



UNESCO on Human Flourishing and the Aims of Education

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A widespread view about education's aims is that education's overarching purpose is to support human flourishing. Among the organisations that endorse this view is UNESCO, which has recently stated that flourishing is 'the central purpose of education' (1). Yet, what we might call the 'orthodox view' on education's aims is that the aim, or the primary aim, of education is epistemic: to (i) increase students' knowledge and (ii) advance their understanding, and (iii) develop the cognitive skills and epistemic virtues that support (i) and (ii), such as critical thinking skills. Whether we hold that education has a principal aim or set of aims, it's uncontroversial that its goals include the epistemic aims above and supporting flourishing. So a key question to ask is, what is the relation between education's epistemic aims and its aim of supporting flourishing? In what follows, I discuss the areas of UNESCO's recent research brief in which the above view is stated that are concerned with the relationship between flourishing and education's epistemic aims (all page references with no referent are to the brief).

1. Fulfilment of potential

The authors of the brief state that education's 'central purpose' is human flourishing, defined as 'develop[ing] optimally and liv[ing] a complete human life' (1). They distinguish 'cognitive' and 'emotional potentials', stating that both are needed for learning (2). They hold that 'children are entitled to develop their potentials to the full' (3) and 'Flourishing is conditional on the contribution of individuals and requires an enabling environment' (2). Among the features of an enabling environment would be access to education.

Their account holds that fulfilment of potential is a necessary condition for flourishing. Fulfilling one's potential involves developing epistemic abilities – for example, a level of self-understanding. While there's no explicit reference to epistemic notions in their explanation of 'potentials', we could interpret 'cognitive potentials' to include epistemic features, such as certain types, areas and levels of knowledge and understanding, and cognitive skills that support gaining knowledge and understanding. These are necessary for our optimal development.

2. Living well

In their explanation of 'living well as a human being', the authors write that there 'are aspects of living that are good for all human beings, simply because they make a life a human life'. They describe three categories of what constitutes 'good': relationships; engagement in activities; and agency; learning is given as an example of the second. They do not explicitly state epistemic features, but it would be odd if learning did not include these (3). Our 'optimal continuing development' requires continued learning, which requires acquiring knowledge, developing understanding and cognitive skills.

3. Teaching

Epistemic features emerge under the authors' definitions of teaching and learning (4). The main feature emerges from their questionable definition of teaching as a process in which the teacher 'provokes students to come to understanding'. They claim that this 'provocation' is a necessary condition for an activity to count as pedagogical: 'Teaching would not be teaching if students were not aroused to see the point'. Teaching 'implies a relational act' between teacher and student, in which a teacher encourages students 'to act in particular ways'. By provoking 'students to come to understanding', they mean that the teacher invites students 'to think for themselves', which they describe as 'a matter of being summoned to come to understanding' (5).

On this view, a necessary condition for teaching is to elicit independent thinking from students to foster understanding. Independent thinking skills are among the cognitive skills that support gaining knowledge and

understanding. So their definition of teaching holds that teaching necessarily involves attempting to elicit independent thought from students, from which we could derive the claim that developing independent thinking skills is a necessary epistemic feature of teaching.

4. Learning

The authors define learning as a process where 'students' potentials are evoked, to come to understanding in agential ways of being and acting'. By this they mean that students' potentials need to be 'evoked in the quest to gain understanding [and] insight' (5).

This involves epistemic features: understanding, insight and independent thinking skills. Learning also involves students becoming able to make sense of the knowledge they acquire from stimuli such as texts and experiences ('make sense of the knowledge they are taught to read and/or the experiences they gain') (5).

5. Flourishing and education

The authors hold that flourishing and education are mutually beneficial: (i) education enables flourishing and (ii) flourishing enhances education. Of (i), teaching and learning introduce us 'into the social, cultural and natural world', by helping us to 'make sense of [our] world ... to be able to live well as human beings'. They take this to show that 'flourishing can be regarded as an aim of education' (6). Here they define flourishing as 'an aim' whereas earlier they defined it as education's 'central purpose' (1). I'll interpret their view as the latter.

On (ii) they write,

when teachers and students flourish in their teaching and learning, in other words when they can develop their potential and live well and when teaching and learning are meaningful to them, ... the teaching and learning will have a higher quality (6).

Evidence shows that increasing well-being enhances learning. Evidence from positive psychology shows that enhancing psychological well-being enhances learning (Seligman 2011, 80). Activities that improve physical health, such as exercise, improve cognitive performance (Hillman et al. 2008 & Mandolesi et al. 2018). By enhancing learning, increasing well-being can support the fulfilment of education's epistemic aims. Since flourishing is defined in terms of well-being in some of the most influential contemporary accounts of flourishing, such as positive psychology and the account endorsed by the Harvard Human Flourishing Program (VanderWeele 2017), flourishing can support the fulfilment of education's aims. However, the same degree of evidence has not been put forward for well-being enhancing teaching as it has been for learning.

6. The relation between education's epistemic aims and its aim of supporting flourishing

UNESCO's account holds that education has one overarching aim, which is to support flourishing, which is supported by fulfilling education's epistemic aims. We can identify three reasons for this:

- (i) Education's 'central purpose' is human flourishing (1).
- (ii) Fulfilment of education's epistemic aims can support that purpose: 'teaching and learning can contribute to realising education's purpose' (1).
- (iii) Epistemic aims need to be met for human beings to reach their potential and a state of 'optimal continuing development', which, on UNESCO's account, are necessary for flourishing (2).

7. What UNESCO's position means in practical terms

UNESCO's research brief discussed above (de Ruyter, Oades & Waghid 2020) seeks to articulate the meanings of human flourishing and education and the relationship between them and adumbrates some of the ways in which 'teaching and learning can contribute to realising education's purpose' (1). The brief is for UNESCO's International Science and Evidence-based Education Assessment (ISEEA), a major project launched in September 2019 which provides the science and evidence to support UNESCO's Futures of Education report. The ISEEA aims to provide the first ever large-scale assessment of knowledge on education which can be used as a resource to inform education policymaking at all levels and scales (9). Human flourishing is one of the three research groups constituting the work for the ISEEA. The brief is a summary of a chapter of the ISEEA's Report, due for publication this year (7). While this account of the relation between flourishing and education's aims is very recent, given its place in this report, it may exert a significant influence on education worldwide in the coming years.

The view that education's overarching purpose is to support human flourishing is becoming increasingly widespread. It is endorsed by movements such as positive psychology (Seligman 2011, 97), research centres such as the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (Jubilee Centre 2017, 1), philosophers of education such as Harry Brighouse (Brighouse 2008, 60), educationalists such as Ken Robinson (Robinson 2010), institutions such as the Church of England (Church of England 2016, 2 & 2018, 1), and politicians such as Nicky Morgan (Morgan 2017; Wright & Watkin, 1). On all these views, flourishing is held to be either the aim of education or at least among its central aims. UNESCO's article offers a new perspective on this which may be influential and subject to critical assessment in the coming years.