

It Takes an Ecosystem: Q&A with Tom Akiva and Kim Robinson



Thomas Akiva, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education, and the director of the Schoolwide EdD program. He is the winner of the Out-of-School Time Scholar Award (2016), and Emerging Scholar Award (2011) from the American Educational Research Association. His research areas include continuous improvement and professional learning, equity in out-of-school learning and citywide ecosystem approaches to learning and development .



Kimberly H. Robinson, Ph.D. is a social scientist and Executive Vice President at the Forum for Youth Investment, and the Managing Director of the Forum's David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality where she leads efforts to strengthen youth program quality through the development and support of continuous improvement systems focused on organizational and staff practices. She has led applied research and related improvement efforts at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Baltimore City Public Schools and the New York City Department of Education.

In 2016, Information Age Publishing (IAP) launched a seminal and timely series on Current Issues in Out-of-School Time (OST). The Series promotes and disseminates original theoretical and empirical research, promising practices and policy perspectives from practitioners to further grow the OST field.

It Takes an Ecosystem, Understanding the People, Places, and Possibilities of Learning and Development Across Settings is the sixth book of the series, Current Issues in Out-of-School Time. The book explores the benefits of developing connections across the systems in which adults engage with young people. This book guides the reader through research and examples of initiatives that demonstrate the positive and negative ways that interactions with all adults in the lives of young people shape their learning and development. This book provides evidence as to why this shift in thinking about the learning and development landscape to an ecosystem perspective envisions a more connected and equitable world. SCRI spoke with the book's editors, Thomas Akiva and Kimberly H. Robinson.

Q: Define for our reader what you mean by an ecosystem.

Tom: The simplest way to answer that question is by referring to our subtitle: People, Places and Possibilities. The idea of an ecosystem is that there are many different aspects that are important for learning and development. It's not just about people, places and possibilities, it's also about the interaction of all of those different things in a complex, dynamic and ever changing way. Another important aspect is that there's not a center to an ecosystem: there is not a single child at the center, nor a school at the center. If you think about a biological ecosystem, there is no center, it is made up of all of these different parts, interacting in various ways. A learning ecosystem is the same.

Q: Why is this perspective of focusing on the collective ecosystem around a child important?

Kim: Picking up on what Tom said about ecosystems not having a center - an approach that puts children at the center can have an unintended consequence of problematizing young people instead of the systems that serve them. Expanding to an ecosystem model allows a more expansive way to understand where problems are

situated within the ecosystem itself, and helps us to think about where the challenges, solutions and opportunities actually are.

Tom: Ecosystems can be more or less healthy. Talking about the health of an ecosystem is different than talking about an individual student and how well they're doing; it's about the ecosystem itself and how well it's functioning. School represents a small fraction of the time when learning and development happens. Focusing on the whole ecosystem is really necessary for solving some of the challenges of education that aren't solvable by schools alone.

“Expanding to an ecosystem model allows a more expansive way to understand where problems are situated within the ecosystem itself, and helps us to think about where the challenges, solutions and opportunities actually are.”

Q: Can you elaborate a little bit on what those problems of education are?

Tom: Our educational system is hugely inequitable. We have vast, what we call, achievement gaps, but they are really opportunity and support gaps, and we have a very unfair system. I know this as an educator, a researcher and as a parent. The pandemic illuminated the inequities early on when schools went online yet many kids and families were unreachable. Schools can't do it alone. We need a village approach to be able to really actively reach children.

Kim: There's such a focus on standards and outcomes and high stakes accountability systems, particularly in our K-12 public school systems, that educators are often constrained from having the time and space to support young people in other ways beyond academics. If we shift our thinking to the adults that support young people, the systems that support young people and the

connections and intersections of people and places, we have many more opportunities to effectively leverage a broader set of supports.

“If we shift our thinking to the adults that support young people, the systems that support young people and the connections and intersections of people and places, we have many more opportunities to effectively leverage a broader set of supports.”

Q: Has this ecosystem approach been tried before and what was the outcome? What about the current political landscape would make it possible to see a different outcome now?

Tom: Yes, it has been tried for decades but we are in a different place now and I think there's more momentum. We have more Out-of-School Time (OST) infrastructure and more research than ever before. We have consensus on the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD).

Kim: With the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD), there is a cross-disciplinary consensus about how learning happens through safe and supportive relationships and environments, and how those set the stage for rich instructional practices. This shared understanding is helping to soften the walls between the long standing silos of formal education and more informal learning opportunities.

Another critical set of research findings came out of the Social Emotional and Academic Development (SEAD) Commission. The Commission confirmed that learning is not only about instructional content but it's also about relational experiences and the way that contexts are structured to support learning and development. The SoLD Alliance and SEAD Commission both represented deep collaboration across education and youth development, and have resulted in clearer understandings than before.

Tom: Even within the OST sector, we've been too isolated in the past. For example, afterschool programs were separate from libraries, museums and other settings where adults who aren't teachers work with young people every day. In the book, we argue that we need the Allied Youth Fields. We need to recognize that the core of all of their work is youth development, centered around relational experiences. This relationship-centered learning expands across far more fields than we usually put under the umbrella of learning. It will be a long time before the Allied Youth Fields is fully realized in practice, but we're making progress, building understanding and breaking down walls.

Q: What do you think it will take to disseminate this concept more widely - that learning happens everywhere, and that OST is just as important a part of the ecosystem as any other setting?

Tom: The first thing that comes to mind is what we talk about in Chapter 3, Why Narrow Definitions of How, Where and When Learning Happens Undermines Equity. Narrow definitions of what counts for learning have been a critical factor in keeping an ecosystem vision from moving forward. We need to continue to push for different kinds of learning to count apart from strictly academic learning.

We need people to begin thinking about learning ecosystems in the same way they think about biological ecosystems. For example, and to make this more tangible, in a biological ecosystem you might introduce a new animal or remove some trees in order to impact the ecosystem as a whole. This type of adaptive management of ecosystems needs to apply to learning ecosystems as well.

Kim: In biological ecosystems there is a concept of keystone species, where by observing the wellbeing of one species in an ecosystem there can be insight into the overall health of the ecosystem. If we think of youth workers or other adults in the Allied Youth Fields as the keystone species, then when there are challenges facing the adults, we understand that there are ripple effects throughout the entire system. This shifts the nature of the conversation and helps us imagine more solutions than simply pushing harder to achieve outcomes.

Q: Can you give an example of a challenge that would have a ripple effect?

Kim: We are hearing a lot about the need to prioritize the mental health of young people living through a pandemic, but we're talking less about how to prioritize the mental health of the adults - teachers and youth development workers. There is a tremendous amount of pressure and stress placed on educators and we are living in a time of great uncertainty. With a growing awareness of the need to attend to the health and wellbeing of teachers, some districts have provided more time off during the holidays. They know that teachers and youth workers are burnt out, and this is a small step, but it also indicates a realization that we need to support educators with tools and resources to take care of themselves in order for them to be effective in supporting the needs of young people.

Tom: We argue that youth workers are a keystone species in the ecosystem. The health of youth workers affects the health of the whole system. If youth workers are healthy - have high job satisfaction, are paid well, etc. - then that can have a ripple effect on their impact on the youth they serve. One implication of this approach is if you place the energy toward the health of youth workers instead of placing energy into evaluations of youth program outcomes, then you are changing a part of the system. For example, if you change the minimum wage and all youth workers experience a growth in their income and receive better benefits, focusing on youth workers rather than a laser-like focus on youth outcomes will actually affect the health and wellbeing of the youth in the system and the overall health of the ecosystem as well.

Q: How do you see the ecosystem approach being a driver of equity?

Tom: We often use deficit language when talking about young people. For example, "low-achieving" or "impoverished". The deficit view of youth is a real problem because when you see individual children as having deficits and you work to address those deficits, the system never changes. To me, there are two ways to counteract the deficit view. One way is to focus on strengths, using asset-based language, and not trying to fit everyone into a mold that doesn't show their strengths. The other way to counter the deficit

view is a systems approach. A systems view shifts the perspective from a deficit view of the child to a view of the health of the ecosystem. That flips the script and shifts the conversation to consider equity, allowing us to consider how we can have opportunity and support for all kids within the system. That shift is the biggest change that drives an approach that strives toward equity.

“A systems view shifts the perspective from a deficit view of the child to a view of the health of the ecosystem. That flips the script and shifts the conversation to consider equity, allowing us to consider how we can have opportunity and support for all kids within the system.”

Kim: The shift from viewing the deficit of individuals to the system as a whole and looking at inequity as an indicator of a problem within the system allows us to have a wider range of root causes that can be identified. We are not going to advance equity if we keep identifying things like instructional hours as the root cause of inequity. There are cultural, historical and political contexts that impact multiple components, such as systems that shape youth experiences and patterns of inequity. Zooming out to a systems view makes us wrestle with those realities. The systems are producing the outcomes that they were designed to produce, and disparate outcomes means there needs to be a reimagining of systems so that they can produce more equitable outcomes.

Using a strengths based approach as a counter view to the deficit narrative does not bring us far enough. Shifting to a systems view gets us farther. It is also important to examine the deficit narrative that exists within the positive youth development framework, centered

around the notion that we are serving underprivileged children, whom but for our services would be lost. There is a real need to unpack the narratives and assumptions and the location of agency. Reimagining systems requires us to examine where specifically those deficit narratives have taken hold and where they still need to be pushed out.

Q: The examples in your book provide the notion that this work is happening at the practitioner level - local organizations, governing bodies in cities and even private philanthropy. Say more about that - how are practitioners leading the movement and what will it take for policymakers to pick up the baton?

Tom: It's critical to recognize that there are so many systems in place that limit what practitioners can accomplish. The question to policy makers and decision makers is: What can we put in place to enable youth workers to do their jobs better and ultimately to enrich learning and development ecosystems for young people?

Kim: The book shares examples of policy structures, like youth cabinets or inter-agency work groups, that have attempted to bring folks together across agency silos to better support youth development. But the juiciest examples are happening in local systems - local intermediaries and youth organizing are shaping how systems are designed. There are policies in place, but they are barely scratching the surface, and there is a lot more opportunity of replicating successful structures through examining what is happening in local jurisdictions.

“There are policies in place, but they are barely scratching the surface, and there is a lot more opportunity of replicating successful structures through examining what is happening in local jurisdictions.”

Q: What is your hope for enhancing ecosystems thinking within the next 5-10 years?

Kim: The broadest notion of ecosystems would require a fundamental reordering of existing systems. However, in terms of how we get there, there are promising things happening, like stronger partnerships between in-school and out-of-school spaces to support a more holistic range of needs for young people. Continuing to build these connections, examples and models can begin to move things forward in meaningful ways.

Tom: I'd love to identify a few really strong pockets of change. Fifteen years ago when the After Zones started in Rhode Island, that story trickled out and changed what people thought was possible in terms of organizing learning and collaboration. Shifting the unit from the program to the campus, it opened up opportunities. I would like to see a few shining examples of cities that take an all-in ecosystems approach, and then those stories could inspire other cities to know what is possible and pursue it.