

It Takes an Ecosystem: Understanding the People, Places, and Possibilities of Learning and Development Across Settings

Reviewed by Neil MacNeill



**It Takes an Ecosystem:
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One of the major problems in education is that we have been ploughing the same ground for hundreds of years, and have become preoccupied with finessing introspections of the little variations that regularly coincide with political election cycles and machinations. *It Takes an Ecosystem* is a timely wake-up call to everyone involved in education because it points out an aspect of education that morally needs rethinking. The neglect of youth education is appalling because this is a time when students' life prospects are being cast, and a failure here condemns some students to a life on the outside, which is not a cost that any caring family, society, or country, should have to bear. Turning every page of this book is an experience of reading an expose of the "Matthew effect" (Boyd & MacNeill, 2020) at work in sidelining an area of education that desperately needs support.

Some years ago, I was the principal of an elementary school in a remote Indigenous community, and at the school's recess time, when the prison truck that was transporting Indigenous prisoners to daily community work-tasks went past, everyone waved and the prisoners waved back. "There

is my brother.” “There’s my cousins.” All of the students knew the mainly teenaged prisoners and there was no shame, because being jailed was almost a *rite of passage* for these young men who had never finished high school. If there were ever a need to support the intent of *It Takes an Ecosystem*, then provocative images like this push the educationally accepted moral inequities into the readers’ faces.

What hit me, as a reader, was the palpable enthusiasm of the authors’ messages, and the infusion of new blood into educational thought. Interestingly, the book title is a play on words of the commonly quoted Nigerian aphorism: “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” It is unusual to pick up a newspaper these days and not find a major reference to ecological issues that influence public concerns. The authors’ resurrection and adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory gives thoughtful credence to his thinking, as ecological issues now fight their way into the public consciousness. However, there is a perception that Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Model is individual school student focused and not systems focused. In Chapter 2, Akiva, Hecht and Blyth create a *Learning and Development Ecosystem Framework* based on three principles:

- the systems principle;
- the complexity principle; and
- the health principle.

In these principles, the authors make the strategic point that they use the term *ecosystem* “...over ecology, or community to emphasize the whole system and the complexity of the interactions with people, places and possibilities...” (p. 14).

This is a stimulative read because the writers published in this anthology shout their ideas in multiple forums, and the chapters in this evocative text are supported and expanded in a flurry of digital Blogs supporting the book’s main intents. There are four interconnected themes developed in this book:

- learning and development ecosystems;
- the science of learning and development (SoLD);
- vision for allied youth fields; and
- equity and justice.

In the Introduction, editors Kimberly Robinson and Thomas Akiva warn of the framing terminology adversely influencing this field of concern, and the Out-of-School-Time (OST) programs, for example, are simply thought of as school extension programs. As a result, some programs avoid this damaging simplification by rebranding OST as *community-based-youth-work* or some other synonym. In reality, the whole issue of youth education now needs a major rethink, and as the authors queried:

What if we strove to better understand and invest in the various parts of children and youth's learning and development ecosystems in such a way that more of the people, places and possibilities for learning were more deliberately and effectively utilized to create healthier and more equitable learning experiences for all youth? (p. 5)

In support, Hecht and Crowley (2019) point out that "Acknowledging connections between ecosystem elements is not enough to affect the systemic change that the wicked problem of education requires" (p. 1). And, as Pittman et al. (2022) state, it is important for OST to be seen as partners, and not as "complementary service providers" in planning change (p. 39).

All of the authors agree that the health, role, and status of the Learning and Development Ecosystem Framework is of real concern if change is to be enacted for youth education. The management of the status perceptions for youth education needs to rid itself of the albatross hanging around its neck, which spells out *failure* in an education universe that values success. Examining the development of the status of youth education Akiva et al. (2022) observed that it is important to develop greater educational status by involving members of the allied youth fields, which will then improve "vibrant learning experiences for youth" (p. 30).

The equity issue is a major concern for OST, and as mentioned previously, it fits all of the criteria of the Matthew effect, and until now there has been little incentive to change the educational algorithm. Schools, districts, and systems bask in the glory of the efforts of the high achievers, while the students who are not comfortable on the normative pathway are often quietly ignored and considered failures, which is a good example of the fallacy *argumentum ad hominem* at work. This labelling then impacts on the systemic will to redress the situation, and busy schools rarely look more deeply, or ask "Why?" or "What can we do about it?"

In proposing a planned solution to this dire, ethical situation this book contains a lot of great ideas, and the efforts of 41 committed writers and educators are worth interrogating.

Firstly, the authors see that the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic may foster an opportunity to have the key decision makers re-examine how education is delivered in the *big picture* situations. The major upside of the COVID problem was that *hybrid instruction* or *blended learning* was promoted quickly to meet the needs of students who could not attend school. Penn State (2022) confirmed that hybrid learning is a combination of face-to-face classroom learning with an online mix of learning and activities. This change of lesson delivery, with technical support, has the capacity to engage students who cannot sit in classrooms, and as such offers alternatives to the disengaged youth who need to be convinced of mattering.

Secondly, the racial issues that are seen with Black Lives Matter cannot be ignored, and Roderick Carey's 2019 research on mattering is highly relevant:

I argue that the most widely adopted educational imagination for Black boys and young men reflects the reification of social and school contexts that compel their marginal mattering (minimal recognition that implies their insignificance) and partial mattering (selectively valuing certain talents and attributes they embody) (p. 373).

The "mattering" concept can be applied to any disempowered group in society, and it is important to find an ethical solution to this issue.

Thirdly, learning development exists in a social milieu of developmental relationships that hold the key to success, and this concept segues with mattering. Teachers who successfully teach in Indigenous, racially closed, or poverty-stricken communities know exactly what this means in terms of relationship building, equity, and trust.

Fourthly, one needs to query the curriculum content that has been reified into the scope and sequence ladders. In reality, there are masses of content that can be taught to achieve an educational outcome, and the challenge is to develop culturally appropriate material that prevents student and specifically youth alienation.

Conclusion

It Takes an Ecosystem shouts a warning to all educators and politicians, and is a reminder that we need to have a more holistic, ecosystemic view of education that includes youth education. The 41 authors in this book challenge current educational practices and policies, and they push for an immediate redressing of the major equity problem of disengaged youth education, which presents as a classical example of *blaming the victims*.

Without doubt, this valuable book will be used as a study resource in universities, and it will also be a valuable tool for personal reflection by teachers, school leaders, and system coordinators. Professional Learning (PL) is an important but problematic exercise in every school because of the frequent failure to embed the ideas presented by the fly-in, fly-out experts. One strategy to reinforce a school or district's ecosystemic commitment would be to present every school teacher with a copy of this book, and then organizing collegial symposia on each of its four sections. School staff love being treated as professionals and problem solvers, and such an exercise may be a game changer for schools, teachers, and students.

Supporters of the status quo may be tempted to resist the ethical/equity pleas that have been eloquently delivered in the book, but at individual and community levels, society cannot continue to ignore the situation. While the term *ecoanxiety* has never been used in this context, it is fair to say that the disengaged students and their hopeful supporters may experience this as they await the implementation of their healthy learning and development ecosystems.

This is a future-looking book presenting contemporary ideas replete with supporting digital blogs and other relevant conversations. This book of the times proclaims a message about a major equity issue that needs to be heeded by everyone in the education field because of the blinkered, school-focused view that is ignoring parts of education that need desperate attention. This book describes an educational problem that can be solved, and in doing so the process may force a re-examination of traditional educational pathways, and what knowledge, skills, and beliefs are really important in the 21st Century educational ecosystems.

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