

The New Flourishing Agenda in Education: A Report on the Current Theoretical State of Play

Report commissioned by OECD, Directorate for Education and
Skills



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Executive Summary

This report, commissioned by OECD, aims to provide readers with a comprehensive critical overview of the current theoretical state of play within academia regarding the concept of flourishing in education. The concept of flourishing has recently come into vogue within various areas of the humanities and social sciences (philosophy, psychology, economics, health sciences, education). This report focuses exclusively 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 somewhat radical view that flourishing can be seen not only as a significant aim, but even the central aim, of all educational endeavours. The report a) maps out the relevant conceptual landscape of ‘flourishing’, b) describes various approaches to flourishing in education, Western and non-Western, c) compares and contrasts the competing approaches, looking for synergies, and d) examines reverberations of flourishing approaches for classroom practice, the education and role of teachers, and the policy environment.

Key Findings

- A flourishing account is replacing the human capital theory of the aims of education.
- As a conceptual condition, a flourishing account must either feature objective components of well-being only, or mix objective and subjective components in a way that gives priority to the former.
- An important distinction must be made between preconditions and constituents of flourishing, and also between educable and non-educable aspects of flourishing, with accounts of flourishing in education targeting the former only.
- There are various competing accounts of flourishing in the West, of which four historical ones are scrutinised here. There are also various mixed ones, of which three are explored. To complicate matters, various non-Western accounts also need to be considered, of which three are singled out here. The non-Western accounts have some unique characteristics that separate them from (most of) the Western accounts.
- There is considerable consensus among most of the competing accounts about a number of core statements relating to flourishing in education. However, there are also some outstanding issues that may serve as obstacles to a synthetic conciliatory account, with a potential for international application.
- It is one thing to aim at a conciliatory universal account of flourishing; it is quite another challenge to make such an account work, given the current policy environment, the rough and tumble of classroom practice, and the preparedness of teachers.
- The ideal of education for flourishing has significant implications for all current OECD aspirations in the areas of strategy and research.

Key Recommendations:

- OECD needs to support the creation of ‘a systematic theory’ of flourishing in education that includes attention to cultural nuances.

- More attention needs to be paid to the political and institutional conditions of flourishing schools and education for flourishing.
- More systematic exploration is required of the required changes in curriculum and teaching methods for the aim of flourishing to be achieved.
- More engagement is to be called for with developmental psychology, in order to be able to individualise efforts at education for flourishing more effectively and reach out to disenfranchised individuals and groups.
- More collaborations between teachers and parents is needed to figure out how schools and homes can draw mutual benefit from each other's efforts in enhancing the flourishing of young people.
- Better integration of a flourishing agenda into teacher training must be made.

Introduction: Aims, Scope, and Motivation

Aims and Scope

This report,¹ commissioned by OECD, aims to provide readers with a comprehensive critical overview of the current theoretical state of play within academia regarding the concept of flourishing (*eudaimonia* or *eudemonic* well-being). This concept – referring to predominantly objective features of human well-being – has recently come into vogue within various areas of the humanities and social sciences (philosophy, psychology, economics, health sciences, education) after only playing a marginal role since its halcyon days within ancient theorising about the good life (in particular, Aristotle, 1985). This report focuses exclusively on the potential role of flourishing within education, bringing insights from the other disciplines to bear only insofar as those have potential educational implications. Indeed, within education 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’ (Kristjánsson, 2020). This bandwagon has blazed a trail for the somewhat radical view that flourishing can be seen not only as a significant aim, but even the central aim, of all educational endeavours.

While space only allows a cursory glance over some parts of the vast educational terrain, a wide lens is needed to secure anything resembling a comprehensive view of the nature of flourishing as an educational construct. After the current Introduction, the report continues, therefore, in Section 2, with a general mapping-out of the relevant conceptual landscape, and the identification of the minimal conditions that an approach must satisfy to count as being about flourishing. This then leads, in Section 3, to an exploration of four main Western approaches to flourishing and three subsequent theoretically mixed approaches. Three non-Western approaches are also added, to give a more multi-culturally balanced view. Section 4 addresses the question of possible convergence in a sea of apparently divergent approaches, by positing a number of common statements about human flourishing and hypothesising how the different approaches would respond to them and why. These comparisons and contrasts then enable a brief evaluation of possibility of a conciliatory synthesis. Section 5 turns to questions that are educational, in a narrower sense, by looking at the reverberations of a flourishing approach for the policy environment, the education and role of teachers, and classroom practice. Section 6 offers some concluding reflections and research recommendations.²

¹ Notice that this document constitutes a *report* on the current state of play on flourishing research in education rather than an *academic paper*. The report aims at accessibility for readers at various levels of engagement with educational issues: practical, political, and policy-related, as well as academic. Scholarly nuance is therefore at times sacrificed for clarity, and depth for breadth, in order to cut through some of the complexities of the discourse. Although the report is reflective rather than merely descriptive, it does not aim for radically new insights or definitive conclusions. For those who wish to delve deeper into the issues broached, the detailed list of references at the end offers guidance. For more extensive reviews of some of the main topics covered, the following sources may be particularly useful: Curren (2023); Fowers et al. (2022); de Ruyter et al. (2022); de Ruyter & Wolbert (2020); Høltge et al. (2022); Kristjánsson (2020); VanderWeele (2017); Wolbert et al. (2015).

² This report circumvents some otherwise relevant educational topics that are being explored in other reports commissioned by OECD, for example one on measurements of flourishing by Tyler VanderWeele.

Motivation: Why Flourishing?

The motivation for writing this report is already implicit in the remarks above: if a powerful new approach to education is developing in academia, there is obviously good reason for the OECD to want to make sense of it and assess its promise for fulfilling the organisation's wide-ranging educational goals (Stevenson, 2022). This section probes further, however, and inquires why flourishing is enjoying this recent revival. What motivates it?

Philosophers may be tempted to say that the springboard of the interest lies in the revival of virtue ethics within moral philosophy (Anscombe, 1958; MacIntyre, 1981) and the simultaneous setback for instrumentalist cost-benefit analyses of the utilitarian kind (Mill, 1972; Weber, 1949), as well as formalistic deontological (rule-based) procedures emphasising purely rational decision-making (Kant, 1964; Kohlberg, 1981). Educationists will no doubt add the insight that the recently fashionable approach of character education (Jubilee Centre, 2022) – as the educational incarnation of virtue ethics – has inspired the flourishing agenda, because the foundational concept of character education, harking back to Aristotle (1985), is actually flourishing rather than (good) character. Psychologists may then refer to the recent rise of interest within their discipline in normative issues, including constructs of character and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Fowers et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021) and a morally imbued concept of wisdom (Grossmann et al., 2020; Kristjánsson et al., 2021), all of which require an overall objective conception of a good life.

There would no doubt be a grain of truth in all those explanations. However, academics have a tendency to overestimate the influence of theoretical paradigm shifts on educational policy and practice. The educational reforms of the 19th century and the spread of public education in the West had, for instance, less to do with the educational ideas of Wollstonecraft, Rousseau, Locke, and Kant than the impact of the Industrial Revolution and its economic ramifications. Similarly, the recent re-imagining of educational goals along the line of flourishing is not primarily an upshot of the resuscitation of virtue ethics and character education in academia, although it has also played a part (VanderWeele, 2017). The roots lie, rather, in a growing disillusionment among educational policy makers, politicians, educators, and to some extent the general public with dominant ideals concerning the aims of education.

'Ideologies' might be a more felicitous term than 'ideals' here, for views about the aims of education often assume the form of inter-related networks of ideas and ideals, rooted in historically conditioned socio-cultural contexts. It should be noted that when we speak of the 'aims of education' here the focus is not on the specific goals of a given class or a school subject. It would be distinctly odd, for example, to claim that the aim of an algebra class is human flourishing. Rather, what is being referred to is something along the lines of the ultimate aim, or 'the ungrounded grounder', of all systematic educational efforts. Terms such as 'central purpose' or 'overall regulative ideal' are also sometimes used here interchangeably, although they may have different connotations (de Ruyter & Wolbert, 2020; de Ruyter et al., 2022). The idea is that if we inquire further into why the student is meant to be learning algebra – i.e., what it is for – and continue to ask 'but why is that educationally important?', we end up sooner or later with a 'grounder' where the further question 'yes, but why is that important?' does not make sense anymore for those who share the vision of the given justification as psycho-morally or socio-politically foundational.

To be sure, some educationists have argued that education does not need any foundational 'aims' on this understanding (Standish, 1999), or that it has numerous irreducibly pluralistic aims (Siegel, 2023). Nevertheless, each historical era tends to be characterised by an answer

to this question that is *monistic* in a sense that implicitly steers educational policy and practice in one particular direction. The medieval era in Europe was, for instance, typified by a classical conception of education, according to which its main aim is *epistemic* and *intrinsic*: knowledge for knowledge's sake (and that included knowledge of God and his plan for humankind), irrespective of any instrumentalist benefits. This classical conception was later deemed elitist and did not mesh well with the post-Enlightenment secularisation of the West and the mass expansion of educational opportunities, resources, and aspirations in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

During the 20th century, a new monistic view of the fundamental aim of education emerged, which can be helpfully 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). Although these may seem to be distinct aims, they are interwoven through the instrumentalist credo that the sole aim of education is the advancement of economically beneficial human capital. This view of the aim (*qua* central purpose) 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 blowback, but a few scattered suggestions can be made:

- 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 has 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 artificial intelligence where machines that do most of manual and even intellectual 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.

Whatever the exact reasons (possibly a combination of those and many more), educational authorities around the world have become increasingly disillusioned with the human capital theory, and this disillusionment has been most strongly expressed by some of the countries that tend to score highest in international PISA tests.³ Arguably, therefore, the recent turn towards flourishing as a new monistic model of the central aim of education (see, e.g., de Ruyter et al.'s 2022 UNESCO report, and Stevenson, 2022) – although coinciding with a turn towards flourishing in academic circles – must be understood more as a groundswell of scepticism towards the human capital theory in political and policy-making circles than as a direct implication of developments within philosophy and psychology, specifically.

As happens in times of a paradigm shift, however, all sorts of misunderstandings prosper. For instance, in the U.K., most parents seem to think that teachers are still in the thrall of the human capital theory, prioritising grade attainment and job success only, whereas the parents claim to be more interested in the holistic (including characterological) development of the child – and vice versa for the teachers, who seem to understand parents as pure instrumentalists while they themselves are not (Harrison et al., 2022). Furthermore, while 'flourishing as the aim of education' has become the rallying cry of various

³ Those include Finland, Singapore, and Hong Kong, see Stevenson (2022).

educational political activists, along with academics and educators, there is reason to worry that the advocates are promoting a plethora of heterogeneous ideas under the label of ‘flourishing’ rather than a single ideal. Hence, the need for the conceptual and theoretical clarifications undertaken in the next three sections, looking out for a possible consensus on core issues as well as remaining divergence. As happens with any new paradigm, critics have also arisen of late, taking the flourishing ideal to task (Carr, 2021; Hand, 2023; Siegel, 2023), although none of them recommends a return to either the elitist medieval conception or the instrumentalist human capital one.

What is perhaps most noteworthy about the recent flourishing agenda, insofar as it has been promoted by politicians, is how it seems to cut across both international and political divides. Although *eudaimonia* is originally an ancient Greek concept, it has parallels in the virtue ethics of Confucius, and hence is not confined to a Western mind-set. Moreover, it has not become the exclusive property of either the political left or right. For example, among Secretaries of State for Education in the recent Conservative governments in the U.K., we have had both vocal proponents of the human capital theory that the purpose of education is to equip students with the skills to get good jobs (Gavin Williamson) and the alternative conception that education ‘is at heart about human flourishing’ (Nicky Morgan, see her 2017 Introduction). Already more than a decade ago, Evans had concluded, after exploring the views of both Labour and Conservative party leaders in the U.K., that as far as the flourishing ideal is concerned, ‘our leaders are all Aristotelians now’ (Evans, 2011).

The Conceptual Terrain

The Differentia of Well-Being Accounts

The flourishing agenda under review in this report is obviously about flourishing as an overarching educational aim or ideal, as explained above. Although, according to this agenda, all education should ideally aim at flourishing, this does not mean that all flourishing is educable. It goes without saying that an account of an *educational* aim or ideal is logically limited to what can be taught and learned (Hand, 2023). For instance, although we may agree that deep love and affection are vital ingredients in flourishing, this does not mean that, according to the flourishing agenda, those attitudes and affections must, or even can, be taught in schools (although students may learn indirectly about their value through reading good literature, for instance).

Despite the fact that the flourishing agenda is about the educable subset of flourishing only⁴ – and also granting that the distinction between flourishing as an overall aim of life versus as an overall aim of education has often not been carefully made in the relevant literatures (Siegel, 2023) – in order to make sense of the flourishing agenda in education, we need to attend first to the more general meaning of ‘flourishing’ within theorising about ‘the good life’. We are entering well-trodden territory here, covered in various other publications (e.g., de Ruyter & Wolbert, 2020; de Ruyter et al., 2022), so this general overview will be cursory.

Well-being is generally accepted as a conceptualisation of ‘the good human life’. However, if we understand well-being as an ‘umbrella concept’, there are two main accounts of well-being competing for priority under the umbrella. A *subjective* account considers the criteria

⁴ This raises the methodological question whether prospective measures of flourishing in education should target the overall construct of flourishing (gauging the relationship between education and overall flourishing) or only focus on the directly educable subset of flourishing.

of well-being to be subjective in the sense that they have to do with psychological states (experiences, attitudes, feelings, beliefs) of an agent. On an *objective* account, however, the criteria of well-being have to do with objective features of the agent – facts about her life – that can, in principle, be viewed from an external perspective and to which she may or may not be privy. Subjective accounts can be divided further into *hedonic* and *life-satisfaction* accounts. On the former, well-being is identified with pleasure as a raw, undifferentiated subjective feeling. Those accounts are typically criticised for not making a qualitative difference between types of pleasure and for implying (counter-intuitively) that being mindlessly ‘high’ on a pleasure-inducing pill counts as true well-being. On the life-satisfaction accounts, well-being signals the ratio of one’s perceived life accomplishments and fortunes to one’s aspirations. Those accounts are typically criticised for the (counter-intuitive) assumption that to enhance well-being, it is as useful to lower aspirations as it is to increase accomplishments. Hedonic and life-satisfaction accounts have been combined to form widely used measures of so-called (overall) subjective-well-being (*SWB*).

More relevant for present purposes are the *objective* accounts, of which the flourishing-as-the-aim-of-education ones tend to be seen as instantiations. There is also a variety of objective accounts on offer (Haybron, 2016), variously well equipped to counter a standard objection of being elitist and paternalistic by potentially second-guessing the agent’s own estimation of her well-being from ‘the outside’, as it were. Finally, there are some well-being accounts that are truly hybrid by incorporating objective and subjective features in equal measures (e.g., Ryff, 1989). However, we leave those out of reckoning here, as they have not influenced the educational discourse much.

It is often noted that the distinction between objective and subjective accounts may be tenuous, as measures of the two types of well-being turn out to be fairly well correlated. Yet there are two reasons for keeping them clearly separated for present purposes. One is logical and the other is historical. The *logical* reason is that it is possible to offer at least hypothetical counter examples to an equivalence thesis: i.e., of a person who enjoys objective but not subjective well-being (in ordinary language: is ‘flourishing but not happy’), and vice versa. Those may be statistical outliers, but they matter for analytic purposes. The *historical* reason is that there is a close connection between the human capital theory of the aim of education, discussed in Section 1, and the view of well-being as subjective. Although the human capital theory sees economic benefits as the ultimate aim of education, it allows for the further question of why that is valuable, before hitting, so to speak, the explanatory bottom ground. The answer typically given will be that economic benefits enhance subjective well-being as the ‘ungrounded ground’ of human life: an answer symptomatic of the instrumentalism and the *SWB*-monism that pervaded 20th century social science, including both economics and psychology (Fowers, 2010). It is precisely because the flourishing agenda is best seen as an antidote to the human capital theory that we need to foreground its objective features.

All that said, none of the four main Western approaches to flourishing as the aim of education explored in Sections 3 turn out to be purely objective. All of them contain some subjective features. For example, the original Aristotelian approach incorporates a certain kind of pleasure (supervening upon successfully enacted activities) as a necessary feature of flourishing. Nevertheless, all those approaches give priority – logical and developmental – to the objective features. Even Seligman’s (2011) positive psychological approach considers all the components of flourishing – some of which are subjective – to be underpinned by character strengths and virtues as objective features of a person. It is, therefore, valid to offer as the initial conceptual condition for an account of flourishing as the aim of education to pass muster that it must either feature objective components of well-

being only, or mix objective and subjective components in a way that gives priority to the former.⁵

Further Conceptual Conditions

We have already seen that it is far from being self-evident what sort of approaches can be deemed ‘objective enough’ to count as flourishing accounts. What has already transpired is that a substantial amount of conceptual regimentation and tidying-up work is needed to cut through the conceptual disarray and confusing cross-talk in this discursive field. At the end of the previous section, one conceptual condition was suggested, and earlier it was noted that to make the grade as an account of flourishing *qua* educational aim, rather than just flourishing in general, it must be about aspirations that are, in principle, educable. Yet, for a concept that is open-textured like flourishing (as opposed to the conceptually closed concepts of logic and mathematics), it helps to provide more specific characterisations.

In an important groundwork article, Wolbert et al. (2015) offered a number of formal criteria for an approach to fall under the concept of flourishing.⁶ They argue that although those are derived from Aristotle’s original account, they can target any approach to flourishing. More specifically, Wolbert and colleagues offered two criteria, of which the second one has three sub-criteria. The first criterion is that flourishing is an *intrinsically worthwhile activity*. This criterion distinguishes the flourishing agenda in education clearly from the human capital theory, according to which the aim of educational activities lies beyond them, in economic gain. Rejecting such instrumentalism, the flourishing agenda sees flourishing-constituting activities as intrinsically valuable. This is a very important claim because it does away with the view that education is always carried out for the sake of something beyond itself. According to the flourishing agenda, reading and digesting an intriguing poem in a literacy class is, thus, not an activity that is conducive to the students’ flourishing in the sense of contributing to an aim beyond the activity; rather the activity is itself constitutive of the process of flourishing (cf. Harðarson, 2012).

The second criterion has to do with flourishing *optimising human potential*. This means that underlying the flourishing agenda is a view of human beings possessing a universal set of capacities⁷ – as well as culturally and individually specific ones – that education aims to optimise. This has to happen, according to the further three sub-criteria, *over life as a whole*, involving *dynamic ongoing activities*, which target *objective goods*. From an educational perspective, the implication is that an education only optimising one part of students’ holistic development (e.g., only the rational part but not the social or emotional ones) is not education towards flourishing. Moreover, educational outcomes can never be understood

⁵ Although a discussion of flourishing measures is outside of the purview of the present report, it is worth mentioning that normally one would expect proponents of objective accounts of well-being to apply measures of observable (e.g., performance-based) indicators – ideally longitudinal and perhaps even qualitative rather than (only) quantitative (see, e.g., Fowers et al., 2021). However, as it happens, self-report measures predominate the field of flourishing studies as much as they do in the case of *SWB* (see, e.g., VanderWeele, 2017).

⁶ Although the authors seem to want to offer formal criteria for the concept of flourishing in general, the present reading limits it to the concept in its educational incarnation. The interpretations offered below do not necessarily reflect the views of the three original authors.

⁷ This is why Sen’s (2000) ‘capabilities view’, developed with philosopher Martha Nussbaum at the close of the 20th century, can count as a precursor of the current flourishing agenda.

as just a state to be aimed at but rather as parts of an ongoing process. Finally, at least some of the goods targeted must be objectively justifiable.⁸

Preconditions versus Constituents of Flourishing

To round off this tour of the conceptual terrain, one more thorny issue needs to be addressed: namely, the distinction between *preconditions* and *constituents* of flourishing. Most flourishing theorists agree that various preconditions must be in place for a flourishing life to become so much as a possibility, let alone an actuality. Those may range from external necessities, such as food and shelter, to internal necessities, such as freedom from irrational fear. Aristotle is particularly vocal about the need for such preconditions, pouring scorn on theorists who think everyone can achieve flourishing just by practising a virtuous life (Aristotle, 1985: 21 and 203 [1099a32 and 1153b19–21]; cf. Kristjánsson, 2020: chap. 2; Curren, 2013).

What are those resources or goods of fortune that we need to so much as stand a chance of flourishing? Aristotle provides extended lists of those (see Aristotle, 1985: Book I, chap. 5), for instance:

- Close parental attachment and good upbringing.
- Good government, ruling in the interests of the people, and a just constitution.
- Enough wealth to make sure we do not come a cropper.
- A complete life, meaning, a life in which we do not die prematurely.
- Health and strength.
- Friends and family.

However, even for the stickler for conceptual rigour, Aristotle, in the case of some of those items the distinction between preconditions and constituents of flourishing becomes blurred. For example, in one sense, we can think of friends as ‘instruments’ (Aristotle, 1985: 21 [1099b1–2]) that confer benefits upon us, necessary in order for us to prosper; in another sense, bonds with our best ‘friends for character’ become indispensably constitutive of (as distinct from merely conducive to) our flourishing, so much so that that the friends become parts of our own selfhood as our ‘other selves’ (Aristotle, 1985: 246 [1166a29–32]). Similarly, for health, it is not easy to distinguish between health as a precondition of flourishing and as an essential ingredient in it; and Aristotle sometimes mixes up the two.

To some readers of this report, the distinction made here may seem like an obscurantist one, solely of exegetical interest. However, there is more to it than that, especially if seen from the perspective of the flourishing agenda in education. Firstly, some items are simply not educable by their very nature; hence, they cannot possibly count as constituents of educational flourishing. For instance, children cannot go to school if there is no school building available, but providing that resource is not an educational process in itself. Secondly, whether something counts as a precondition or a constituent can determine to whom we attribute responsibility and possibly apportion blame for non-action. We may hold educational agents (school principals, teachers, etc.) responsible for students’ lack of

⁸ The authors are not being conceptual pedants here. Rather, they argue persuasively that the term ‘flourishing’ should not be used casually and vacuously in educational contexts, but rather given some clear criteria, so that we can ascertain with initial specificity, at least, whether an approach on offer is really one of flourishing.

educational flourishing, but we would normally ascribe accountability for a shortage of school buildings, or of other resources necessary for educational flourishing to take place, to politicians.⁹ In some cases, views may differ on the nature of an item and hence how it is categorised with respect to this dichotomy. For example, if we believe that it is within the remit of teachers to imbue students with a sense of personal purpose, we might be inclined to count (the cultivation of) personal purpose as a constituent of educational flourishing, but if we think that purposefulness is essentially formed prior to or independent of schooling, we might see it rather as a precondition of educational flourishing.

As readers will have noticed already, flourishing in general, and flourishing as an educational construct in particular, are extremely complex concepts. We need to make sure to establish at least a minimally shared meaning of their fields of reference before we can so much as begin to evaluate different practical approaches to flourishing.

Various Approaches to Educational Flourishing

Four Standard Western Approaches

There is no set number of approaches to flourishing that indisputably deserve a mention in an overview report. Different approaches and variants abound, often just differentiated by the preferred vocabularies and priorities of individual authors. In this section, four standard Western approaches have been singled out for consideration. Only one of them, the liberal one, was originally produced as an approach to educational flourishing as such. The other three are simply educational variations on general flourishing accounts about the good life or the nature of human well-being. One approach is developed from moral philosophy (Aristotle's), one from political philosophy (the liberal approach), and two from psychology (positive psychology and self-determination theory).

The natural place to begin is with *Aristotle's account*, as all subsequent versions tend to have an Aristotelian 'tincture and provenance' (Carr, 2021: 290). Aristotle's original concept of flourishing as *eudaimonia* rests on one fundamental argument: the so-called *function* argument, according to which human beings have a natural function, just as an oak tree or a tiger: a function that can be identified objectively by looking at what humans are best at (Aristotle, 1985: 15 [1197b25]). Human nature presses teleologically towards its specific human function, its humanness. The function peculiar to human beings, according to Aristotle, 'is the soul's activity and actions that express reason'. As 'each function is completed well when its completion expresses the proper virtue', the human good 'turns out to be the soul's activity that expresses virtue' – infused with reason (1985: 17 [1198a12–16]).¹⁰ What is 'proper to each thing's nature' (here, reason-infused virtue), is 'supremely best and pleasantest for it' (1985: 287 [1178a5–7]). Hence, to flourish or live well in the distinctive human way will give human beings a kind of pleasure as an ornament: a type of 'flow' (later defined by Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) as pleasure in

⁹ This does not mean that we might not hold teachers responsible for fighting for the rights of students to educational resources. Views on how far that responsibility can go, without making teaching an impossibly burdened profession, differ considerably, however. Cf. Kristjánsson (2020: chap. 2) versus Hand (2023).

¹⁰ Aristotle is here referring to what nowadays are called moral, intellectual, and civic virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2022).

unimpeded, successfully enacted activities.¹¹ It is part of human psychology to enjoy the exercise of our realised human capabilities. The same goes ideally for learning this exercise, for instance at school, so something is not right, according to the Aristotelian conception, if that fails to happen. This is why, as noted in the previous section, that the Aristotelian approach to educational flourishing is not a purely objective one.

Flourishing implies not only having virtues but expressing them; therefore, it constitutes an activity rather than a state. Moreover, cultivating one's flourishing is not just a self-interested activity. Many of its constitutive virtues (logically and/or empirically) include other people: say, compassion. In some other virtues, such as friendship, the self–other distinction even becomes blurred. Despite the existence of various disabling conditions, most people who receive a decent upbringing remain capable of achieving flourishing. It is thus not a rarefied ideal for the exclusive few.

In a nutshell, then, in light of the function argument, flourishing can be seen as the intrinsically desirable ultimate end of human beings. It involves virtuous, reason-infused activity, suitable and peculiar to human beings, achieved over a complete life. As Aristotle simply takes it for granted that the purpose of education replicates the purpose of life – to optimise our natural function – he never produces any distinct argument to motivate the step from general flourishing to educational flourishing. Indeed, the *Nicomachean Ethics* can be read simultaneously as a handbook about the good life and a guide to good education.

The second approach to flourishing to be cashed out here is the *liberal* one. Since its inception in the Enlightenment, liberalism has assumed two main forms. One is a value-thin, rights-bases form (often called ‘classical liberalism’), harking back to John Locke, which resents any comprehensive theories of the good being promoted by the state and in public schools. The other form is what Mautner (2018) calls ‘liberalism of flourishing’, with roots in the writings of John Stuart Mill and the Germanic *Bildung* approach. According to this tradition, the good life is one in which an individual develops her capabilities, and it is the role of the state to create the background conditions that allow this to happen. Insofar as current flourishing theorists in education are arguing for a liberal take on flourishing, they seem to be doing so from within this tradition of ‘social liberalism’ of flourishing (Mautner, 2018: 31).

The liberal thinkers advocating a flourishing approach to education tend to be more sensitive than contemporary Aristotelians are to the fact their approach is about flourishing as an *educational construct*, specifically. Here are a few examples of self-described liberals: Brighouse states unequivocally that ‘the central purpose of education is to promote human flourishing’ (2006: 42). White wants schools, above anything else, to be ‘seedbeds of human flourishing’ (2011: 3). De Ruyter focuses on the hopes of parents that ‘their children will lead a flourishing life’ (2004: 377), with those hopes being directed both at the present, namely that the children are flourishing here and now, and the future, namely that their overall lives as adults can be considered flourishing ones (2015: 85). Wolbert argues that student flourishing should instantiate human flourishing ‘in a broad sense’, referring to ‘living an *optimal* life in which people are free (enough) to make their own choices, fill their time with meaningful and successful activities and relationships, and feel happy or satisfied’ (2018: 2).

¹¹ Notice that many flourishing-constituting activities are never completed (like one completes a Marathon run), although they are progressively and successfully enacted, for instance sharing experiences and joys with close friends throughout life. Cf. Harðarson (2012).

All of these words could, apparently, have been written by Aristotelians. It is not until we dig deeper into the content and background of the statements that the liberal backbone emerges. Thus, White (2011) understands flourishing as autonomous, wholehearted, and successful immersion in worthwhile pursuits, both activities and relationships. Brighouse (2006) defines flourishing similarly as referring to a worthwhile life that contains objective goods and is ‘lived from the inside’ (2006: 16), in the sense that the agent identifies with the pursuit of those goods. Brighouse is also an avid defender of autonomy as an essential component of flourishing, but he is perhaps less sensitive to the need for internal and external factors enabling the relevant activity to ‘succeed’ than Aristotle and White would be. De Ruyter believes that human flourishing consists of ‘generic goods that are objectively identifiable and the meaningful interpretation of these goods by the person herself’ (2004: 384), who, in the process, is able to ‘make the most of her qualities and live her life to the full’ (2015: 92).

All these recent authors may be seen to be offering accounts of (student) flourishing that are more in tune with the mindset of Western liberal democracies than Aristotelian flourishing, in particular through their emphasis on autonomous choices and individual purposefulness; however, none of them proposes the sort of value-buffet subjectivism into which classical liberalism often tends to collapse. Notably absent from the liberal approach is any specific mention of virtues or character strengths as having a privileged position among the capacities to be optimised: a reverberation of liberalism’s reluctance to acknowledge a thick core of universal values.

As we turn to the two psychologically derived approaches, the contextual landscape changes. The normative focus turns from what is universally valuable (as in Aristotelianism) to what happens to be universally valued (McGrath, 2015), and from the socio-political role of educational institutions (as often foregrounded by liberals¹²) to an individual’s aspirations for psychological fulfilment. Rooted in a paradigm shift in academic psychology from a deficit model, foregrounding illnesses and obstacles, towards trying to understand the nature of human well-being by studying happy people, the original position of the father of *positive psychology*, Martin Seligman (2002), was a hybrid view of well-being, but with the centre of gravity leaning heavily towards the subjective. It was, in other words, not a flourishing approach.

In 2011, Seligman published his landmark book, *Flourish*, which contains an emphatic recantation of his earlier well-being account and the makings of a new one. ‘I used to think’, Seligman says, ‘that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, that the gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction’. By 2011, however, he believed that the goal of positive psychology is well-being *qua* flourishing. Subjective accounts of happiness flounder down this cul-de-sac of meaninglessness; for example life-satisfaction ‘essentially measures cheerful mood, so it is not entitled to a central place in any theory that aims to be more than an apiology’ (2011: 4). Seligman’s revised approach, which carries so many educational implications that it was even given a new name, ‘positive education’ (Knoop, 2013), continues to be a hybrid one, but it satisfies the conceptual condition of a flourishing approach to education (see Section 2) by prioritising, logically and developmentally, the objective features.

Seligman devised a list for the actual ‘elements’ of well-being, understood as flourishing: ‘positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishments’ (i.e., PERMA; 2011: 16). In this new account, universally valued virtues and character

¹² Notice, for example, how Brighouse moves seamlessly from questions about the main aim of education (as flourishing) to political/institutional questions about the central purpose of *a school* to ‘promote the long-term prospects for the flourishing of the children in its charge’ (2008: 70).

strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) play an even more prominent role than in the 2002 account; they now undergird all the PERMA-elements (Seligman, 2011: 24). Despite the emphasis on objective elements in his new account, Seligman acknowledges that one of them – positive emotion – is subjective and that the others incorporate some subjective components. He thus prefers to refer to his approach as pluralistic (or what we have called ‘hybrid’ above) rather than objective. Nevertheless, Seligman now considers all the elements of flourishing to be underpinned by objective moral virtues.

The final Western approach to be introduced here, *self-determination theory (SDT)*, is also of psychological provenance and was originally not created specifically as a contribution to a flourishing discourse, either general or educational. However, in recent years, especially after collaboration with an Aristotelian scholar deeply interested in flourishing, Randall Curren (2013), self-determination theory has assumed the contours of a flourishing approach, with salient educational implications (Ryan et al., 2013). The focus for present purposes will not be on what *SDT* has in common with Aristotle, but rather its own unique contribution. That contribution lies in highlighting the importance of *need satisfaction* for a flourishing life. The previous three approaches do not usually invoke ‘needs’ when they speak of the ‘virtues’ or ‘capacities’ that should be optimised through education. Rather, they tend to confine the term to what are sometimes called ‘Aristotelian necessities’ that must be in place before any meaningful flourishing process can commence. For *SDT*, however, needs are the vital constituents of any flourishing-instantiating activity. For instance, good education can be judged on the extent to which it homes in on and allows for the satisfaction of those needs.

The needs in question are for *autonomy* (self-directedness congruent with personal values and sense of self), *relatedness* (a supportive social climate and affirming relationships), and *competence* (experiencing oneself as capable); and the related potentialities can be broadly categorised as agentive, social, and productive (Ryan et al., 2013). A central, cross-culturally replicated finding in *SDT* research is that the satisfaction of all three of these basic psychological needs, through fulfilment of related potentials, is essential to and predictive of well-being, measured in a variety of ways although, for present purposes, the relevance for flourishing is the key.

A significant insight from *SDT* research for an educational construct of flourishing stems from decades of research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The upshot there is that it matters not only *that* the three needs are met but also *how* they are met – or, perhaps more accurately put, the needs can only be authentically met through motivation of a certain sort, which is intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic. Extrinsic motivation in the classroom from high-stakes testing or shaming – although possibly meant to enhance competence – will thus not only fail to enhance flourishing *qua* need satisfaction, but actually diminish it. Although *SDT* has not been given an official alternative label as an educational approach (such as ‘positive education’), recent work on *SDT* has been turning more and more away from an individualistic focus to the question of how the conditions of need satisfaction can best be met institutionally, not least within schools and universities.

As we have seen above, therefore, all the four approaches introduced in this section are highly relevant for educational policy and practice although the original thinkers often had other goals in mind. Indeed, questions of flourishing as ‘living well’ (Curren, 2013) cannot easily be separated from questions of ‘teaching and learning well’ in classroom contexts.

Mixed Flourishing Approaches

As already noted, a number of times, the four main Western approaches described above all happen to be hybrid in a conceptual sense, with respect to standard taxonomies of well-being accounts, although all prioritise the objective. In current educational discourse, however, these approaches are rarely invoked under the historical labels given to them above. Flourishing approaches to education appear rather as *mixed* approaches, synthesising elements from different directions. Notice that the terms ‘hybrid’ and ‘mixed’ are not used synonymously in this report. ‘Hybrid’ is used to denote the integration of subjective and objective elements in well-being accounts; ‘mixed’ is used to denote the synthesis of various elements from different flourishing approaches within a single promulgated approach. In this section, three examples of such mixed approaches will be given.¹³

It is perhaps easiest to begin with the present author’s own approach (Kristjánsson, 2020), labelled ‘neo-Aristotelian’. ‘Neo-Aristotelianism’ is usually taken to mean Aristotelianism updated with recent (esp. social scientific) findings. However, the neo-Aristotelian view of ‘flourishing as the aim of education’ presented in Kristjánsson’s (2020) book includes some significant departure from standard Aristotelianism. Although this is not explicitly explained in the book itself, the approach taken can perhaps best be characterised as a synthesis of Aristotelianism with some elements from the liberal and positive psychological approaches, as well as other non-flourishing-specific ones, such as 19th century Romanticism.

Kristjánsson’s proposed specification of flourishing runs as follows: ‘*Human flourishing* is the (relatively) unencumbered, freely chosen and developmentally progressive activity of a meaningful (subjectively purposeful and objectively valuable) life that actualises satisfactorily an individual human being’s natural capacities in areas of species-specific existential tasks at which human beings (as rational, social, moral, and emotional agents) can most successfully excel’ (Kristjánsson, 2020: 10).

Worrying that the biggest threat to flourishing approaches to education is one of ‘banality’ (cf. Carr, 2021), where the concept simply becomes a shopping trolley for anyone’s random selections of goods, the book in question tries to populate each variable in this complex-sounding definition with sufficient specificity (Kristjánsson, 2020: 10–12). Yet in that process, and later in the book, it transpires that some of the variables are essentially non-Aristotelian. To sum up the departures from Aristotle, those include the accommodation of:

- a modernised liberal notion of individual students’ sense of purpose and meaning (drawing esp. on Damon, 2008)
- awe-struck enchantment (more in line with positive psychology, or even Romanticism, than Aristotle)
- the possibility of radical moral conversions later in life (which Aristotle doubted)
- Platonic attraction to transpersonal moral ideals (as distinct from Aristotelian emulation of persons representing those ideals).

Let us now turn to another conceptualisation of educational flourishing, from a contribution to a recent UNESCO report by a group of academics (de Ruyter et al., 2022).

¹³ This list is by no means exhaustive. New synthetic frameworks are appearing regularly, see e.g. Ellyatt (2022).

As the lead author is a well-known representative of the liberal approach, and at least one of the other authors has been linked with positive psychology, one may expect to see a mixed approach. That also happens to be the case. Their definition is as follows (2022: 97–98): ‘Human flourishing is both the optimal continuing development of human beings’ potentials and living well as a human being. It means being engaged in relationships and activities that are meaningful, that is, aligned with both an individual’s 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.’

Similar to Kristjánsson (2020), each variable in this definition is then fleshed out in considerable detail. What is most notable about the lengthy elaborations, which cite a great number of references each, is how they draw upon authors representing all the four main Western approaches mentioned above, and even beyond those, upon authors advocating more purely objective accounts of flourishing, such as the capabilities view (Sen, 2000). Although this is not spelled out explicitly, the lesson to be learned from de Ruyter et al.’s helpful overview seems to be that the standard approaches to education as flourishing in the West align sufficiently for those to be used as ammunition to complement and support each other.

The final mixed approach presented here is the one advocated by Tyler VanderWeele, Director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard.¹⁴ His (2017) conceptualisation of flourishing is particularly relevant because of the extensive use of the flourishing measure that he created on the back of it. Observing first that flourishing can be understood as a state in which all ‘aspects of a person’s life are good’, VanderWeele (2017: 8149) quickly moves towards identifying the life domains that would command general acceptance as the relevant ‘aspects’ within which flourishing can be explored: namely, ‘(i) happiness and life satisfaction; (ii) health, both mental and physical; (iii) meaning and purpose; (iv) character and virtue; and (v) close social relationships. All are arguably at least a part of what we mean by flourishing. Each of these domains arguably also satisfies the following two criteria: (i) Each domain is generally viewed as an end in itself, and (ii) each domain is nearly universally desired.’

After introducing these domains, VanderWeele devotes most of the rest of the paper to reflecting upon their possible interrelationships (‘pathways’) and drawing upon a host of empirical sources to figure out how to measure each of them. This leads to two fairly simple self-report measures at the end of the paper: one targeting the five domains only and the other adding a sixth domain of financial and material stability, which would fall under what we called earlier ‘preconditions’ of flourishing.¹⁵ Noticeably, VanderWeele does not explain the theoretical provenance of the five domains; he simply refers to an assumed common consensus that those are the domains mattering (most) for flourishing. That said, (iv) is clearly more Aristotelian than liberal, for example, while the opposite can be said about (iii). VanderWeele does not apply this conceptualisation to education specifically, but as with most of the previous approaches mentioned, the extension would be fairly obvious; and were his measure(s) given to students in a school, the findings would probably give some indication of the quality of the education they are receiving.

¹⁴ VanderWeele is the author of another OECD report, commissioned alongside the present one, on measures of flourishing.

¹⁵ A recent comparison of findings from this measure among emerging adults in 10 countries showed most of those flourishing constituents to be positively related to one another: supporting a systems-approach to flourishing, focusing on chain-reactions and spillover effects when one domain is activated and positively influences the others (Höltge et al., 2022).

Perhaps the implicit message to be taken from VanderWeele’s approach is that theorists have spent too much intellectual energy on identifying the precise constituents of flourishing and how these are best labelled. If there is – as he assumes – sufficient convergence in public ideas about what a flourishing life and a flourishing-enhancing education look like, then most of that energy would probably be better spent on practical interventions and measurements: cultivating flourishing rather than philosophising endlessly about what flourishing is.

Non-Western Approaches

One of the standard apples of discord in debates about flourishing is how universalist the concept can be (see, e.g., Fowers et al., 2022; 2023). It is one thing to argue, for taxonomical purposes, that the difference between objective and subjective accounts lies in the former prioritising objective features of well-being; it is quite another (and a much taller order) to argue that the presumed ‘objective’ features in the objective accounts are similar enough for us to be able to say that flourishing assumes essentially the same forms, temporally and geographically.¹⁶ The fact that standard Western approaches are often synthesised (as seen in the previous section) may indicate that there are areas of convergence within all of them. In the present section, however, we widen the lens to some non-Western approaches. At the behest of OECD, and on the back of worries about a homogenising tendency in Western approaches to flourishing, a webinar was organised in November 2022 where three non-Western accounts of flourishing were introduced: represented by Buddhism, Confucianism, and the African *Ubuntu* philosophy (Flanagan, 2022; Sigurðsson, 2022; Metz, 2022).¹⁷

It could be argued that the very label ‘non-Western’ also betrays a homogenising tendency, given the variety of multicultural accounts of offer. However, there is a long tradition in cultural psychology of drawing a major distinction between Western and non-Western approaches, harking back to Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) construal of *interdependent* (non-Western/traditional/collectivist) versus *independent* (Western/liberal/individualist) self-conceptions. These conceptions, it turns out, involve not only different psychological self-images, but also radically divergent ways of feeling, seeing, acting, and being in the world. The juxtapositioning of the Western and non-Western self-concepts is based on a whole mountain of social scientific research, which offers a rationale for looking at non-Western approaches through a common lens, as aimed for in the above-mentioned webinar.¹⁸

There is no space in this report to do justice to all the nuances of the three non-Western approaches on offer as general philosophies of life. The focus here remains on their relevance for a potential theory of flourishing in education. To begin with *Ubuntu*,¹⁹ this concept has stronger philosophical and educational connotations than simply indicated by rendering it as ‘harmony, community, and friendliness’. It signifies that one does not

¹⁶ For instance, de Ruyter et al. (2022: 77) share the belief that it is possible to give a ‘general description of flourishing and education’, although ‘interpretations and realizations’ will differ somewhat across cultures.

¹⁷ The whole webinar can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0DqjnorXhs>

¹⁸ More recently, Western approaches have been labelled ‘WEIRD’, referring to the fact that the people who typically participate in psychological and educational surveys are Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (see e.g. Flanagan, 2017) However, even this label has been criticised for being overly homogenising, as it does not account for differences in race, religion, and gender.

¹⁹ The word comes from the Nguni languages of Southern Africa, such as Zulu and Xhosa.

become a real person (a ‘true self’) except through and with other persons. The concept of purely individual flourishing (e.g., as an educational aim) thus loses all traction. The ‘through and with other persons’ means being hospitable, open, and available to them within a closely-knot community. Just as there is no private language, there is no private road to education and flourishing. In caring for the needs and educational affordances of others, one is also caring for one’s own needs. There is no real education either without a strong focus on socio-moral excellences; one becomes educated by learning to participate in socio-moral projects that have communal value. Notwithstanding its universal elements, all education therefore needs to be grounded in local cultures and histories (Metz, 2022).

Confucianism also begins, so to speak, with the realisation of the relational notion of selfhood, i.e. understanding of oneself as being largely constituted by one’s immediate social environment. The true nature of humanity and humanness, to which all education should aspire, is therefore ‘associated humanness’. Confucianism understands education as lifelong learning and continuous transformation, by which one reaches increasing harmony with one’s social environment. ‘Holistic education’ is a familiar term within Western educational discourse, but in Confucianism it takes on an added dimension as being holistic not only with respect to different capabilities of an individual that become synergised but also with respect to different excellences of individuals that become harmonised in the service of the community (large or small). As in *Ubuntu*, for Confucians education is a process of general humanisation, and it cannot be severed from its socio-moral and emotional moorings. Regarding the latter, other-regarding emotions of empathy and compassion are foregrounded; and there is no chance of becoming ‘emotionally intelligent’ within a private sphere or through only nurturing self-regarding virtues. Even more so than in *Ubuntu*, Confucianism fails to draw any clear conceptual distinction between flourishing and becoming more educated, or between formal and informal education. As Confucius says in the *Analects* (7.22), ‘whenever in the company of three, I have teachers present’ (Sigurðsson, 2022).

Buddhism constitutes a more standardly philosophical (e.g., metaphysical) system than do either the more practically oriented *Ubuntu* or Confucianism, and Buddhism also has more explicitly religious undertones (although some Buddhists take their approach to be compatible with any credible religion). Yet Buddhism also has a practical take on the concept of flourishing that makes it educationally relevant. The most conspicuous aspect of its notion of flourishing is how radically *ethicised* it is. The ultimate aim of flourishing (and, indeed, education towards flourishing) is to help students grow the moral disposition of compassion towards all living beings (and the environment) and to overcome the three common ‘poisons’ of egoistic cravings, feelings of anger, and intellectual illusions. At least the first two of these ‘poisons’ can only be neutralised through moral endeavours; hence education is an inherently moral enterprise, and teaching is, more than anything else, an inherently ethical profession. Buddhism distinguishes itself, however, from the two other non-Western approaches mentioned here and also most of the Western approaches to flourishing by a) not positing pleasure even as an oblique side-effect of true flourishing, making do rather with a lack of suffering; b) rejecting completely any notion of individual selfhood – or even the very concept of a stable ‘self’ (individual or communal), and c) not making political justice, with its assumption of people’s differential deservingness, a mandatory virtue, but rather adopting a forgiving, compassionate orientation towards anyone, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Flanagan, 2022).

Despite Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) classic analysis of the difference between Western and non-Western approaches, these final remarks about Buddhism remind us of the dangers of homogenising the non-Western approaches. Yet if we focus our attention exclusively on implications for a possible general approach to education for flourishing, the three non-

Western approaches have at least three significant commonalities that distinguish them from (most of) the Western approaches that we have scrutinised:

- They are more heavily moralised than most of the Western approaches, i.e., consider it impossible to conceptualise or evaluate flourishing in educational contexts without including moral character strengths and virtues.
- They include ‘education’ in their very definition of ‘flourishing’. Hence, they do not face the standard Western problem of having to make a specific case for theories of flourishing being educationally relevant.
- They think of prosocial values/virtues as being inherently relational and other-entwined, thus focusing much more on other-regarding than self-regarding values.²⁰

Closer Look at the Differentia of Standard Western and Non-Western Approaches

Some Typical Assertions about Flourishing, and Their Uptake in the Standard Approaches

It is now time to shift into a more reflective mode after providing a mostly descriptive account of different flourishing approaches in Section 3. The crucial remaining question is whether those are similar enough to be synthesisable into a consensual approach that could form the basis of an international programme of education for flourishing. There is no space in this report to compare and contrast all the approaches mentioned in Section 3, so attention will be confined here to the four standard Western approaches from Section 3.1 and the three non-Western ones from 3.3.

Let us begin by extracting a number of representative statements about flourishing from the relevant literatures – assertions that one comes across in various sources – and ask, for each of them, what the response from the standard approaches would (likely) be. This helps to assess the extent of divergence versus convergence and to move, in Section 4.2, towards a more general discussion of the synthesis/reconciliation question. Confessedly, the choice of representative statements will, by necessity, be slightly arbitrary. Singled out for comparison here are simply *ten statements* that are a) common in the background literatures and b) seem instructive for comparing and contrasting the approaches in question.

- *Flourishing is the ungrounded grounder of all human strivings, and /the ultimate aim of all educational activities.* This is the most general statement. It comes straight out of the mouths of the Aristotelians; and positive psychologists (post-Seligman, 2011) would presumably agree (as long as positively valenced, i.e. pleasant, activities are made an ineluctable part of flourishing). The standard *SDT*-literature does not make this claim, but Ryan et al. (2013) come close to it. The liberal thinkers cited in Section 3.1 seem to endorse this statement, although most historical accounts of liberalism as an educational policy foreground autonomy-cultivation, specifically, rather than flourishing-creation more generally. Apart from Aristotelianism, all the Western approaches face the justificatory demand of having to provide a rationale for why education should be (made relevant) for

²⁰ Confucianism is somewhat closer to Aristotelianism here, however, in focusing both on self-regarding and other-regarding virtues.

education.²¹ As we saw above, however, the non-Western approaches already seem to contain education within its characterisations of flourishing (i.e., they see flourishing as an inherently educational process), which renders the transition from the first to the second part of the statement logically less problematic.

- *Flourishing is an ongoing activity, not a state, let alone an end-state.* This claim comes originally from Aristotle but the liberals have taken it up also, and there is no good reason why the other should disagree. As explained with regard to the first statement, the non-Western approaches have an even easier task of defining flourishing as an ongoing activity (namely, educational).
- *Flourishing is about capacity actualisation rather than success, worldly or otherwise.*
- This is a fairly generic statement. The fact that all four of the Western approaches under scrutiny here would accept it is salient, however, because it helps distinguish flourishing approaches to education from the human capital theory. Of the non-Western approaches, Buddhism goes further down this road than any of the others, in rejecting the assumption that even a bare minimum of worldly necessities is required for flourishing.
- *Flourishing is a relational and communal activity.* This statement is derived from the non-Western approaches. Those Aristotelians who draw on Aristotle's *Politics* rather than just his *Nicomachean Ethics* would also agree, and this seems to tally with one of the basic needs posited in *SDT*. Positive psychologists have so far not talked much about the flourishing of whole communities. Liberals might worry, however, about the danger of collectivism rearing its ugly head here. Modern-day liberals are not anti-community *per se*, but they do believe that individuals and their pursuit of a flourishing life should be the focal point of educational efforts, rather than the community.
- *A flourishing life in one in which the individual has found meaning and purpose through autonomous decision-making.* This statement lies at the very core of the liberal approach, as well as the *SDT* one. It is also reflected in the M ('meaning') element of PERMA in positive psychology. It is difficult, however, to square this with a pre-modern approach like that of Aristotle. Similarly, the idea of excellence in 'purposeful autonomous decision-making' may sound like an oxymoron in the non-Western approaches, as they think that true purpose can only be found within practices of communal/collective decision-making.
- *Good character is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of flourishing.* Good character (as made up of moral, intellectual, and civic virtues) is the core of the Aristotelian approach, although it does not suffice for flourishing. The positive psychologists agree, at least nominally (Peterson and Seligman, 2004); but their view of character and virtues differs substantially from the Aristotelians; for instance in not positing an intellectual meta-virtue (*phronesis*) for adjudication when different virtues seem to collide. Neither the liberal nor the *SDT*-approach make direct references to virtues, however. There is no strong intellectualist thread running through *SDT* in general. Confucianism and the *Ubuntu* philosophy have no issues with this statement, and Buddhism might not even consider it strong enough, claiming that good character is both necessary and sufficient for flourishing.

²¹ It could be argued that Aristotelianism faces the opposite problem of over-populating general flourishing with educational goals, and hence making education overly demanding for practitioners.

- *Flourishing accounts are grounded in an ontology of value that is not subjectivist.* All the four Western approaches could potentially agree with this, but they would do so for different reasons. The Aristotelians are moral realists (i.e., they believe that moral judgements *describe* a world of evaluation rather than just *evaluating* an independent world of description). Positive psychologists do not commit themselves to any moral ontology (including subjectivism); they are simply interested in what the majority of people find valuable. The liberals tend to be moral pluralists rather than pure realists or subjectivists. The *SDT*-theorists do not posit a moral ontology, but the focus on universal psychological needs involving psychomoral attributes seems to rule out subjectivism. The non-Western approaches are all anything but subjectivist; hence they would all concur with this statement.
- *Flourishing requires some external necessities.* It is not sufficient just to have the right mindset to flourish. This is a basic point made by the Aristotelians and Confucians. The liberals would probably opt for a thinner set of external necessities, but they would not object in principle; neither would presumably the *SDT*-theorists or *Ubuntu* proponents. This relative consensus is important because it distinguishes the approaches in question collectively from a number of other approaches that consider the right mindset (most commonly characterised as moral goodness) to be sufficient for flourishing. This includes the Buddhists, as briefly mentioned earlier in connection to ‘worldly success’.
- *Flourishing requires agents to become attached to values that are bigger than themselves.* It is difficult to formulate the need for enchantment and self-transcendence in a way that does not upset the practically minded Aristotelians (who have no concept of awe, for instance, as distinct from mere curious wonder) and the pluralist liberals. Positive psychologists are very strong on awe and elevation, and while these concepts do not figure prominently in *SDT*-theory, they are not incompatible with it. Buddhism (*qua* its religious elements) is not short of self-transcendent values, and while *Ubuntu* and Confucianism are more practically oriented, both make references to self-transcendent concepts (such as *Tao*, or ‘the Way’, in Confucianism).
- *Making flourishing the explicit aim of education will require considerable changes in the way schooling is organised and subjects are taught.* All the approaches would probably agree with the first part of this statement. For example, Aristotelians foreground the needs for discrete foci on character and citizenship education, and positive psychologists tend to be keen on special ‘happiness lessons’. The second part of the statement divides scholars across the approaches without following standard theoretical lines. As we see in later in Section 5.3, for example, some liberals promulgate a complete revamping of the school timetable while others request only modest changes. No contributions from scholars from within the three non-Western approaches were found that directly address the question of how much curricular change would be needed for making flourishing the explicit aim of education.

The Hope for Consensus

Wisdom research in psychology seemed to be floundering in a sea of divergence until a ‘task force’ of the competing players, summonsed by Igor Grossmann, came up with a consensus account of wisdom, accompanied by a list of remaining unresolved issues

(Grossmann et al., 2020). Something similar is arguably needed in the field of flourishing research in education, at least if aspirations for internationally endorsed understandings and programmes are to become real. In a sense, the ‘mixed’ approaches described above in Section 3.2 can already be seen as attempts towards reconciliation, as all three of them draw, in different ways, upon more than one of the four standard Western approaches. The answer to the question of a possible consensual position on flourishing depends, therefore, partly on readers’ assessment of the extent to which the approaches in Section 3.2 achieve their aim. However, those conciliatory approaches are, again, more than one, **so a further question beckons** about the possibility of reconciling the three – and other contenders for a mixed approach. Moreover, the non-Western approaches canvassed briefly in Section 3.3 add a further complication. While perhaps not directly incompatible with the Western approaches, they offer different areas of emphasis and priorities. Given that much of the impetus within OECD for a new flourishing paradigm of education comes from non-Western countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong (Stevenson, 2022), it is difficult to imagine a credible universal theory of flourishing in education that takes no account of the non-Western approaches.

This last issue has been given a thorough treatment in a recent article (Fowers et al., 2022) that provides a scathing critique of current theories and measures of flourishing (both within and outside of education), as both *under-motivated theoretically* (i.e., not grounded in any clear philosophies but simply in the personal intuitions of the researchers) and *culturally biased* (i.e., presented as cosmopolitan but grounded only in Western Anglophone assumptions). Fowers and colleagues consider this cultural bias as an example of common malaise in Western psychology, which tends to quietly elide non-Western approaches. They interpret their findings in the form of a paradox: either Western researchers present their results as universal, in which they can be accused of ethnocentrism, or they present them as applicable only in Western contexts, in which case they cannot ground universal conceptions of concepts such as ‘education for flourishing’. The authors do not consider their argument to be mainly deconstructive and deflationary, however, nor as potentially paralysing for the field. In contrast, behind the dissensus they identify some areas of consensus across the globe, such as that flourishing is ‘a measurable or scalar concept that people experience in degrees’, ‘a multidimensional concept that is irreducible to a single variant’ and ‘a richer concept than either positive affect or life satisfaction’. They recommend the creation of ‘a systematic theory’ that includes reflections on cultural nuances. In essence, then, they recommend the sort of endeavour to which the present report has aspired to contribute as a first step.

Returning to the question of a possible universal synthesis of ‘education for flourishing’, at least three outcomes are possible here. *Firstly*, and most optimistically, it could be hoped for that a single approach – a theoretical ‘sweet spot’ – can be identified which synthesises sufficiently the different foci of the competing approaches in such a way that none of them will find their core message compromised. The potential problem with this outcome is that the synthesised approach will potentially be watered-down to the point of banality. *Secondly*, we could end up with a consensual approach along the lines of Grossmann et al.’s (2020) account of wisdom, in which consensual features are foregrounded, but outstanding non-consensual issues are also highlighted (and perhaps measured separately in potential measures of student flourishing²²). *Thirdly*, and most pessimistically, while a process of synthesis could possibly succeed in excluding certain marginal conceptions as no-go areas for a consensual position, the remaining controversies could still outweigh the agreements, and everyone would just continue to pursue their own agenda of flourishing in

²² In practice, this could mean that measures of student flourishing could partly vary between countries or parts of the world.

agenda (or the whole bandwagon simply grind to a halt). Which one of those three outcomes is most likely is anybody's guess until a systematic attempt at reconciliation and synthesis has been made.

While it is outside of the purview of the present report to offer such an attempt, our exploration of the four Western approaches, the three mixed approaches, and the three non-Western approaches, has drawn attention to certain necessary features that an apt conciliatory approach to flourishing (as an educational ideal) needs to incorporate. It must highlight:

- *Those components of flourishing that are realistically educable in contemporary schooling.* This will probably be the most difficult area of reconciliation across different political views, between those who want to politicise education to the extent of seeing most socio-political goals as educable, and those who want to retain the autonomy of education as non-political (at least in a party-political sense).
- *A combination of intellectual, performative, moral (including emotional), and social goals.* The latter two cannot be left out with impunity if we are to respect the Aristotelian and non-Western traditions; and the values in question must also be understood as universal rather than merely subjective. This will probably be the most difficult area of reconciliation across the great divide between those who believe in a strict distinction between facts and values and those who do not.
- *A synthesis of the view of educational accomplishments as autonomously, authentically, and individually arrived at (on the modern Western view) and as an other-entwined communal activity (on the non-Western views).* This will probably be the most difficult area of reconciliation across different worldviews.
- *A synthesis of the view that students find purpose through learning objectives that help them realise practical life goals, and through goals that put them in contact with more enchanted, self-transcendent ideals (which can either be understood in a secular or religious sense).* This will probably be the most difficult area of reconciliation across different academic and disciplinary orientations.

Practical Educational Implications

The Policy Environment

Universities are large talking factories. What matters for the practical import of the flourishing agenda described in this report, however, is its actual uptake in educational policy and practice. It is in order to sound an optimistic note at the outset: the motivation for abandoning the human capital theory about the central aim of education has come as much from practitioners and parents as from academics. But having an appetite for change is one thing; the proof in the pudding lies, as always, in the eating.

Wolbert et al. (2019) claim that most current flourishing approaches to education are *ideal* in the sense of trading in abstract idealisations of students, teachers, schools, and their situations, rather than *non-ideal* in the sense of referring to actual situations and offering action-guiding, policy-relevant advice on how to transition from the ideal to the practical. However, they also make a distinction between 'utopian idealisation' and 'realistic idealism' and acknowledge that most of the approaches canvassed in this report are at least 'realistically ideal'. The dividing line between 'realistically ideal' and 'non-ideal' may be thin. Nevertheless, it is true that most of the players in the academic games being played about flourishing are not directly involved in the crucible of schoolwork. Neither are most

of them well connected in policy circles. Hence, they may not have a keen enough sense of what will be considered a realistic recommendation by policy makers and practitioners and what will be considered to be beyond the pale as hopelessly idealistic.

In defence of the academics, it could be said that a lot of day-to-day educational thinking suffers from a lack of vision and a reluctance to try out radically alternative possibilities. Blue-sky thinking about flourishing does not hurt anyone, and it is precisely such thinking that has motivated paradigm shifts in educational thought (if not necessarily always practice) in the past – with Wollstonecraft’s and Rousseau’s work as prime historical examples. What is badly needed now, however, is a bridge-building effort that can bring academics, policy makers, politicians, and practitioners interested in flourishing closer together. An organisation such as OECD can serve an important function here; and in a sense the commissioning of this report already represents an exercise in bridge-building.

It could be argued that policy makers and academic educationists have actually more in common here than either cohort has with classroom practitioners, for both of the former trade in the general rather than the granular. This report has aimed at presenting complex philosophical ideas in as simple and concise forms as possible to make them more accessible for policy-level thinking. The flourishing agenda may seem too academically obscure and exegetical at times, but there is no doubt that the intention behind most of it – even when produced by those academics who have least personal experience of policy-level decision-making or practice – is to influence schoolwork. That can of course be done slowly, plank by plank, by igniting the interest of individual teachers. But history tells us that for systematic changes in education to take place, policy edicts and governmental policies do carry heavier weight. If the consensus in political circles across the world is developing into an explicit rejection of the human capital theory about the central aim of education, something else needs to fill the gap. The flourishing agenda seems to be at least a serious contender, especially because ‘flourishing’ appears to strike policy makers as ‘more aspirational’ than ‘well-being’ (Stevenson, 2022: 12).

Ryan et al. (2013: 69) argue that ‘*eudaemonist* thinking’ is essentially prescriptive. However, we need to make a distinction between the ‘normative’ as ‘evaluative’ and as ‘prescriptive’. The flourishing agenda in education is clearly *evaluative* in the sense of projecting certain criteria of well-being as objectively grounded and morally imbued. Yet it is not necessarily *prescriptive* in promoting action towards flourishing, say, in schools. Someone could argue that while flourishing is a good thing, other values matter more in education, and flourishing must be set aside in the assignment of priorities. Things change, on the other hand, if flourishing becomes part of educational policy, set down in legislation and policy documents. Then it becomes truly prescriptive. This is why more responsibility lies on the shoulders of policy makers than academics. The latter can allow themselves to play with ideas but the former need to put them into practice.

Policy-level decision makers are not the ultimate arbiters on educational policy, however. That responsibility rests with politicians, and more indirectly with the voters from whom they get their mandate. Politicians need to ask themselves searching questions about the agenda presented in this report and how it chimes in with their overall ideals. If, as Curren (2023) argues, the flourishing agenda can be motivated by a credible theory of *educational justice*, then that should provide an incentive for politicians to give it serious consideration.

Classroom Practice

None of the above matters if it has no impact on classroom practice. Whichever approach to flourishing one favours, they all carry significant implications for how teachers should go about their business and how schoolwork should be organised. Those implications

involve systemic whole-school thinking (Ellyatt, 2022) about evaluation and disciplinary practices, levels of student engagement, the framing of learning activities, the explicit cultivation of moral, civic, and intellectual virtues, the attention to students' psychological needs, and so forth.

Readers need to be warned, however, that most of the flourishing-relevant teaching materials created in recent years have not been pitched as such, but rather introduced under other academic umbrellas such as social and emotional learning (*SEL*), character education, citizenship education, life-skills education, and positive education.²³ Unfortunately, the plethora of labels and approaches tends to create the impression of hopeless heterogeneity. If the flourishing agenda is to morph into an international movement with a synchronised agenda, as much synthesising work is needed with respect to practical resources as that needed for conceptual and theoretical integration and reconciliation.

Practical guidance on classroom practice under the umbrella of the flourishing agenda calls for another report or two. No justice can be done to it in a short section here. It should be brought to readers' notice, however, that most of the educationists who have written about education for flourishing are no pedagogical revolutionaries, and the actual changes recommended to standard school curricula of subjects and to subject contents seem to be relatively modest in most cases. Education for flourishing is thus typically supposed to include traditional subject knowledge and other practical ingredients of a well-rounded education. It is not meant to supplant anything, except perhaps the obsession with high-stakes testing, but rather to enhance and add new layers to already existing school practices.

This 'politics of small steps', to use Willy Brandt's famous phrase, characterises both the Aristotelian and liberal participants in this debate. For example, Brighthouse (2006) mentions a revised role for schooling, as building the general potential of individuals rather than fitting them into potential slots in the economy. He also invokes four new kinds of educational experiences that students need to have in schools for flourishing: classes to learn about parental life, learning about work–life balance, learning about saving and investing, and about how to make good use of their leisure time. Otherwise, Brighthouse does not seem to foresee a radical overhaul of the curriculum of academic subjects. For him, education for flourishing is more about the general approach to, rather than the specific content of, the curriculum. The same goes for de Ruyter; for her the most prominent feature of education for flourishing lies in teachers passing on knowledge in such a way that children learn to understand what is conducive to human flourishing (de Ruyter, 2004: 385).

The main exception to this rule of pedagogical modesty comes from the liberal educationist John White. Not only does White (2011) want to see a change of emphasis in schooling from comprehensiveness to active engagement with particularities, he also thinks that education for flourishing necessitates the tearing up of the whole curriculum, as carved up into discrete subjects, and restructuring it along the lines of general educational aims (see also Reiss & White, 2013). Despite his radicalism, White is optimistic that the 'advent of the well-being school may be closer than we think' (2011: 145).

In response to – or simply to complement – White, it may be pointed out that flourishing cannot be achieved without basic knowledge in reading, writing, mathematics, the arts, and the sciences (however they happen to be labelled in the timetable). An overall emphasis on student flourishing, however, may help teachers identify what educationist Darling-

²³ All the resources gathered by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues are a good example of this, see <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/2955/character-education/teacher-resources>. See also the Greater Good Science Center and its materials: <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu>.

Hammond calls ‘the teachable moment’ (1997: 97), when students are in flow and intrinsically geared towards worthwhile activities. ‘I want a revolution in world education’, positive psychologist Seligman enthuses (2011: 63). This is possibly not the same kind of revolution for which White hopes – but it evokes the ideal of a reawakening and reimagining of education. Such a reawakening may, however, have less to do with a change in the *choice* of subjects and topics taught than with a change in *how* they are taught.

The Role of the Practitioners

None of the above will be achieved without the support and facilitation of practitioners in schools, in particular teachers but also head teachers (school principals) and other school staff. The initial enthusiasm of teachers notwithstanding (Harrison et al., 2022), there is unfortunately no reason to be over-optimistic about how easily the role as ‘flourishing facilitators’ will come to them. Recent empirical literature teems with examples, from all over the world, of how badly teachers deem themselves prepared for tackling life’s biggest questions in the classroom. They complain about dearth of attention to normative issues in teacher training and about their own lack of moral language and moral identity (see various references in Kristjánsson, 2015: chap. 7). As Higgins correctly observes, ‘restoring to its central place the flourishing of the practitioner is the first step in constructing a virtue ethics of teaching’ (2011: 10). In other words, before teachers can help students explore and answer adequately the question of what kind of persons they want to become, in order to fulfil their potential and flourish, the teachers themselves need more extensive training in how to ask and answer such questions about themselves, both at the professional and personal levels. Indeed, it is hard to see how those two levels can be separated in practice.

If we agree that student well-being is heavily influenced by staff well-being, and that the success of the flourishing agenda depends partly on reforms in teacher education, there is clearly a long and winding journey ahead of us. This is particularly the case because of the pervasiveness of the human capital theory about the central aim of education: the only systematic aims-theory to which many teachers have been exposed. As far as a break from that theory is a radical endeavour, bringing the teachers along is going to require significant concerted efforts (although the level of teacher preparedness no doubt differs between countries).

Another tricky question, about which eminent educational thinkers have disagreed in the past (see Kristjánsson, 2020: 38–40), concerns the moral commitments towards general educational aims that we can reasonably expect teachers to adopt. The views on offer range here from the modest claim that teachers bear responsibility only for the flourishing of their own students, to the far-reaching injunction that it lies in the very calling of a teacher to be an activist for the rights and needs of students all over the world to lead flourishing lives. The paradox that lurks here is that the more committed teachers become to the ideal of flourishing for all students, the more likely it is that they will experience burn-out by taking on an impossible task (Hand, 2023).

What stands out is that a flourishing school community must nurture partnerships in learning, involving shared authority and responsibility for the school’s success, in its mission to enable everyone in it to live well (Curren, 2023). No such partnership and mission can succeed unless teachers’ own needs and judgements are respected, and unless they can truly be flourishing themselves in their role as flourishing facilitators.

Concluding Remarks

In an earlier OECD report on flourishing, Michael Stevenson describes education as being ‘at crossroads’ (2022: 6). The present report has tried to answer Stevenson’s call for a close look at the academic credentials of the flourishing agenda in education, in general, and specific approaches to it, in particular. In their article on the psychology of flourishing, Fowers et al. (2023) add a caveat: ‘We recognize there are many other theoretical approaches to flourishing, and our approach is unlikely to be universally adopted. This non-finality actually makes our proposal easier because it frees us from the false idea that we should have the final word on flourishing.’

Those words can be echoed and applied to the present report also. In aiming at an overview of the current state of play, this report has deliberately avoided the sense of finality that comes from making a strong case for one approach over the others. Although the present author’s own views have been made clear in earlier writings, it must be left to readers to decide what they think about the credibility of the flourishing agenda, in general, and the possibility of synthesising satisfactorily the different approaches to it, in particular.

Alignment with OECD Strategy and Research

In Section 5, we turned the lens to some practical implications of the new flourishing agenda for educational policy, classroom practice, and the preparation of teachers. It is worth revisiting some of those considerations here at the end in order to reflect on alignments with the current OECD strategy development and research programme. In so far as OECD’s aspirations relate to (educational) flourishing, they address issues of orientation (finding one’s purpose through learning); competences and approaches to assessing them; learning environments, including pedagogies; professional training and development; and system design (Stevenson, 2022). The ideal of education for flourishing has significant implications for all those aspirations:

- It merges the subjective attraction of purposefulness with the objective attractiveness of fulfilling your potential as human person through flourishing: blossoming and thriving as a human person.
- While moving away from the instrumentalist language of ‘competences’ and ‘skills’ towards that of ‘intrinsic excellences’, the flourishing ideal retains the emphasis on the intellectual aims of schooling and produces internationally testable variables.
- The flourishing ideal foregrounds the importance of the flourishing school as an institution, and it offers an irreducibly holistic view of strategies of learning (although flourishing proponents do not agree on the radicality of the curricular changes needed).
- The flourishing ideal takes it for granted that a wholesale change of educational emphasis cannot be achieved without a significant overhaul of teacher training and provisions for continuing professional development. Many teachers are not yet ready for the role of ‘flourishing facilitators’.
- The flourishing ideal has salient ramifications for the design of educational systems. Because of the ethical thread that runs through it, it potentially redefines ‘success within educational systems’ such that success cannot be credibly operationalised without taking account of educational equity and other socio-moral concerns, as well as environmental factors that will set the context for all education in the 21st century.

All in all, it is important not to understand the ideal of flourishing in education as just one more theoretical plaything, only of interest to philosophers, psychologists, and ivory-tower educationists. Rather, it is a practical approach to education which – while grounded in a classical conception of human excellences – is of immediate modern appositeness for the rough and tumble of everyday education and schooling.

Future Research Directions

At the close of the present author's (Kristjánsson, 2020) book on flourishing, some recommendations were made about future research directions. It is in order to rehearse some of them here, as they are equally valid three years later:

- More attention needs to be paid to the political and institutional conditions of flourishing schools and education for flourishing.
- More explicit departures must be made from subjective measures of well-being to performance measures of flourishing as an objective variable.
- More systematic exploration is required of the required changes in curriculum and teaching methods for the aim of flourishing to be achieved.
- More engagement is to be called for with developmental psychology, especially the psychology of individual and cultural differences, in order to be able to individualise efforts at education for flourishing more effectively and reach out to disenfranchised individuals and groups.
- More collaborations between teachers and parents is needed to figure out how schools and homes can draw mutual benefit from each other's efforts in enhancing the flourishing of young people.
- Better integration of a flourishing agenda (including, but not confined to, character and civic education) into teacher training must be made.
- In addition, the discussion in previous section has motivated a further recommendation:
- OECD needs to support the creation of 'a systematic theory' of flourishing in education that includes attention to cultural nuances.

Until recently, flourishing was rarely discussed outside of the hermetically sealed hothouse of Aristotelian philosophy. In the last few years, hordes of psychologists and educationists have come on board. Some academic trends become abortive while others continue to catch on. It is worth appealing to the readers of this report to help move the flourishing discourse forward in order to make it enrich educational policy and practice.

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