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Flourish Project
The Ecology of Wellbeing

An ESF Evaluation on the OECD Early Learning and Child Wellbeing Study 2025: *A Reflection through the Lens of Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF)*

The OECD *Early Learning and Child Well-being Study 2025* represents one of the most ambitious global efforts to assess early childhood development across multiple domains. This commentary paper applies the Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework to critically examine the study's conceptual foundations, methodological choices, and implications for policy and practice. While the study makes important advances in integrating cognitive and socio-emotional development, it remains constrained by an anthropocentric, measurement-driven paradigm. This paper argues that a shift toward an ecosystemic, relational, and regenerative model of flourishing is required to fully address the challenges of the 21st century.

1. Introduction: From School Readiness to Systemic Flourishing

The OECD study seeks to understand how early childhood experiences shape later life outcomes, focusing on emergent literacy, numeracy, self-regulation, and social-emotional skills . It reflects a growing international consensus that early-years investment is critical for long-term well-being and societal outcomes.

However, from an ESF perspective, the central question is not simply how children become *ready for school*, but how they become **fully embedded, relational beings capable of contributing to flourishing systems**.

The ESF Framework positions flourishing as a dynamic interplay between four domains:

- Natural Environment
- Circular and Regenerative Economics
- Cultural Values and Identity
- Human Capacities and Potential

This commentary explores how far the OECD study aligns with this broader conception.

2. Conceptual Strengths: A Shift Toward Holistic Development

The OECD study represents a significant step beyond narrow academic assessment models. It includes:

- Cognitive development (literacy and numeracy)
- Executive function and self-regulation
- Social-emotional competencies such as trust, empathy, and pro-social behaviour

This aligns strongly with the ESF domain of **Human Capacities and Potential**, which emphasises holistic development across multiple dimensions of human experience .

In particular, the study's inclusion of:

- Parent-child relationships
- Early childhood education and care (ECEC) quality
- Socio-economic inequalities

demonstrates an awareness that development is relational and context-dependent.

This marks an important departure from purely individualised models of child development.

3. Structural Limitations: The Persistence of a Human-Capital Paradigm

Despite these advances, the study remains embedded within a broader **human-capital framework**, where early development is primarily valued for its contribution to:

- Academic success
- Economic productivity
- Labour market participation

This orientation is evident in the emphasis on measurable competencies and cross-national comparability.

From an ESF perspective, this creates three key limitations:

3.1 Measurement Bias

Cognitive skills, particularly literacy and numeracy, remain the most:

- Standardised
- Comparable
- Policy-relevant

As a result, they disproportionately shape interpretation and decision-making, even when other domains are included.

3.2 Reduction of Flourishing to Outcomes

Flourishing is implicitly framed as: a set of competencies that predict future success
rather than: a lived, relational process emerging within interconnected systems

3.3 Individualisation of Development

Although relational factors are acknowledged, development is still primarily measured at the level of the individual child, rather than:

- Family systems
- Community ecosystems
- Cultural narratives
- Ecological relationships

4. Missing Domains: An ESF Gap Analysis

Applying the ESF Framework reveals significant gaps across three of its four core domains.

4.1 Natural Environment: The Absent Foundation

The study contains no substantive measures of:

- Nature connection
- Outdoor learning
- Ecological awareness
- Environmental stewardship

This omission is critical. ESF identifies the natural environment as the **foundational domain of all flourishing**, recognising that human wellbeing is inseparable from ecological health. Without this dimension, the model remains incomplete and misaligned with contemporary ecological realities.

4.2 Circular and Regenerative Economics: The Invisible System

While the study addresses socio-economic inequality, it does not engage with:

- The structure of economic systems
- Care economies and parental time
- Community resilience
- Regenerative or circular economic practices

Early childhood development is deeply shaped by these systemic conditions, yet they remain largely outside the analytical frame.

4.3 Cultural Values and Identity: A Partial Inclusion

The study includes variables such as:

- Migration status
- Language background
- Home learning environment

However, it lacks deeper engagement with:

- Cultural meaning-making
- Ethical development
- Spiritual dimensions of childhood
- Indigenous and place-based knowledge systems

ESF emphasises that values and worldviews are not peripheral but **causal drivers of behaviour and societal outcomes** .

5. Reframing Early Childhood: The Seven Levels of Human Motivation

The ESF Framework identifies seven core human developmental needs:

- Security

- Relationship
- Independence
- Engagement
- Fulfilment
- Contribution
- Growth

The OECD study maps strongly onto:

- Security (safety, stability)
- Relationship (attachment, trust)
- Engagement (learning behaviours)

But it underrepresents:

- Fulfilment (joy, creativity, meaning)
- Contribution (agency, participation)
- Growth (purpose, transformation)

This results in a model that is developmentally sound, but **not yet aspirational or transformative**.

6. Toward an Ecosystemic Model of Early Childhood Assessment

To align with ESF, future iterations of the study could incorporate the following shifts:

6.1 From Measurement to Meaning

Complement quantitative metrics with:

- Child voice methodologies
- Narrative and observational approaches
- Participatory research with children and families

6.2 From Individual Outcomes to Systemic Health

Include indicators related to:

- Family wellbeing
- Community cohesion
- Access to nature and cultural life

6.3 From Human Capital to Relational Flourishing

Reframe core competencies as:

- Embedded within relationships
- Expressed through contribution
- Oriented toward collective wellbeing

6.4 From Anthropocentric to Ecological

Introduce measures of:

- Nature connection
- Environmental care
- Biophilic learning environments

7. Discussion: A Transitional Framework

The OECD Study currently represents a **transitional framework** - one that is moving toward greater integration but has not yet completed the shift.

It successfully challenges:

- Narrow academic assessment
- Late intervention models
- Ignorance of early inequalities

But it has not yet fully embraced:

- Ecological embeddedness
- Cultural depth
- Systemic transformation

8. Conclusion: Expanding the Definition of What Matters

The OECD Early Learning and Child Well-being Study 2025 provides a powerful evidence base for the importance of early childhood development. However, it remains rooted in a paradigm that prioritises measurable competencies and future outcomes.

The ESF Framework invites a broader question:

What does it mean for a child - and the systems around them - to truly flourish?

Answering this requires moving beyond:

- Literacy and numeracy as central indicators
- Individualised models of development
- Anthropocentric assumptions

toward a vision of early childhood that is:

- Relational
- Ecological
- Cultural
- Regenerative

Only then can early childhood policy align with the realities of an interconnected, rapidly changing world.

The Flourish Project is a global initiative dedicated to advancing the Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework - an integrative approach to wellbeing that recognises the deep interdependence between human development, cultural values, regenerative economies, and the natural world.

Rooted in systems thinking, relational practice, and emerging research on flourishing, the project seeks to support the development of compassionate, resilient, and ecologically conscious individuals and communities through education, policy innovation, research, and cross-sector collaboration.
A global multidimensional framework designed to complement GDP through the measurement of equitable, inclusive, and sustainable wellbeing across present and future generations. The framework integrates wellbeing, inclusion, sustainability, resilience, institutional quality, and environmental conditions into a unified dashboard architecture for national and international policy application.