

Exploring a Social Justice Learning Ecosystem Embedded in University, School, and Community Partnerships

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Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual paper was to examine the literature on university, school, and community partnerships and add to the body of research as it relates to social justice and learning ecosystems. Specifically, a social justice learning ecosystem was explored and conceptualized through school–university partnerships with the purpose of building and strengthening a social justice orientation among multiple school community members to advance student outcomes. Social justice in learning ecosystems is of importance to both educational researchers and practitioners on a national and international platform. As school leaders focus on social justice issues that impede student success, the creation of learning ecosystems will help to aid schools, communities, and universities in providing a system of support and access. Furthermore, the work of this paper concludes with recommending a model for collaborative partnerships through learning ecosystems.

Keywords: school–university partnerships, school–university–community partnerships, social justice, learning ecosystems, urban schools

Introduction

The disparities facing urban schools are not typical to all urban-centric areas nor do all urban schools face the same disparities. But there are physical and demographic characteristics shared by urban schools that differentiate them from their suburban and rural counterparts. Urban schools are localized in heavily populated areas, serve a larger and more diverse student population, and have a higher concentration of poverty and linguistic diversity (McFarland et al., 2018; Schaffer et al., 2018). Furthermore, urban schools have high rates of student transiency (Daniel, 2017).

Urban schools are focusing on how to bring about equity and access to high-quality resources through after school programming, integrated student supports, and parental and community collaborations (Daniel, 2017). In the last decade, one response to this dynamic in urban schools has been an increased focus on social justice and community engagement within educator preparation programs (Dempsey, 2011). Educators who approach student learning from a social justice view “create learning environments that include numerous entry points for learning and multiple pathways for practice and ongoing investigation” (Ayers, 1998, p. xxviii). While educator preparation programs inculcate social justice perspectives in teacher education candidates and ensure it within the context of the classroom, social justice can be amplified further by collaboration between universities and communities. As noted by Ayers (1998), when the university and community collaborate, they maximize access to multiple learning environments and offer more opportunities in a diverse environment for all learners (Daniel, 2017).

Green (2015) suggested student experiences are not limited to the school but expand outside of the classroom and the extended school day. Furthermore, Weiss & Reville (2018) noted that schools and communities working together to improve students’ educational learning experiences is not a new idea. In fact, there are individuals and organizations committed to improving learners’ educational experiences. The role of the community, therefore, requires additional scholarly attention to cultivate

partnerships that affirm social justice frameworks to advance learner outcomes. With this collaborative thinking at the core, certain studies have been directed to determine the outcomes of community involvement and improved student success (Deslandes, 2006; Epstein, 2001; Weiss & Reville, 2018). Blank & Villarreal (2015) recommended using a collaborative network approach to tackle the impact of poverty in urban communities and schools. A collaborative network approach recognizes the enormous amount of work needed to support learners as well as the need for professionals outside of the school to be involved in addressing the barriers such as shelter, health, wellness, and employment.

Furthermore, studies have been added to the body of literature about creating partnerships in schools (Kinsella-Meier & Gala, 2016; Lawson, 2013; Moore, 2019). However, Moore (2019) noted that a considerable amount of the focus of these studies has been on highlighting school–community partnerships and the integration of professional learning communities or collaborative communities of practice (DiMartino, 2019). Specifically, studies highlighting school–community partnerships are engrossed with the process for creating and sustaining relationships within the group (Kinsella-Meier & Gala, 2016). There is a gap in the literature on the challenges of creating school–community partnerships to improve student performance. Moreover, DiMartino (2019) implied that studies have not addressed the development of a systematic sustainable approach in creating a strong learning ecosystem with a social justice emphasis in school–community partnerships. Additionally, the need to cultivate principal, teacher, higher education administrator, and community member dedication to improved student performance, especially those considered marginalized or underserved, is well established in the literature (Huerta, 2011). Responding to this need, educator preparation programs made heroic efforts to prepare teacher candidates and aspiring principals to infuse social justice tenants in urban education (Carter, 2008). Still, only recently has the literature begun to investigate the enactment of social justice education (Agarwal et al., 2010; Picower, 2011) within university–school partnerships.

University–School Partnerships and Social Justice

Despite empirical and academic consensus for the incorporation of social justice as a partnership guideline, the complexities of uniting K–12 and higher education collaborations prevail. Through the K–12 lens, the learner achievement gap in K–12 school systems is a critical social justice issue. The polemic allows universities and colleges a real and abiding opportunity “to form partnerships that address social issues, such as improving service delivery, enhancing education and educational access, reducing poverty, improving sustainability, sharing of resources, research, and program evaluation” (Moore, 2019, p. 4). A new period of educational change is taking place, and as Weiss & Reville (2018) suggested, is giving way to new opportunities to increase the presence of school–university partnerships, focused access, equity, and improved student outcomes. Schools and universities working in tandem to advance social justice is a central vehicle for change in this new era. However, Coburn et al. (2013) and Dempsey (2010) document the lack of empirical research on school–university relationships, a significant barrier that compromises opportunities for success.

Conceptualizing Social Justice and Learning Ecosystem

As documented in Brooks (2008a), social justice has been studied in many disciplines including economics and public policy. Furthermore, it is noted in the literature (Jean-Marie et al., 2009) that social justice underpinnings are embedded in curriculum and pedagogy (Apple, 1996; Freire, 2000). In summary, as Jean-Marie et al. (2009) asserted, the term social justice is subjected to numerous interpretations.

For the purpose of this paper, as guided by Jean-Marie et al. (2009), social justice terminology builds upon Auerbach’s (2012) and Cochran-Smith’s (1999) social justice teachings. Auerbach’s work focused on authentic partnerships undergirded in social justice tenants of equity, responsibility, and

effective school–community partnerships. Furthermore, Auerbach described authentic partnerships as mutually beneficial relationships formed with educators, families, and community members who value differences and share power in search of democratic schools. Likewise, Cochran-Smith reiterated the prominence of the community by intellectualizing social justice as the work of social change extending beyond methods-based “best practices” to include six principles of practice. These principles included “building on what students bring to school with them: knowledge and interests, cultural and linguistic resources.” (Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 118). As asserted by Auerbach and Cochran-Smith, social justice is vital to the work of schools, universities, and communities, thus creating multiple networks for student support.

Emerging in the literature in relationship to building networks in community partnerships is the concept of ecosystem. As reported by Abdul-Jabbar & Kurshan (2015), the term ecosystem, conceived in business, technology, and industry only recently, is gaining use and application in education. Embedded in the language of Falk et al. (2015) as described in DiMartino (2019), this paper refers to a learning ecosystem as where “learning happens across a wide range of settings and situations across the day and over a lifetime” (p. 199). This means a learning ecosystem can develop and implement processes to support collaborative intertwined relationships in partnerships. An example would be more intentional, collaborative methods in urban communities and schools in creating a social justice learning ecosystem embedded in university, school, and community partnerships.

Florida Urban Schools

Five of the largest urban school districts in the country, with a combined student population of 1,236,882, are in the state of Florida. Orfield et al. (2017) emphasized that Florida has become a more diverse state in terms of race and ethnicity, but the public schools are becoming more segregated. From 1990 to 2017, Florida saw an upsurge in the number of Hispanic students, practically quadrupling from 8% to 31%. However, during the same period, the number of White students dropped from 68% to 40% while the Black student population remained constant at 22%. Furthermore, the Asian population has increased from 1% to 3%.

Since 1990, student enrollment data in Florida show there is growing racial isolation among Hispanic and Black students on some measures (Orfield & Ee, 2017). In addition to racial isolation in segregated schools, economic segregation was also a factor, where 83% of poor students were also grouped together.

School segregation in Florida today resembles residential patterns of urbanization, where students of color live in predominantly urban-centric areas. Consequently, highly segregated schools are in the metropolitan urban areas of the state, including metro Miami, Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville, and Tallahassee. The Miami metro area, however, has the highest concentration of intensely segregated schools of all five metro areas in Florida (Orfield & Ee, 2017). Additionally, the rate at which Hispanic and Black students attend schools where most of their classmates qualify as low income is almost 1.5 times higher than that of their White or Asian peers. As a result, there is escalating double segregation by race and class across the nation, and Florida is not an exception (Collins Institute, 2017).

To help close the gaps associated with segregation and poverty, the literature supports collaboration as being critical for the social justice education for students (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Collaboration is the catalyst to inspire community and social change and to develop and foster educational excellence and opportunities. Implementing social justice learning ecosystems is particularly important to the improvement of university–school–community partnerships in the state of Florida.

Literature Review

Green (2015) suggested there is a gap in how school–community partnerships visualize effective strategies for forming such collaborations. Although numerous studies have focused on school–community partnerships’ implementation strategies and sustainability activities (Green, 2015; Weiss & Reville, 2018), there is a gap in the research on the idea of a learning ecosystem within urban settings.

A directed content analysis (Hseih et al., 2005) was conducted from a review of existing literature on learning ecosystems and school–university partnerships. First, there was a review of the extant literature on learning ecosystems by locating literature on urban schools, ecosystems, and social justice efforts in urban schools. Second, literature on the historical context of school–university partnerships was examined, and, lastly, there was a review of the research on effective school leadership models. To do so, the terms “ecosystems,” “school–university partnerships,” “urban schools,” “social justice theory,” and “effective school leadership” were searched in Google Scholar, ERIC, Lexus Web and Research Gate. Then, the literature was examined to find patterns and draw conclusions.

This literature review explores themes in the research on university, school, and community partnerships as they relate to a social justice learning ecosystem. The review has four sections: learning ecosystems, the art of social justice leadership in education, school leadership for social justice, and social justice and the role of the university.

Learning Ecosystems

Schools and community partners engaging in collaborative relationships focused on social issues is not a new phenomenon. Early on, Dewey (1902) suggested schools need to address social issues and make them the forefront. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory supports learners and the relationships that influence learning. More specifically, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory was expanded by Epstein’s (2001) research on the connections of schools, families, and communities in student learning. Nevertheless, the attention now has moved to the role networks occupy within partnerships and how networks have become acknowledged as a set of approaches that integrate and value coordination and collaboration in the partnership approach (Abdul-Jabbar & Kurshan, 2015). The ecosystem approach as detailed by Falk et al. (2015) offers avenues for coordination and collaboration among educational stakeholders.

Falk et al.’s (2015) findings define the learning ecosystem as one in which learning experiences happen in the community, a setting that is influenced by social networks. Furthermore, through the community engagement process, new networks can be formed (Falk et al., 2015). Ball et al. (2012) describes the concept of social networks in the ecosystem as individuals and community organizations intertwined and committed to engaging in communicating, exchanging resources, and collaborating on solving social issues. Also, Bryk et al. (2015) and Ishimaru (2013) suggest the approach of integrating collaborative networks and research-based partnerships as a strategy to stimulate and create learning ecosystems.

The learning ecosystem, as defined by Falk et al. (2015), recognizes individuals and organizations that influence student learning and collaborate to further promote success. Underserved urban schools are struggling with being the sole education providers and responding to the wide range of needs for 21st century learners (Bryk et al., 2015). Schools are faced with providing and meeting such needs as nutrition, physical and mental problems, shelter, and clothing. These needs are impediments to student learning and must be met quickly and efficiently. The contributors to learning, as described by Falk et al. (2015) must be leveraged within the ecosystem to effect changes in learner outcomes. The development of an ecosystem that can provide learners with diverse experiences and bestow further

high-quality services to learners can help tackle disparities in the urban school systems (Castrechini & London, 2012).

The Art of Social Justice Leadership in Education

According to Jean-Marie et al. (2009), the term social justice was somewhat unfamiliar to the educational leadership discipline in the early years of the last decade. Furthermore, several descriptions of social justice have emerged in the literature, including Blackmore's (2011) assertion that "social justice calls upon a range of disciplinary fields such as sociology, history, cultural studies, psychology" (p. 27) and Marshall et al.'s (2010) description of social justice leadership as directing moral dialogue for high academic achievement for all students. Relatedly, social justice concerns were driven by many factors including, as Evans (2007) noted, "the scholarship of social justice supports the notion that school leaders have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural, and sexual orientation backgrounds" (p. 250). Observing the similarities and perceived understanding of the term social justice, school leaders can promote social justice through leadership practices.

Theoharis (2007) entwined social justice in education directly to the practices of educational leadership. Although Theoharis's work focused on K–12 education and the school principal, his views are highly relevant in higher education and to colleges of education that train teachers and aspiring school leaders. Social justice urges educational leaders to acknowledge inequalities and to work actively to address them through "ongoing actions, skills, habits of mind, and competencies that are continually created, questioned, or defined" (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, p. 847). School leaders who practice social justice place student achievement in the center and couple social justice strategies with the moral responsibility dimension of leadership to effect change (Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Likewise, Jean-Marie et al. (2009) suggested principals should advocate on behalf of marginalized and underrepresented learners, thus making social justice leadership a fundamental role of a school leader.

School Leadership for Social Justice

The role of the school leader is multifaceted and enormously challenging (Bogotch et al., 2008). Inequalities are prevalent in schools. Thus, Jean-Marie et al. (2009) advocated for school leaders to have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable school practices. Similarly, school leaders should engage in practices that promote social justice activities focused on equity and access for student learners. In addition, while engaging in their practices, school leaders can promote the quality of life, advocate for diversity, and, as Astin and Astin (2000) suggested, promote cultural enrichment and intellectual honesty.

Having knowledge that a role of the school leader is to participate in advocacy efforts on behalf of students who are marginalized forces schools to create a paradigm that goes against the systemic systems of oppression and neglect (Allen, 2006). This means that school leaders must be aware of the explicit and implicit forms of biases, foster a commitment to right the wrongs, and act as an advocate for change for traditionally marginalized students (Allen, 2006; Brooks et al., 2012).

Effective school leadership requires expert knowledge of instructional leadership, student achievement, faculty development, organizational development, and developing and maintaining community relationships (Gumus et al., 2018). One strategy an effective school leader engages in to support the needs of the school is community partnerships. Valli et al. (2013) suggested effective school leaders develop partnerships to address student needs and engage in experiences focused on building relationships with the community. Moreover, effective school leaders participating in partnerships provide much needed supplemental resources to teachers, while also strengthening community ties and changing attitudes about students (Blank & Villarreal, 2015).

Social Justice and the Role of the University

Universities influence the socialization of learners by functioning as “sites of citizenship” (Winter et al., 2006, p. 211), which are widely accepted as the preparer of citizens for a democratic society. This indicates universities prepare learners for civic and community responsibilities and provide opportunities for what students need to learn and know to serve as citizens within a diverse democratic state (Stanton, 2008). However, this commitment may be daunting in today’s educational settings. This commitment to advocating for a diverse democracy and providing access to opportunities have been met with some discord in the university setting, as noted by Meyer (2007). Moreover, complicating these social justice realities is the assumption that social justice education creates effective social justice activists. Furthermore, social justice activism in higher education is often deterred by the continuous uncertainty in support for undocumented, underrepresented, and marginalized students to related issues of access, student health, and increasing costs (Butler, 2006; Meyer, 2007).

Traditionally, universities are the driving forces for the promotion of democratic ideals, but with communities becoming more involved with efforts to promote equity and access, this has transformed their role (Ostrander, 2004). Certainly, institutions of higher education have the capacity to purposefully foster moral and civic learning (Colby et al., 2003) and engage social activists within the community. Nevertheless, Winter et al. (2006) suggested universities have performed as a sociopolitical system, reproducing White, middle-class consciousness and neoliberal ideologies. Others, such as social justice activists, understand universities to be a means for righting the wrongs in the democratic process, including decreasing inequality, racism, and sexism (Ostrander, 2004).

Findings and Discussion

This research revealed themes on implementing an interdisciplinary approach in creating social justice learning ecosystems within school–university partnerships and its significance for both researchers and practitioners on a national and international platform. Additional themes in the literature illustrate how school–university partnerships are emerging as learning ecosystems to develop and sustain partnerships and to use strategies that are directed toward building social justice activities for their schools and communities.

The concern to improve schools and student experiences is not to be redundant but to use approaches that integrate social justice partnerships into schools and communities. The learning ecosystem acknowledges individuals and organizations committed to influencing learning through collaborations in the school setting (Falk et al., 2015). Overall, there is a gap in the literature on what a social justice learning ecosystem school–university–community partnership looks like, thus giving way to too few effective approaches for schools, universities, and communities to participate in social justice activities. Furthermore, the model proposed is based on the synthesis of the literature reviewed and demonstrates how schools and universities can implement social justice learning ecosystems within school–university partnerships.

Practices that Promote Social Justice Learning Ecosystems Partnerships

Gross et al. (2015) and Bryk et al. (2015) identified student learning, parent–community ties, professional capacity, and leadership as subsystems in the development of partnerships (DiMartino, 2019). Like Bryk et al. (2015), Maier et al.’s (2017) community school research revealed four pillars integral to partnership development: integrated student supports, after school programming, families and community engagement, and collaborative leadership practices. However, for these subsystems or pillars to be effective in partnership development, they should be in connection with one another and work in a synchronized manner as a system (Bryk et al., 2015; Maier et al., 2017). Throughout

the overall system and within the subsystems, a responsibility to social justice also should inform the practices of school leaders as well as university and community members (Bogotch, 2002).

Creating Partnership Structures

Historically, schools and universities have engaged in partnership activities addressing the needs of both entities (Weiss & Reville, 2018). In fact, initially, the needs of the university were the essential compelling force for school–university partnerships. Universities needed internship placements for student teachers and aspiring school leaders, as well as participants for research studies conducted by university faculty. However, since the passage of the 2002 landmark federal legislation No Child Left Behind, school needs are more prevalent, thus driving the formation of more school–university–community partnerships. Particularly, the achievement gap continues to present major challenges to schools located in high poverty urban and rural areas (Schaffer et al., 2018).

Addressing schools’ needs and the challenges of insufficient resources and capacity to improve achievement, schools have been induced to pursue help from universities and community organizations. Responding to school districts, universities and community organizations have become more aware of their responsibilities in collaborating to solve a range of social issues. More specifically, Walsh et al. (2013) noted school–university partnerships are being developed around improved student performance, school leadership, and integrated student supports with the three roles of universities: teaching, research, and service. By finding ways to connect the needs of the school with the roles of the university and community, partners can create mutually beneficial collaborations.

Building Capital

Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined social capital as “the resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network of associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents” (p. 1067). When partnerships are structured to incorporate social justice by building capital, this investment results in services addressing the shared goal of reducing the inequalities of poverty and its impact on schooling. Furthermore, capital development is managed by committed collaborators who can optimize the revenue available.

School leaders can intentionally build capital by being deliberate in developing relationships, coordination, and alignment of services across multiple partners to benefit students and their families (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Weiss & Reville, 2018). When building capital within the school, community members participating in the partnership should envision their roles in developing capital within the school network. Maier et al. (2017) noted communities can build capital in school partnerships by engaging in building a strong and coordinated variety of academic and integrated student supports.

Enhancing University Partnerships and Diverse Perspectives

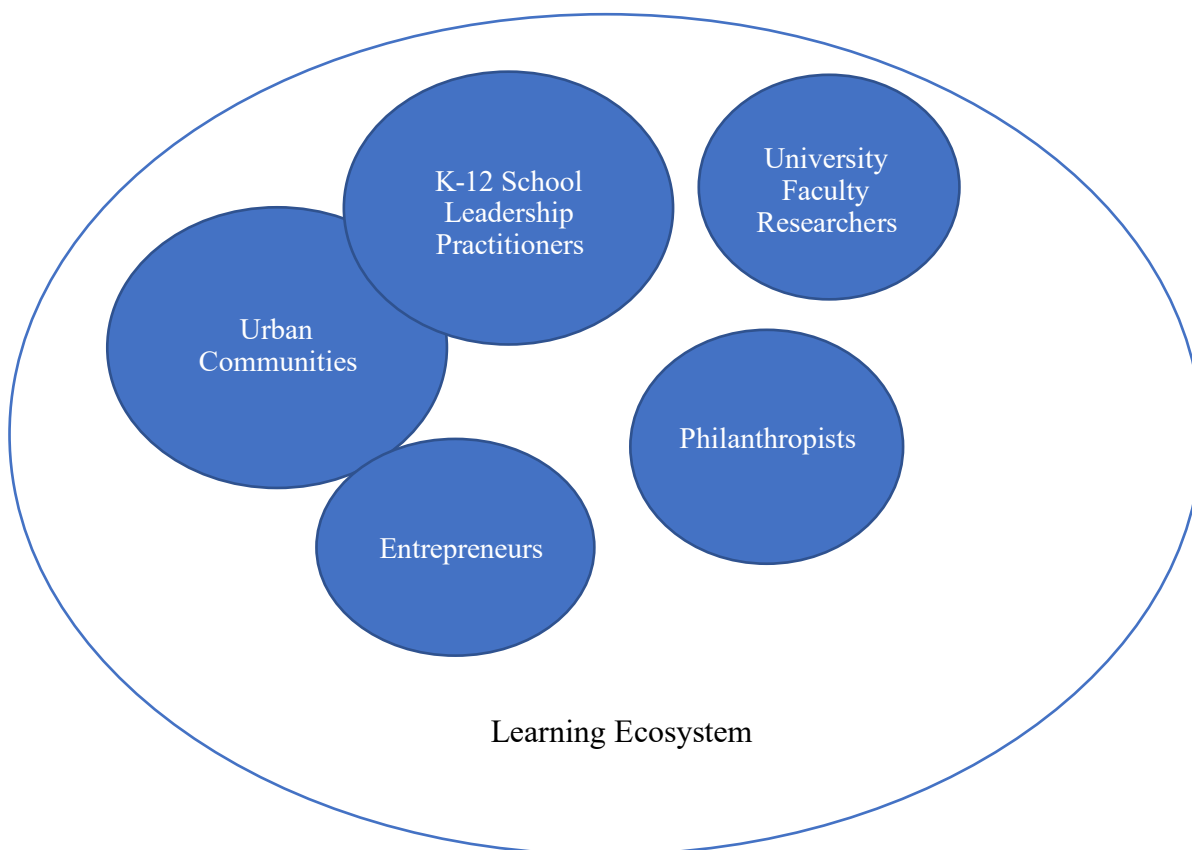
Universities can foster long-term projects with communities by having physical space inside the communities where they could work. Spaces can include community centers, community gardens, and/or art spaces. Students and faculty working in those spaces can become a presence in the neighborhoods where partnerships are taking place and can develop relationships with the community members that use them. This is the case with various post-secondary institutions that have become brokered neighborhood engagement programs in a social justice context or have partnered with schools for community programming (Bowers-Brown, et al, 2019). Regardless of the type of work they do, the projects need to develop capacity in the community such that the scales are not tipped in favor of the university, but rather the university engages in democratizing social justice activism outside of the academic setting (Dempsey, 2010).

Lastly, intentionally advocating for the representation of diverse perspectives within the partnership will ensure sustainability. School–university–community partnerships need to embrace the diverse perspectives of their members and, as Muijs et al. (2010) suggested, rely upon collaboration so as not to become closed and myopic. If the appropriate structures exist, much can be gained from the diverse perspectives of schools, universities, and community partners.

Conceptual Framework for an Interdisciplinary Learning Ecosystem

Throughout this paper, discrete entities have been interrelated: (a) educational K–12 leadership, (b) university, and (c) urban communities in creating social justice learning ecosystems through partnerships. Entrepreneurs and philanthropists also make contributions to the interdisciplinary learning system, helping to both bolster the system and reap benefits that further social justice within the learning ecosystem. Given current conversations about increasing collaborations and partnerships in schools, universities, community organizations, and school leaders need to be flexible, yet comprehensive, strategic, and not prescriptively mandating, with each entity being attentive of their environment (Johnston et al., 2017). Within the current learning ecosystem, urban communities, K–12 school leaders, university researchers, philanthropists, and entrepreneurs all occupy the same ecosystem, but they do not necessarily make intentional connections or engage in interworking among potential partners. Figure 1 shows the current, typical learning ecosystem and the entities within the system.

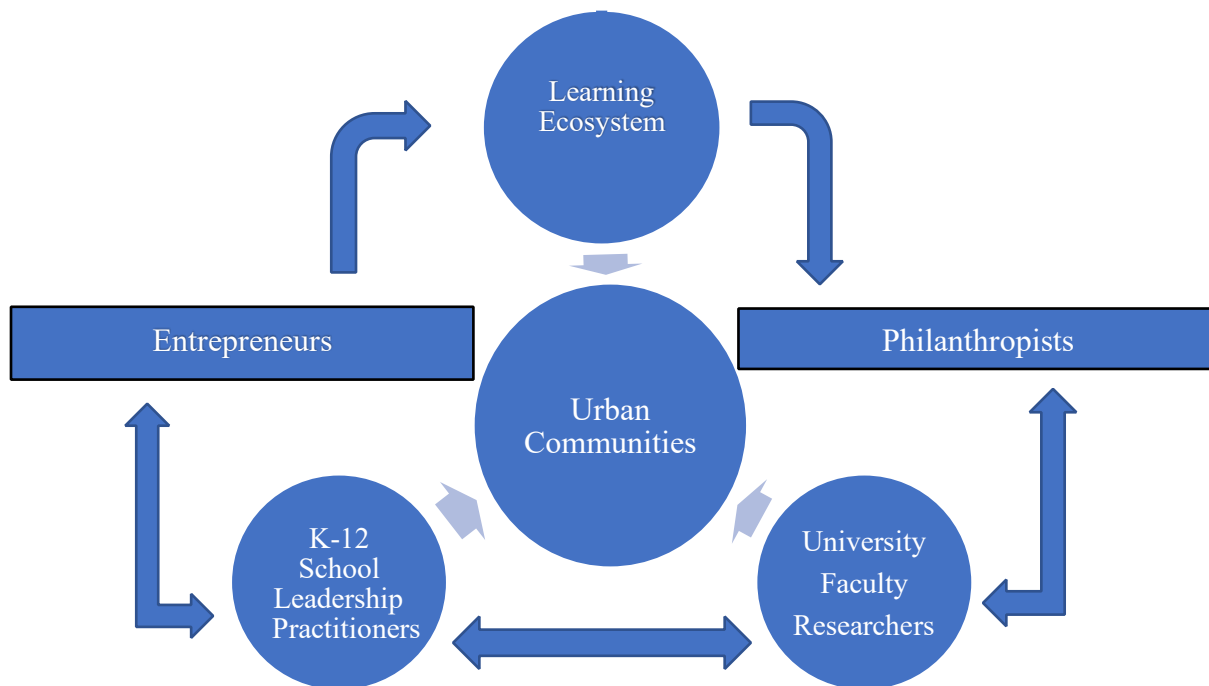
Figure 1. *Conceptualization of the Current Structure of the Learning Ecosystem*



The interdisciplinary ecosystem reimagines the current ecosystem by forging intentional connections and interworking among and between the partners in the system. It illustrates connections among the diverse partnership arrangement emerging across the interdisciplinary learning ecosystem, involving K–12 school leaders, community members, university researchers, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists. Moreover, it suggests that entities within the interdisciplinary ecosystem influence one another by constructing intentional and fluid connections that create synergy among the potential partners.

Within the center of the interdisciplinary model is the community. The community draws on entrepreneurs, philanthropists, K–12 school leadership, and university faculty researchers to provide integrated student supports including traditional wraparound services like mental health and nutrition supports, as well as family supports. The outer spheres operate in a manner that allows them to guide support as needed to various partners and cycling that support through the entire ecosystem. For example, entrepreneurs and philanthropists would invest in universities, schools, and communities while collaborating with K–12 school leadership practitioners and university faculty researchers to develop and pursue bold strategies supporting social change. Also, K–12 school leadership practitioners and university faculty researchers would provide high quality professional development on social change to community members, philanthropists, and entrepreneurs and report outcomes. Figure 2 shows the conceptualized interdisciplinary learning ecosystem and the entities within the system.

Figure 2. *Conceptualization of the Interdisciplinary Learning Ecosystem*



Conclusion

Collaborations across schools, universities, and communities can and do create opportunities to provide access, promote equity, support shared vision and purposes, and promote learning ecosystems embedded in social justice principles. The work to promote and integrate social justice into school–university–community partnerships and create interdisciplinary learning ecosystems is well aligned with leadership pedagogy and standards. However, it is imperative that schools, universities, and communities work together through a collaborative and comprehensive approach that facilitates and reinforces the social justice ecosystem, promoting equity, diversity, and access as social justice practices. This work must not only be collaborative but future forward, with social justice learning ecosystem partnerships focusing on strategies that have positive impacts on student outcomes and general wellbeing.

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