
Statement on Flourishing as an Educational Aim

We need to define flourishing as an educational aim, as distinct from flourishing as a more general life goal, and focus on the flourishing student rather than the flourishing human being more generally.

Context

A group of international scholars, practitioners and policy-makers attended a consultation in Jerusalem on August 25–28, 2023, to discuss the viability of making flourishing an official aim of education, world-wide. The consultation was organised jointly by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham, and the Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University. The consultation took as its starting point recent reports commissioned by UNESCO (De Ruyter et al., 2022) and OECD (Stevenson, 2022), on flourishing as an educational aim, and explored the credibility of advancing and applying flourishing as an overarching aim of education. After extensive discussions, the participants agreed upon, and signed, the present document, which summarises the proceedings of the consultation.

Background

The concept of flourishing (*eudaimonia*) has recently come into vogue within various areas of the humanities and social sciences (philosophy, psychology, economics, health sciences, education). This document focuses on its potential role within education, where the retrieval of flourishing has perhaps been most visible of all the recent areas of interest, setting in motion what some have called a ‘flourishing bandwagon’. This bandwagon has blazed a trail for the view, referred to above, that flourishing can be seen not only as a significant aim, but even the central aim, of all educational endeavours: a view endorsed now, for instance, by OECD (Stevenson, 2022).

During the 20th century, a monistic view of the fundamental aim of education emerged, which can be referred to under the label ‘human capital theory’: a term that fully took hold in the 1960s (see, e.g., Ergas et al., 2022).

According to this theory, human skills, which are to be cultivated in education, form capital that aids production and has double benefits: for society (increased GNP) and the individual (employability and higher wages). This view of the aim of education – while always controversial in academic circles – began to come under heavy public criticism and scrutiny at the turn of the 21st century. It is difficult to identify all the main reasons for this pushback, but a few suggestions emerged during this consultation:

- Increased worries about human capital theory being incompatible with the proclamation in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that all children have a right to education (irrespective of their economic input).
- Concerns about the effects of unbridled economic growth on the environment, social cohesion and political equity.
- Projections about most skills learned at school becoming outdated soon, as we enter the age of automation and artificial intelligence where machines do much of manual and even information-processing work.
- The mental health crisis among young people, hitting as hard, or even harder, at economically and educationally advanced nations – and sometimes related to ever more competitive high-stakes testing.
- Concerns about narrowly focused PISA-comparisons driving all educational policy-making.

What policy-makers are calling for internationally is not a new ‘philosophical plaything’ but rather an account of the contours of flourishing that can advance educational practice.

Whatever the exact reasons, educational authorities around the world have become increasingly disillusioned with the human-capital model, and this disillusionment has been most strongly expressed by some of the countries that tend to score highest in international PISA tests, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Finland (Stevenson, 2022).

Problem Statement

In spite of the multi-faceted interest in flourishing as an educational aim, the concept is controversial, both generally (as targeting the aim of human life) and educationally (see recent critiques by Carr, 2021; Hand, 2023; Siegel, 2023).

The participants in the present consultation deemed it important to disentangle three different levels of problems relating to analysing and justifying a concept such as flourishing. The first and most general level is the *semantic* one, in which a broad definition is offered as well as some generic formal criteria for a proposed conception to fall under the concept. Some advancement has already been made in this area with regard to the formal criteria of flourishing, as contrasted with its antithesis of languishing (see esp. Wolbert et al., 2015). The second level is the *substantive* one where different philosophical assumptions are brought to bear on the formal definition to flesh it out with the necessary specificity. These assumption have to do, in the case of flourishing, with the nature of the specifically human capacities that flourishing is seen to encompass (as distinct, for example, from an AI machine), and how the concept is meant to reflect a given axiological theory. Much of the recent theoretical writings about flourishing have taken place at this substantive level and have aimed at conciliatory specifications meant to cut across various theoretical divides (e.g., VanderWeele, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2020). The third level is the *pragmatic* one, in which a given substantive definition is translated into a language that is relevant to educational practice.

While much of the discussion during the Jerusalem consultation focused on the substantive level and aimed at exploring various conciliatory proposals about how different theoretical understandings of flourishing could be integrated, we – the signatories – decided to confine the current statement to the pragmatic level. We consider this level vital, for present purposes, because what policy-makers are calling for internationally is not a new ‘philosophical plaything’ but rather an account of the contours of flourishing that can advance educational practice. Moreover, some of the recent criticisms of the flourishing discourse in education have objected to its distance from practical classroom concerns (Hand, 2023).

It is unrealistic to expect a single consultation to come up with a definitive pragmatic account of flourishing as an educational aim that can address all remaining concerns and controversies. However, we consider it possible to propose a list of items that any credible pragmatic account of this kind needs to address. In other words, we defined it as our task to come up with a list of the *success criteria for any future account of flourishing as an educational aim*.

The flourishing of individual students cannot be separated from the flourishing of the schools they attend, the relevant educational systems and the societal provisions of educational resources that facilitate individual flourishing.

Statement on the Success Criteria of Any Pragmatically Viable Account of Flourishing as an Educational Aim

We, the signatories, do not claim to be in full agreement on the substantive variables of a construct of flourishing as an aim of life. However, we agreed that for an account of flourishing as an educational aim to have real-world traction, it needs to meet these minimal pragmatic criteria:

1) *Consensus*. Any such account needs, as far as possible, to synthesise different philosophical, psychological, theological and political conceptions of flourishing and to target similarities rather than differences. These conceptions include Aristotelian, liberal, positive psychological and self-determination-theory ones in the West, as well as traditional conceptions from the East and the Global South.

2) *Educational focus*. Any such account needs to be, specifically, about flourishing as an educational aim, as distinct from flourishing as a more general life goal, and focus on the flourishing student rather than the flourishing human being more generally. Thus, it should focus on what educators can and should offer to enable students to flourish now and later in life. This means that any such account needs to draw on findings from developmental psychology and offer insights about the life-span trajectory from being a flourishing student to becoming a flourishing citizen.

3) *The individual and institutions*. Any such account needs to bridge the gap between individual flourishing and the flourishing of the relevant institutions. For example, the flourishing of individual students cannot be separated from the flourishing of the schools they attend, the relevant educational systems and the societal provisions of educational resources that facilitate individual flourishing (but a lack of which can stifle flourishing)

4) *Academics and more*. Any such account needs to honour the traditional goals of schooling which focus on academic excellence and the development of intellectual virtues. However, these primary goals must be complemented with broader ones, see 5) and 6) below.

5) *Moral and civic virtues and a sense of purpose*. Any such account needs to offer guidance on the role of education in cultivating general moral and civic character virtues (and the performative skills needed to execute them), as well as helping students develop a clear, morally justifiable, autonomous and authentic sense of purpose, and a metacognitive capacity for practical wisdom to make good choices.

6) *Aesthetic dimension*. Any such account needs to incorporate an aesthetic dimension, in the sense of helping students attune to experiences of aesthetic value (a sense of wonder, awe, hope, self-transcendence and spirituality).

7) *Out-of-school experiences*. Any such account needs to acknowledge that students also have a life out of school, which can accelerate or detract from their flourishing. This includes extra-curricular activities; the quality of personal relationships, including engagement with family and friends; and various modes of participation in cyberspace (including mobile phones and social media).

8) *Teacher education*. Any such account needs to provide guidance on how teacher education (and CPD courses for existing teachers) can better prepare educators to become flourishing facilitators. This includes paying attention to the flourishing of the practitioners themselves, not only their students.

9) *The curriculum and classroom practice*. Any such account needs to offer detailed and extensive, but also realistic, advice on the extent to which curricular design and classroom practice need to be altered to serve the aim of overall student flourishing better, not least in future educational systems permeated by AI technology.

10) *Evaluation*. Any such account needs to acknowledge that, although not everything that is valuable about flourishing can be quantified and easily measured, schools need actionable yardsticks to evaluate whether students have made progress with respect to different flourishing variables or not. Best psychometric practice needs to be harnessed to create an evaluative repertoire that schools and teachers can draw upon for this purpose.

Concluding remark

All in all, the undersigned participants in the 2023 Jerusalem Consultation commend the recent educational discourse – theoretical as well as practical – on flourishing as the aim of education. We all consider it to signal an advancement on the now-outdated human-capital theory. However, this discourse is still work-in-progress, and it is vital that academics, practitioners and policy-makers are given the time and space necessary to consult further on if and how credible substantive accounts of flourishing can be translated into terms that truly enrich classroom practice across the world.

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