

Self-directed flourishing: a conceptual meta-framework for dealing with the challenges of 21st-century learning and education

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to address the concern that humans are experiencing unprecedented, rapidly changing conditions, in part exacerbated by a recent pandemic, digitization and ongoing wartime.

Design/methodology/approach – A paper that seeks to address what the authors are calling the “Educational Malaise”. The authors achieve this through a conceptual and theoretical exploration of the social nature of human beings and learning in the context of readings of human nature, and moral and rational powers.

Findings – It is proposed that education should be designed to empower learners to meet the demands of rapidly changing conditions. The ability to adapt is of primary importance for meeting the demands of the changing world, and the “Self-Directed Flourishing” meta-framework can help educators to meet this challenge.

Originality/value – Using conceptual and theoretical lenses, in this paper, the authors identify some core problems with traditional pedagogies in formal education and advance a person-centred, humanistic approach to pedagogy. The authors advocate for a new meta-framework for educators: “Self-Directed Flourishing”. The authors propose placing co-creation, courage and conceptual insight at the heart of educational policies and practices, which the authors suggest will nurture a dynamic, adaptable and ethical microculture for human flourishing in 21st-century education and beyond.

Keywords Quality education, Conceptual analysis, Constructivism, Self-directed learning, Human flourishing, Future skills

Paper type Conceptual paper

Setting the scene

This paper is about, in one sense, a radically new approach to education, *Self-Directed Flourishing*, and yet, in another, it is as old as the hills. Fundamentally, it is a proposal for a meta-framework for better understanding what is more effective and ethical in *current* educational best practices already, as well as reimagining what meaningful and adaptable education, oriented towards nurturing the conditions for human flourishing in the future, might look like. Hence, while the concept is new, many of the sentiments and values that undergird the concept are not. In fact, they have been noted for decades, centuries and even millennia. Still, our adapted approach may help to capture what is important today and how we can better prepare our learners for the challenges they face in a 21st-century world.



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To begin, we will explore the rationale for a new way forward for educators and learners. In short, we will outline the problem of what we are calling the “Educational Malaise”, namely, the utter failure of educational policymakers, in some contexts (particularly in state education), to take proper account of the human-centredness of educational practice. As we suggest, this is primarily due to the toxic mix of the subjection of education to the market logic of neoliberalism and the related tendency in the modern era towards positivism, scientism, managerialism and performativity. There is a better way, and we will highlight what we think this looks like.

It will then be helpful to lay the fundamental conceptual categories that inform this work. We will frame this discussion in terms of *Three Pillars of Self-Directed Flourishing*. In Pillar I, we suggest that to fully understand what it means to be human; we must first respect that students are, first and foremost, human beings, and only afterwards, students or learners. In Pillar II, we will explore the philosophical foundations of self-directed learning. Then, in Pillar III, we will move on to include a discussion of the problematic move over recent years to advance flourishing as the *aim* of education. The central reason why this is problematic is, we suggest, that by implication it fails to locate the focus of responsibility on the student as the appropriate agent of their own flourishing.

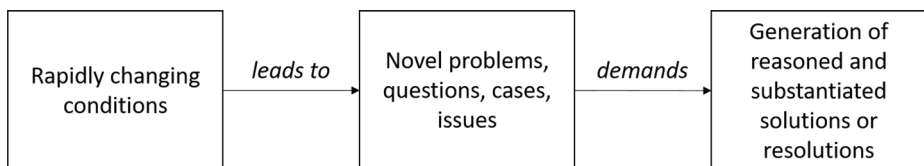
As a capstone to this discussion, we will articulate our Self-Directed Flourishing framework through the prism of three foundational principles: *Co-Creativity* (as a core *Value*), *Courage* (as a core *Virtue*) and *Conceptual Insight* (as a core *Virtuosity*), which we suggest provides educators with the conceptual tools for an effective and ethical pedagogy, nurturing the *conditions* for flourishing in and through education.

Taken together, we suggest that our new framework offers a coherent *meta*-rationale for much of the great work that is already occurring, as well as a kind of conceptual yardstick by which we may better assess the opportunities for genuinely transformative education fit for 21st-century education and learners.

The educational malaise

It is widely understood that we are facing unprecedented, rapidly changing social contextual conditions; in part exacerbated by a recent pandemic, digitization and ongoing wartime (Ng, 2023; Owen, 2022). Under rapidly changing conditions, we are more frequently likely to face what Jarvis (2007, p. 22) termed *disjuncture* at work or in daily living, where “only when there are sudden changes or novel situations are people stopped in their tracks, as it were, because they do not know automatically what to do or how to respond to a question or so on”. In this sense, the more conditions change, the more disjuncture individuals will face (cf. Figure 1).

What we are most interested in is the ability to deal and adapt competently with this disjuncture. That is, education is an opportunity to foster the adaptivity and agency necessary for both meeting the demands of our rapidly changing world and concomitantly proactively changing it (e.g. Wang et al., 2023).



Source: Authors’ own work

Figure 1. Disjuncture: increasing demands consequential of changing conditions

Nonetheless, we acknowledge the complexity of the issue, including in terms of “holding onto” our traditional pedagogical practices in formal educational settings. For instance, instrumental controls from central governments can hinder localized agency for teachers to change in pedagogical practices, in some contexts. For example, Ellis (2023, p. 2) has recently stated: “England now has the most tightly regulated and centrally controlled system of ITE [Initial Teacher Education] anywhere in the world”. These developments have been decades in the making and have led to what Ball (2021) has characterized as a problem of “performativity”, that is, where policy technologies contribute to a managerial environment at the expense of local autonomy, innovation and person-centred teaching practices. The result is, arguably, that pupils and students are robbed of their innate human potential and taught instead to become passive learners in an education system oriented towards economic ends (Schinkel, 2021).

Educational aims evaluated etymologically

It may be important to briefly consider what we are trying to achieve in education as well as the relationship between language, policy and practice in education. This is important because of the powerful impact language has on shaping our policy world as well as our conceptions of reality (cf. Biesta, 2022). As Winch (1990, p. 15) has said:

[...] in discussing language philosophically we are in fact discussing what counts as belonging to the world. Our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use. The concepts we have settle for us the form of the experience we have of the world.

For example, by looking at the term “pedagogy”, which originated from the Ancient Greek term *paidagōgia*, meaning *I lead a child* (cf. Dave, 2017), we can already see a relationship of *power* in education. Although what “leading” means is situated and contextual, it locates the power in education primarily with educators. Similarly, the pedagogical nurturing of a student’s human potential by a teacher is further explained looking at the etymology of the concept of “education”, which is based on the Latin noun *educare*, which means “to train”, vs *educere*, which means to “lead out” (Craft, 1984; cf. Pearsall, 1998). From consideration of these linguistic and conceptual origins, we can think more deeply about how language informs practice, and specifically, the practice-based tensions between traditional versus more innovative, person-centred forms of teaching and learning; in particular, the stark differences in the negotiation of *agency* in the pedagogical process.

In this regard, the seminal work of Freire (1970) presented a damning outline of the process and consequences of traditional forms of education – naming it the “banking” model, where the teacher’s job is to fill learners’ heads with predefined knowledge and skills; the more that the teacher is able to successfully fill the heads of children (or adults), the better they are deemed to be. The assessment processes that guide modern teaching help to cement this implicit assumption into practice and therefore student experience. In these traditional forms of pedagogy, the human learner is subjected to a learning process that is underwritten by behaviorist and outcome-focused learning assumptions (Morris, 2019) where the goal of a teacher or educator is to “transfer” knowledge into the minds of learners, a relationship of hierarchy (Bruner, 1966).

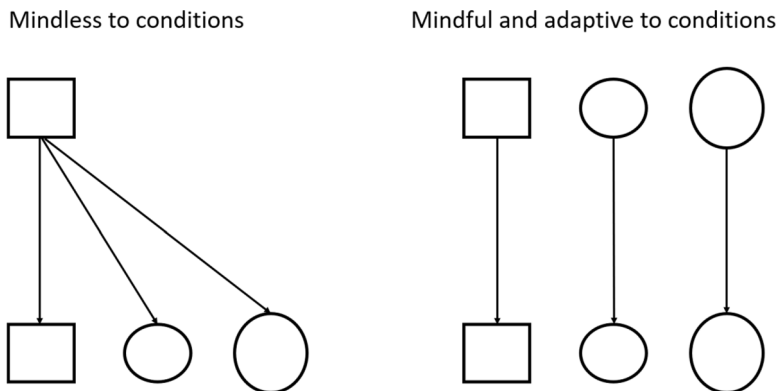
We consider these forms of “traditional” pedagogies to be increasingly unjustifiable and excessively controlling over both the “means and objectives” of learning (cf. Knowles *et al.*, 2020). Unfortunately, the stipulations of the curricular demands commonly frame the possibilities and limitations of the classroom didactics, especially in centralized systems: to be “successful” in the process, the student must “game” the system, that is, they must listen to the requirements set out by the teacher and strictly follow the stipulations outlined (cf. Dewey, 2013, 1963; Ellis, 2023).

This is irrespective of whether they actually learn anything meaningful or useful at all. At the very least, it is a reductive account of learning (amounting to memorization and use of rote learning) and an enculturation of instrumental cynicism, even meaninglessness, within the educational process (Biesta, 2022).

Ball (2021) explains what helped to bring us to this position, which we are calling the “Educational Malaise”. For example, he highlights that in England, since Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government’s victory in 1979, there has been a trend towards (1) an education system that is strongly underwritten by neoliberal, market-logic oriented policies, (2) a move back towards traditional teacher-centred pedagogies, (3) a more rigid centralized National Curriculum and (4) a focus on learning [memorizing] pre-determined facts detached from context. Similar tendencies, for example, have also been found in the USA and Nordic countries to various degrees (Blossing *et al.*, 2014; Morris *et al.*, 2024). The teacher’s role in this context is reduced to that of an instructor who monitors “learning” through feedback techniques, guiding the learner toward pre-defined learning objectives (Bruner, 1966; Langer, 2017).

The traditional model of mainstream state-led education does lead to learning of sorts, i.e. the results of the process are measurable, at least in terms of differentiating the learning progress of learners through standardized tests, which can be used for comparison measures nationally and internationally (cf. Meng *et al.*, 2023). However, it is worth putting such notions of “success” into perspective and developing a better understanding of the tangible human costs and harms of such a model and asking some rather fundamental questions about its suitability. This is because the type of learning that is observable and “measurable” may well be counterproductive in terms of developing the kind of mind that is flexible, independent and adaptable in thinking, one that enables learners to foster a competence and confidence to be responsive to meet the demands of changing contextual conditions (Barak, 2018; Langer, 2017).

Indeed, such reductive forms of learning can encourage learners to become “creatures of habit”; to become accustomed and comfortable with habitually reinforcing patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling and acting – preferring stability but habitually uncomfortable in dealing with change and disjuncture (Arnold, 2017; Gould, 1978; Graham, 1991). This feature of dependency might show itself when a learner habitually generates tokenistic solutions that are not quite fitting; figuratively speaking: students can end up confused trying to fit square pegs in round holes; rather than being able to adapt to the



Source: Authors’ own work

Figure 2. Mindless versus mindful to conditions

subtleties and nuances that inevitably present themselves as a consequence of complex, changing conditions (cf. [Figure 2](#)).

Concomitantly, there is an ethical dimension. These issues leave students with little motivation to learn in a meaningful way and to engage fully in their own development other than as an economic, utilitarian and instrumental *means* to an end. This is ethically problematic and wasteful and suggests a blatant disregard for human dignity, agency, sense-making and potential. In short, it is artificial, reductive, abusive and dehumanizing. It frustrates what might otherwise become the conditions for human flourishing through education because it limits the ordinary and natural development of human capacities (cf. [Kahn, 2017](#); [Keenahan, 1990](#); [Pekarsky, 1982](#)). It also inhibits learners from developing a coherent and rich sense of understanding and meaning, a cogent self-narrative, and an effective model for navigating the complexities of life; in short, it tells someone else's story. The digitalized education system of the post-COVID era has exacerbated these worrying trends towards alienation with related impacts on students' sense of belonging and community within educational institutions (cf. [Farag et al., 2022](#); [Edwards and Magill, 2023](#); [Syska and Pritchard, 2023](#)). We suggest that our societies need a more *human* and *humane* education system; we can and must do better.

The challenge of OECD's transformative competencies

In response to concerns about rapidly changing conditions of work and education, emerging as a result of globalization and changes in technology, [OECD \(2019a, 2019b, 2020\)](#) engaged with policymakers and researchers from across the world to develop a set of three key "Transformative Competencies". The Transformative Competencies concept is embedded within the broader "Learning Compass" framework, which is itself within the "Future of Education and Skills 2030" position paper. That paper aimed to provide a shared language within which educators from across the world can begin to have a dialogue on how best to respond to future needs in a way that is "holistic, inclusive, and sustainable" ([OECD, 2020](#), p. 7). The specific Transformative Competencies posited are:

- *Creating new value* (creative agency, entrepreneurship and conceptual insight);
- *Reconciling tensions and dilemmas* (epistemic and moral orienteering resilience; and coping with uncertainty); and
- *Taking responsibility* (moral and civic agency; and development of academic, civic and ecological virtues) [1].

The "transformative" nature of these competencies is seen to rest within their capacity to encourage an educational system that is dynamic and responsive to change, both in terms of systems, societies and policies, as well as in terms of their capacity to nurture responsiveness to student and stakeholder feedback and the affordance of adaptive levels of student agency. We welcome these transformative competencies as a significant shift towards the kind of education that we need for a more agile and agent-centred education system that is future-ready.

However, this is not the first time that OECD has proposed a competencies-based approach, and there is a somewhat justified degree of healthy scepticism. One of the key criticisms of the hugely influential OECD "Key Competencies" set of proposals ([Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\), 2005](#)), for example, lies in terms of the tendency of the Key Competencies approach to reproduce existing class-based inequalities. For example, embedded within the proposals were assumptions about similar levels of emotional, psychological and social development; according to some critics, this led to a "deficiencies" analysis of underperforming children and their families ([Takayama, 2013](#)). Of course, the issues

with this internationalized comparative approach adopted and driven largely by NGOs like OECD is well-documented elsewhere, too (c.f. [Auld and Morris, 2016](#)). The central criticisms focus on programme for international student assessment (PISA)'s excessively reliance on standardized testing in many countries with often hugely different social, economic and cultural contexts. This has inevitably led to a lack of recognition of cultural nuance and a narrowing of curricula across the world, reducing complex educational aims to "measurable outcomes" at the expense of other humanistic educational aims such as physical, moral, civic and artistic developments (cf. [Takayama, 2015](#)).

The new Transformative Competencies framework adopted by the OECD, seems, at least in part, to be an attempt by the OECD to address this historical stain. Nevertheless, we suggest that these competencies do indeed have the potential to be transformative (if meaningfully realized). The key benefits of the Transformative Competencies concept are not so much that they provide clear paths for action, but that they help to embed within educational systems a radical set of values that acknowledges the importance of creative agency and "conceptual insight". This is certainly the aspect of Transformative Competencies that we support as moves in the right direction [\[2\]](#).

With this in mind, we will now explore these possibilities through a series of three "Pillars" of what we are calling the "Self-Directed Flourishing" meta-framework. These "pillars" are complemented by three core categories (*Values*, *Virtues* and *Virtuosities*). We wish to focus on the following in particular, "Co-Creativity" as a core *Value*; "Courage" as a core *Virtue*; and "Conceptual Insight" as a core *Virtuosity*. We suggest that this framework better helps to capture and explain what is good about current practices, while also supporting greater innovation across the educational fields of policy and practice. We also suggest that understanding "why" more humanistic, agent-led conceptions of education are more ethical, more effective and more future-ready is also crucial. Hence, in the following section, we will articulate a conceptual approach to education. This can be a useful heuristic tool for assessing and distinguishing the "reasons for good reasons", that is, understanding between and settling debates between differing frameworks through skills of conceptual understanding (cf. [Mountbatten-O'Malley, 2024a](#)). This may help to address the root causes of much of what we have called the "Educational Malaise", hitherto explored.

The three pillars of "self-directed flourishing" in education

Pillar I: "homo loquens" – a distinctly human social animal

As human beings we are subject to biological and psychological processes. Although some of these processes are unique to human beings - in particular, our psychological processes - we are nevertheless an embedded part of the natural environment which includes all sentient creatures. As such, we share many of these processes with our non-human animal (hereafter called "animal") family, particularly more evolved creatures such as dolphins and chimpanzees [\[3\]](#). But what is it that makes us distinctly human? We suggest that it is our ability to conceptualize experience and develop sophisticated language to aid understanding; our ability to reason.

We are not merely human as *Homo sapiens* (as a self-knowing, biological being) but *Homo loquens* (a concept-deploying creature within a community of language-speakers). As [Hacker \(2007, p. 1\)](#) has suggested, "[a] mature human being is a self-conscious agent, with the ability to act, and to react in thought, feeling and deed, for reasons"; that is, we have moral and rational *powers*. These are advanced intellectual and imaginative powers which entail both managing factual intellectual learning and development (propositional knowledge, i.e. knowing-*that*), as well as experiential and applied learning requiring advanced skills and expertise (knowing-*how*; cf. [Hacker, 2007](#); [Ryle, 1946](#)).

In this respect, [Vervaeke and Ferraro \(2013\)](#) articulate a metatheory of cognition where they divide knowledge (ways of knowing) into four distinct categories: a) propositional (fact-based, scientific); b) procedural (skill-based, similar to knowing-how); c) perspectival (context-specific knowledge); and d) participatory knowledge, i.e. shared, social knowledge. This theoretical framework is, in our view, supported conceptually, particularly with reference to the works of [Wittgenstein \(2009\)](#) on the nature of knowledge and human understanding. The latter category of *participatory* forms of knowing has significant implications for how our agency is conceived in social environments, i.e. our co-creative *interdependence* as agents in education [4].

Further, as social, language-using creatures, our learning is fundamentally practical; it is guided *towards* problem-solving. In the modern era, the kinds of skills we need are closely aligned with navigating complexity and problem-solving. This is more important than ever in the context of “information overload” ([Bawden and Robinson, 2020](#)) and the risks of “moral deskilling” through the increasing use of automation as a method of personal as well as political decision-making ([Vallor, 2014](#)). Hence, to operate effectively in the modern world, human beings must learn how to develop skills of moral and rational orienteering, a kind of knowing-how. This goes further than the simpler skill of “critical thinking”, which can be seen as a “step in the creative process” (cf. [Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019](#)). It is at its core about conceptual insight and understanding, a form of practical wisdom (as traditionally taught in the classical liberal arts), yet distinct, we suggest, because of renewed philosophical insights from [Hacker \(2007\)](#), [Baker \(2004\)](#), [Mountbatten-O'Malley \(2024a\)](#) and many others [5].

In a general sense, this conceptual skill set has been known as advantageous within the empirical literature for some time, whether in philosophy, or the sciences such as mathematics, chemistry, engineering, psychology or nursing education (cf. [Feltovich et al., 1993](#); [McDermott, 1984](#); [Mills, 2016](#), etc.). It helps learners to situate propositional knowledge clearly within a context ('metacognition'), contributing to critical depth, intellectual rigour and the ability to see new connections (cognitive and perceptual flexibility) and thereby to develop deep understanding about how to think about and resolve (assess, evaluate) arguments and problems in standard cases. Further still, it provides the toolkit for *dissolving* conceptual problems (i.e. showing a given problem as being premised on conceptual misunderstanding, thereby addressing a conceptual problem as its root cause) [6].

The issue here is that this skill set is largely ignored within school education and adult learning settings. Yet, this ability to distinguish and discriminate, to situate and contextualize problems and questions properly, is a philosophical skill that requires insight into the conceptual working of language and the mind. It is therefore deeply and distinctly *human*. This is why we suggest that this helps provide a sensible justification for an increased focus on 'Conceptual Insight' as a core pillar for navigating complexity in the socio-political climate of 21st-century education. It aids learners to learn, but more importantly, aids them in their ability to learn 'how' to learn.

Pillar II: philosophical and theoretical foundations of self-directed learning

The theoretical concept of “self-directed learning” is also founded upon a suite of modern philosophical and theoretical foundations: humanistic philosophy (directly concerned with concepts such as “self-realization”, “self-actualization” and “personal development”), but also the pragmatic philosophy of thinkers such as Dewey and others, with constructivist epistemological underpinnings ([Morris, 2019](#)). Similarly to the skill of conceptual insight, self-directed learning aids learners to rightly position the context of a problem

(c.f. Jonassen, 1999). The self-directed learning concept was popularized in the adult learning literature. Cyril Houle (1961) laid the foundation for a growing number of studies on self-directed learning through his 1961 study entitled “The Inquiring Mind” (cf. Hiemstra, 1994). Houle also supervised the doctoral dissertations of two scholars who published seminal work on self-directed learning, including the Canadian, Allen Tough, who identified self-directed learning as a common and “natural” form of adult learning (Tough, 1971). However, Knowles (1975, p. 18) popularized the concept and he defined self-directed learning in the following terms:

In its broadest meaning, “self-directed learning” describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes [7].

More recently, in the context of adolescent-age children, Gibbons (2002) suggested that self-directed learning is important because it enables students to customize their approach to learning in ways that combine characterological development alongside academic knowledge and skills useful throughout a student’s life. In short, self-directed learning as an approach and system of values is a radical shift in thinking about the nature of teaching and learning itself. Fundamentally, it allows learners to develop a host of human-centred skills, competencies, attitudes and virtues that contribute to learner “independence” and “responsibility” – thus evading the kind of learning that perpetuates pathological cycles of mindless thinking and knowledge-dependency (Gibbons, 2002).

What will now follow is a brief exploration of some of the recent developments in the field of education in the context of our third Pillar: “The Flourishing student”. As we will outline, the correlation of flourishing with education is both natural and problematic. Nevertheless, we suggest that we have found a way to resolve this difficulty in ways that helps to retain the substance of what this correlation is aiming to achieve.

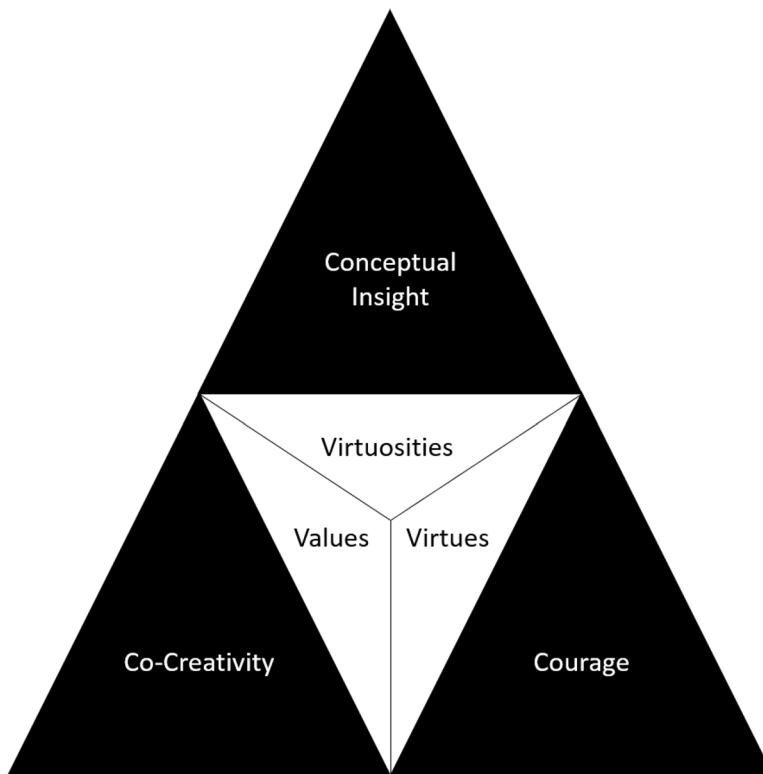
Pillar III: the “flourishing student” – problems and prospects

The notion of flourishing as the *aim* of education, and relatedly, the distinction between human flourishing and the “flourishing student”, has been somewhat of a contentious area over recent years, with a series of intellectual skirmishes occurring between proponents of flourishing as the aim of education and those against. For example, the idea that “flourishing” might serve as an overarching *aim* of education has been championed in recent years by a number of philosophers (Brighouse, 2008; Curren, 2013; De Ruyter, 2004; De Ruyter *et al.*, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2020; Schinkel, 2021). Many of them have recently signed the Jubilee Centre’s “Statement on Flourishing as an Educational Aim” (Arthur *et al.*, 2023). Whether flourishing can meaningfully be said to be the “aim” of education is, however, not at all a settled matter, with some voices of scepticism emerging from Carr (2021), Siegel (2023), Hand (2023) and Mountbatten-O’Malley (2024b) [8]. Recent responses to the major criticisms include Curren *et al.* (2024) and Kristjánsson and VanderWeele (2024). There is no scope to address those matters fully here; nevertheless, we do wish to make some brief remarks on the nature of human flourishing for students/learners, in particular why it matters and has a firm place within our Self-Directed Flourishing framework.

Firstly, the concept of flourishing is “context sensitive”, and grasping the concept depends on a number of factors, specifically oriented around the *purpose* of asking. Nevertheless, it may be worth summarizing some brief points here from a recently published systematic analysis of the concept (Mountbatten-O’Malley, 2024a). Centrally, the concept of human flourishing (in speaking about *persons*) includes three necessary conditions: the need

to nurture spaces of 1) agency, 2) personal growth and 3) meaningful happiness – irrespective of personal circumstances. In this case, what is relevant is the *human* nature of learners (as above), recognizing the need for conditions of their goodness and as well as their role as students and learners to grow and develop their innate capacities. Educational environments that do not support such conditions, we suggest, are in fact impeding the flourishing of their students and as such may be doing more harm than good.

In the context of the wider discourse on flourishing in education, therefore, we propose that for flourishing to have a meaningful role in education, it should be considered as a core *value*, rather than an aim. This is because by implicitly locating the agency for aims with educators, proponents appear to misunderstand the nature of student (or learner) flourishing, which is not in the gift of educators to aim for. Rather, it is for learners themselves as the pertinent *agents* to aim towards reaching their potential. This is especially important in the context of a policy-environment that is prone towards dehumanizing performativity and managerialism. After all, misplacing aims and conflating them with values may contribute to policy-slippage into a paternalistic and infantilizing “Brave New World” policy-environment (cf. [Seligman, 2011](#)). Indeed, this is not unreasonable; we should take these concerns seriously in the current policy climate [9]. We, therefore, advocate for a reasonable degree of healthy



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 3. Self-directed flourishing meta-framework

scepticism towards these kinds of 'aims' that are couched in beneficent language, especially in this highly politicized and contentious social context.

Hence, flourishing should provide a philosophical basis for the development of a humanistic values-framework for educators rather than an aim, *per se*. Indeed, we suggest that as *loco parentis*, what is in the gift of educators is the duty to nurture *conditions* for student flourishing. We suggest that this is an important ethical point of clarity because it focuses our attention on the importance of learner *agency*, 'the' central conceptual criterion of human flourishing. This values-oriented approach should help to dispense with the problems of both conceptual incoherence as well as political paternalism, while also laying the foundation for a more sensible and ethical approach to the role of flourishing in education more widely.

We now make the case for the *Self-Directed Flourishing* meta-framework more explicit by articulating it in terms of *Values*, *Virtues* and *Virtuosities* with accompanying core components.

The self-directed flourishing meta-framework

We therefore suggest that the following meta-framework (Figure 3) will help to resolve some of the difficulties seen in this discussion on befitting education for current and future needs in ways that are ethical, conceptually warranted, coherent and potentially powerful and transformative within educational contexts and beyond.

Values

There are numerous potential candidates for values that may inform this kind of framework, and we do not want to be dogmatic about this. For example, compassion, collaboration and respect. However, in recognition of the profound depth of our human *dignity* (widely recognized in our international frameworks, including for disabled persons (United Nations, 1948, 2006), and as explored already at length in former sections, we propose “Co-Creativity” as our fundamental core value. In a recent systemic literature review, Doust *et al.* (2023) identified a cluster of concepts in the literature related to the concept of “imagination” in education. These included, among others:

- Creative thinking and intelligence (including problem-solving and questioning);
- Formation of being (conscious observation of stimuli);
- Sense of agency (the capacity to make decisions);
- Individual self-efficacy (self-awareness and faith in one’s abilities);
- Persistence (resilience and optimism);
- Experience (process rather than outcome);
- Curiosity (non-judgmental inquiry); and
- Innovation (playing with possibilities).

According to the authors, creativity “unleashes human potential”, “[...]fueling the construction of new ideas and perspectives, emphasizing the need to foster creativity and imagination to support the holistic development of young children”. (*ibid*, p. 8). This empirical and theoretical set of views therefore also supports creativity and agency as central facets of the kind of education that encourages personal engagement, fulfilment and enjoyment as well as personal efficacy, arguably necessary aspects for a flourishing student life. Hence, building on the theoretical insights from thinkers within self-directed learning, we suggest that the concept of “Co-Creativity” rightly positions learners within a healthy and

dynamic interpersonal relationship with their educators, one that is mutually negotiated and ethically responsive to human needs in relationship with our world, and in recognition of the shared and socially constructed nature of knowledge.

Virtues

Similarly, there are numerous virtues that could inform what good *character* looks like, both for educators as well as learners, and the literature on this discussion is considerable, including addressing character in terms of moral education and character “strengths” (Hodges and Clifton, 2004) and developing “resilience” (Brunwasser *et al.*, 2009). Some of the leaders in the UK in this regard include Wellington College who claim to be the first school in the UK to introduce a course in happiness and well-being as early as 2006 (Wellington College, 2024). The movement of Positive Psychology has also influenced the Higher Education sector, with the University of Buckingham (2017) becoming the first “Positive University” in the United Kingdom. More recently, discussions have extended into issues around “ethics” (Arthur *et al.*, 2016) and “moral agency” (Pattaro, 2016), which we welcome.

With that all said, navigating the complexities of thinking clearly, coherently and deeply about the moral universe and our role in it, is first and foremost, a courageous *self-work* of personal transformation (cf. Wittgenstein, 1998). As learners increasingly become masters of their own understanding, they will need to press into difficult areas of epistemic and ethical doubt and difficulty. This requires a certain kind of boldness and leadership to see the bigger picture and to be willing to contribute to enabling better decisions that will help to create innovative, creative and practical solutions and a brighter future for all. Hence, although imagination and creativity are important virtues, we posit that the core virtue needed within education (which aligns closely with the related notions of moral agency) is “Courage”, without which no other virtue is possible.

Virtuosities

Finally, we believe in the incredible capacity of our learners of all ages to learn, grow, develop and contribute to human understanding and innovation. This skill set begins with knowing our way around our own thoughts (self-knowledge) as situated in complex social and linguistic and social contexts. Navigating this messy world requires insight and a kind of mastery, or rather, virtuosity. As human beings we possess a range of abilities such as rationality, judgement, agency, imagination and insight into complex emotions (cf. Hacker, 2007). However, those abilities can be frustrated through traditional forms of learning that, when unmitigated, may obscure the agency of learners. Although we are born with the ‘capacity’ to reason, the *ability* to reason takes time to master through induction and training over time within a community of language speakers as we mature into adulthood, i.e. as we learn the *rules* for the use of our words within a community of learners (cf. Hacker, 2007, 2013). We suggest that it is this specific set of skills that aids our development within complex and contentious social environments and so contributes to sense-making skills, practical wisdom and adaptive future-readiness. In short, it develops our capacity to *think*, as well as how to learn to think better, to self-evaluate assumptions, and to situate knowledge in its appropriate category; it is a form of advanced metacognition.

Because creativity, know-how, moral and rational orienteering all require a certain kind of approach to knowledge and understanding, one that is flexible, adaptable and perceptive, we suggest that the core virtuosity needed here is “Conceptual Insight”. As suggested earlier, this is a hugely neglected form of “know-how” that, nevertheless, if harnessed properly, has the power to generate in learners the ability to grasp and manage problems that are embedded within

intricate webs of complexity and nuance, precisely what learners need today and, as well as in the future, in order to flourish as learners and creators of value in the world.

To bring these *Three Pillars* into focus a little, the “School of Humanity” is a good example of the kind of transformative education we advocate for in this paper. Specifically due to their focus on *flourishing* as a value but also as a “soft skill” set of virtues, as embedded within the “Human literacies curriculum” (House, 2024). In our view, there may be more work to be done in terms of conceptual insight as an *explicit* skill set sector wide. Nevertheless, at the School of Humanity, the opportunity for learners to address “real-world” problems in an interdisciplinary manner, contributes to the strengthening of learner abilities for managing complexity, moral and rational adaptability and know-how. Further, the Human literacies framework is encapsulated within the Mastery Transcript approach, which allows for the recording and development of a significant degree of adaptation and personalization of learning through “self-identified areas of knowledge and skills” (Barty *et al.*, 2024).

This brief discussion about the approach of the School of Humanity is *indicative* for how education can be done differently. The key challenge for educators of the future that we anticipate, will be working with state sector partners so that governments can begin to see the ethical *and* pragmatic benefits of this kind of transformative education for better equipping, enabling and empowering the learners, entrepreneurs and creators of the future.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have problematized traditional approaches to education (such as the “banking model” (cf. Freire, 1970), labelling this set of policies and pedagogical practices as the “Educational Malaise”. We have argued that this approach is unfit for the demands of 21st-century social, political or educational environments. This is partially because students are subjected to a cycle of rote learning, pathological dependency and mindlessness, which contributes to learners’ lack of preparedness for adapting to changing contexts. We also explored the etymological roots of learning and education (e.g. “to lead out” vs “to train”), advancing some insights into how language helps to shape our world, including the world of policies as well as the internalized world of learners. We have also briefly discussed some positive movements in the policy realm in terms of OECD (2020) “Transformative Competencies”. These certainly show good prospects for the kind of radical and transformative change we need in education. Similar moves towards responsibility, deep thinking and action are seen elsewhere, including within innovative educational thought-leadership (e.g. Soulsby (2024), the Salzburg Global Seminar (2024), and Surma *et al* (2025).

The OECD’s (2020) “Transformative Competencies” approach, though generally sound, is somewhat limited. Limited partially because they are yet another example of an international agency top-down concept (an issue that deeply contributed to the “Educational Malaise” in the first place). But further, because Transformative Competencies do not address the “reasons for good reasons”, namely, how to discern why one framework should matter above others. This is why we need a meta-framework to help us, as educators and thinkers, to navigate this complexity. The “Self-Directed Flourishing” meta-framework is, we suggest, this very framework that enables this kind of conceptual navigation. It is bold, innovative and at least potentially, radically transformative for education globally. If applied by educators, it can help students themselves to navigate complex epistemic domains of knowledge and information in a complex and constantly shifting world, exactly what all the voices in the ‘futures’ choir are asking for, and in this case, they seem to be right. The trend does not seem to be tokenistic, there is something meaningful happening; change is coming because the current system is not

sustainable. The question is, do NGOs like OECD and UNESCO really know what they are asking for? A population that is more informed, critical and understanding of conceptual “complexity” is better equipped for ethical civic dissent (cf. [Stitzlein, 2012](#)). They will not settle for the simple compliance of the past but will hold their leaders to account and will change the world around them. This must be exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure, but as we suggest, it is the call of our times and we have an ethical duty to nurture these conditions for meaningful change.

We suggest that the “Self-Directed Flourishing” meta-framework will be supportive and helpful in this regard. It alerts educators to the very possibility of harms through education (e.g. through unreasonable restraints on learner agency and expressions of their innate humanity and abilities), and it places *flourishing* as a central concern and *value* for educators, but it does so in a way that retains conceptual warrant and learner agency. This may be just the beginning of a serious dialogue on this important matter. Whatever the case, we suggest that the Self-Directed Flourishing meta-framework should help to provide a clear and coherent rationale and language for educators within both private and state sectors to work together to nurture a more humanistic educational environment, one that is flexible, adaptive, ethical and intelligent. In other words, one that is fit for 21st-century education.

Notes

- 1 Readers may be interested that the [Salzburg Fellows \(2024\)](#) have also recently released their statement on civic and civil education that similarly focuses on future skills under the rubric of “Being” (responsibility), “Doing” (active participation) and “Thinking” (skills to analyse root causes of global problems). This is another indication of the growing awareness and necessity for transforming our educational practices and policies.
- 2 It may be worth noting that [OECD \(2024\)](#) continues this dialogue in the context of thriving learning environments. This suggests to us that OECD is serious about this decentralized and humanistic direction, which we welcome.
- 3 For example, chimps can actually understand the intentions, goals and perceptions of other chimps ([Boesch and Tomasello, 1998](#)). Indeed, sociality can be witnessed even among social insects such as ants and bees ([Hacker, 2007](#), p. 170).
- 4 We suggest these insights could be useful for dislodging what might appear to be individualist leanings in our Self-Directed Flourishing framework. This form of collaborative and social agency has also recently been articulated in the theoretical literature as “we-agency”, “joint-agency” ([Le Besnerais et al., 2024](#)) or “co-agency” ([OECD, 2019, 2020](#)).
- 5 *Nb*: this form of knowledge is not dissimilar to the Greek concept of *episteme*. To have grasped the concept of *episteme*, one must not only know a thing, one must also understand its “cause” and/or explanation, that is, where it rightly sits in a scheme of knowledge: “[...] [t]his is to understand it, to know in a deep sense what it is and how it has come to be”. ([Lear 1988](#), p. 6). While this suggests scientific knowledge, it could just as easily apply to matters of necessary truths and conceptual logic.
- 6 For direct readings of this notion of dissolution where the problem will simply “disappear” please see [Wittgenstein \(2009\)](#); for in-depth analysis of the distinction between resolving and dissolving problems, also see [Hacker \(2007](#), p. 15) “[many empirical problems] [...] must be explored in detail in order to expose the *roots* of the nonsense”; finally, see [Stickney \(2017\)](#) for a discussion about Wittgenstein’s notion of dissolution, as applied in educational contexts.
- 7 One notable example of early thinking on this approach to learning was the seminal work of [Carl Rogers \(1969\)](#), who spoke about self-directed learning being the most important competence to foster in formal education. Further, the analytic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, had many insights on

human development in and through education. For example, he suggested that: “[...]a teacher may get good, even astounding, results from his [...] and yet not be a good teacher; because it may be that, while his pupils are directly under his influence, he raises them to a height which is not natural to them, without fostering *their own capacities* for work at this level, so that they immediately decline again as soon as the teacher leaves the classroom” (Wittgenstein, 1998, 38e, emphasis added).

- 8 Despite the problems identified, this should not detract readers from the explicit problems identified, specifically the problems associated with the neoliberalization of education (cf. Schinkel *et al.*, 2023) and related issues with student disempowerment, educational performativity and bureaucratic managerialism (Ball, 2021) – all of which are serious, fundamental problems and form part of what we have called the “Educational Malaise”.
- 9 For example, in “positive” education, young children have been measured against metrics of “flourishing behaviours” (Stephens, 2014), which Mountbatten-O’Malley (2024a) has suggested is, in fact, reductive and ethically dubious. Further, in a distinct but related context, Crutchfield (2019) argued that during a pandemic “covert administration of a compulsory moral bioenhancement” is preferable because it “[...] promotes values such as liberty, utility, equality and autonomy”. This may be extreme but is another example of a form of *theoretical incongruence*, i.e. when theories advance dehumanizing policy suggestions that are couched in the language of welfaric aims.

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