, we need to prioritize meaningful relationships for significant learning to occur.

When learners feel they belong, they are more likely to see challenges or failures as part of the process and not indicative of their own self-worth and value in the group. Creating a sense of belonging and sharing the learning process, not just the product, can help all learners see that they are not alone in their struggles and can grow as part of the learning community.

I can succeed at this.

Every year, we have gone on a family trip to the mountains, bundled up our kids, rented skis, and put them on the mountain. When Zack, my son, was six years old, he was content skiing the bunny hill. He had been pretty successful, so we decided to take the gondola up the mountain for lunch and take him on a more challenging run. But it was quite a bit more challenging than we anticipated. He fell a few times and lost his skis once, but overall I thought he did pretty well. Yet when we got to the bottom of the

run, he said, “I didn’t like that at all!” He told me that there were too many “bumps,” and he didn’t want to do it again. I tried to encourage him, but he was frustrated and wanted to go back to where he was successful and wouldn’t fall. Against my wishes, we skied a few more times down the bunny hill and called it a day.

On day two after a few easy runs, we convinced him to go back on the gondola to the Big Mountain. Our family split up, and, after we all finished our respective runs, we met at the bottom with my brother. He said, “I accomplished my goal.” He had attempted a back flip and *almost* landed it. Zack watched the video my dad had taken and saw my brother’s attempted back flip, saw him fall and also saw that he was excited about it because he was pushing himself to try something new. Zack didn’t say much about the video, but his attitude toward falling and interest in getting up and trying again changed after hearing his respected uncle talk about falling and getting back up, not failing and quitting. At the end of each run, he started to update me on his progress and how many times he fell, except he was more excited to go back up and keep trying. After about the fourth run, we arrived at the bottom, and I leaned down to tell him how proud I was of him. Before I could say anything, he said, “I accomplished my goal—I made it down the hill without falling!” I couldn’t have been more proud of him, not because he hadn’t fallen but because he was setting his goals and working to achieve them. He knew what he wanted to do to feel successful and worked to get there.

As I think of how Zack’s view of failing changed because of a model of an older and more capable individual, it changed how he thought about success and what he needed to do to accomplish his goal. I see how he was inspired by a mentor and support systems to help him when he was frustrated and how he pushed through to accomplish his goal. I can’t help but think about the parallels in our classrooms and the importance of empowering learners of all ages to set their own learning goals and support them in working toward

them. When learners know where they are going and when they have agency to determine their paths, there is no limit to what they can achieve. You know the age-old wisdom attributed to Henry Ford, “If you think you can or can’t, you’re right.” Research and practice support this too. When students believe in their ability to succeed in tasks even when those tasks are challenging, that belief impacts their ability to persist. Creating opportunities for students to set goals, receive feedback, and reflect on their progress can impact their beliefs about and their expectations for success. This self-awareness enables people to make better decisions, collaborate effectively with a diverse group, and accept areas of weakness in oneself and in others. Creating authentic learning experiences that empower learners to develop the skills and talents to manage themselves and build on their talents rather than focus on deficits maximizes the motivation and impact of all learners.

My ability and confidence grow with effort.

In *Creativity, Inc.*, Ed Catmull, Pixar’s co-founder and president, describes how their movies are always bad to begin with. He acknowledges, “First drafts always suck.” Yes, this is the same company that has produced *Toy Story*, *Up*, *Monsters, Inc.*, and so many more number one movies. He shares that instead of creating systems that prevent errors and striving for perfection, he understands that the creative process takes time, and their approach is to create systems for feedback and support to take initial ideas for movies and move from “suck to unsuck.” He urges, “Don’t wait for things to be perfect before you share them with others. Show early and show often. It’ll be pretty when we get there, but it won’t be pretty along the way.”³¹ At Pixar, their movies go through multiple drafts and revisions, and teams receive candid feedback from others to make sure the ideas are the best they can be. This resonated with

31 Ed Catmull and Amy Wallace, *Creativity, Inc.* (New York: Random House, 2014).

me because I think this is exactly opposite of how we too often expect learners to perform and to be perfect in school. Here's a scenario that I commonly see:

- Student receives an assignment
- Student maybe receives a rubric on how the assignment is graded
- Student is expected to do the assignment on their own in class or for homework
- Student is expected to turn in a perfect product
- Grade is given based on the expectations of completing the assignment
- Repeat

This is *not* teaching. This is evaluating.

Don't get me wrong; there is a place for evaluation, and it needs to happen sometimes, but it shouldn't be confused with or substituted for the learning process. We have this notion in education that "work" needs to be perfect when it's turned in. Sometimes it's the first time that the student has seen it with no opportunity for feedback or revision, but the assignment is graded and recorded, and we move on. When we organize classrooms and learning experiences this way, we communicate that intelligence is fixed and that you either know something or you don't, not that we can improve with effort.

My work has value to me.

I used to start the year with blank walls and have the students fill them as we learned and grew together as a community. I love it when I walk into a classroom or school, and I see pictures of students, their artwork, and evidence of their learning process. Honoring the unique talents and interests of the individuals you serve can help

them see that they belong in the community and have value. When we only focus on the end result, we fail to communicate to learners the importance of sharing ideas early, receiving feedback, and revising to improve. If we don't honor the learning process, we communicate that we either get it or we don't, and learners often fail to see how the work has value to them personally. And as a result, we are negatively impacting learners' confidence, creativity, and investment in their own learning and growth with an increasing focus on failure in the learning process. This is certainly part of learning, but the bigger picture to me is acknowledging that success isn't black and white. Learning is a process that takes time, effort, and growth to achieve success even when we don't see it. I have been thinking about how they approach their work at Pixar to ensure that the work that individuals do has value to them. They embody the Innovator's Mindset, a concept that George Couros defines as the belief in one's ability to develop talents and skills to create something new and better. What would it mean for classrooms if we acknowledged that ideas are often not perfect when they are first conceived; that first drafts aren't usually very good, and that we learn through the process of creating new and better ideas?

So if we go back to the initial scenario that I presented and apply the Innovator's Mindset, it might look something like this:

- Student chooses a problem to solve or investigate based on learning goals
- Student receives a rubric on how the assignment is graded or even better—it is co-created
- Student generates some ideas
- Student shares ideas with diverse people and receives feedback (kind, specific, and helpful)
- Student revises ideas and creates something new and better, repeating as necessary

- Student conferences with teacher for feedback based on learning goals and to determine next steps
- Student is expected to turn in a perfect product that demonstrates learning and growth based on learning goals
- Student receives feedback based on the expectations of learning goals
- Lessons learned are applied to new problems and ideas, and growth is documented along the way

In either scenario, you can replace student for a teacher, administrator, or any learner. If we are honest, anything that is worth doing and learning takes time, feedback, critique, and multiple revisions to improve. To maximize learning opportunities, not only do we need to allow room for mistakes, but we need to create a culture that relies on learning from others and build in opportunities to reflect, revise, and improve.

I don't teach it that way.

In a conversation with some teachers, we brainstormed ways to improve learning experiences in their classrooms. Although excited, they dismissed the new ideas as they were brought up because of having to keep up with the pacing guides and the fear of not meeting expectations of their colleagues or their administrator. Yet they were frustrated because they knew that their students needed something different. Boldly, another teacher countered, “I *don't* teach it that way.” All eyes quickly moved to her as she shared that instead of assuming that she wasn't allowed to do something in her classroom, she proactively approached her principal to share her ideas and described why she wanted to do something else.

Whether you realize it or not, both of these approaches require making a choice: to comply or to challenge the status quo. You

might think that following the rules is the easiest course of action, but it's not always as fulfilling or the best option for kids. As one teacher acknowledged in this conversation, "There is nothing worse than teaching something in the pacing guide when you know that there is a better way to teach it." I would argue that there is something worse: not doing it. If you know that there is a better way to meet the needs of learners, you owe it to them and yourself to try it.

What choice are you making?

For this to work, however, teachers have to trust themselves as the professionals they are and be willing to take risks. If you are doing something to truly make school better for kids, don't hide it. If you want to try something new, make your goals and your learning transparent—share your idea with your colleagues, communicate with your principal, talk to your students, ask for feedback, use it, and then share what you are learning.

What's Holding You Back?

How many times have you heard, "This is the way we have always done it"? These words plague education and prevent us from moving beyond the status quo. Seth Godin points out, "The status quo is safe, it's here, it's now, it's known, and it won't hurt us, not as much as the unknown future might hurt us." The fear of being wrong, not being enough, making mistakes, and sometimes even the fear of doing something great, prevents us from taking risks and putting our ideas out into the world. Every time someone holds back on a new idea or fails to try something new, ask for feedback, or offer ideas to improve an idea or product, we miss out on the opportunity to create something better for individuals, communities, and possibly the world. On the contrary, when learners are nurtured and their ideas are heard, they demonstrate a greater willingness to accept and solicit feedback.

If we don't have the right conditions and are afraid of the ramifications, we avoid trying new things, which means growth and development can be stunted. With the foundation of solid relationships, creating a culture that allows for risk-taking is foundational to innovation. Kaleb Rashad, an incredible person, leader, and Director of High Tech High, is intentional about creating a culture where teachers and students can take risks to be creative and innovative with what he calls the 3Ps: Permission, Protection, and reduction of Policies.

- **Permission**—Give people permission openly and remind them often that they have your permission to try new things in the best interests of the learners.
- **Protection**—Assure people that you will protect them when things go wrong. When you are trying something new, they will fail, and that has to be honored in the process.
- reduction of **Policies**—Remove barriers and policies that encumber people from putting innovative ideas into practice. Empower them to make choices within reasonable boundaries rather than creating hoops to jump through.

Permission, protection, and reduction of policies are important to create the conditions for those you serve to take risks, but changing these habits and behaviors that are deeply ingrained in a culture takes time. I have seen visionary leaders tell teachers that they have freedom to teach what they feel is best for their students and they are free from pacing guides only to be frustrated that many still cling to the pacing guides for fear of not doing it right or not being sure of the new way. It's hard to blame them. Many have been trained to do it this way and rewarded for being compliant in many cases. The same thing happens when teachers tell their students

that their projects are open ended and that they can explore topics of interest. Instead, students beg for the worksheet or the formula to just get it right rather than have to think and learn in a more ambiguous, unknown space. You can't tell people to do something different or simply give them permission without showing them that they are protected and actively work to remove the barriers. You have to intentionally create the culture of learning and innovation every day.

I would also add a fourth *P* to Kaleb's list that all of us need to embrace, which is to eliminate **Perfectionism**, an unattainable goal. If we expect perfection (or more accurately, the illusion of perfection) of ourselves or others, we are setting ourselves up for failure. Brené Brown describes it like this: "Perfectionism is not about striving for excellence. Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. *Perfectionism is a defensive move.* It is the belief that if we do things perfectly, and look perfect we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame."³² I had never thought about perfectionism as a defensive move, but it makes complete sense if you think about it. If you follow the pacing guide and teach by the book, you can't be blamed if your students don't succeed because you did what you were told to do. If students follow the formula and memorize all the answers for the test, they are safe because they did exactly what you told them. When we do things to please others and receive positive feedback for doing it right, it can be frightening to try something that is not tried and true with a clear recipe for pleasing others or being seen as perfect. This fear of the unknown can be crippling if you are used to operating in this perform, please, perfect cycle as Brené describes it. The risk can seem far greater than the reward.

Focusing on continuous growth over perfection in our schools will require deviating from the notion of best practices. The safe

32 Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness* (New York: Random House, 2017).

and perfected lessons that might have worked in the past might not be the best for the learners now. Consider some of the best practices that have shifted over time. It was once a best practice to put babies to sleep on their bellies, which we now know can be dangerous, so practices were updated with recommendations that babies sleep on their backs. When students misbehaved, best practices used to include paddling them. This is no longer looked upon favorably and is even against the law in many places. At one time, and in some places still might be, a best practice was giving ten minutes of homework per grade level, yet a great deal of research shows that this has little to no impact on student achievement. Will we continue to do this because it is a cultural norm, or will we push back to create better practices that meet the needs of learners today? Learner-centered innovation requires understanding the context, learning to improve, and assessing the impact of our practices on the learners we serve to determine what is working and what might be next.

The world is not linear, and the path to success is not a fixed trajectory. Our students will need to learn to navigate diverse and unfamiliar pathways for which no roadmaps exist, so our best bet is to start equipping them with the tools and dispositions to begin exploring with us by their sides. We would all be better off if we eliminated the notion of perfection and instead strove for continuous growth and improvement, not just for our own emotional well-being but to actually create better ideas and products. To illustrate this, a study shared in the book *Creative Confidence* by Tom and David Kelley³³ details that how we design learning experiences can impact how learners see their work and their ability to improve over time. In one class, half of the students were told they would be evaluated on the quality of a single clay pot due at the end of the

33 Tom Kelley and David Kelley, *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential within Us All* (New York William Collins, 2015).

class, and the other half of the class was told they'd be evaluated by how many pots they created. The first group attended to creating the best clay pot possible. The second group generated as many as they could. In the end, the group focused on creating more pieces had better pots than the group focused on creating the one, perfect piece. The group who made more pots actually spent more time iterating and improving their craft with each piece rather than just working on perfecting one piece. Continuous improvement is about seeking to learn and improve, whereas perfection is about pleasing others to earn approval. Does your culture empower learners and value growth and improvement over perfection?

What Kind of Culture Have You Created?

My hunch is that this teacher I described earlier who asked her principal to do something differently is probably a great teacher, but I also believe that she likely became that way, like so many great teachers I know, by trying new things and adapting to meet the needs of the learners in her class. How do you respond when you don't have all the answers? How often do we hold students back from doing great things and exploring their passions because we aren't sure of the outcome or it doesn't fit in the day's plan? Often in school, when we focus on answers and dismiss learners' unique ideas, we squelch creativity. Instead, encouraging learners to ask more questions, empathize with others, and seek problems to solve can kindle their creative spark. Culture is made up of the collective attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the group, and everyone contributes to this. If we want to create learning experiences that unleash the talent in all students, teachers, and administrators, we have to work together to push back against existing norms and traditions and intentionally design a culture that serves the larger goals. At the beginning of a meeting or on the first day of class, the leader commonly defines expectations and sets norms for how the group will work together. This is an

important step in setting up the culture, but it's more important to attend to how people act. Is everyone's voice honored? Are correct answers sought, or are questions encouraged?

You can't just do a lesson on growth mindset and expect it to change the culture. You have to align your words, expectations, and actions and live it every day. For example, I walked into one classroom where a whiteboard had a space for classroom wonderings. Some people responded or added more questions and ideas. You could tell questions were valued and actively encouraged. While in another classroom, students were asked to hold questions until the end of the lesson. I am fairly certain that both teachers want their students to believe their ideas matter and desire to foster excitement about learning, but this is much more likely to occur when the culture supports that type of learning. If people are afraid to try something new and are holding back ideas because it's not in the curriculum or wasn't part of the assignment, think of all of the opportunities for new and better learning that are squashed. If we create cultures where teachers don't feel like they have to ask for permission to deviate from the curriculum map but are empowered and held accountable to meet the shared goals in a way that meets the needs of the learners in their classrooms, imagine what is possible. If we really want creative, inspired learners in our classrooms, we have to design a culture to nurture this type of learning. Learning and innovation must be encouraged and supported for all learners, not just a few.

Concluding Thoughts

Examples abound of educators, who, like my husband, Matt, are frustrated by mandates, bureaucratic systems, and a lack of resources and support. You too might be frustrated with an ineffective system that moves uninspired and disconnected kids through school. But education doesn't have to be this way! The example of VIDA highlights the reality that a school's culture, which *everyone* helps to create, contributes to how teachers see their role and the impact they have on students. We all thrive when we feel valued and have positive relationships with colleagues at work. These relationships are also the most predictive of teachers' job satisfaction and intentions to stay in the teaching profession. If you think that relationships don't matter or that they will just happen, your culture will suffer. The shift at VIDA didn't happen by chance. They created a culture, a shared way of doing things, that valued people first and created the conditions for everyone to learn, develop, and grow. The following factors are critical to the culture of learning and innovation that facilitated change in VIDA's practices:

- Emphasis on relationships to meet the needs of the learners and align school with the world in which they live
- High expectations with support and inspiration from colleagues and administration
- Autonomy to take risks and create amazing opportunities for learners

If you see your role as learning, teaching, and leading to create opportunities for students above focusing on test scores or managing programs, you too can create the kind of environment where people feel valued, cared for, and empowered to learn and make an impact. And the ultimate result is improved student outcomes.



Reflect and Connect Challenge
Share your thoughts, questions, and ideas using
#LCInnovation

- How would people describe the culture of your school? Are you okay with that message?
- Does your culture support the type of learning that you value? What steps might you take to shift the culture?
- Do the 4Ps, permission, protection, and reduction of policies, and elimination of perfection, exist in your culture? How can you support and model these practices?
- Does your culture value and promote growth and development for all learners?



Katie Martin

DR. KATIE MARTIN is the head of partnerships for the Western United States at AltSchool. Her work has centered on developing partnerships with diverse districts to learn and share how to create the conditions to support the evolving role of the educator. Her focus is on shifting pedagogy to inspire deeper learning and leveraging technology to ensure the best possible classroom and life experiences for all learners.



Katie has a bachelor's degree and master's degree in middle school education, and her PhD specializes in new-teacher induction and ongoing support to impact teacher efficacy. She has served as middle school English language arts teacher, instructional coach, and led the district new-teacher mentoring program; additionally, she enjoys teaching graduate classes in diverse education programs.

A leader, teacher, and speaker, Katie's experience in research and practice guide her belief that if we want to change how students learn, we must change how educators learn. She aspires to do that by creating experiences that empower all learners to develop knowledge, skills, and mindsets to thrive in a changing world. As a mom, she wants her kids to have learning experiences in school that build on their strengths and interests, and she is passionate about making sure educators are equipped to that for all kids.

Connect with Katie

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What if education could be better—for students and for educators?

Our changing world demands creative thinkers and collaborative problem solvers, but too often, schools stifle growth and discovery in favor of getting through the curriculum or preparing for “the test.” Learning opportunities and teaching methods must evolve to match the ever-changing needs of today’s learners.

When we tell learners to complete an assignment, we get compliance. When we empower kids to explore and learn how to make an impact on the world, we inspire problem solvers and innovators. This required change in education involves more than providing training for administrators and teachers to implement new curriculum or programs and resources; it demands that we, as teachers and leaders, create an environment where learners at every level are empowered to take risks in pursuit of learning and growth rather than perfection.

This book is for you if you are wondering . . .

What if learners were valued for their diverse talents and not just our traditional model of “smart”?

What if I could create new and better experiences for those I serve?

What if I could inspire students to learn, to discover their passions, and to share their ideas with the world?



“Katie not only provides an analysis of what’s (glaringly) wrong in education, she also paints a bright vision for what’s possible and provides a practical roadmap for how we might get there.”

—Kaleb Rashad, director, High Tech High, San Diego

“In *Learner-Centered Innovation*, Martin eloquently shares evidence-based, practical ways to ignite curiosity, develop passions, and unleash student genius through the types of learning experiences that today’s modern learners need to thrive in tomorrow’s world.”

—Thomas C. Murray, director of innovation, Future Ready Schools

“*Learner-Centered Innovation* is an inspirational call to action for all educators who dream of a brighter future for our children.”

—Devlin Vodicka, chief impact officer, AllSchool

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