

# The Purpose of Education - from attainment to Human Flourishing

Wendy Ellyatt, April 2022



## A shift in focus

There is currently global recognition that we need to move away from an over-focus on attainment to that of more clearly identifying and nurturing all the factors that lead to good and meaningful lives. For example, UNESCO's recent report holds that education has one overarching aim, which is to support flourishing, which is then further supported by the aspect of fulfilling education's epistemic aims.<sup>i</sup> And this is being endorsed by a rapidly growing number of other leading institutions, including the OECD<sup>ii</sup> and the Harvard Human Flourishing Program.<sup>iii</sup>

The influential UNESCO 2022 International Science and Evidence Based Education Assessment (ISEEA) Report<sup>iv</sup> says:

*“Education for flourishing in schools should take into account three relationship levels: (1) relationships with other people; (2) relationships with ourselves; and (3) relationships to knowledge or subject matter. The traditional focus of schooling, on maximizing individual cognitive potential and imparting technical knowhow needed for success in the labour market, is insufficient for advancing flourishing.*

*Schools seeking to promote flourishing need to foster a range of additional capacities. These include, but are not limited to, the capacity to tune in to one's own emotions, thoughts and feelings, to understand another person's perspective, to resolve conflicts peacefully, to develop compassion for self and others, to engage critically with subject matter.”*

We know that education can bring about profound change. However, effective education is fundamentally relational and must engage the energies and creative potentials of all those involved. In this way, students and teachers cooperatively build relationships of trust, that can then optimise the conditions for flourishing.

Such conditions need to respond to the huge diversity of learner backgrounds and capabilities with the aim of allowing every child with the opportunity to fulfil his or her unique potential, within a social world of others. For a peaceful world, this must also include education's role in understanding and responding to both personal and cultural trauma and the shaping of prosocial values, beliefs and worldviews.

I suggest that Educational Flourishing should therefore include:

**Ecosystemic approaches** The need to understand the interconnected and interdependent nature of the values and wellbeing of students, parents, families, schools, local communities, cultures, political and religious systems and nations.

**Systemic Collaboration** The alignment of Research and Practice across sectors, particularly in relation to how these identify and respond to sources of human languishing and promote and resource our understanding of human and planetary flourishing. The active participation of all system participants i.e., students, parents, teachers, leadership and governance teams and policymakers.

**Embracing the Future** Futures Literacy. Cultivating engaged and resilient learners who can collaboratively respond to and shape the emergent needs of the future. Optimising the use of technology to enhance human and planetary flourishing. Education in the Future, for the Future, about Futures and as an evolving emergent process

and should encompass the following six sub-categories:

**1) Equality of Opportunity**

Prioritising equitable learning experiences for all that optimise human values, worldviews, contribution and worth. Ensuring that access, participation and progression are available to all and that personal or social circumstances – such as gender, socio-economical or immigrant background – are not obstacles to achieving educational potential.

**2) New Educational Narratives**

The development of narratives that build alliances across fields and cultural viewpoints, that support new definitions of personal value, wealth and success and that underpin pathways towards peaceful and sustainable global futures.

**3) Learning as a generative lifelong process**

Promoting learning as a complex and multi-faceted life process that underpins human flourishing and cultural evolution and that is not limited to formal educational environments.

**4) Educating the Whole Child**

Promoting human flourishing as the balanced integration of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities that optimise human wellbeing, fulfilment and potential within the context of a social world of others. Providing learning environments that optimise personal meaning-making and flow and that recognise curiosity, innovation and independent thinking as core aspects of this process.

**5) Honouring the Role and Contribution of Parents and Teachers**

Recognising the flourishing and active participation of parents and teachers as essential for effective educational and societal transformation.

**6) Assessment for Human Flourishing**

Assessment and accountability systems that respect and nurture every child as a unique learner, every teacher as a force of creativity and innovation and every school as an important and dynamic centre of community engagement and positive transformation. The bringing together of experts from diverse disciplines e.g., early years development, neuroscience, education, economics, philosophy, psychology, spirituality, data and evidence, technology and sustainability, to inform best practice and to ensure the adoption of science and evidence-based approaches.

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<sup>i</sup> UNESCO, 2021, A New Social Contract for Education

<sup>ii</sup> OECD, 2018, The Future of Education and Skills, Education 2030

<sup>iii</sup> Harvard Flourishing Program, 2022 <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu>

<sup>iv</sup> UNESCO, 2022, Education 2030 International Science and Evidence Based Education Assessment (ISEEA) Report



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