Flourishing from the Ground Up: Introducing the Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework as a Relational Model of Children's Innate Spirituality

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Abstract

This paper introduces the **Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework** as a relational and integrative model for understanding children's innate spirituality as foundational to individual, ecological, and societal wellbeing. Drawing from interdisciplinary research—spanning developmental psychology, neuroscience, Indigenous epistemologies, and ecological ethics—the ESF Framework challenges the prevailing neglect of spirituality in child development theory and practice. It posits spirituality not as an optional or religious add-on, but as a universal, embodied capacity for connectedness, meaning-making, and ethical interdependence.

Central to the framework is a matrix comprising four interdependent ecological domains and seven levels of human motivation**,** offering a developmental schema for how children experience and express spiritual awareness across the lifespan. Positioned at the intersection of educational reform, global sustainability, and wellbeing science, the ESF Framework aligns with both the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Inner Development Goals (IDGs)**,** serving as a holistic paradigm for systems-level transformation. The paper argues that recognising and cultivating children's spiritual capacities is not only developmentally essential but also crucial for regenerating educational systems, strengthening planetary ethics, and fostering collective resilience in an age of polycrisis.

Keywords: ecology, wellbeing, wholeness, connectivity, meaning-making, ethics, love

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1. Introduction

Amid converging global crises—environmental degradation, social fragmentation, and spiritual disorientation—there is a pressing need to reframe our understanding of human development. This is especially urgent in relation to children, who are not only vulnerable to systemic dysfunctions but also bearers of profound capacities for insight, connection, and transformation. This paper presents the **Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework** as a contribution to the discourse on children's spirituality, offering a relational and integrative approach grounded in global, interdisciplinary, and Indigenous scholarship.

The ESF Framework proposes that flourishing arises from the dynamic interplay of four interdependent domains, each of which incorporates spiritual dimensions of experience. At its heart lies the recognition that spirituality is innate—a foundational capacity for connectedness, meaning, and transcendence that manifests throughout human life, and particularly in childhood (Hay & Nye, 2006; Hart, 2003; Narvaez, 2014).

2. Spirituality as Innate: Evidence from Research and Practice

Research from multiple disciplines affirms the presence of spiritual capacities in children from an early age. Hay and Nye (2006) describe "relational consciousness" as a universal capacity in children to attune to self, others, nature, and the transcendent. This relational awareness often manifests through moral sensitivity, awe, wonder, and existential questioning (Hart, 2003; Hyde, 2008). Similarly, Schein (2012) identifies spirituality as a central thread in children's play, storytelling, and moral deliberation. Developmental neuroscience supports these observations, indicating that affective attunement, empathic

engagement, and a search for meaning are neurobiologically embedded (Schore, 2019). Narvaez (2014) proposes that optimal early environments cultivate what she terms the "evolved developmental niche," fostering a sense of belonging and moral awareness that includes spiritual sensitivity.

Cross-cultural research reinforces the claim that spirituality is both universal and diverse in expression. For example, studies among Mapuche communities in Chile (Calfio Montalva, 2014), Yoruba cosmologies in West Africa (Abimbola, 1997), and Maori conceptions of wairua in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Durie, 2001) demonstrate that spiritual awareness is deeply embedded in relational, ecological, and cosmological contexts. These traditions affirm children's innate capacity to relate to the unseen, to feel part of something larger, and to engage in moral and communal responsibility.

Amy Miller's work adds empirical weight to the claim that spirituality manifests across domains, cultures, and pedagogical settings. Her research identifies spirituality as a sense of aliveness and inner truth, integral to children's ability to navigate meaning, values, and belonging. Spirituality, understood in this way, transcends narrow religious definitions. It is present in secular experiences of wonder, ethical reflection, inner silence, and a felt sense of meaning or coherence (Zohar & Marshall, 2001). As Vaughan (2002) asserts, "spiritual intelligence" is a human faculty essential for discernment, empathy, and vision.

3. The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework

The ESF Framework builds on this view of spirituality as a core human potential, interwoven with ecological, social, cultural, and economic systems. It proposes four domains through which flourishing can be understood and nurtured:

3.1 Human Capacities and Potential

This domain includes the full spectrum of intelligences and inner development, including cognitive, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth. Flourishing is seen as a dynamic unfolding of one's unique potential in service of both personal fulfilment and collective wellbeing (Palmer, 1993; Goleman, 2006).

Within this domain, the ESF Framework identifies seven core human motivations or levels of flourishing, grounded in developmental and existential psychology:

1. **Security and safety**
2. **Love and relationship**
3. **Autonomy and independence**
4. **Engagement and curiosity**
5. **Fulfilment and meaning**
6. **Contribution and service**
7. **Growth and self-transcendence**

These levels highlight the spiritual dimension present across human striving—from belonging and purpose to transformation and interconnectedness.

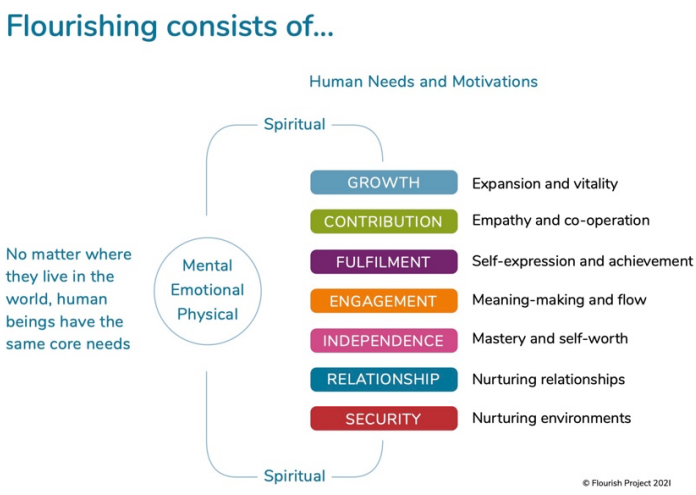

Figure 1: ESF Framework Seven Levels of Human Motivation

It reflects the nested nature of human existence by showing the child centred within his or her social and cultural context.

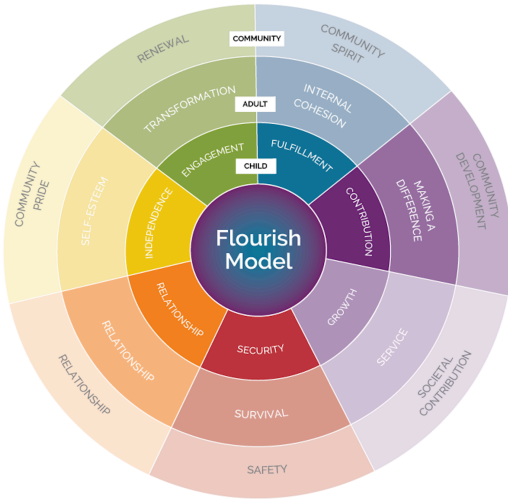

Figure 2: ESF Framework Seven Levels Nested Sphere

3.2 Cultural Values and Identity

Culture shapes the ways in which spirituality is understood, communicated, and lived. This domain recognises that language, story, ritual, and artistic expression are primary vehicles for spiritual meaning-making (Geertz, 1973; Dei, 2002). Indigenous and community-based traditions often locate spirituality within a web of ancestral, land-based, and communal relationships (Wilson, 2008; Battiste, 2013).

3.3 Natural Environment and Ecological Consciousness

Spirituality is deeply intertwined with our relationship to the Earth. Many traditions affirm the sacredness of the natural world and the kinship between human and more-than-human life (Abram, 1996; Berry, 1999). The ESF Framework affirms that ecological belonging, biophilia, and reverence for life are essential to flourishing. Spirituality here fosters stewardship, humility, and reciprocity.

3.4 Circular and Regenerative Economics

Dominant economic paradigms often alienate individuals from meaning, time, and community. The ESF Framework advocates for economic systems grounded in care, interdependence, and regeneration. This includes localised economies, gift cultures, and wellbeing indicators that honour non-material dimensions of value (Raworth, 2017; Eisenstein, 2011).

4. Global Contributions to a Flourishing Worldview

The ESF Framework is enriched by diverse epistemologies that reject dualisms between spirit and matter, self and other, child and adult. African Ubuntu philosophy, for instance, centres human dignity and mutuality: "I am because we are" (Tutu, 1999). Andean cosmovisions speak of *buen vivir*- living well in harmony with community and Pachamama (Gudynas, 2011). First Nations scholars emphasize intergenerational responsibility and spiritual sovereignty (Cajete, 2000; Simpson, 2011).

Many of these worldviews also align with contemplative and regenerative educational approaches. In Buddhist philosophy, as articulated by the Dalai Lama (2001), the development of inner values such as compassion, equanimity, and interconnectedness is foundational to education for peace and ethics. The Buddhist concept of Interbeing, introduced by Thich Nhat Hanh, beautifully expresses the deep insight that all forms of life are fundamentally interconnected: “To be is to inter-be.” This concept resonates across ecological, spiritual, and pedagogical contexts, encouraging a worldview that dissolves the illusion of separateness and supports the cultivation of reverence and humility in the face of life’s complexity.

Pioneering educators like Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner understood spirituality as the deepest impulse of human development. Montessori’s notion of the “spiritual embryo” affirms the child’s inner guide toward wholeness and meaning (Montessori, 1949). Steiner’s Waldorf pedagogy integrates spiritual and artistic development, seeing education as a path toward freedom, inner balance, and service to humanity (Steiner, 1923).

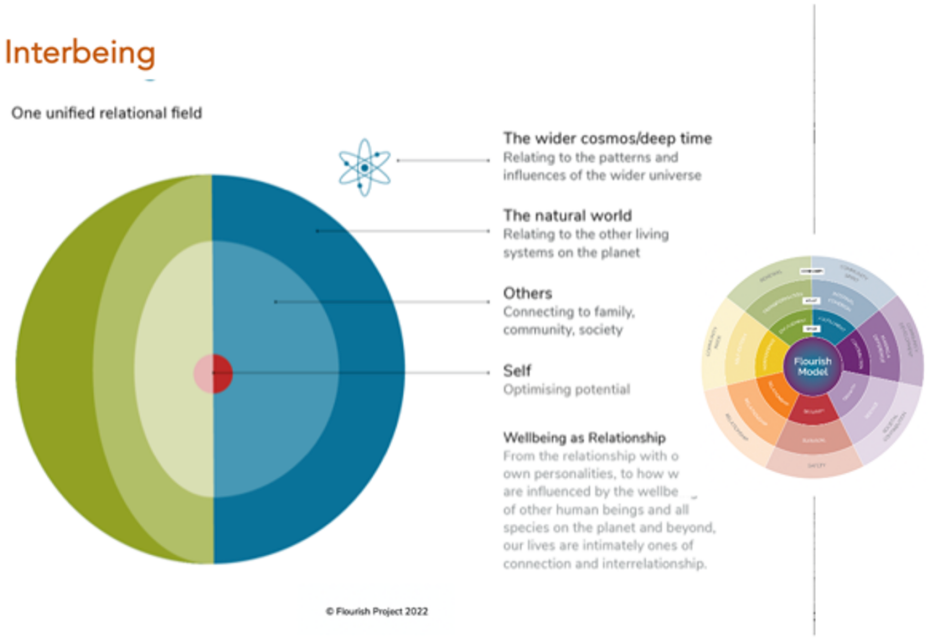

Figure 3: ESF Framework – Interbeing: The Ecological Self

4.1 Love as a Spiritual and Developmental Imperative

Across traditions and disciplines, love is increasingly recognised as the core of human flourishing and spiritual development. Scherto Gill (2022) highlights love as the ontological foundation of relational ethics and education, describing it as a unifying force that nurtures wholeness, belonging, and healing. Bell Hooks (2000) similarly frames love as an active ethic of care, commitment, and responsibility.

Biologist and systems thinker Humberto Maturana brings a profound evolutionary and biological lens to this discussion. He asserts that love is not merely an emotion or moral ideal, but *a biological condition of human existence* - the domain in which the human arises. In his words, "love is the emotion that expands intelligence" and is the grounding condition for learning, cooperation, and ethical behaviour (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008). For Maturana, love enables relational openness and co-regulation - qualities that are not only foundational to early attachment and neurodevelopment but also to the ongoing process of becoming fully human.

Love - as compassion, wonder, justice, and joy - is deeply connected to spirituality in childhood. It is present in the desire to care for others, to protect life, and to find meaning. Tatjana Schnell (2020) affirms love's role in sustaining existential wellbeing and resilience. Framing education and flourishing in terms of love not only affirms children's spiritual nature but offers a counter-narrative to performance-driven, fragmented systems.

The ESF Framework positions love as both a developmental drive and a systemic principle: a *force that binds the four domains of human potential, cultural identity, ecological consciousness, and regenerative economy* into a coherent and life-affirming vision. Recognising love as a biological, relational, and spiritual imperative challenges us to design educational environments where connection, care, and ethical presence are not supplemental - but central.

5. Implications for Education and Practice

Educational systems have too often marginalised spirituality, treating it as either taboo or private. Yet a growing body of research shows that nurturing children's spiritual capacities contributes to resilience, empathy, purpose, and mental health (Schnell, 2020; Benson et al., 2003). Integrating the ESF Framework into pedagogy involves:

- Creating spaces for silence, reflection, and wonder
- Valuing cultural and ecological identity
- Recognising children's ethical and existential questions
- Supporting educators' own inner development

Contemplative education frameworks—such as those developed by the Garrison Institute, Mind & Life Institute, and in contemplative pedagogy—offer methods for cultivating attention, compassion, and embodied presence in learners and educators alike (Jennings et al., 2019).

Forest Schools, Philosophy for Children, and Indigenous pedagogies rooted in story, ceremony, and land-based learning (Wildcat et al., 2014) provide further pathways. These align with regenerative practices in education that seek to restore wholeness through relationship, reciprocity, and community-building.

6. Implications for Policy and Global Impact

The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework offers a unifying, regenerative paradigm for educational policy that meets the demands of our time - ecological collapse, mental health crises, and a growing global deficit in meaning and belonging. Positioned at the intersection of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Inner Development Goals (IDGs), ESF provides an actionable architecture that redefines

education not as preparation for economic output, but as a sacred, ecological, and developmental process rooted in interdependence. It powerfully aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and the IDG focus on *being, relating, thinking, collaborating,* and *acting* by emphasizing relational learning, inner transformation, and systems consciousness. ESF's domain of ecological consciousness brings SDG 13 (Climate Action) to life by embedding planetary stewardship into the fabric of pedagogy - promoting place-based, nature-integrated education that cultivates awe, reciprocity, and ecological humility.

In parallel, ESF supports SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) by integrating developmental neuroscience and trauma-informed learning practices to foster environments of psychological safety and moral growth. It reinforces SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by operationalizing cultural dignity, relational ethics, and participatory governance within school communities. Rooted in the ethical imperatives of the Earth Charter, Laudato Si', and the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic, the ESF Framework moves beyond reductionist metrics and offers tools for qualitative wellbeing assessment that honour spiritual, emotional, and communal flourishing.

Crucially, ESF serves as a bridge between education and emerging global compacts, such as the People's Pact for the Future, UNESCO's Futures of Education, and the Future Generations Index, all of which call for intergenerational equity, planetary consciousness, and reimagined governance. It embodies the principles of *integral ecology*, championed in both Indigenous epistemologies and neurophilosophy, by recognizing that sustainable futures must be co-created through systems that nourish both inner life and outer systems. By harmonizing SDG indicators with IDG capabilities and relational wellbeing measures, the ESF Framework becomes not merely an educational model, but a *regenerative governance tool* - empowering governments, educators, and civil society to enact policies that cultivate collective thriving across generations and ecosystems.

6. Challenges in Recognising and Nurturing Children's Spirituality

Despite growing global awareness of spirituality's relevance, multiple challenges inhibit its integration into mainstream education and policy. These challenges stem from cultural taboos, systemic pressures, conceptual misunderstandings, and fragmented paradigms.

6.1 Conceptual Ambiguity and Secular Discomfort

Spirituality is frequently conflated with religion, creating discomfort in secular contexts. Educators and policymakers often avoid spiritual language due to concerns about indoctrination, neutrality, or perceived irrelevance. As Schnell (2020) and Schwenk (2025) observe, this hesitancy can marginalise children's existential questions and undermine opportunities for deeper connection and meaning-making.

6.2 Educational Structures and Curriculum Constraints

Standardised curricula, outcome-based assessments, and time-limited schedules leave little room for contemplative, reflective, or dialogical practices. Teachers report a lack of training and institutional support to engage with children's spiritual lives (Mata-McMahon et al., 2022). Moreover, the dominance of cognitive and technical priorities in education sidelines holistic, relational dimensions of learning.

6.3 Cultural and Political Tensions

In pluralistic societies, integrating spirituality into public education is politically sensitive. Concerns about fairness, neutrality, and cultural representation make it challenging to create inclusive spiritual pedagogies without oversimplification or appropriation. This is particularly pronounced in contexts with histories of religious conflict or marginalisation.

6.4 The Inner Readiness of Adults

Perhaps most significantly, the capacity to recognise and nurture children's spirituality depends on the inner development of adults. Teachers and caregivers who lack opportunities for reflection, spiritual literacy, or holistic wellbeing are less equipped to accompany children on their journeys of meaning, wonder, and ethical growth. Without sustained investment in adult inner life, the conditions required to support children's spiritual flourishing remain fragmented or superficial.

Recent pioneering work by the *Caregivers and Teachers Wellbeing Group* of the Wellbeing Project underscores the critical connection between educator wellbeing and relational capacity. Their global research initiative explores how contemplative practices, emotional self-awareness, and embodied presence directly influence teachers' ability to foster safe, connected, and ethically responsive learning environments. The findings point to a paradigm shift: from focusing solely on pedagogy to cultivating the inner life of the educator as a central element of systemic educational transformation (The Wellbeing Project, 2024). Such insights echo and extend contemplative education frameworks, affirming that the inner readiness of adults is not a luxury, but a precondition for recognising and responding to the spiritual dimensions of childhood.

In this view, adult flourishing is both a relational and ethical imperative. Investing in teacher wellbeing not only reduces burnout and improves mental health, but also creates the relational field through which children's existential questions, ethical sensitivities, and intuitive knowing can be meaningfully held and guided. The ESF Framework situates adult development as a reciprocal process within the ecology of flourishing, calling for systemic supports—time, space, community, and practice—that allow educators to embody the very values they are tasked with cultivating.

7. Conclusion

The **Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework** provides a powerful integrative model for re-envisioning children's spirituality as a foundational dimension of human development and societal renewal. It bridges ancient wisdom and contemporary science, spiritual intelligence and ecological interdependence, and inner development with systemic change. By affirming that spirituality is not an external addition but *an intrinsic feature of human flourishing* - expressed in values, relationships, and questions of meaning - we can shift educational and developmental paradigms from fragmented and mechanistic models toward holistic and life-affirming systems.

In today's context of climate breakdown, cultural polarization, and mental health crisis, the recognition and nurturing of spiritual awareness in children is both urgent and hopeful. The ESF Framework invites educators, faith leaders, policymakers, and families to restore this essential dimension to the heart of our learning, care, and governance systems. It calls us to design environments where children's inner lives are respected, where worldviews of interconnectedness are cultivated, and where flourishing is understood not as individual success but as collective wellbeing within the web of life.

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