

A Thriving Future for Every Child

Stories to Imagine, Reflect, Share, and Inspire



THE BIG IDEA STORY SERIES
COLLECTION ONE

Meet Joe: Crafting His Own Path



Joe, 14, had been exploring his interests through connections his Learning Advisor helped him make but hadn't yet found something he was really interested in.

He mentioned to his Learning Advisor that he loved helping his uncle in his cabinet business during the summers. There was something about working with his hands and design that energized him and got him excited to learn about angles, different kinds of woods, and how the materials worked with one another to create beautiful designs. Consulting with his Advisor, he signed up to learn about woodworking at the local hardware store located close by and on the local bus line.

Joe took pop-up courses on different skills like joinery, learned in small group classes with peers his age and adults interested in woodworking, and even helped build a playground the store had been hired to construct. The hardware store, a member of a national network of 2,200 other stores that partner with career-technical education (CTE) groups to provide certifications to emerging carpenters, recognized Joe for his work and granted him Sustainable Construction and Carpentry Level I Certification. His mentor at the store had never seen someone so curious and dedicated to learning.

Joe's experiences helped him begin to craft his own path.

Reflect and Consider...

- How does an ecosystem approach help maximize the capacity of different spaces and places in a community?
- What other spaces in our neighborhoods and communities are under-utilized, or could be repurposed for this type of learning?
- How does an ecosystem approach shift how we think about credentialing learning experiences?

Meet the Youngsters at Mr. Watts' Home Base



Mr. Watts ran a multi-age Learning Hub just outside of Philadelphia for young learners. The learners wanted a playhouse inside for times when they couldn't go outside.

“What if we walk around and look at the playgrounds in our own neighborhood,” they asked.

For two weeks, out they went—visiting different playgrounds and discussing what they might like to include in their own indoor playhouse. Incorporating what they thought would be important to include, each learner drew their own dream playhouse. A classroom parent, who happened to be an architect, came and reviewed their drawings.

He introduced them to the process of designing a building bringing models, sketches, and blueprints to share with them. He looked at their drawings, interviewing them (as you would any client) about what they wanted, what was important, and why. They measured the space where it would be sited and considered the constraints and possibilities:

- How many stories could it be?
- Where would the hidden place be?
- Could it be easily stored?
- What would it cost? Do we already have materials we could use?

He came back a few weeks later with a design and a simple model. The children critiqued his presentation. He returned with a detailed scale model and material samples. He was joined by another class father who was a carpenter who would build the playhouse.

One month later they had their own custom, dream indoor playhouse.

Reflect and Consider...

- What did an ecosystem approach to learning make possible for Mr. Watts' Learning Hub that might not have been possible otherwise?
- How can the community enhance learning experiences?
- What do Learning Hubs make possible for families?

Meet Michelle: The Artist



Michelle is an artist. By ten, she had experienced a handful of art classes and summer art programs but wanted to take her passion to the next level.

Curious about what other art forms were out there and how she might advance her skills, she asked her parents for help. Her parents posted two of her paintings on their social media. When one comment stated, “Where can I buy that?” Michelle and her parents realized this might be an opportunity to grow her passion and worked on making that dream a reality.

As a result of the posts, Michelle also gained attention from two local artists who became great mentors as she developed her skills and grew her budding business. She was able to ask them questions ranging from “What paints do they choose?” to “How do they price their works?” Michelle used all the research and insights she learned from her mentors to choose a place to sell her artwork and find places to take additional courses on special painting techniques.

Her 15-year-old brother, acting as her marketing manager, helped her research online sites to sell her work and learn how to reach new audiences. He encouraged her to take pictures, price the artwork, and write descriptions that shared her voice and passion for art. Her audience grew, and her art began to sell. Michelle eagerly shared everything with her Learning Advisor, so she was credited for all that she was discovering and learning.

What started as a spark in summer programs, led to Michelle finding her niche.

Reflect and Consider...

- How does an ecosystem approach enable learners like Michelle to connect with others in the community?
- How did Michelle’s passion fuel deeper learning and competency development in an ecosystem approach?
- In what ways might technology play a role in an ecosystem approach?

Meet Xavier: An Expert in the World of Fashion



Xavier was interested in fashion from a very early age, often playing dress-up and sewing his own outfits.

Fashion helped create a raucous space for Xavier's self-expression. At 12, Xavier's advisor in his **Home Base** noticed his interest and started to work with him to identify learning goals that helped him develop competencies and tied into his passion for fashion. By the time he was a teen, he and a group of friends created and hosted runway shows at their local community center. Organizing the events stretched him to learn project management, marketing, and how to communicate with his community.

Coming at his passion from a different angle, he worked with his neighborhood community theater for three seasons designing costumes. Talking fabrics, cuts, and design — Xavier never felt more alive and like he belonged. This local theater served as his **Learning Hub** for those three seasons, giving him deep exposure to the ins and outs of how costume design supports a character's identity and developing sewing skills and other aspects of running a theater.

From theatre production to styling photoshoots for a local ad agency, Xavier was not short on internship opportunities or avenues to grow and apply his skills. He worked over the years with his **Learning Advisor** to weave together a tapestry of experiences and had mentors who exposed him to the art of creating fashion, as well as the business side of the industry. As he ventured out on his own as a young man, he started a part-time retail job at an eco-only clothing store and began pursuing a professional career in fashion-related public relations.

Fitting the pattern together for the life and career you want.

Reflect and Consider...

- Is there a young person in your life that has an untapped talent, passion, or interest?
- Who in your community could contribute to that young person's talent, passion, or interest?
- What did an ecosystem approach to learning make possible for Xavier that might not have been possible otherwise?

Meet Ava: Motherhood and More



Ava is a 17-year-old high school student and she is also an expecting mother.

Although Ava hasn't always felt passionate about her educational experiences, she feels it is very relevant to the next steps in her journey towards her own independence, and being able to support a good life for her and her soon-to-be child.

Ava talked with her Dad and **Learning Advisor** and has decided to start a paid internship program through her local **Community Action Plan Early Childhood Education Center**. In this program, Ava will intern several days a week in the Infant Room at the Childcare Center. At the same time, she will start in the Early Childhood Education Program at a Career and Technical School where she will earn her certification upon graduation. Filled with excitement, nervousness, and anticipation, Ava is moving forward and creating a path that works for her.

Motherhood is bringing a new direction to her life.

Reflect and Consider...

- Who in your community might benefit from an ecosystem approach?
- What did an ecosystem approach to learning make possible for Ava that might not have been possible otherwise?
- What other community resources might be possible to access and deliver in an ecosystem approach?

Meet Karl: Finding Your Voice



Karl grew up in a musical family. Some of his earliest memories are of singing with family and his faith community.

His voice was pure, angelic, and a joy to exercise. Unfortunately, that came to a sudden halt at age 13 when his voice began to change and he stopped singing. Feeling a bit lost and unsure of what other passions he had, he asked his Home Base Advisor for guidance.

Four years later, as a 17-year-old, his best friend begged (and begged) him to try out for a new show choir forming at the Performing Arts Center. Unused for four years, amazingly his voice had settled into a rich, deep, baritone. The thrilled choir director began mentoring Karl, exposing him to a wide range of music genres. A shared recording of Jessye Norman turned into a newfound passion for Opera. Together they identified an Opera Coach — a homegrown soprano now teaching at a conservatory thousands of miles away.

Virtually Karl and his Opera Coach worked on a recital. In addition to diligently practicing, Karl found the recital venue, organized the publicity, and designed the space to create just the right atmosphere for the event. With his Show Choir director as his accompanist, Karl sang in four languages and brought the house down. In a post-concert reflection, the choir director shared his own personal growth as a mentor. Karl reflected on all that he had learned, the relationships he'd developed leading him to continue his voice studies and passion for music during a gap year.

Karl found his voice and so much more.

Reflect and Consider...

- How did his Home Base provide the safe space for Karl to build stable relationships that supported his learning and growth?
- What did an ecosystem approach to learning make possible for Karl that might not have been possible otherwise?
- How do the roles of adults and of learners shift in an ecosystem approach?

Meet Ella: An Earthbound Space Explorer



Ella, an eight-year-old, loves outer space.

It all started when she met a local scientist who worked on the NASA James Webb telescope. From observing the stars at night to learning about the first female astronaut, she just can't get enough.

To deepen her understanding of outer space, Ella and another learner at her **Home Base** enrolled in an online course about the history of space travel and checked out every book they could from the local library during a recent **Field Site** visit. They decided together to do a project exploring the possibility of living on another planet and space tourism. Given the increase in travel to outer space, they found lots of current debate on the topic. They also enlisted their local scientist as an advisor to help inform their understandings and provide critical feedback. Interviews with peers and adults in their community led them to realize that maybe space tourism actually has a lot more to do with what is happening here on Earth than they originally thought.

The project consumed them both for an entire quarter. Ultimately, they both saw benefits and disadvantages to pursuing more permanent life on another planet. The two shared their work with other learners in their **Home Base** by creating a video describing what they learned and why they think it is important for youth to pay attention to the environmental challenges we face on Earth.

Ella learned to shoot for the stars with the things she could learn!

Reflect and Consider...

- How did a field site experience open up new possibilities in learning for Ella?
- What competencies might Ella have developed as a result of her project?
- What did an ecosystem approach to learning make possible for Ella that might not have been possible otherwise?

Meet Jax: Getting Serious About Games



Jax is a 16-year-old home-schooled student and avid gamer.

They They recently signed up for an online coding challenge where they are developing newly-discovered coding skills. Jax is mostly interested in the “world-building” aspect of gaming and they’ve had a hard time finding a mentor from the local community as they explored this particular interest. By being able to explore different virtual experiences and challenges, Jax has been hoping to connect with mentors and other learners who share their passion.

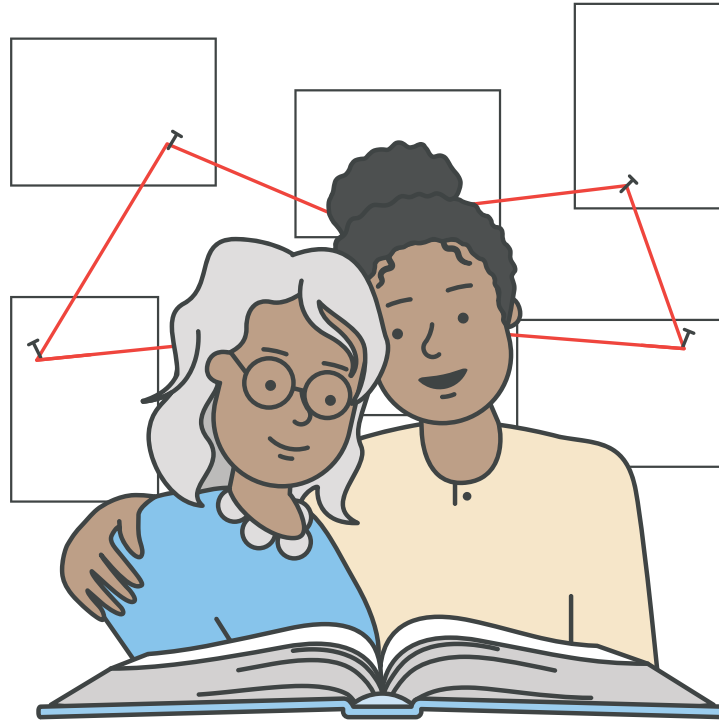
Recently, through their **home-schooling consortium**, Jax connected with a programmer who specializes in developing world-building software. Jax has committed to meeting with the programmer once a week to further deepen their competencies for a coding class. Together with their mentor, they identified a coding challenge offered by an international tech platform. Jax and their mentor are excitedly working together on an entry. All of this work is enhancing and deepening Jax’s skills—informing the creation and building of an online world they are building. Up next—a storytelling course to inform gameplay!

Who knew games could be such a serious endeavor?

Reflect and Consider...

- Is there a young person in your life that has untapped talent, passion, or interest that an ecosystem approach might support and enhance?
- Who in your community could contribute to that young person’s talent, passion, or interest?
- How is learning personalized, relevant, and contextualized in an ecosystem approach?

Meet Jada: Discovering a Lost History



Jada, 16 loves the outdoors, mathematics, and spending time with her grandmother.

She also has a growing interest in social justice and racial equity. One day when Jada was exploring her grandmother’s backfield, she came across an unusual stone marker and dug around to find out what it signified. Turns out it was an old mileage marker for a postal route. She was inspired to dig deeper and learn more about this route and if there was anything else she could learn about the people who lived on this land in the past.

Jada worked with her **Learning Advisor** to turn this into a project that tied into her natural interests and learning goals. An introvert by nature, she also wanted to challenge herself to go beyond her comfort level socially and spend some time interacting with local people who might be able to share more about the postal route. Together, with her advisor and grandmother, they shaped a multi-level project to meet many of the competencies she needed for the year.

The project led to three months of research, another couple of months of exploring the postal route, and intensive outreach to identify local historians and significant places. Jada used mathematic skills to chart, map, and measure the distance and path of the route. She used communication skills to interview community members. She deepened her understanding of the social and racial issues people faced who lived here years before. And that led to new questions she wants to explore about how people feel living in the town today.

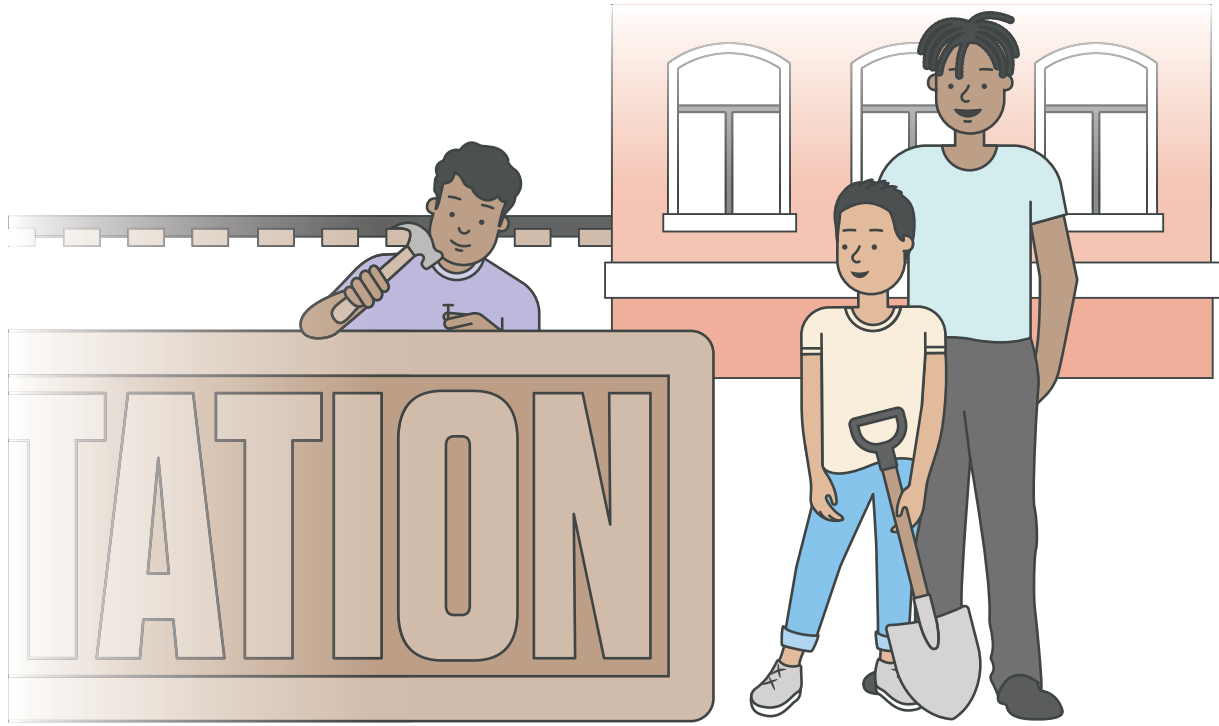
She documented her project, including the dozens of people she met and the six historic sites she visited. She kept a journal along the way, sending out a daily post each night to family and friends about what she was learning. She took hundreds of pictures that she posted on a social media platform and shared them with the town. Back home with her grandmother, she shared her experience, the history she “lived” and what she learned about herself through her project.

Digging into lost history grounded Jada in a new purpose.

Reflect and Consider...

- What knowledge, skills, and dispositions were present and tapped into by Jada in this one project?
- Who in your community could contribute to a young person exploring their talents, passions, or interests?
- What did an ecosystem approach to learning make possible for Jada that might not have been possible otherwise?

Meet Casey: Craftsman in the making and budding community leader



The town where Casey lives has just built a new train station and wants to memorialize the old train station, a historic building that is now being repurposed as a micro-brewery and restaurant.

The town's business development office has asked the leaders at several **Learning Hubs** whether some students might want to be involved in designing and creating memorial signage. Casey, 11, who loves woodworking and has been developing this interest at the local maker space (one of his community's Learning Hubs), got excited when he heard about the possibility of working on a real-world project.

The town's development office sent over ideas for the sign and requested learners come back with concepts and a proposal. Casey talked to some other learners in his woodworking class. They asked the maker space staff where they could find woodworkers and other experts who could mentor them. They found a few mentors who could help with the design and others offered resources, materials, and equipment for installing the finished sign. They made a project plan with the help of some of their parents. Together Casey and his team built and installed the sign outside the Train Station. Everyone who participated deepened their connection to the town, the town's government, and the businesses that are a part of their community.

Every time Casey passes the sign he proudly sees what they all created.

Reflect and Consider...

- How does an ecosystem approach foster a sense of community and belonging?
- What projects in your own community might make meaningful learning experiences for young people?

Meet Melanie: Discovering the Power of Knowing Oneself and Asking for Help



Lately, Melanie, 12, has been feeling tired all the time.

In a check-in with Olivia, her **Home Base** advisor, Melanie shared that she didn't feel sick but off and overwhelmed. In the conversation, she shared that she had tried to put herself out there (a shadow day experience and at a friend's party), and it did not go well. Melanie felt she missed pieces of the conversation and didn't understand people's reactions. She's feeling confused and self-conscious. Olivia had also taken note of the change and had already reached out to Melanie's mom.

Together, Melanie and Olivia discussed if this was a just bumpy developmental stage or was something else going on. Looking back, they surfaced a few clues—a sensitivity to sound, light, and textures of certain foods. They consulted with a district developmental adolescent specialist. They determined that Melanie was on the autism spectrum with sensory and processing issues. Olivia and Melanie's parents took time and care in explaining the diagnoses and how Melanie could relate to this new information about herself.

Together, Melanie and Olivia, along with supportive **Home Base** friends, adjusted environmental factors in their space. Melanie felt such relief and was surprised at how her cohort stepped up to support her. Six months later, she can confidently ask for help when she needs it, knowing there are real reasons why a particular situation might be challenging.

Melanie discovered that there is real power in asking for help.

Reflect and Consider...

- What is the power of having an advisor for learners?
- How does a learner-centered ecosystem approach honor the unique gifts, needs, and strengths of all learners?

Meet a Team of Young Changemakers



A group of teens, all of whom identified as female, set out to study their neighborhood’s housing, architecture, and history.

In particular, they wanted to learn more about the women who helped lead social change and positive progress in their city. The group generated ideas for a community development impact project after a six-month-long inquiry. In a cross-discipline inquiry, they designed and suggested possible sculptures and art projects that reflected the architectural history and honored three specific women they identified who had made significant contributions to their city.

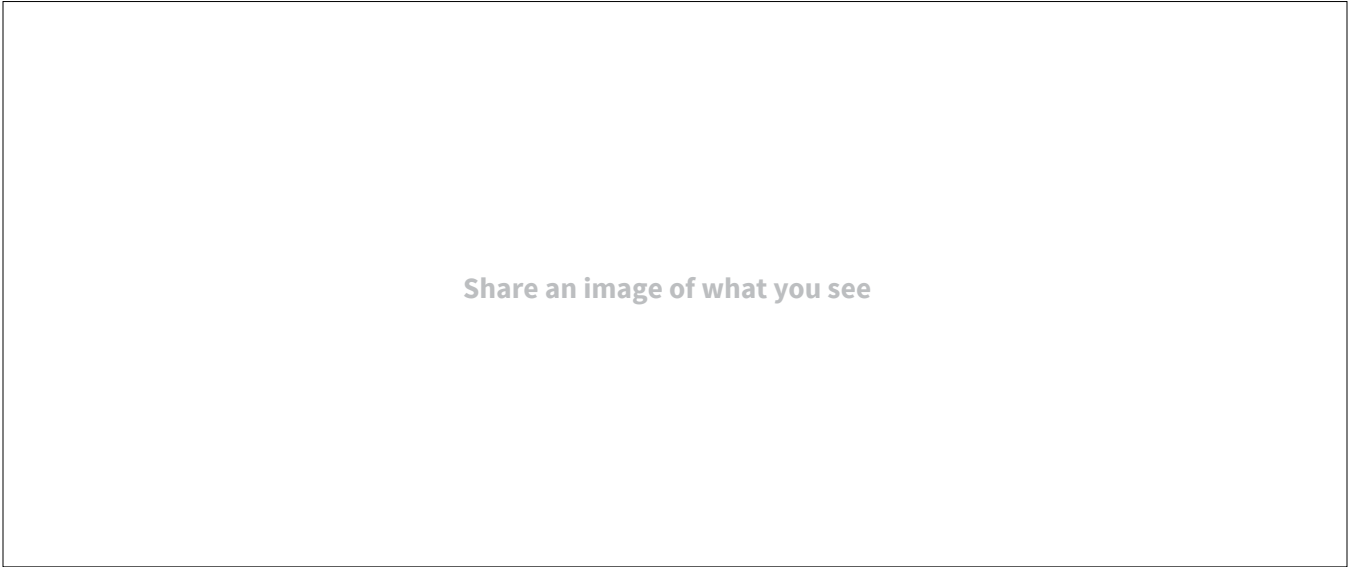
They wrote group and individual poems about these powerful women and the impact they had on their neighborhoods and the city. The group captured ideas for reinvigorating their neighborhood by highlighting the incredible stories of the women they learned about in their inquiry. In a culminating project, the teens held an exhibition at City Hall and presented their ideas to the city council. They were highlighted on the local news leading to a public-private partnership with a major architect to bring revitalization efforts, including a new sculpture and park dedicated to the women, to the neighborhood.

Contributing your talents and working together can make a difference—leading down unexpected paths.

Reflect and Consider...

- How can students develop agency through an ecosystem approach?
- How is learning personalized, relevant, and contextualized in an ecosystem approach?
- What did an ecosystem approach to learning make possible for this group of teens that might not have been possible otherwise?

Write Your Own Story!



Write your headline here.

Reflect and Consider...

- Write your questions here.

Write your story here.

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