
Guest editorial: Leading schools towards ecosystems for learning and flourishing

Introduction to the special issue

In a world marked by escalating complexity, political polarization, uncertainty and social fragmentation, schools are increasingly called upon to become more than spaces for academic instruction. Educational institutions are being reimagined as dynamic ecosystems where diverse actors collaborate to foster learning, well-being, equity and human flourishing. This special issue brings together two timely and interrelated concepts in education: learning ecosystems and human flourishing. A *learning ecosystem* can be defined as a dynamic and evolving network of formal, non-formal and informal learning environments – such as schools, families, cultural centers, local institutions and digital platforms – that work collaboratively and intentionally to support lifelong, life-wide and life-deep learning. These ecosystems are characterized by trust, interdependence, co-responsibility and shared values with a deep commitment to learning at all levels. *Flourishing* refers to a holistic and multidimensional state in which individuals and communities experience well-being, purpose, belonging and the capacity to grow and contribute meaningfully to their environments. Flourishing entails not only academic achievement but also emotional resilience, civic engagement, social connectedness and a strong sense of agency.

This special issue presents a compelling collection of studies that reconceptualize educational leadership as a powerful lever for social regeneration. Rather than viewing schools as isolated institutions for instructional delivery, the contributions in this issue position them as living, interdependent ecosystems, crucial infrastructures for weaving the social fabric in fractured times. In a global context marked by deepening polarization, rising loneliness and eroding democratic trust, schools emerge here as spaces where relationships are nurtured, collective agency is cultivated and the foundations of inclusive democracy are renewed. Echoing urgent calls from a variety of global thought leaders, this issue affirms that reimagining schools as ecosystems for learning and flourishing is not merely an educational imperative, but it is a societal and moral one.

The articles included in this issue offer an expansive view of educational leadership in the 21st century. The research in this issue moves beyond traditional linear models of leadership, embracing systemic, ecological and relational frameworks that reflect the realities of global contemporary education. Drawing from studies across the globe – including Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Taiwan and the United States of America – these contributions provide empirical and conceptual insights into the practices, tools and conditions that enable schools to flourish as ecosystems.

A unifying theme across the collection is that leading schools toward ecosystems for learning and flourishing requires more than structural reform. It calls for cultivating the social, relational and cultural conditions that allow educational communities to grow and sustain change. The studies in this issue collectively affirm that when leadership is attuned to context, grounded in trust and oriented toward collective capacity-building, schools can transform into vibrant ecosystems that support both student and teacher flourishing. The issue brings to the fore a multi-layered view of leadership that connects schools with families, communities, universities and systems, all working together to support learners and educators. In doing so, it responds to a growing societal need: to rebuild the connective tissue of our societies by restoring trust, empathy and shared purpose.

One key subtheme that emerges is the use of diagnostic and developmental tools, such as the SchoolWeavers Tool, to assess and strengthen the overall “health” and sustainability of



school ecosystems. These tools – focused on trust, relationships, belonging, purpose and collaborative culture – are not just measurement instruments but catalysts for shared reflection and action. Other studies explore frameworks such as the Weaving Circle for Systemic Impact, showing how systems thinking and complexity leadership theories can guide schools in navigating ongoing change and achieving deeper outcomes.

Another subtheme woven throughout the collection is access and excellence. They serve as principles enacted through everyday interactions and schoolwide practices. The studies illustrate how learning ecosystems can offer meaningful support for addressing the needs of diverse groups, including students with varied educational needs, culturally diverse backgrounds and educators in underserved settings. Leadership in this context is depicted as a strategic, intentional and collaborative endeavor that transcends institutional boundaries to foster more responsive and inclusive practices.

Intentional leadership practices also emerge as central to school ecosystems. Rather than operating through top-down reform mandates, leadership in these contexts is enacted through dialog, distributed influence and deliberate cultivation of professional relationships. These practices foster the emergence of new relational configurations, networks that enable shared expertise, responsiveness to context and long-term collective learning.

This issue also showcases the transformative potential of sustained, cross-sector collaboration. These partnerships – across schools, districts, universities and communities – are shown to evolve into inter-organizational ecosystems grounded in mutual learning and shared purposes. They illustrate how leadership aligned with community values and priorities can generate more coherent, sustainable and context-responsive change, which brings to life the very essence of leading schools as ecosystems for learning and flourishing.

Collectively, the articles invite readers into a rich, interdisciplinary dialog grounded in educational leadership, systems thinking, social capital theory and ecological perspectives. They enable school leaders and stakeholders to make sense of relational dynamics and align their practices with the lived experiences of their communities. They offer both conceptual insights and actionable pathways for designing, implementing and sustaining learning ecosystems that are relationally grounded, equity-focused and locally responsive. Readers will encounter a range of models, tools and narratives that illustrate how leadership – when intentionally cultivated and shared across systems – can shape the conditions for transformation, connection and human flourishing.

Importantly, the issue calls us to recognize schools and communities as vital social ecosystems where trust is cultivated, solidarity is strengthened and the foundations of democratic life are renewed. As the world continues to grapple with systemic challenges – from public health to climate change, technological disruption and widening disparities – this special issue provides a timely and hopeful roadmap. It affirms that schools can be regenerative, restorative and transformative spaces where young people, educators and communities learn not only to adapt but are empowered to flourish. We hope these contributions will energize scholars, practitioners and policymakers alike, offering compelling visions and grounded strategies for leading schools and nurturing ecosystems of learning and flourishing into the future.

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