# The Accessible Learning ExperienceS.02, Ep.03: Family Engagement & Inclusive Technology Practices

Luis Pérez: Welcome to The Accessible Learning Experience, where we help you turn learning barriers into learning opportunities. On this episode, we'll focus on the work of CITES, the Center on Inclusive Technology and Education Systems at CAST. The mission of CITES is to empower school districts to create and sustain inclusive technology systems that serve all students, including students with disabilities who require assisted technology or accessible educational materials. After a brief introduction to the CITES framework, which includes family engagement as one of its inclusive practices, we'll hear from this month's guest, Yokasta Urena. Yokasta will share her perspectives on family engagement as both the parent of a student with a disability and as a professional in the field of education. The CITES framework includes practices to support inclusive technology systems, including practices focused on leadership, infrastructure, teaching, learning, assessment, and family engagement. Why family engagement? The research is clear.

Implementing strong, authentic family engagement practices has a positive impact across the board for educators, families, and learners themselves. Because of the demonstrated impacts and benefits of implementing family engagement practices, our federal partners encourage their use in law. ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires schools to meaningfully engage the parents of all students and ensure they're giving input and influence in decision making. Taking that commitment a step further, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, requires that parents of students with disabilities are full and equal participants in their child's individualized education program. But special educators or even classroom educators in general aren't the only district services interfacing with families these days. Barriers for families and learners who use technology, particularly students with disabilities and their families arise at every level of this system. Direct service providers, paraprofessionals, classroom volunteers, teacher librarians, instructional coaches, and help desk folks can all be part of designing and delivering technology to students and families to access learning.

It is with this concept in mind that the CITES family engagement practices elevate this critical piece of district technology implementation across the five areas of the CITES framework: leadership, infrastructure, teaching, learning, and assessment. Unearthing these practices started with a literature review, then a landscape analysis serving over 300 family members of students with disabilities, and finally focus groups with families and interviews with district teams that focus on quality family engagement. We invite you to learn more about the work of CITES on family engagement through the links in the show notes for this episode, or by visiting the CITES website at CITES, C-I-T-E-S.cast.org. With this introduction to the work of CITES on family engagement, let's now hear from Yokasta as she shares her perspective on this topic. Hi, Yokasta, it's so great to have you on The Accessible Learning Experience. Let's get started by having you introduce yourself and tell us what is your accessibility story.

Yokasta Urena: Hi everyone. My name is Yokasta Urena. I am the daughter of immigrant parents from the Dominican Republic. I was born in New York, but I was raised between Dominican Republic and New York City. My accessibility journey has been a very interesting one. For my early years and into junior high school and high school, I had no accessibility during my schooling. Basically, my accommodations for my visual impairment consisted of a monocular, which is basically like a binocular, but for one eye and carbon paper. So I had a note taker who would take notes and give me a copy of the notes. If my note taker was out, guess what? I was out of luck.

So I want to go back for a second and just speak a little bit about my visual impairment. So I have a condition called Leber congenital amaurosis, and this condition basically affects the rods and the cones and the retina. Their main function is to capture light, perceive light, and transmit that to the brain. I'm very photophobic. I use sunglasses outside because I'm very sensitive to light, and I'm also nearsighted. I use a cane in certain circumstances. I don't use it all the time. I use it to travel, mainly when I'm traveling internationally, because I don't know the layout and the landscape.

Luis Pérez: And I understand you also use a number of accessibility features in your technology. Tell us about that.

Yokasta Urena: I also use technology functions such as Zoom, VoiceOver, inverted contrast. VoiceOver is a technology that allows you...allows someone with visual impairment to listen to the information that's on the screen. But what becomes challenging for someone with low vision, such as myself, is that not every webpage has the function available for us to use VoiceOver. So for example, if the webpage is not coded to allow VoiceOver, VoiceOver will not work and I will not be able to access that page. It's really important for content creators, businesses, and organizations that are putting out information to make sure that their web page allows for VoiceOver, because if it doesn't allow for VoiceOver, then I will just move on to another page and use that information that is accessible to me.

Luis Pérez: Thank you so much, Yokasta, for that introduction and for highlighting the need for accessibility. And of course, on the AEM Center website, which we can share in the show notes, we have lots of information on how you can improve the accessibility of the content you create so that it works with VoiceOver. So I'm really excited for this conversation because you and I share a lot in common. You're the child of Dominican immigrants. I am a Dominican immigrant, and I also have a visual impairment that's very similar to yours in that it affects the retina and it affects the ability to capture light. But, you know, both of us have been able to find success in school and in the workplace. So tell me a little bit about what you're doing now in terms of your career and some of your achievements.

Yokasta Urena: So when I came back from Dominican Republic on one of my many trips back and forth, my year of college was not accepted in the United States, so I had to go back to school and get a GED. There's nothing wrong with getting a GED if that's where you are in your life, but it was very difficult for me because I saw myself going into a four year college. That was not possible. I had to get a GED and get an associate's degree and get my bachelor's in psychology, master's in education, a few postgraduate degrees in the field of education, early childhood special ed, teacher for the blind and visually impaired. And now I'm in an ED doctorate program at New England College.

My journey in education has been a long journey, and it's been arduous with a lot of hiccups in terms of accessibility, but with every step I've taken, I've just become more determined to be at the leadership level. I want to see more change in the area of special needs and accessibility. And I feel that the only way I can do that is if I'm at the table making decisions, helping districts, helping organizations to really understand that accessibility helps us all. So right now, in terms of work, I'm working on the ED doctorate. I'm also an early intervention service provider, so I work with children zero to three years old, providing direct intervention and also as a teacher for the blind and visually impaired.

Luis Pérez: Well, I would say your experiences give you a very rich experience and background to draw upon for your work that you do, and we really appreciate it. And there's another wrinkle to your experience in that you are the parent of a child that has a disability as well. Can you tell us a little bit about that and then we'll move into the topic for this episode, which is really the importance of family engagement.

Yokasta Urena: Yes. So Liam, I can blame him for going into special education. I was actually a psychology major. I wanted to be a clinical psychologist and possibly open my own practice. But when my son was born also with Lebers, it completely changed my career track. I saw how difficult it was to navigate the system as a parent. I saw the way that sometimes professionals spoke to me as a young mother with a disability, with a child with a disability, and I felt that I wanted to become his advocate and that I wanted to feel more, feel a sense of power. So I went into education and received my master's in education mainly to support him and his journey as a student with a disability and also as a Latino in the United States.

Luis Pérez: Well, I would say that thank you, Liam, for inspiring you to continue your work as an educator. And I'm sure that many other children over the time that you've worked in education definitely are grateful for that career move. So we want to get into the family engagement piece. As you said, your work is inspired by the fact that you yourself are a parent of a child with a disability. So why is family engagement so critical for students and teachers?

Yokasta Urena: Well, family engagement really breeds collaboration. I think that very few teachers would disagree with me when I say that having parents involved and engaged in classroom life and in understanding what teachers are doing in the classroom only helps the teachers and the administrators run their classrooms and their school smoothly. Because when there's buy-in from the family, there's collaboration. Parents feel that everyone is on the same team and that the main goal of the educators in their children's lives are to really help the student reach their fullest potential.

Luis Pérez: If you had to share two or three tips that you could say to a teacher or a fellow educator that would promote family engagement, what would be those top three tips?

Yokasta Urena: My first tip when it comes to family engagement is keep yourself in check. And I do this myself, right? Keep your ego in check. I try to keep my ego in check as much as possible because no matter how many degrees or certifications I have, I am not that child's parent. And we as human beings have the mama bear and the papa bear syndrome in us. When we feel attacked or we feel that our child is being attacked, we are going to react. So when you speak to a parent of a child that is struggling in your classroom, be very mindful of your tone, your body language, the volume of your voice. When a parent feels attacked, they shut down. And sometimes it's not our intention as teachers. Teachers are multitasking. We have a lot of things on our minds, lot of things on our plate.

So sometimes we're not aware of how we're interacting with a family. Many times we're interacting with a family at the end of the school day and we're stressed and all these things have, people have called out and we're short staffed. But please keep in mind that that parent is there to support their child. And if they mistake your tone for anything less than cooperative and collaborative, they will shut down. So keep your ego in check is number one.

Number two, have an open door policy as much as possible. I've found over the years that having an open door policy actually helps me. It makes my job easier. When parents tell me what's happening with their child, I don't have to guess. So it really eliminates all the guesswork when I have open communication with parents. And the third piece of that kind of goes along with open door policy is include your families in your classroom community. I teach early childhood, so I have more fun I think, than the kids do. I try to create events where I can invite families. Now that we have Zoom and that we have Google Meets, the events can also be virtual. Try to find ways, creative ways, to include families in your classroom life. They can be readers, they can be guest speakers, they can work on STEM projects with your students. You just don't know how rich of a culture you have in your classroom unless you extend that invitation to parents.

Luis Pérez: Excellent advice. I would encourage everyone to take those three tips, these three excellent tips into consideration as you think about how to better engage families. So in addition to all the other things that you have going on, I understand that you worked for CAST a little bit as an intern supporting the family engagement research that has been done through the Center on Inclusive Technology and Education Systems, or CITES. So as you participated in that research, what did you learn? What did you take away from it? Were there any surprises that you want to share?

Yokasta Urena: Wow, I took a lot away from CAST. I've been in education roughly 20 years now in many different roles. I've been a parent coordinator, so I've worked very, very closely with families over the year. I've been an advocate for students with special needs. I've been a classroom teacher, an independent service provider. So I've worn many, many hats, but I've worked many times on the side of the families and the students. So I had a view of education as one big system. I didn't really see it in terms of the CITES framework where education is really broken up into sections, like leadership and infrastructure.

That was my biggest wow moment, right? That a leader in a school could have the best intentions for your child and he or she may want to get the accessibility technology for your child, but they may not be connected to the infrastructure piece or the communication between leadership and where the infrastructure is coming from may be fractured. That was something that I never really thought about. I put a lot of the ownership on the school principal, and through my internship with CAST, I realized that there are many systems at play in special education. It is not just the principal. The district plays a huge role in what happens at the school level.

Luis Pérez: Thank you, Yokasta for sharing that. And we will share in the show notes a link to the research related to family engagement from CITES. But I just want to follow up by asking you, how do you think that the CITES family engagement practices and the resources from CITES can impact schools and districts?

Yokasta Urena: Well, I love the resources from the CITES website. For example, under the family engagement practices, we have the self-assessment and goal setting. I think that this gives schools and districts an opportunity to become increasingly more self-reflective in terms of how they are engaging with families. This is a great opportunity to really hone in on what is the school doing, right, as a community to engage families in conversations around accessibility. And I think it's almost like a safe space because this self-assessment can really be done privately as a school. So there isn't this fear of like, 'Well, how are we going to look to the district?' or, 'How are we going to look to parents?' You can have an internal conversation with your staff and your parents in your own school and then take it up a notch and engage other schools in the district in this self-assessment.

I think it's a great tool to really think about, reflectively, what are we doing right? Where can we improve? So it's a good way to be self-reflective and not feel like you're under a microscope, but really look at it from a school community or, if you're ready, at the district level to look at how your district is doing in comparison to itself. Really, how were you doing last year? How are you doing this year? It's a great way to keep track of data in relation to how you're engaging families.

Luis Pérez: And we'll go ahead and share the family engagement literature review that CITES has done as one of the resources in the show notes. And we also encourage everybody to visit the CITES website. Yokasta, you do such great work. So how can people stay in touch? Where can they find you?

Yokasta Urena: Well, I'm trying to become more social media savvy, so for now you can find me on Instagram @beyond20201. So it's beyond 2020 and the number one at the end of that.

Luis Pérez: Great. And I encourage everyone to follow you, and I can't wait for you to finish your doctorate and all of the great work that you're going to do in promoting accessibility, promoting greater family engagement, and just moving the conversation forward so that the needs and the preferences of people with disabilities like ourselves are more part of the learning environment, are more considered when designing learning environment. So Yokasta, thank you so much for joining us on this episode of The Accessible Learning Experience. It's been a lot of fun having you on it.

Yokasta Urena: Thank you so much for having me.

Luis Pérez: Thanks for tuning in to this episode of The Accessible Learning Experience, brought to you by the National Center on Accessible Educational Materials at CAST. You can find us on the web at aem.cast.org. There you'll find show notes with links to all of the resources mentioned on each episode. Thanks again for listening and remember, accessibility is everyone's responsibility.

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