Learning to Flourish: *An Ecosystemic Vision for Education in an Age of AI and Planetary Change*

Wendy Ellyatt & Simon Lightman, July 2026

LEARNING FOR LIFE

Flourish Project
The Ecology of Wellbeing

THE FLOURISH LEARNING LAB

The ideas presented in this paper have not emerged from a single project or discipline. They represent the gradual convergence of a body of work exploring human flourishing, relational intelligence, worldviews, ecosystemic thinking and regenerative education over more than a decade. Throughout this journey, one recurring insight has become increasingly clear: flourishing cannot be understood as an individual achievement alone. It is an emergent property of healthy relationships within and between people, communities and the wider living world. The Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework was developed as one practical attempt to translate this insight into a coherent educational architecture.

The Educational Question Has Changed

Every generation inherits the responsibility of preparing young people for a future it cannot fully predict. Yet the scale and nature of the transformations unfolding today suggest that education has entered a qualitatively different moment in history. Artificial intelligence is reshaping how knowledge is created and accessed. Climate change, biodiversity loss and ecological degradation are redefining humanity's relationship with the living world. Democratic institutions are experiencing declining public trust, while loneliness, anxiety and social fragmentation are affecting the wellbeing of people across all stages of life. These challenges are often discussed separately, yet they are deeply interconnected.

Together they invite us to reconsider one of society's most fundamental questions: **what is education ultimately for?**

Around the world, a remarkable convergence is beginning to emerge. International organisations, educational researchers, systems thinkers and practitioners from diverse cultural traditions are increasingly recognising that the purpose of education cannot be reduced to the transmission of knowledge, the acquisition of skills or preparation for employment alone. UNESCO has called for a new social contract for education grounded in solidarity, justice and the common good (UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 2025). The OECD has argued that learners require agency, adaptability and the capacity to navigate an uncertain future (OECD, 2019). At the same time, flourishing research has demonstrated that meaningful lives depend not only upon cognitive achievement but also upon relationships, purpose, contribution, health and belonging (VanderWeele, 2024). Across these conversations, a common insight is emerging: the future will depend as much upon the quality of our relationships as upon the quantity of our knowledge.

This insight is not new. Long before contemporary debates about sustainability or artificial intelligence, many Indigenous knowledge traditions, African philosophies such as Ubuntu, Eastern

contemplative traditions and relational philosophies in the West understood human beings not as isolated individuals but as participants within larger communities of life (Cajete, 1994; Ramose, 1999; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998; Kimmerer, 2013; Yunkaporta, 2019). Contemporary developments in ecology, systems thinking and developmental science increasingly point towards similar conclusions: flourishing is not an individual possession but an emergent property of healthy relationships operating across people, places, cultures and living systems (Bateson, 1972; Narvaez, 2014). Education therefore cannot be understood simply as something that happens within schools. It is one of the primary cultural ecosystems through which societies continually shape the relationships, identities and values that influence both human development and the future conditions of life on Earth.

The Flourish Learning Lab has been established as a place to explore this emerging educational landscape. It is not founded upon the assumption that education requires another curriculum, another assessment framework or another isolated innovation. Rather, it begins from a simpler proposition: that education is itself a living ecosystem, and that flourishing emerges through the quality of the relationships that educational communities intentionally cultivate. Understanding education in this way invites us to move beyond fragmented reforms towards a more integrated vision in which ecological integrity, cultural meaning, economic responsibility and human development are understood as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single living whole (Barnett, 2018; Biesta, 2022).

This perspective also changes how we think about artificial intelligence. The most significant educational question is no longer whether learners can access information or produce knowledge more efficiently. AI is rapidly transforming both of these capacities. Instead, education is increasingly called to cultivate those deeply human qualities that enable knowledge to be used wisely: ethical judgement, creativity, imagination, compassion, ecological awareness, critical reflection and the capacity to participate responsibly within complex living systems. In this sense, artificial intelligence does not diminish the importance of education; it makes its deeper human purpose more important than ever (Vallory, 2025; McGilchrist, 2021).

The Learning Lab brings together insights from educational philosophy, flourishing research, systems thinking, Indigenous knowledge, developmental science and regenerative practice to explore how education might contribute to futures in which both humanity and the wider community of life can flourish together. It does not offer a finished model of education, nor does it assume that flourishing can be reduced to a single framework or methodology. Instead, it proposes that learning is fundamentally about deepening our participation in the relationships that sustain life, and that educational ecosystems are among the most powerful places in which that participation can be nurtured.

The pages that follow explore this proposition. They ask what it means to understand education as a living ecosystem, how flourishing might become the organising purpose of educational practice, what kinds of learners and learning communities this perspective invites us to cultivate, and how education might respond creatively to an age defined not only by unprecedented technological capability, but by an equally profound opportunity to reimagine what it means to learn, to belong and to flourish together.

What Does It Mean to Belong?

For much of the past century, education has been shaped by a powerful assumption: that its primary purpose is to prepare individuals to succeed. Success has been variously understood in terms of academic attainment, economic participation, employability, social mobility and, more recently, wellbeing. Each of these aspirations has value, and each has contributed to expanding educational opportunity across the world. Yet they all begin from a similar premise - that education

is principally concerned with the development of individuals who will subsequently contribute to society. Increasingly, however, educational philosophers and international organisations are suggesting that this understanding is no longer sufficient for a world characterised by ecological interdependence, accelerating technological change and growing social complexity. An ecosystemic perspective begins somewhere different. It suggests that before human beings become successful, productive or even knowledgeable, they first learn what it means to belong. Belonging is not simply an emotional experience, nor is it limited to feeling accepted within a family, classroom or community. It is a much deeper recognition that our lives are continually shaped by relationships: with other people, with places, with cultures, with the living world and, ultimately, with the unfolding story of life itself (Buber, 1970). Education therefore becomes not simply the transmission of knowledge but the gradual cultivation of our capacity to participate wisely within these relationships.

This understanding represents a profound shift in educational thinking. Rather than asking how schools prepare individuals for society, we begin to ask how educational communities help people discover their place within larger living systems. Learning becomes less about acquiring information and more about developing the wisdom needed to participate responsibly in an interconnected world. Achievement remains important, but it is understood as one expression of a deeper process of human becoming rather than an end in itself (Biesta, 2022; Barnett, 2018).

Perhaps surprisingly, this insight is neither new nor confined to any single culture. Across many of the world's philosophical, spiritual and Indigenous traditions we find remarkably similar understandings of what it means to live well. While their languages, cosmologies and practices differ, they consistently describe human beings as fundamentally relational rather than fundamentally separate.

Ubuntu philosophy expresses this through the familiar affirmation that *'I am because we are' - or 'a person is a person through other persons'* (Ramose, 1999; Tutu, 1999). Here, identity is not something possessed by an isolated individual but something continually realised through relationships of dignity, reciprocity and mutual recognition. Indigenous knowledge traditions similarly understand people as members of living communities that extend beyond human society to include ancestors, future generations, animals, plants, waters and landscapes (Cajete, 1994; Wilson, 2008). The Māori concept of *whakapapa*, for example, reminds us that identity is inseparable from the relationships that connect us to one another and to the wider community of life, while Robin Wall Kimmerer describes this as a kincentric understanding of the world in which reciprocity rather than extraction becomes the foundation of flourishing.

Why Should Education Be Understood as a Living Ecosystem?

If belonging is the foundation of flourishing, then the next question naturally follows: **what kind of educational environment best enables belonging to emerge?** Increasingly, educators, researchers and international organisations are recognising that the answer cannot be found simply by redesigning curricula, introducing new technologies or refining methods of assessment. These remain important aspects of educational practice, but they do not by themselves explain why some educational communities become places where people thrive while others struggle to nurture curiosity, trust, creativity or hope. The difference often lies less in the individual components of education than in the quality of the relationships that connect them.

This insight invites us to see education differently. Rather than viewing schools and universities primarily as institutions that deliver knowledge, we might understand them as **living ecosystems**: dynamic communities in which learners, educators, families, cultures, places and the wider environment continually influence one another. Like natural ecosystems, educational ecosystems cannot be fully understood by examining their individual parts in isolation. Their health emerges

through patterns of interaction, reciprocity, adaptation and shared purpose (Capra and Luisi, 2014; Bateson, 1972; Meadows, 2008).

The distinction is more than metaphorical. A forest is not simply a collection of trees, nor is a coral reef merely an assemblage of marine organisms. Their resilience arises through countless relationships that connect soil, water, climate, fungi, insects, plants and animals into living wholes capable of continual renewal. Likewise, a flourishing school cannot be understood simply through examination results, curriculum documents or organisational structures. It is shaped by the relationships between teachers and learners, among colleagues, with families, with local communities, with culture, with place and increasingly with the digital environments that mediate contemporary life. It is these relationships that create the conditions in which learning either flourishes or diminishes (Jackson, 1968; Noddings, 2013).

Understanding education as a living ecosystem also changes how we think about educational improvement. Conventional reform often focuses on optimising individual elements of the system: introducing a new curriculum, strengthening accountability, improving teacher training or adopting emerging technologies. Such initiatives can generate important benefits, yet they frequently leave untouched the deeper relational patterns through which educational cultures reproduce themselves. A school may introduce programmes for wellbeing while maintaining cultures of excessive competition. It may teach sustainability while remaining disconnected from the ecological realities of its own community. It may encourage collaboration in the classroom while organising leadership through hierarchical structures that discourage participation and shared responsibility. In each case, the formal curriculum communicates one set of values while the lived experience of the educational community communicates another.

An ecosystemic perspective suggests that transformation begins elsewhere. Rather than asking how individual parts of education can be improved, it asks what kinds of relationships enable the whole system to become more alive. This shift reflects a broader movement within systems thinking, regenerative design and complexity science, where lasting change is increasingly understood to emerge through strengthening the relationships that connect people, organisations and environments rather than through optimising isolated components (Wahl, 2016; Scharmer, 2016; Bateson, 2021). In education, this means attending as carefully to trust as to testing, to belonging as to behaviour, to collaboration as to curriculum, and to ecological participation as to academic performance.

Seeing education as a living ecosystem also reshapes our understanding of educational purpose. Learning is no longer conceived simply as the transfer of knowledge from one mind to another, but as a process through which people gradually deepen their participation in increasingly complex communities of relationship. Knowledge remains essential, but it is situated within a wider ecology of human development in which emotional security, cultural identity, ethical discernment, creativity, ecological awareness and shared responsibility are recognised as equally important dimensions of learning (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1972; VanderWeele, 2024).

This understanding becomes even more significant in an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence. As AI transforms how information is generated, analysed and communicated, the distinctive contribution of education shifts. The enduring value of educational communities lies not in competing with technology's capacity to process information, but in cultivating those deeply human qualities that emerge through lived relationships: empathy, wisdom, imagination, moral judgement, dialogue, creativity and the capacity to care for both people and the living world. Artificial intelligence may augment knowledge, but it cannot replace the relational experiences through which human beings learn trust, responsibility, compassion or belonging. If anything, the rapid development of AI reinforces the importance of understanding education as a living ecosystem in which these uniquely human capacities can continue to flourish.

For the Flourish Learning Lab, this perspective represents more than a conceptual shift; it provides a practical orientation. It encourages educators to look beyond isolated initiatives and ask a different set of questions. What relationships currently shape learning within this community? Which of those relationships are life-giving, and which constrain flourishing? How might curriculum, leadership, assessment, pedagogy, place and community become more deeply connected? These questions move educational improvement away from simply making systems more efficient towards helping them become more fully alive.

Ultimately, understanding education as a living ecosystem invites us to move beyond the language of educational delivery towards the language of educational cultivation. Gardens cannot be forced to grow; they flourish when the conditions that sustain life are intentionally nurtured. Educational communities are no different. Their greatest responsibility is not simply to produce successful learners, but to cultivate the relational conditions through which people, communities and the wider community of life can continually learn, adapt and flourish together.

How Do Human Beings Learn to Flourish?

If education is understood as a living ecosystem, then learning itself must also be understood differently. Conventional educational models have often described learning as the acquisition of knowledge, the development of competencies or the mastery of increasingly complex skills. These remain important dimensions of education, yet they describe only part of a much richer process. Human beings do not simply accumulate knowledge; they are continually formed through their participation in the relationships, cultures and environments that shape their lives (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1972; Biesta, 2022).

An ecosystemic perspective therefore understands learning not as the transfer of information but as the gradual deepening of participation within the living systems of which we are already a part. Learning changes not only what we know but also how we perceive, how we relate, how we care and ultimately how we contribute. It shapes our identity as much as our understanding, our character as much as our competence. In this sense, education is fundamentally a process of human becoming rather than simply human knowing.

Across diverse educational traditions, this process appears to follow a remarkably consistent rhythm. Although different cultures describe it in different ways, flourishing learners repeatedly move through four interconnected modes of participation. These should not be understood as rigid stages or sequential steps. Rather, they represent recurring movements that continually deepen throughout life.

The first movement is **encounter**. Every meaningful learning journey begins with an encounter that captures attention and awakens curiosity. This may be an encounter with a person, a landscape, a scientific phenomenon, a work of art, a difficult question or an unexpected experience. Before analysis comes attentiveness. Learners first become aware that the world is richer, more complex and more beautiful than they previously imagined. Educational philosopher Maxine Greene described this awakening as the beginning of wide-awakeness: the capacity to perceive possibilities that had previously remained unseen (Greene, 1995). Similarly, Indigenous educational traditions have long emphasised careful observation and respectful attention to place as the foundation of wisdom (Cajete, 1994). Learning begins not with certainty, but with wonder.

Yet encounter alone is insufficient. Lasting learning develops through **relationship**. As curiosity deepens, learners begin to participate more fully with the people, communities and environments they are exploring. Knowledge gradually becomes relational rather than merely informational. Scientific understanding grows through collaboration and dialogue. Ecological understanding develops through repeated engagement with living places. Moral understanding emerges through

relationships characterised by trust, empathy and mutual responsibility. Increasingly, learners discover that understanding cannot be separated from participation. We come to know the world not simply by observing it but by becoming responsible participants within it (Buber, 1970; Noddings, 2013).

Relationship naturally gives rise to **inquiry**. As participation deepens, learners begin to ask more searching questions of themselves and of the world around them. They examine assumptions, encounter different perspectives and become increasingly comfortable with ambiguity and complexity. Rather than seeking definitive answers, they learn to appreciate that many of the most important educational questions remain open throughout life. This capacity for critical and reflective inquiry lies at the heart of democratic education and scientific discovery alike (Freire, 1972; Biesta, 2022). In an age of artificial intelligence, where information can increasingly be generated automatically, the ability to ask thoughtful, ethical and imaginative questions may become one of the defining characteristics of an educated person.

The fourth movement is **co-creation**. Learning reaches its fullest expression when understanding becomes contribution. Learners begin to recognise themselves not simply as recipients of knowledge but as participants in shaping families, communities, cultures and ecosystems. They create new knowledge, solve problems collaboratively, care for places, contribute to the common good and imagine alternative futures. Education therefore becomes less concerned with individual achievement alone and more concerned with cultivating people's capacity to participate responsibly in the ongoing renewal of the world they inherit (Wahl, 2016; VanderWeele, 2024).

These four movements - encounter, relationship, inquiry and cocreation - are not separate educational activities but mutually reinforcing dimensions of flourishing. Each continually nourishes the others. Encounters awaken curiosity; relationships deepen understanding; inquiry expands awareness; co-creation transforms learning into meaningful participation. Throughout life, learners revisit each movement in increasingly rich and complex ways as their circles of relationship continue to expand.

This understanding also changes the role of educators. Teachers become more than transmitters of information or managers of classrooms. They become designers of conditions in which meaningful encounters can occur, relationships can flourish, inquiry can deepen and collaborative creation can become possible. Their work resembles that of skilled gardeners far more than that of factory supervisors. Rather than producing identical outcomes, they cultivate diverse forms of human potential within environments that support growth, resilience and belonging (Palmer, 1998; Fullan, 2020).

Seen in this way, learning is neither a commodity to be delivered nor a performance to be measured. It is a living process through which human beings gradually discover how to participate more wisely, more creatively and more compassionately within the evolving ecosystems of life. The Flourish Learning Lab understands this ongoing process of ecosystemic formation as the heart of education. Before learners can transform the world, they must first learn how to encounter it with curiosity, relate to it with care, inquire into it with humility and participate in its continual renewal with imagination and responsibility.

How Might We Design Educational Ecosystems for Flourishing?

If flourishing emerges through relationships, and if education is one of the principal living ecosystems through which those relationships are formed, then educators inevitably face a practical question: **how might we intentionally cultivate the conditions in which flourishing becomes more likely to emerge?** Philosophy provides direction, but educational communities also require shared ways of seeing the whole. Without some form of integrative architecture, even the

most inspiring educational vision can become fragmented into disconnected initiatives for wellbeing, sustainability, citizenship, creativity or inclusion. The challenge is therefore not simply to identify what matters, but to understand how these different dimensions of education belong together.

The Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework was developed in response to this challenge. Rather than beginning with curriculum subjects, institutional structures or policy priorities, it begins with a more fundamental question: **what relationships must remain healthy if people and the wider community of life are to flourish together over time?** Drawing on systems thinking, developmental science, flourishing research, ecological philosophy, Indigenous knowledge and educational practice, the framework identifies four interconnected relational domains that together describe the principal living contexts within which human flourishing is continually shaped. These domains should not be understood as separate sectors or competing priorities. They are better understood as four dimensions of a single living ecology, each continually influencing and being influenced by the others (Ellyatt, 2025).

The first domain is the **Natural Environment**. This is deliberately placed first because every educational endeavour ultimately depends upon the health of the living systems that sustain life itself. Air, water, soil, climate and biodiversity are not simply topics for environmental education; they provide the conditions that make every human activity possible. Increasingly, educational thinkers are recognising that ecological literacy must become a foundational dimension of education rather than an optional addition to an already crowded curriculum (Orr, 2004). From an ecosystemic perspective, learners are not separate from nature but participants within it. Education therefore has a responsibility to cultivate ecological understanding, stewardship and a lived sense of belonging within the more-than-human world.

The second domain concerns **Circular and Regenerative Economies**. Every society organises relationships through economic systems that influence how resources are produced, exchanged and valued. Yet economies are far more than mechanisms of finance or production. They express assumptions about what societies choose to care for and what they regard as progress. Around the world, increasing attention is being given to wellbeing economies, circular economies and regenerative models of development that seek to align economic activity with the flourishing of people and planet rather than with economic growth alone (Raworth, 2017; Fioramonti, 2017). Educational communities therefore have an important role in helping learners understand how economic choices influence ecological integrity, social justice and intergenerational responsibility.

The third domain is **Cultural Values and Identity**. Human beings inhabit worlds of meaning before they inhabit worlds of information. Every educational community transmits stories about what it means to be human, whose knowledge is valued, how difference is understood and what kinds of futures are worth creating. Whether intentionally or not, schools shape identities, moral imagination and collective aspirations through both their formal curriculum and the cultures they embody (Bruner, 1996; Biesta, 2022). This domain therefore encourages educational communities to become more conscious of the narratives, traditions and values that shape learning, while also creating space for dialogue across different cultural and philosophical perspectives. It invites learners to recognise that diversity is not an obstacle to flourishing but one of its greatest sources of resilience and creativity.

The fourth domain, **Human Capacities and Potential**, focuses on the qualities that enable people to participate wisely within ecological, economic and cultural systems. Education has always sought to develop knowledge and capability. Yet the challenges of the twenty-first century increasingly require capacities that extend beyond technical competence alone. Curiosity, emotional maturity, ethical discernment, systems thinking, creativity, compassion, resilience and collaborative leadership are becoming essential for navigating a world characterised by uncertainty

and complexity (OECD, 2019; VanderWeele, 2024). Significantly, this domain is presented last. This reflects the understanding that human capacities do not develop in isolation. They emerge through continual participation within healthy ecological, cultural and economic relationships. The learner is therefore not the starting point of the framework but one expression of a much larger living system.

Taken together, these four domains describe the principal relational fields within which flourishing unfolds. They do not compete with existing educational priorities but seek to integrate them within a coherent ecosystemic perspective. Environmental education, citizenship, wellbeing, global learning, creativity, values education and sustainability all find their place within a wider understanding of education as the cultivation of healthy relationships across the interconnected systems that sustain life.

Importantly, the framework should not be understood as a fixed model or a universal prescription. Every educational community exists within its own unique ecological, cultural and historical context. The purpose of the framework is therefore not to standardise educational practice but to provide a shared language through which communities can reflect upon the conditions that support flourishing in their own circumstances. It serves as a compass rather than a blueprint—helping educators ask richer questions, recognise overlooked relationships and design learning environments that contribute to the flourishing of both present and future generations. Ultimately, the significance of the four domains lies not in their classification but in their integration. They remind us that flourishing cannot be cultivated through isolated educational initiatives. It emerges through the quality of the relationships that connect people with one another, with their cultures, with their economies and with the living Earth. Educational ecosystems flourish when these relationships flourish together.

What Kind of Learner Does the Future Call For?

If educational ecosystems are to contribute meaningfully to human and planetary flourishing, then they must ultimately be judged not only by what learners know, but by who learners are becoming. This question has become increasingly urgent as artificial intelligence transforms access to knowledge, information and routine cognitive tasks. If machines are becoming increasingly capable of storing, retrieving and generating information, then education's distinctive contribution lies elsewhere. It lies in cultivating the uniquely human capacities that enable knowledge to be used wisely, relationships to flourish and communities to thrive (UNESCO, 2025; Vallory, 2025; McGilchrist, 2021).

This represents an important shift in educational thinking. Rather than asking what competencies learners should acquire, we are invited to ask what qualities enable people to participate responsibly within increasingly interconnected ecological, cultural and technological systems. The answer is unlikely to be found in any single competency framework or developmental model. Human flourishing is simply too complex for that. Yet across psychology, education, neuroscience, philosophy and flourishing research, there is growing agreement that certain dimensions of human development consistently underpin lives characterised by resilience, purpose, contribution and belonging (Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2024; Narvaez, 2014, World Health Organization (2021)).

Within the Ecosystemic Flourishing Framework these recurring dimensions are described through seven enduring qualities of participation. They are not presented as fixed stages through which learners progress, nor as competencies to be measured in isolation. Rather, they describe aspects of human flourishing that remain significant throughout life while continually deepening as our relationships with others and the wider world expand.

Everything begins with **Security**—the experience of physical wellbeing, emotional safety and trust that allows learners to explore the world with confidence. Developmental research consistently demonstrates that secure relationships provide the foundation upon which curiosity, resilience and learning can flourish (Bowlby, 1969; Porges, 2011). In educational communities, security extends beyond safeguarding. It includes creating environments where learners feel respected, valued and able to take intellectual and creative risks without fear of humiliation or exclusion.

Security creates the conditions for **Relationship**. Human beings discover who they are through encounters with others. Belonging is therefore not simply a desirable educational outcome; it is one of the principal ways through which identity itself is formed. Flourishing educational communities intentionally cultivate relationships characterised by empathy, trust, dialogue and mutual care, recognising that these qualities underpin both academic learning and personal development (Noddings, 2013; Cohen, 2022).

As learners experience security and belonging, they increasingly develop **Independence**. Here independence should not be understood as separation from others but as the growing capacity to exercise agency within relationships. It is the confidence to ask questions, make decisions, express one's own ideas and accept responsibility for their consequences. Genuine agency emerges not despite belonging but because belonging provides the confidence from which exploration becomes possible (Bandura, 2006; OECD, 2019).

Agency naturally leads to **Engagement**. Human beings flourish when they become deeply involved in meaningful activity. Whether through scientific inquiry, artistic expression, collaborative problem-solving or play, engagement reflects the intrinsic motivation that accompanies authentic learning. It is characterised by curiosity, immersion and the joyful experience of discovering something larger than oneself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Educational ecosystems nurture engagement by creating opportunities for learners to connect learning with real questions, real communities and real purposes.

Over time, sustained engagement invites learners to seek **Fulfilment**. As young people mature, they begin asking questions that extend beyond achievement: *What gives life meaning? What kind of person do I wish to become? What responsibilities accompany my freedom?* Educational systems have often found these questions difficult because they resist standardised assessment. Yet research consistently suggests that meaning and purpose are among the strongest predictors of lifelong wellbeing, resilience and flourishing (Frankl, 1959; VanderWeele, 2024). Education therefore has an important role in creating spaces where learners can explore values, vocation and purpose within the context of their own lives and communities.

Purpose naturally seeks expression through **Contribution**. One of the most consistent findings across flourishing research is that human wellbeing deepens when people recognise that their lives matter to others. Contribution is therefore not simply community service or volunteering. It is the experience of participating in ways that strengthen families, neighbourhoods, institutions, ecosystems and future generations. Educational ecosystems cultivate contribution whenever learners experience themselves as active citizens, collaborators, mentors, creators and stewards rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Putnam, 2000; UNESCO, 2021).

Finally, lifelong learning is sustained through **Growth**. Growth recognises that flourishing is never a destination reached once and for all. Human beings continue to learn, adapt and expand throughout their lives. As our circles of relationship widen, so too does our awareness that personal flourishing cannot ultimately be separated from the flourishing of the larger systems within which we live. Growth therefore reflects an increasing capacity to hold complexity, embrace diversity, live with uncertainty and contribute to futures that extend beyond one's own immediate interests. It

represents not perfection but continual participation in the ongoing evolution of self, society and the living Earth (Barnett, 2007; Bateson, 1972).

Taken together, these seven dimensions describe an expanding ecology of participation rather than a hierarchy of achievement. Security remains essential throughout life. Belonging continues to shape identity. Agency deepens through experience. Engagement renews curiosity. Fulfilment evolves as understanding matures. Contribution broadens as relationships expand. Growth remains an open-ended invitation to continue learning throughout life. None replaces the others; each enriches and depends upon them.

Collectively, these dimensions also point towards a broader educational aspiration. They describe the qualities of what might be called **the ecosystemic learner** - a person who increasingly understands that flourishing emerges through relationships rather than individual achievement alone. Such learners approach the world with curiosity rather than certainty, with humility rather than domination and with responsibility rather than entitlement. They recognise that different cultures, disciplines and traditions each offer valuable ways of understanding complex realities, and they remain open to continual learning throughout life.

Four complementary dispositions characterise this orientation. The first is **ontological humility**: recognising that no individual or discipline can fully comprehend the complexity of living systems. The second is **relational responsibility**: understanding that our choices continually shape the wellbeing of other people, future generations and the more-than-human world. The third is **epistemic plurality**: valuing scientific, artistic, Indigenous, embodied and contemplative ways of knowing as complementary rather than competing sources of insight. The fourth is **critical reflexivity**: the willingness to examine one's own assumptions, cultural narratives and institutional practices while remaining open to transformation.

These dispositions should not be understood as additional learning outcomes to be measured through assessment frameworks. Rather, they emerge through sustained participation within educational ecosystems that embody the very qualities they seek to cultivate. They represent less a description of an ideal student than an orientation towards lifelong learning, ethical participation and regenerative citizenship.

Ultimately, the ecosystemic learner is not defined by how much they know, but by how they choose to participate in the world. In an age of unprecedented technological capability, this may become education's greatest contribution: helping every learner discover not only how to think critically, but how to live wisely, care deeply and contribute generously within the larger community of life.

What Might Ecosystemic Education Look Like in Practice?

If education is understood as the cultivation of flourishing relationships rather than simply the delivery of knowledge, then educational practice begins to change in subtle but significant ways. The question is no longer merely *What should learners know?* It becomes *What kinds of experiences, relationships and environments enable people to flourish throughout their lives?* This shift does not require abandoning existing educational strengths. High-quality teaching, rigorous scholarship, disciplinary expertise and intellectual challenge remain essential. What changes is the wider ecology within which these elements are understood. Knowledge is no longer an end in itself but part of a broader educational purpose: enabling people to participate wisely and responsibly in the flourishing of the world they inhabit.

This broader purpose has implications for every aspect of educational life. Curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, leadership, governance and community partnerships cease to be separate areas of improvement and instead become interconnected expressions of a shared educational vision.

Rather than asking how each can be optimised independently, educational communities begin asking how each contributes to the quality of relationships that learners experience every day. Flourishing is therefore understood not as another initiative to be added to an already crowded agenda, but as the organising principle through which existing priorities become more coherent (Fullan, 2020; Senge et al., 2012).

Curriculum, for example, becomes more than a sequence of subjects to be mastered. It becomes an invitation to explore the relationships that connect different forms of knowledge and to appreciate how scientific, artistic, historical, philosophical and ecological perspectives illuminate one another. Rather than reducing complexity, learners are gradually supported to engage with it. They begin to understand that climate change cannot be understood without ecology, economics, ethics and politics; that health depends upon relationships between biology, psychology, community and environment; and that technological innovation raises questions not only of engineering but also of justice, wisdom and human purpose. Interdisciplinary learning therefore becomes not simply a curriculum innovation but a reflection of the interconnected nature of reality itself (Barnett, 2018; Sterling, 2001).

Pedagogy also changes. Teachers continue to introduce knowledge, challenge assumptions and develop understanding, but they increasingly become cultivators of inquiry, dialogue and participation. Learning experiences encourage observation before judgement, collaboration before competition, and reflection alongside action. Encounters with local communities, natural environments, creative practice and real-world challenges become integral to learning rather than peripheral enrichment activities. Place-based education, service learning, outdoor learning and collaborative inquiry all contribute to helping learners experience themselves as active participants in living systems rather than detached observers of them (Orr, 2004; Sobel, 2004; Freire, 1972).

Assessment, too, requires fresh thinking. Assessment remains essential because it supports feedback, progression and high expectations. Yet if flourishing is understood as a lifelong process of participation, then educational success cannot be measured solely through standardised attainment. Educational communities increasingly need ways of recognising curiosity, collaboration, ethical reasoning, creativity, ecological understanding, systems thinking and contribution alongside academic achievement. This does not imply abandoning rigour; rather, it calls for a richer understanding of what rigorous education seeks to cultivate.

Leadership assumes a similarly relational character. Educational leaders become more than managers of organisational performance. They become stewards of educational culture, responsible for nurturing trust, shared purpose and conditions in which learners and educators alike can flourish. Such leadership recognises that healthy organisations are built not primarily through control but through relationships characterised by openness, dialogue, distributed responsibility and continual learning. Leadership itself becomes an educational practice, shaping the culture through which every other aspect of school life is experienced (Fullan, 2020; Wheatley, 2006).

This perspective also redefines the role of teachers. In many educational systems, teachers have become increasingly constrained by administrative demands, accountability pressures and curriculum overload. An ecosystemic perspective recognises teachers not simply as deliverers of curriculum but as architects of learning environments and cultivators of human possibility. Their influence extends far beyond subject knowledge. Through everyday interactions they help learners develop confidence, curiosity, resilience, ethical awareness and a sense of belonging. Supporting teacher flourishing therefore becomes inseparable from supporting learner flourishing. Educational ecosystems cannot sustainably nurture young people if the adults within those ecosystems are themselves unable to flourish (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

Families and communities likewise move from the margins to the centre of educational life. Learning has never been confined to classrooms. Families, neighbourhoods, cultural institutions, workplaces, voluntary organisations and natural environments all contribute to shaping how people understand themselves and the world around them. Educational ecosystems therefore seek to strengthen partnerships rather than boundaries, recognising that flourishing depends upon continuity between the many environments in which learning takes place. This perspective resonates with growing international interest in place-based education, community schools and lifelong learning societies, all of which recognise that education is fundamentally a shared societal responsibility rather than the sole responsibility of formal institutions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; UNESCO, 2021).

Perhaps the most significant implication concerns educational purpose itself. When flourishing becomes the organising principle of educational ecosystems, familiar tensions begin to soften. Academic excellence and wellbeing are no longer competing priorities. Creativity complements rather than competes with rigour. Environmental stewardship becomes integral to citizenship. Personal fulfilment becomes inseparable from contribution to others. The question shifts from balancing competing agendas to understanding how they can mutually reinforce one another within a coherent ecosystemic vision.

This transformation is unlikely to occur through isolated innovation alone. Around the world, many educators are already creating inspiring examples of regenerative, place-responsive and learner-centred practice. The challenge now is not simply to multiply individual initiatives but to cultivate educational ecosystems capable of sustaining this way of working over time. This requires supportive policy, courageous leadership, collaborative professional learning and, above all, a shared understanding that the purpose of education extends beyond preparing young people for the future. Education is itself one of the principal ways through which the future is continually created.

The Flourish Learning Lab has been established to support this ongoing work. Rather than promoting a single educational model, it seeks to create a collaborative space in which educators, researchers, policymakers, learners and communities can learn with and from one another. Its purpose is to explore how ecosystemic principles might be interpreted within diverse cultural and educational contexts, recognising that flourishing cannot be prescribed but must always be cultivated through relationships that are responsive to local people, places and possibilities (Ellyatt, 2024).

An Invitation to Reimagine Education

Education has always been society's way of preparing each generation for the world it will inherit. Today, however, that responsibility extends further than preparing young people simply to adapt to change. The challenges of the twenty-first century invite education to participate actively in shaping the conditions from which more flourishing futures might emerge. In an age characterised by ecological uncertainty, accelerating technological capability and increasing social complexity, education is no longer concerned solely with helping individuals succeed within existing systems. It is increasingly called to contribute to the continual regeneration of the relationships upon which both human and planetary flourishing depend (Ellyatt, 2025).

This paper has argued that such a transition begins with a simple but transformative shift in perspective. Rather than understanding education primarily as the transmission of knowledge or the development of human capital, it invites us to see education as one of society's most important living ecosystems. Within this ecosystem, relationships become the primary medium through which learning occurs, identity develops, cultures evolve and futures are continually created. Flourishing therefore becomes not another educational objective, but the organising purpose through which

curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, assessment and community find renewed coherence (Barnett, 2018; Biesta, 2022).

Seen from this perspective, the educational question also changes. It is no longer sufficient to ask what knowledge learners require, what competencies they should acquire or what occupations they may one day pursue. These questions remain important, but they are increasingly accompanied by deeper questions. How do learners discover that they belong within the wider community of life? How do educational communities cultivate wisdom alongside knowledge, responsibility alongside freedom and contribution alongside personal fulfilment? How might education enable people not simply to navigate an uncertain future but to participate in creating futures in which people, communities and ecosystems flourish together?

Artificial intelligence makes these questions more urgent rather than less. As technology increasingly augments memory, information retrieval and many forms of analytical reasoning, the distinctive contribution of education shifts towards those qualities that remain irreducibly human: ethical discernment, imagination, compassion, creativity, dialogue, ecological awareness and the capacity to build relationships characterised by trust and mutual care. The future of education will therefore depend not upon competing with intelligent machines but upon cultivating wiser, more caring and more responsible human beings (McGilchrist, 2021; UNESCO, 2025; Vallory, 2025).

At the same time, the ecological challenges facing humanity remind us that education cannot be separated from the wider living systems that sustain life. Schools, universities and learning communities do not exist outside nature; they are embedded within it. Every educational decision contributes, directly or indirectly, to shaping how future generations understand their relationship with one another and with the Earth itself. Education therefore occupies a unique position within society. It is one of the few institutions that touches every generation while simultaneously influencing the cultural, ecological, economic and ethical trajectories through which societies continually recreate themselves (Capra and Luisi, 2014; Orr, 2004).

The Ecosystemic Flourishing Framework has been presented as one possible architecture for supporting this transition. It is offered neither as a universal model nor as a definitive account of flourishing. Every educational community is shaped by its own history, culture, ecology and aspirations. The framework should therefore be understood as a compass rather than a blueprint—a way of helping educators recognise relationships that may otherwise remain hidden, ask richer questions and design learning environments that nurture flourishing in ways that are responsive to local contexts while remaining connected to our shared global future.

This understanding also shapes the purpose of the Flourish Learning Lab itself. The Learning Lab has not been established to promote a single educational programme or to prescribe uniform solutions. Rather, it exists as an evolving international community of inquiry and practice. It seeks to bring together educators, researchers, learners, policymakers, Indigenous knowledge holders, community organisations and young people to explore together what ecosystemic education might become in different cultural and educational settings. The most important educational innovations of the coming decades are unlikely to emerge from any one institution or discipline alone. They will arise through dialogue across perspectives, through careful experimentation, through collaborative research and through a shared commitment to learning from one another.

Ultimately, flourishing cannot be delivered. It cannot be mandated through policy, measured solely through assessment or secured through technological innovation. Flourishing is cultivated. It emerges wherever relationships of trust, dignity, curiosity, reciprocity and shared purpose are intentionally nurtured over time. Educational ecosystems have a unique capacity to create these conditions because they bring together people at every stage of life, connecting generations through the shared work of learning, caring and imagining new possibilities.

Perhaps this is the deepest invitation of ecosystemic education. It asks us to move beyond seeing education as preparation for life and to recognise it as life itself: a continual process through which individuals, communities and the wider living world learn, adapt and flourish together. The future of education will not ultimately be determined by how much knowledge humanity accumulates, but by the quality of the relationships we learn to cultivate - with ourselves, with one another, with technology, with our communities and with the living Earth that makes every future possible.

The Flourish Learning Lab invites all who share this aspiration to participate in that continuing journey.

References

Bandura, A. (2006) 'Toward a psychology of human agency', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1(2), pp. 164–180.
Barnett, R. (2007) *A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Barnett, R. (2018) *The Ecological University: A Feasible Utopia*. London: Routledge.
Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Bateson, N. (2021) *Combining*. Axminster: Triarchy Press.
Biesta, G. (2022) *World-Centred Education: A View for the Present*. London: Routledge.
Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and Loss. Volume 1: Attachment*. London: Penguin.
Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Bruner, J. (1996) *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Buber, M. (1970) *I and Thou*. Translated by W. Kaufmann. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
Cajete, G. (1994) *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. Durango, CO: Kivaki Press.
Capra, F. and Luisi, P.L. (2014) *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Cohen, G.L. (2022) *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*. London: Allen Lane.
Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
Dewey, J. (1938) *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan.
Ellyatt, W. (2026) *Paradigms as Lived Symbolic Systems: Worldviews, Regeneration, and Eco-Systemic Flourishing*. *This View of Life Magazine*. ProSocial World.
Ellyatt, W. (2025) *Toward a Unitive Narrative and Worldview: An Integrative Response to the Global Meta-crisis*. *Global Journal of Science Frontier Research: Environment and Earth Science*.
Ellyatt, W. (2025) *Introducing the Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework*. Flourish Project.
Ellyatt, W. (2025) *Worldviews Study White Paper*. Galileo Commission.
Ellyatt, Wendy. 2025. "Eco-Systemic Flourishing: Expanding the Meta-Framework for 21st-Century Education" *Challenges* 16, no. 2: 21.
Ellyatt, Wendy. 2024. "Optimising Worldviews for a Flourishing Planet: Exploring the Principle of Right Relationship" *Challenges* 15, no. 4: 42
Ellyatt, W. (2024) *Nurturing Young Children as Spiritual Beings in a Globalized World*. In: *Sustainability, Spirituality and Early Childhood*. London: Bloomsbury.
Ellyatt, W. (2022) Ellyatt, Wendy. 2022. "Education for Human Flourishing—A New Conceptual Framework for Promoting Ecosystemic Wellbeing in Schools" *Challenges* 13, no. 2: 58.
Ellyatt, W. (2022) *Relational Intelligence: Exploring Children's Spirituality and the Pattern Language of Beauty, Flow and Love*. Flourish Project.
Fioramonti, L. (2017) *Wellbeing Economy: Success in a World Without Growth*. Johannesburg: Pan Macmillan.
Frankl, V.E. (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Fullan, M. (2020) *Leading in a Culture of Change*. 2nd edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Greene, M. (1995) *Releasing the Imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional Capital*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Jackson, P.W. (1968) *Life in Classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
Kimmerer, R.W. (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.
McGilchrist, I. (2021) *The Matter with Things*. London: Perspectiva Press.
Meadows, D.H. (2008) *Thinking in Systems*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
Narvaez, D. (2014) *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality*. New York: W.W. Norton.
Noddings, N. (2013) *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. 2nd edn. Berkeley: University of California Press.
OECD (2019) *OECD Learning Compass 2030*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
Orr, D.W. (2004) *Earth in Mind*. 10th anniversary edn. Washington, DC: Island Press.
Palmer, P.J. (1998) *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Porges, S.W. (2011) *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication and Self-Regulation*. New York: W.W. Norton.
Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Ramose, M.B. (1999) *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books.
Raworth, K. (2017) *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. London: Random House Business.
Scharmer, C.O. (2016) *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. 2nd edn. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
Seligman, M.E.P. (2011) *Flourish*. New York: Free Press.
Senge, P.M., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J. and Kleiner, A. (2012) *Schools That Learn*. Rev. edn. New York: Crown Business.
Sobel, D. (2004) *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities*. Great Barrington, MA: Orion Society.
Sterling, S. (2001) *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*. Totnes: Green Books.
Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. London: Rider.
Tutu, D. (1999) *No Future Without Forgiveness*. London: Rider.
UNESCO (2021) *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. Paris:.
UNESCO (2025) *Renewing the Social Contract for Education: Directions for Change*. Paris:
Vallory, E. (2025) *Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. Conference presentation.
VanderWeele, T.J. (2024) *A Theology of Health: Wholeness, Human Flourishing, and the Divine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
Wahl, D.C. (2016) *Designing Regenerative Cultures*. Axminster: Triarchy Press.
Wheatley, M.J. (2006) *Leadership and the New Science*. 3rd edn. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
Wilson, S. (2008) *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
World Health Organization (2021) *Mental Health Atlas 2020*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
Yunkaporta, T. (2019) *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.