MEANING(S) OF HUMAN FLOURISHING AND EDUCATION

A Research Brief by the INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE AND EVIDENCE BASED EDUCATION ASSESSMENT
An Initiative by UNESCO MGIEP*

Doret de Ruyter[1]
Lindsay Oades[2]
Yusef Waghid[3]

INTRODUCTION

This short paper provides a definition of human flourishing, education, learning, teaching and student evaluation, more commonly known as student assessment. These definitions and their relationship with each other set the context of the International Science and Evidence based Education (ISEE) Assessment. The ISEE Assessment, an initiative by the UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP), was designed to provide the science and evidence support to UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative.

The Futures of Education is necessary given global political, economic and ecological developments that increase injustice in the world and are a threat to people's opportunity to develop optimally and live a complete human life. Therefore, human flourishing is proposed as the central purpose of education in the ISEE Assessment.

Just after the programme had started, the COVID-19 crisis hit the world. The pandemic, which has led to lockdowns and school closures around the globe, has made it even more important to reimagine the purpose of education and to reflect on ways in which teaching and learning can contribute to realising education's purpose. For this, it is first necessary to understand what human flourishing could mean and how education may contribute to the possibility that human beings lead flourishing lives. As human flourishing and education are both capacious concepts and often contested, this short paper describes key meanings of these concepts as well as the relationship between flourishing and education.

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[1] Professor of Philosophy of Education, University of Humanistic Studies, The Netherlands
[2] Director and Professor at the Centre for Positive Psychology, The University of Melbourne, Australia
[3] Distinguished Professor of Philosophy of Education, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

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HUMAN FLOURISHING

The description of human flourishing in this paper is informed by various academic disciplines. It is quite comprehensive but also general in character, i.e. it does not favour a particular theory of flourishing and avoids using words that are associated with particular theories. Moreover the description is formal, allowing for various interpretations of the central elements of the description (possibly informed by a particular worldview).

> "Human flourishing is both the optimal continuing development of human beings' potentials and living well as a human being, which means being engaged in relationships and activities that are meaningful, i.e. aligned with both their own values and humanistic values, in a way that is satisfying to them. Flourishing is conditional on the contribution of individuals and requires an enabling environment."

Flourishing is a hybrid concept: it is naturalistic, culture-dependent and agent-relative. Flourishing is also both objective and subjective: There are potentials that human beings need to be able to develop and enact to say that they are flourishing, but human beings also have their own views, preferences and desires about the way in which they best develop and enact their potential.

Optimal Development

The phrase optimal development is used here to explicitly express the aspirational quality of flourishing. Flourishing means developing oneself throughout one's life in relationship with others and the world towards living and doing well.

It is important to note that optimal development is agent relative, which means that it should not be interpreted as a uniform standard applicable to all humans in the same way, but that which is related to individuals' potentials. Human beings share many potentials, but individuals have different potentials and different levels of potentials and therefore what is optimal/aspirational for A can be different from what is optimal/aspirational for B. It is also agent relative, because human beings develop potentials through different pathways (influenced by their cultural background, beliefs etc.) and also for different ways to live well. For example, cognitive and emotional potentials can be developed for human beings to be good parents or friends, but these potentials are also needed to learn, work and be active citizens.

Potentials (this encompasses capacities, propensities and capabilities)

That human flourishing is phrased in terms of development of human potentials is not contentious; that children are entitled to develop their potentials to the full is also

recognised (e.g. Article 29 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child). However, what human potential means or what it is, is not self-evident. Israel Scheffler (1985) has made a helpful distinction between three notions:

Capacity is a *possibility.* A capacity notion of potential only denies that a person *cannot* acquire some characteristic; it does not say that s/he will. [Compare to definition in Oxford English Dictionary: The power, ability, or faculty for anything in particular, or James (2018): capacity means the ability to hold].

Propensity expresses that *a conditionally predictable endpoint will* be reached if the right conditions are present. [Compare to character strengths as a trait like propensity to contribute to individual fulfilment for oneself and others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).]

Capability is a person's *power and freedom to effectively pursue* what s/he has set out to do. [Compare to Sen (2010): a person's opportunity and ability to generate valuable outcomes, taking into account internal and external preconditions. It captures the individual's freedom of choice and agency in deliberating what constitutes a good life].

Living well as a human being

There are aspects of living that are good for all human beings, simply because they make a life a human life. We identify here three main categories of what constitutes "good": First, having relationships (with family-members, friends, community-members, citizens, animals, and the environment); second, being engaged in activities (e.g., play, work, learning, caring); and third, agency. Note that these categories or dimensions are general and the way in which they are enacted is influenced by the culture in which humans live and dependent on or relative to what is good for an individual human being.

Meaningful

Relationships and activities are meaningful when they are a source of significance and purpose. Significance means that they are important to an individual – they matter to her and contribute to her feeling that she matters. Purpose means that relationships and activities contribute to her reasons for living her life (in a certain way) – they provide her with worthwhile aims in life.

Meaning has both a subjective and objective quality: who she can be and what she can do is only meaningful if it is worthwhile to her, because it aligns with her values. But the activities and relationships are also meaningful only if they are worthy of love and engaged in a positive way (Wolf, 2010), or put differently, that they are pursued for a reason that lies beyond the person herself (Damon, 2009).

Central humanistic values are: negative and positive freedom, equality and equity of human beings, solidarity with (groups of) human beings, care for sentient beings, and care for the environment.

Satisfying

Satisfying has both a cognitive valuative and emotional dimension. Human beings flourish if they a) can (authentically) affirm that their life is good, i.e. they have reasons for giving a positive evaluation; b) have overall positive feelings about their life (they are happy) – which does not mean that they have to have these positive feelings all the time or about everything they do.

Internal and external preconditions

Human flourishing is a dynamic state of being (in relation to others and the world) that can only appear when basic internal and external preconditions are fulfilled. Examples of internal preconditions are mental and physical health; external preconditions are for instance safety, freedom, being respected, living in a democratic society, a healthy environment.

Characteristic of these preconditions is that they are not (completely) under the influence of a single human being and are therefore sometimes regarded as 'luck'. Some can be influenced by collaborative action – which in itself can also be regarded as an aspect of human flourishing.

It is important that preconditions are not only understood in a unidirectional or linear fashion. Whilst the environment may provide opportunity, affordance or be viewed as enabling, it is the dialectic between the person and the world that leads to the ongoing development of the human being's potentials. Examples of the dialectic may include how a person finds meaning by living a healthy life or how he flourishes through his activism for the recognition of a minority in a discriminating society.

EDUCATION

A formal element of education is that activity which describes education as a human *relation*. In other words, without the formal element of human relations, education cannot exist. Education is what it is on the basis of human relations with themselves and others, such as humans with other humans, non-humans and the environment.

Material elements of education manifest in practices such as teaching, learning and evaluation. Put differently, teaching, learning and evaluation are multiple ways in which the concept of education is realised. Within teaching, as an instance of education, there is a relationship among teachers and students. Likewise, learning denotes a relation among

learners, teachers and texts. In a similar way, evaluation is underscored by relations among evaluators (teachers) and evaluatees (students). Consequently, teaching, learning and evaluation can be considered as educational activities. It is the concept of education that organises the many ways in which teaching, learning and evaluation unfold. Put differently, the concept of education is constituted by the acts of human relations that in turn give rise to how teaching, learning, and evaluation are organised.

Teaching

When one teaches, one *provokes* students to come to understanding. Teaching would not be teaching if students were not aroused to see the point (Greene, 1995). The point about teaching is that it implies a relational act according to which students are encouraged to act in particular ways. And to provoke students implies that they are invited to think for themselves - a matter of being summoned to come to understanding. In turn, by provoking the students, the teacher also learns and the students provoke their teachers as well, stimulating her to learn too (if she is sufficiently open to being provoked).

Learning

Learning happens when students' potentials are *evoked* to come to understanding in agential ways of being and acting (MacIntyre, 1967). Learning would fail to be learning, if students' potentials are not evoked in the quest to gain understanding, insight, and be encouraged to embark on academic, political, economic, social and environmental activism. In learning, students act as human agents being intent on coming to make sense of the knowledge they are taught or read and/or the experiences they gain. That is, their learning becomes significant on the basis of their potentials being evoked to see the point. Now when their potentials are evoked, they exercise their freedoms to think for themselves and to make sense of the world around them.

Evaluation

Evaluation involves making reasonable judgments about what is taught and learned – that is, as a form of deliberative inquiry, teachers make sense of what students proffered as a consequence of their learning. Evaluation would not count as evaluation if reasonable judgments are not proffered about what constitutes teaching and learning, and if such judgments are not determined in deliberative action. To evaluate as teachers do, and to be evaluated as students are subjected to, do not happen in isolation but rather, in a way that both teachers and students can justify. When teachers justify their evaluation of students' work, they give an account of why students produce work of a specific kind - that is, they provide a justification for their evaluation.
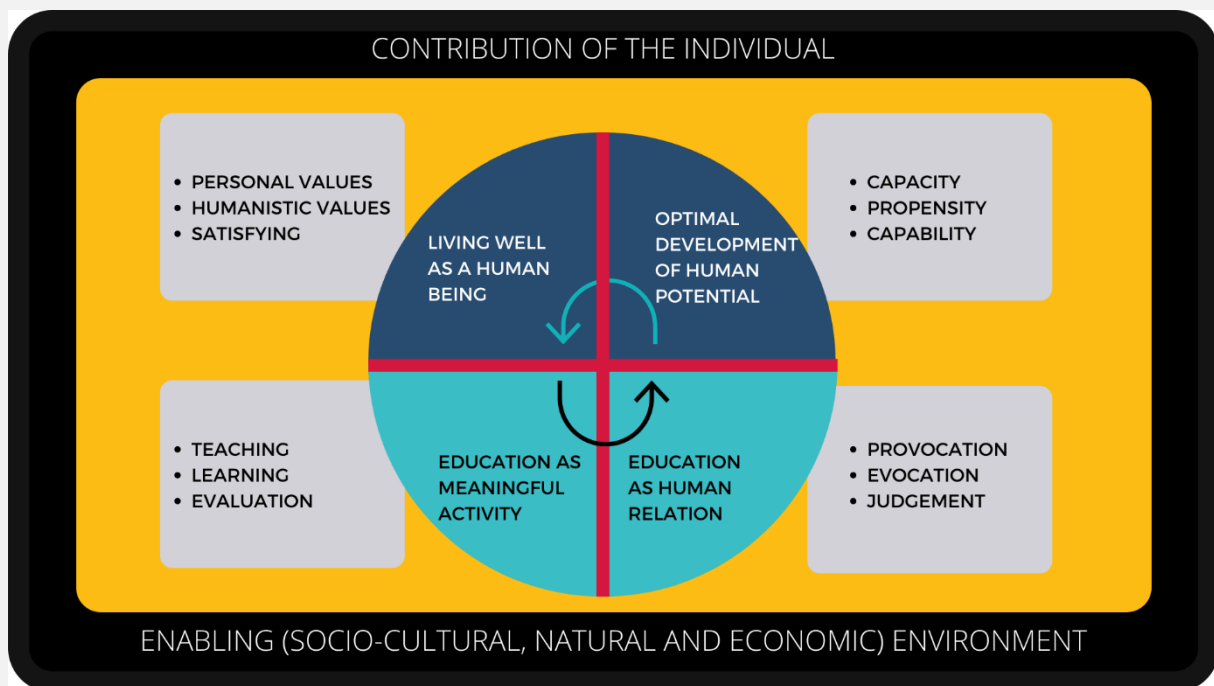
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CONTRIBUTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

- PERSONAL VALUES
- HUMANISTIC VALUES
- SATISFYING

LIVING WELL AS A HUMAN BEING

OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN POTENTIAL

- CAPACITY
- PROPENSITY
- CAPABILITY

- TEACHING
- LEARNING
- EVALUATION

EDUCATION AS MEANINGFUL ACTIVITY

EDUCATION AS HUMAN RELATION

- PROVOCATION
- EVOCATION
- JUDGEMENT

ENABLING (SOCIO-CULTURAL, NATURAL AND ECONOMIC) ENVIRONMENT

Figure 1. A visual representation of the relationship between flourishing and education.

RELATION BETWEEN FLOURISHING AND EDUCATION

Figure 1 shows how human flourishing (dark blue) and education (light blue) are intertwined (mutually reinforcing):

a. Education *enables* flourishing – human beings need to be introduced into the social, cultural and natural world by teaching and learning, in relation to teachers and the environment, for they need to be able to make sense of their world in order to be able to live well as human beings. This means that flourishing can be regarded as an aim of education.

b. Flourishing *enhances* education – when teachers and students flourish in their teaching and learning, in other words when they can develop their potential and live well and when teaching and learning are meaningful to them, their relations will prosper and both the teaching and learning will have a higher quality.

The intertwined character of flourishing and education also shows that flourishing is a hybrid concept: the development of human potentials that make life a human life must inform education (the naturalistic quality of flourishing), but the worlds in which these potentials are fostered are different (cultural-dependent) and good education takes into account that children can develop different ways of living well related to their specific potentials and their

ideas and preferences about how they want to live in the world (agent-relative). That the last is true can be shown by the fact that for some adults being a teacher is a meaningful way of living well, while others want to use the potentials that teachers need to become engineers, doctors or parents (and there are also human beings who do not have the specific potential to become good teachers).

Finally we note that the naturalism of flourishing also draws attention to the basic human needs that need to be fulfilled before education is actually possible: Children need to have sufficient food, water and sleep, safety and security, and also freedom in order to be able flourish as pupils and to benefit from the education they receive.

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Note: This text rests on many more academic shoulders than these eight references above. The brief is a summary of Chapter 2 of the ISEEA Report, to be published in 2021, with more than a hundred references.

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The ISEE Assessment

The International Science and Evidence based Education (ISEE) Assessment is an initiative of the UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP), conceived as its contribution to the Futures of Education process launched by UNESCO Paris in September 2019. In order to contribute to re-envisioning the future of education with a science and evidence-based report, UNESCO MGIEP embarked on an ambitious project of the first-ever large-scale assessment of the knowledge on education.

The overall goal of the ISEE Assessment is to pool the multi-disciplinary expertise on educational systems and reforms from a range of stakeholders in an open and inclusive manner and undertake a scientifically robust and evidence-based assessment that can inform education policy making at all levels and scales. It is not to be policy prescriptive but to provide policy relevant information and recommendations to improve education systems and the way we organize learning in formal and non-formal settings. It is also meant to identify information gaps and priorities for future research in the field of education.

In the education sector, the term assessment generally refers to activities used to measure student progress. Going beyond this narrow notion of education assessment, and drawing lessons from the IPCC Assessment Reports and other scientific environmental assessments (such as Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and IPBES), UNESCO MGIEP aspires to initiate a **scientifically credible, legitimate, relevant and inclusive** process that will assess the state of education as a complex system and its role in achieving sustainable and peaceful societies.

The ISEE Assessment uses the 1996 Delors report's four pillars of education *Learning to be*, *Learning to know*, *Learning to do* and *Learning to live together* as the evaluative benchmarks and the lens of "what", "where", "when" and "how" we learn and teach. The assessment is designed along three Working Groups: (1) Human Flourishing, Education and Learning; (2) Education, Learning and Context; and (3) Learning Experience. In addition, there is a technical group on Data and Evidence. The ISEE Assessment Report is expected to be released in November 2021.

Contact: ISEE Assessment Secretariat
         issea@unesco.org