

A Needed Formula for Youth Success

Equity Driven, Science Informed

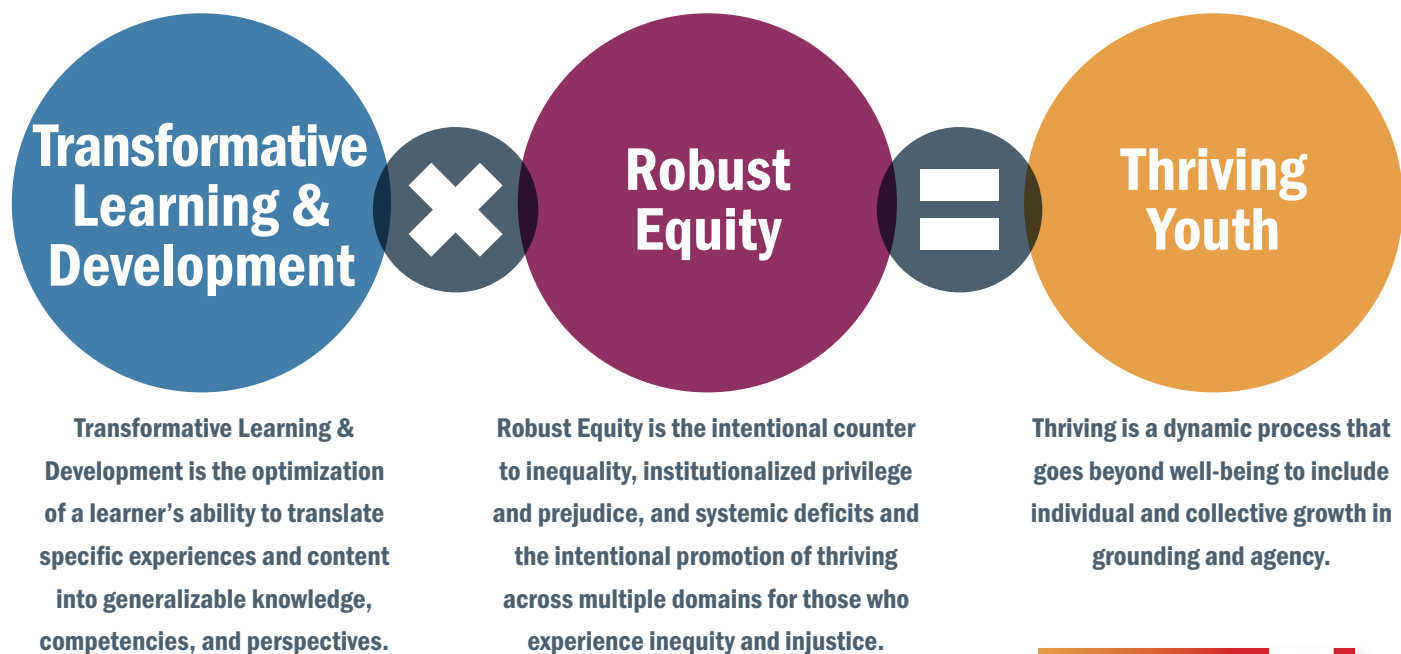
Each and every young person has great potential to thrive.

The potential for thriving is universal, but so is the existence of adversity. Young people can overcome adversities, but the ease of doing so is not equally shared. Opportunity structures – in schools, communities, and society – make it easier for some youth to avoid or buffer the impacts of adversity than others.

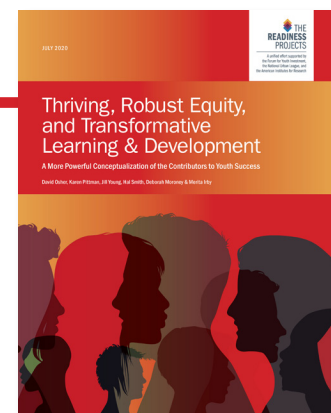
COVID-19 and the renewed attention on racial injustice thrust the country into long-overdue debates about how (not whether) to dismantle systemic, institutional inequities that are literally taking the lives of Black Americans and other people of color. Systemic changes are needed in every system – not just law enforcement and education. Educational equity cannot be achieved without a focus on racial equity.

The formula is greater than the parts.

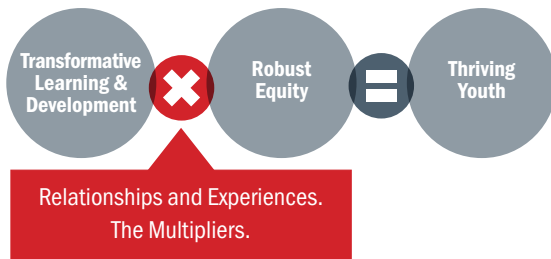
Developing more powerful definitions of thriving, equity, and learning and development, and considering them together enriches our understanding of each. In doing so we can leverage recent syntheses of the science of adolescence, the science of learning and development, and the impacts of institutionalized inequities and emphasize the fact that children and adolescents can realize their potential and thrive.



This brief summarizes key elements from the July 2020 paper, Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning & Development: A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success by David Osher, Karen Pittman, Jill Young, Hal Smith, Deborah Moroney & Merita Irby.



The Critical Multiplier



Formulas describe the relationships between independent and dependent variables. A good formula is a concise way to declare a goal and propose a strategy for achieving it.

The terms “thriving,” “equity,” and “learning and development” (linked together) are frequently found in the same sentence, especially when the topic is education. The relationship between the terms, however, is not always clear. Thriving, equity, learning, and development are connected to different goals and, by association, different systems: thriving with health; equity with racial justice and economics; learning with education; and development with developmental science. More

complete, nuanced and scientifically grounded definitions can highlight the dynamic interrelationships among thriving, equity, and learning and development in ways that should inform policies and practices.

The multiplier insert included with this formula emphasizes the fact that schools supplemented by a host of other organizations – including libraries, museums, employment training programs, community, faith and civic organizations – have been charged with or have taken on responsibility for creating structured experiences that support learning and development in different contexts with different content.

A concerted effort to not only increase the quality and quantity of intentional relationships and experiences created by adults in these organizations is critically needed but not sufficient. There is ample evidence that efforts within systems will be more successful if system leaders and staff are guided to recognize the fact that they and the young people they engage with are a part of a dynamic learning and development ecosystem.

The term ecosystem is frequently used to acknowledge the range of **settings where children, youth, and families live, learn, work, play, and make meaning.**

Relationships are the fuel for brain development.

Relationships shape the developing mind, buffer the effects of stress and ignite learning processes. The moment is now to reach young people experiencing trauma and reshape their future trajectory. A young person’s success is linked to their capacity to thrive – to feel, be, and be seen as competent in multiple life domains – and is a product of their opportunities to develop individual competencies and experience supportive conditions. Adults can support young people to succeed and thrive through life by helping them develop their individual competencies, and also by providing supportive conditions while also working with them and their families to address historical and institutional barriers.

A commitment to aggressively expand access to equitable learning environments is simply an imperative. In schools and across communities, we must align the opportunities for youth that focus on thriving, optimize transformative learning, enhance development, and address multiple determinants of inequity.

The science of learning and development presents many powerful lessons that can transform education systems, advance equity, and can help every young person thrive.

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Beyond Learning...Thriving



A unified effort supported by
the Forum for Youth Investment,
the National Urban League, and
the American Institutes for Research



American Institutes for Research colleagues
David Osher and Jill Young led the development of a
research synthesis paper for the Readiness Projects.

THE ESSENTIALS:

Thriving should be the goal for all youth.

Research confirms that thriving is more than a status or a state of well-being in a single area (e.g., health). Thriving reflects a significant sense of growth or success in and across any number of domains (e.g., academic, social, emotional). Within the context of their cultural references, thriving youth are doing well in multiple domains and struggling in few if any.

Thriving is influenced by internal characteristics and attributes and external conditions.

Young people with access to more and better resources (opportunities/advantages) are more likely to thrive than their peers with similar adaptive skills. Concomitantly, young people who have developed resiliency are better equipped to overcome adversity and take advantage of scarce opportunities than their peers with less developed skills.

Characteristics and conditions interrelate – each influences the other through the common door of experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's seminal research describes how a young person's characteristics are not only influenced by their experiences but also influence the adults who shaped the experiences.

These characteristics and conditions can be improved independently with intentional investments.

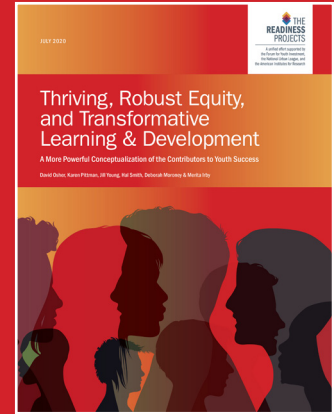
Individual characteristics and external conditions naturally change over time. They can also be improved by design. Young people, especially in their adolescent years, can use the foundations laid for them with adults to make intentional choices and undertake efforts to build skills and competencies needed to experience agency even in the face of adversity. Systems and communities can make intentional efforts to address social and economic inequities.

These intentional investments must be designed to fundamentally enhance the everyday relationships and experiences of all youth.

It is the intentionality of these experiences and the relationships with adults and peers within them that multiplies their impact to transform the learning and create the equity that leads to youth thriving.

Beyond Business as Usual for Youth Success

Conclusions from the paper **Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning & Development: A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success**



Changing business is not just changing the actions or intentions of individuals (e.g. teachers, youth workers, police and security officers). It requires systemic efforts at every level of intervention that ensure that every adult 1) understands how relationships and experiences across contexts drive learning and development, 2) recognizes the power they have to influence youth thriving and success, 3) is empowered to create opportunities and nurturant for transformative learning and development that support inclusivity and robust educational equity, and 4) uses that power in support of thriving and robust equity.

Relationship-rich settings that support transformative learning and development optimize two strategic approaches:

Opportunities for Transformative Learning & Development

Youth benefit from transformative opportunities for learning and development that provide and support:

- ▶ **Meaningful work**
- ▶ **Inquiry as a major learning and development strategy.**
- ▶ **Well-designed collaborative learning and development opportunities and service-learning projects**
- ▶ **Formative assessments and timely, supportive feedback**
- ▶ **Opportunities to develop metacognitive skills**
- ▶ **Opportunities to develop and use social, emotional, and cognitive skills**
- ▶ **Opportunities for critical analysis to challenge biases in knowledge sources, learning opportunities and skill assessment**
- ▶ **Challenging biases and segregated thinking**

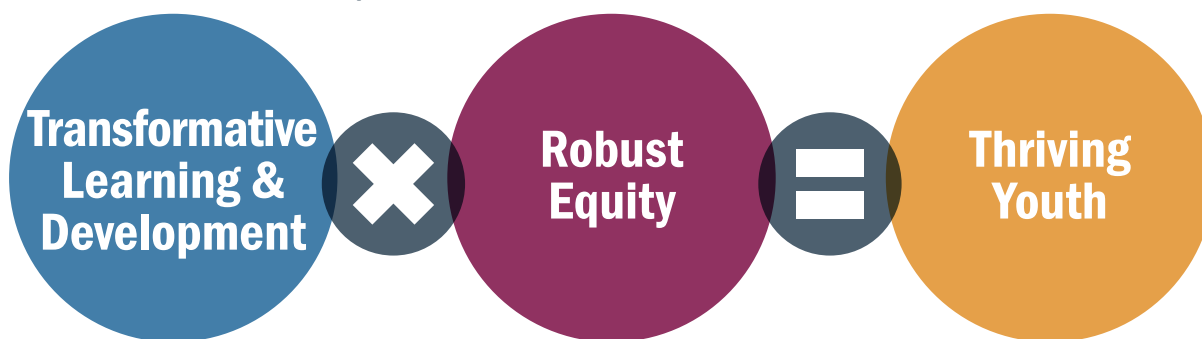
Supportive Conditions for Learning and Development

Relationship rich settings build supportive conditions for learning and development. These conditions reflect and contribute to the dynamic interaction of everybody. They include organizational (or group/family) culture, rules and how they are developed and enforced, the physical environment including greenspace, the supports available to young people and adults, the way in which these supports are organized, and the social and emotional conditions for learning and development.

The social and emotional conditions for learning & development include:

- ▶ **Safety**
- ▶ **Connectedness**
- ▶ **Support**
- ▶ **Challenge**
- ▶ **Peer and adult social and emotional competence**
- ▶ **Cultural competence and responsiveness**

A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success



Transformative Learning & Development

is the optimization of a learner's ability to translate specific experiences and content into generalizable knowledge, competencies, and perspectives.

The powerful definition of learning is:

- ▶ Broader than schooling
- ▶ Intertwined with development
- ▶ Adolescent learning and development is critical to individual and collective thriving

Young people's sense of themselves as a learner is:

- ▶ Shaped by their experiences of having or building the competencies needed to respond, adapt, achieve
- ▶ Influenced by messages received from others
- ▶ Anchored in the confidence that they have the ability to develop and a key role to play in it
- ▶ Enhanced by their ability, as a part of belonging to an identified group, to make collective meaning of their experiences

Leaders acknowledge:

- ▶ Transformative learning & development can occur in all environments if the adults in these environments are intentionally equipped to optimize experiences the potential for learning in all contexts
- ▶ Transformative learning & development is youth-driven
- ▶ Transformative learning & development is culturally responsive

Robust Equity is the intentional counter to inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits and the intentional promotion of thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice.

The powerful definition of equity is:

- ▶ Built on the basics – countering inequality and institutionalized privilege and prejudice, addressing contextual deficits, and creating conditions that support well-being
- ▶ But also multi-dimensional – mindful of overall thriving, and how well-being in one area (e.g., housing) contributes to well-being in others (e.g., health)
- ▶ Cumulative – rooted in historical awareness, with a commitment to long-term, complex change

Young people's sense of themselves as a learner is:

- ▶ Influenced by the degree to which they and their peers have needed experiences and relationships
- ▶ Informed by their awareness and experience of how their groups are treated

Leaders acknowledge:

- ▶ Focus on thriving, not just surviving
- ▶ Create access and accountability working from the margins into the mainstream
- ▶ Surface and address complexity – across systems, across domains of development, and over time

Thriving is a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual and collective growth in grounding and agency.

A powerful definition of thriving is:

- ▶ Strengths-based – more than well-being, resilience
- ▶ Multi-dimensional – reflecting growth or success in any number of domains from physical to economic to spiritual
- ▶ Linked to key internal and external characteristics and assets that interrelate to enable or thwart progress

Young people's sense of themselves as a learner is:

- ▶ Summative, reflecting an overall sense of well-being and future success or growth
- ▶ Relational, reflecting an individual's sense of connection to others
- ▶ Calibrated to cultural lenses and social networks
- ▶ Adjusted over time as experiences and perceptions change

Leaders acknowledge:

- ▶ Establish well-being as a threshold
- ▶ Affirm the importance of resiliency as a socially supported individual response to adversity
- ▶ Create explicit accountability for strengthening individual and group capacities to thrive

New Definitions Driven by Equity; Informed by Science

Transformative Learning & Development

Transformative Learning & Development is the optimization of a learner's ability to translate specific experiences and content into generalizable knowledge, competencies, and perspectives.

The term learning means more than schooling and academics.

School systems are uniquely designed to support learning and development. At their best, they create stable learning communities to which children and youth bring their whole selves, work to become their best selves and realize their connections to their communities. Accountability for academic content knowledge acquisition has led to a focus on teaching over learning.

Learning and development are uniquely intertwined human processes. Physical development continues into the teen years. Brain development continues into the mid-twenties. Learning begins immediately and continues throughout the life span, with heightened opportunities to shape and develop social, emotional and cognitive skills occurring in early childhood and adolescence.

Adolescent learning and development is critical to individual and collective thriving. Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity. Adolescent brains are adapting to the developmental tasks of this stage of life. Adolescents are drawn to novel experiences. Adolescents are highly sensitive to respect. Adolescents are a force for good. Adolescence starts earlier than we think and lasts longer than it used to.

An individual young person's sense of themselves as a learner is:

Shaped by their experiences of being asked to use the capacities and motivation they need to respond, adapt, and achieve in different situations. Learning is activated by relationships and strengthened by application in everyday experiences.

Anchored in the confidence that they have the ability to develop and a key role to play in it. These enable young people to develop positive mindsets; self-awareness, perspective taking and compassion; build senses of identity and purpose; self-awareness and compassion, agency and hope; imagine a future self and community; experience spiritual and cultural grounding, connectedness, and civic engagement, awe and wonder along with aesthetic, kinesthetic; design, and expressive opportunities and to use creativity and critical thinking.

Enhanced by their ability, as a part of belonging to an identified group, to make collective meaning of their experiences. Meaning that helps them build portable

Leaders of transformative learning acknowledge:

Transformative learning and development can occur in all environments if the adults in these environments are intentionally equipped to optimize experiences that address: a) the potential all children and youth have to succeed and the inherent unevenness of learning, b) the role that social, emotional and cognitive needs play not only in supporting content learning but in developing complex skills needed to thrive, c) the importance of environments, experiences and cultures in shaping learning and development, and d) the transformative power of developmental relationships which the Search Institute defines as relationships that express care, challenge growth, provide supports, share power and expand possibilities.

Transformative learning and development is youth-driven. Youth learn with and from each other. They learn and develop best in environments that provide rich opportunities marked by physical, emotional, psychological, identity, and intellectual safety, support and connectedness, challenges and engagement, and support for developing transformative social and emotional skills and dispositions and includes spiritual, kinesthetic, and aesthetic dimensions.

Transformative learning and development is culturally responsive. It addresses the youth as a whole person, and as a member of a family and community that have histories. Context is crucial for learning and development. Context is affected by individual thriving, collective thriving and equity, and by the well-being and capacity of the adults who support youth.

New Definitions Driven by Equity; Informed by Science

Robust Equity

Robust Equity is the intentional counter to inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits and the intentional promotion of thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice.

Built on the basics – countering inequality and institutionalized privilege and prejudice, addressing contextual deficits, and creating conditions that support overall well-being. The terms equity and equality are not the same. Equity is more than a commitment to equal access to content, supports and effective teaching. Equal access to one service (e.g. AP classes) without attention to issues of identity, stereotype threat, implicit bias, unmet mental health needs, and unequal opportunities to learn make it unlikely that all are equally able to participate – emotionally and cognitively – and, therefore, will not result in equitable outcomes.

Multi-dimensional – mindful of overall thriving, and how well-being in one area (e.g., housing) contributes to well-being in others (e.g., health). Efforts to achieve equity in a single area or to reduce disparities between populations will be limited, and often unsuccessful, as these domains interact at an individual, group, and social system levels. For example, housing inequities contribute to health and educational inequities. Robust commitments to equity in any domain incorporate all thriving across all domains and address both the individual and collective dimensions of thriving.

Cumulative – rooted in historical awareness, with a commitment to long-term, complex change. Even though equity decisions may focus on one outcome or apply to one domain or system at one moment in time, the results of these decisions are affected by individual and collective equity status in other dimensions and over time (e.g., income security vs. wealth accumulation). Hence it is important that decisions take into account cross system and domain effects and address how these accumulate over time and lead to longer-term consequences.

An individual young person's sense of robust equity is:

Influenced by the degree to which they and their peers have the experiences and relationships they need to learn and develop.

Young people experience equity when they are assured that they and their peers benefit from development-rich environments that are culturally responsive and respect young people's efforts to make meaning based on lived experiences.

Informed by their awareness and experience of how groups they are a part of are treated. Identity development is informed by young people's unique individual experiences in the world, their experiences as a member of groups, and the sense they and others who matter to them make of these experiences. Their sense of equity is shaped by the degree to which they encounter inequality and institutionalized privilege and prejudice.

Leaders of robust equity acknowledge:

Focus on thriving, not just surviving. Robust equity-oriented strategies – in addition to intentionally countering inequality and institutionalized privilege and prejudice, addressing contextual deficits, and creating conditions that support overall well-being -- also ensure access to experiences that give all young people opportunities to build upon and communal assets and make changes that can transform their lives individually and collectively.

Create access and accountability working from the margins into the mainstream. Ensure that marginalized individuals and communities thrive and have access to mechanisms to achieve social mobility by giving them voice. Create integrated opportunities for groups to name their realities, address how systems of oppression play out, and develop solutions that draw upon and build individual and collective strengths. These might include resources, histories, and understandings that are not valued by systems but are tied to their sense of culture, belonging, and connectedness.

Surface and address complexity – across systems, across domains of development, and over time. Inequities were not created overnight. They are baked in deeply into policies and procedures in multiple systems that have come to inform public and professional perceptions of what different groups and communities can do. Robust solutions have to acknowledge history and anticipate the need to work across systems to create stable, sustainable solutions that the clear paths to young adulthood.

New Definitions Driven by Equity; Informed by Science

Thriving Youth

Thriving is a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual and collective growth in grounding and agency.

The term thriving is strengths-based. It is more than being competent, resilient, and without problems. It is how a person is in the moment, as well as on their path towards optimal development. Thriving is more than being well, it is a sense of doing well. Resilience and well-being are necessary but not sufficient conditions for thriving; rather too often they set a lower and inadequate threshold.

Thriving is a multi-dimensional concept. Reflecting growth or success in any number of domains from physical to economic to spiritual.

Thriving is linked to key internal and external characteristics and assets. Thriving involves social, emotional and cognitive competencies, skills, and dispositions. Other things being equal, resilient, competent youth are more likely to report a sense of thriving at any point in time because they have more capacity to respond to adversity and take advantage of opportunities. Thriving, however, is also related to the social and physical environment: there is a dynamic relationship between and among individual, collective, and environmental thriving.

An individual young person's sense of thriving is:

Summative, reflecting an overall sense of well-being and future success or growth. Thriving is context dependent, and contextual factors promote, accelerate, or constrain thriving. Resilience and well-being are important parts of the thriving journey, because adversity is normative, and trauma and ill-being undermine thriving.

Relational, reflecting an individual's sense of connection to others. Thriving involves children, youth, and adults supporting each other both in every moment as well as over time in dynamic relationship with each other and to culture, social structures, and the physical environment.

Calibrated to cultural lenses and social networks. An individual's situation, including their cultural lenses and their social networks and other reference points, influences which thriving domains (e.g., academic achievement, sports) they see as important, relevant and consistent with their view of success.

Adjusted over time as experiences and perceptions change. Since people learn over time, encounter new situations, and may shift or broaden identities, their perceptions of thriving may also change.

Leaders promoting a robust adoption of thriving acknowledge:

Establish well-being as a threshold. Robust equity efforts have overall thriving – not just well-being in one domain or equalized odds for success between specific groups – as a goal. Practice-focused systems should establish well-being as a bottom-line goal in the life domains for which they have accountability (e.g., health, academic competence, employment). They should incorporate thriving as a multi-dimensional goal towards which they are contributing and, equally important, against which they are not inadvertently doing harm.

Affirm the importance of resiliency as a socially supported individual response to adversity. Considering thriving when we address equity necessitates addressing physical and social emotional and economic wellness. Considering thriving when we support learning necessitates focusing on learning across all parts of a youth's life; providing culturally responsive youth driven conditions for learning and the development of portable assets that support agency, engagement, meaning making.

Create explicit accountability for strengthening individual and group capacities to thrive. Since individuals' sense of thriving is calibrated to their cultural contexts, individuals' capacity and motivation to thrive is enhanced when they experience their efforts as both aligned with, and contributing to, that of the groups with which they identify. Acknowledging individual, group, and cultural identity, history and perspectives is therefore a critical indicator of a robust commitment to youth thriving.