Conceptualizing Equitable, Learner-Centered Ecosystems

Interview Excerpts

On the Vision for & Components of Equitable, Learner-Centered Ecosystems

In *Remix Podcast* Episode 4, Karen talks with Alin Bennet, Education Reimagined's Vice President of Practice and Field Advancement, and Olivia Christensen, a member of Education Reimagined's board and a student at Morningside College. Their conversation expands on a *Learning Out Loud with Education Reimagined* session featuring Alin and Olivia, that explored their experiences as leaders and learners in reimagined systems and settings.

Karen: For me and others, language is so important, and you all have put out such an incredible amount of powerful language about the vision that you want all of us to be aiming towards. Explain what that vision is, why you picked the words that you picked, and how we are moving towards this idea of a community-based ecosystem.

Alin: Education Reimagined is committed to a just, inclusive world where every child is loved, honored, and supported. The global health crisis and a more expansive awakening to systemic racism highlighted the fundamental insufficiencies and inequities in the American education system. So, our organization, over the past year or so, has seen the most powerful way to transform the education system is through learner-centered, community-based, equitable ecosystems of learning and development.

As we talked about language, there are three parts of, of that vision: learner-centered, equitable, and ecosystem.

"Learner-centered" is that learning is recognized as the primary goal of the system (and not the delivery of education, which is the current paradigm); that every learner is unique, capable, and that they are wondrous; and that the most powerful learning occurs when a child's interests, passions and aspirations are centered.

We see equity as an ideal state where every child is able to reach those unique aspirations and goals, where we correct for historical inequities that have existed during time, and where we compensate for them in all the unfair disadvantages and advantages that exist in the current system and in the world.

Ecosystem is a very broad distinction for us. It's just a community that has a stake in the learning development of every member of said community and has the various assets to organize supports and credentials of learning and development.

Karen: I think we have a long way to go in understanding what we mean by ecosystems and, in particular, understanding what the role of systems are in getting us to a full, equitable ecosystem. I want to spend our time together really digging into that word, ecosystem. Why are you trying to help us understand what this decentralized picture looks like? And give us a little bit of understanding of the language that you've selected there?

Alin: We'll start at "home base" This is the place where a child is known fully as to their interests, their passions, their needs. It is where they work in partnership with trusting adults and peers in groups to navigate a very complex ecosystem of learning and development and are able to access those learning hubs and those field sites. And, it is probably one that is the most consistent and structured. Their learning hub opportunities may shift over the 12 plus years of their education, but this place would be sort of the centralized place where that child is known and is supported in navigating an ecosystem.

And if you move up that level to learning hubs, sort of a very broad definition of that is any location or community asset that exists that is supporting learning and development. And that could be, like you said, a library, a public library that has an early literacy program where they're helping a young learner with their phonics and decoding. It could be the Boys & Girls Club sort of up the road that has a strong citizenship and civics program. It could be a 4H that is supporting kids with agricultural learning. It could be the YMCAs where they're doing their physical and health programming.

> Anywhere where that learning is happening is what
> we would call the learning hub.

And then sort of at the top level is the field sites and the field sites you can imagine that being where much more of the application side of learning happens. So, thinking of, you would join a community project that is helping explore the impact of pollution on your local river with the local Save the Bay project. It could be an internship site where you're pursuing your interest in finance at your local bank. So the bank is a field site. It is the parts of the community where, as you transition out of the learning and development ecosystem, where you enter the economic sector, and it's sort of that place where the economic sector interfaces with the learning and development ecosystem, and you get to apply much more of that learning and development that you are engaging with in the ecosystem.

Karen: Olivia, talk about this language. Does it makes sense to you? How do you use it? Do these distinctions between home base and learning hubs and field sites help you think about what's in your community and how you navigated it?

Olivia: Definitely. I think when they first kind of presented these ideas to me, it was very hard for me to wrap my brain around, but as I got more into the work and we talked more about it and definitely with Alin's kind of description it makes a lot more sense and I can definitely pinpoint these spots in my Iowa Big experience.

Karen: Alin, give us a general idea of how we really bring this language to life in these distinctions to life in ways that allow for this mixing and matching across locations and across different kinds of adults. And then take us into, uh, a little bit of how you got into this work, uh, in Providence.

Alin: I usually see "advisory" as the most common way to describe that home base location. And for us at the Met, it did happen at the Met school in some cases, but it also could have been in that child's home. If that child had a specific need that they couldn't come into our school, the advisor went to them and their home base was literally their home. And when students were engaging in dual enrollment and early college programs, they barely left the community college of Rhode Island campus. So, the advisor went to their home base which was centered in the quad of the Community College of Rhode Island. So just to elevate that home base could live anywhere, and it's wherever you can meet that child and support them the most effectively.

In regards to the different learning hubs in Providence, there were a number of them that we worked with, so learners oftentimes left out of the home base of the advisory at the Met school and engaged with their "core content" in those environments.

Then, for the term field site, I would say those were largely manifested in internship programming where the learners would go one or two days a week, full days in an internship that connected to their passion or helped them develop skills that would help them later pursue a passion in their learning journey. And the role of the internship host was the mentor.

In partnership with that advisor, their family members would co-create the learning journey for that learner.