

Rachel Hagues

Vol 3:3 2024

Samford University

Abstract: International education and exposure to other cultures is one way to further a desire within our students to work towards a world where all people have the opportunity to flourish as human beings. Herein, I use an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) to map out human flourishing at various systemic levels with a focus on the macro level. Human flourishing cannot happen if a person is merely surviving; a person must be thriving. All ecological levels – from the micro to the macro – must support or provide opportunity for thriving across physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological domains. I argue that the role of educators – particularly those in higher education – is to help create a space where our students are exposed to different cultures, ways of living, and even injustice, so that in turn they become passionate about ensuring that all people can flourish.

Key words: human flourishing, ecological theory, service-learning, international and global education

Promoting human flourishing through international education:

Pursuing a world where all can thrive

International education and exposure to other cultures is one way to further a desire within our students to work towards a world where all people have the opportunity to flourish as human beings. Herein, I use the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) to map out human flourishing at various systemic levels with a focus on the macro level. Human flourishing cannot happen if a person is merely surviving, but a person must be thriving in his or her life, and all

ecological levels – from the micro to the macro – must support or provide opportunity for such thriving. The definition of “thriving”, for our purposes, according to the American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, is “to grow vigorously” or “to be successful or make steady progress; prosper...” (2011). That thriving should be across physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological domains. VanderWeele (2017) explains that for flourishing to take place, all aspects of a person’s life must be good and not only momentarily, but sustained over time. I argue that the role of educators – particularly those in higher education – is to help create a space where our students are exposed to different cultures, ways of living, and even injustice, so that in turn they become passionate about ensuring that all people can flourish.

The Ecological Model

Urie Bronfenbrenner is credited with developing the ecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner’s model maps out the following subsystems: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-system. An individual exists and develops within each of these systems. I will explain the systems in greater detail below, though I do not give much attention to the chrono system in this paper. While each of these levels or systems are important for creating an environment that promotes and encourages human flourishing, in this paper I spend most of my efforts focusing on the importance of the macro level. My goal is to convince educators of all types of the importance of exposing our students to macro level systems and beyond. However, I start by walking through the other systems.

Micro

As defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994), a microsystem includes the

pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and

symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. (p. 39)

Some make the point that while the individual is influenced by his or her immediate environment (the family, for example), he or she also is an agent or influencer within that environment, and that the environment as well as the individual both are changed through their transaction with one another (Cicchetti & Toth, 2000). The microsystem includes things like the neighborhood, classroom, immediate work setting, but probably the strongest influencer is the family, and for that reason I will discuss it here.

Family. Family can allow for the pursuit of human flourishing, or it can crush the freedom to pursue what causes one to flourish. How can families operate in a way that allows each of their members to flourish? Accepting all family members as valuable and important and valuing the role each member plays are good starting points.

Some of my research (BLIND, 2017, 2019) focuses on gender discrimination of schoolgirls in a remote part of Northern Tanzania. I became interested in this research after participating in a service-learning study abroad program in 2008, and ultimately ended up conducting my dissertation research in this community in 2012; my participation in this study abroad program ultimately led me to this area of research.

One of the many things that I learned in this work is that historically, girls were not valued to the same degree as boys were in families specifically or in society in general. Particularly in families, girls had many more domestic chores than boys, had less time to focus on their schoolwork, and were the first to be pulled out of school if parents could not afford fees for all of their children. One of the most troubling things I heard from women and girls alike was that in some families, parents tell their daughters as young teenagers that they can no longer

afford her cost of living and that she must go and find their own supplies elsewhere. For many young girls who did not yet have a trade, this led to their use of sex as a commodity that they could trade for simple needs -- such as soap. Yet if girls were valued, protected, and parents provided for their needs, much less disease, early pregnancy, and quitting of school would take place. If girls were valued in their families for who they are as individuals and given an opportunity to pursue an education or a trade, they would be more likely to go from simply surviving, to (potentially) thriving. They would also likely see themselves as valuable if their parents valued them and would be less likely to see their bodies as commodities.

Mesosystem

Bronfenbrenner's model also includes a mesosystem, where microsystems that include the developing person interact to influence each other. In his own words, "a mesosystem is a system of microsystems," (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). An example of this that could create an environment for flourishing could include a neighborhood (microsystem 1) where crime is low and education is a priority, so the public schools are quality (microsystem 2 - each school classroom). Within this neighborhood, parents (microsystem 3 - families) are involved in their kids' educations in a supportive manner, read with them at home, help them with homework when needed, and feed their children fresh and healthy food. All these systems interact with and work together to create a supportive mesosystem for children around the issue of their education. This mesosystem (a supportive neighborhood, supportive teachers and mentors, and a supportive family) creates an environment where students are more likely to value learning, are more likely to finish high school, and may be more prone to seek out obtaining a higher education.

Exosystem

The exosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner (1994), is comprised of various systems -- two or more -- that are somehow linked together and interact to influence the other's well-being, ultimately influencing the developing individual or family. At least one of these systems does not directly impact the developing person, but only impacts the person *indirectly*. Bronfenbrenner provides an example of the parents' workplace impacting the rest of the family, the families' social networks, and neighborhood-community contexts (1994). Much of what would be considered our students' exosystem is outside the reach of our classroom but does indeed impact our students and the worldview to which they hold. Thus, we need to work to create a space that mitigates the part of the exosystem that may have a negative impact on our students' ability to be challenged by difference, think critically, and apply what we are teaching them. While we can do this in the classroom, taking students abroad is a powerful way to challenge students' assumptions and help them develop an open mind and heart.

For example, last year I was able to take some students with me to Tanzania for a service-learning program. One of those students, studying social work, had never left the United States and had only flown once. This trip opened her eyes to many cultural and socioeconomic differences. She wrote the following in her journal after leading a hygiene class for adolescent girls,

I learned how to work/teach with a translator. This was a bit of a challenge for me at first and definitely took some getting used to. I also learned that there is such a lack of knowledge for girls in this community about how their own body works...this is so important to me and my future [social work] practice when working with diverse client

populations. I am also a lot more aware of the lack of resources many cultures and communities are facing which I also think will aid my future social work endeavors. - *service-learning participant 2022*

This knowledge can of course be taught in the classroom, but it can have a lasting impact when knowledge is gleaned through wrestling with new experiences that challenge students' worldviews.

Macro

The macrosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner (1994), “consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture or subculture, with particular reference to the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, lifestyles, opportunity structures, hazards, and life course options that are embedded in each of these broader systems” (p. 41). There are several values that exist at the macro-level that can make it possible for a society to reach flourishing. One is the freedom to adhere to a faith or religion; another is politics and economics.

Faith and/or religion. In some societies, the religious institution is held in such high esteem that it controls what people do and think even more than the government does. As such, faith ultimately impacts people from the macro level all the way down to the individual level -- whether a person responds to their faith from the heart versus out of obligation. Our faith can also be something that compels us to pursue certain things (justice, mercy, or hope, for example).

Faith can be life-giving; participation in faith can ultimately leading to a healthy physical and mental state (Levin, 2001). There is now longitudinal empirical evidence that participation in a religious community is associated with flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017). What needs to be in place in order for faith to be life-giving? One of the most important things might be that an

individual has the freedom to walk away from their faith without penalty within the family or in society. Governments need to allow freedom of religion for this to take place.

Policies and economics. Policies and economics often work together to reinforce culture and belief systems, as well as years and years of customs and expectations passed from generation to generation. An example of the power of macro-level systems comes again from Tanzania.

In Tanzania, primary school is compulsory and public (paid for by the government), but secondary school is not. When families decide whether or not to send their children to school, many factors are considered. First and foremost is whether or not the family can afford the cost (which includes supplies, uniforms, traveling costs, etc.). In many families, another question they consider is whether the potential secondary school student is a girl. While there is now equal opportunity for girls to attend school, parents still are less likely to send their girls to get more than a primary education. In research conducted in 2012, I found that historically, girls are not valued the same as boys, and when it comes to education, parents historically have been known to favor sons. In fact, one of the common proverbs I heard was: “Educating a girl is like watering your neighbor’s garden. You are not going to get the benefit of it” (BLIND, 2017). This belief system – that girls are not equal to boys – and the culture of not educating girls or pulling them out of school more quickly – is held at the macro level in Tanzania (and in many other developing countries as well). This macro-level view of women has other macro-level implications, which impact every other system-level as well. For example, the consequences of not educating women to the same degree as men are massive. To name a few: educating girls means a reduction of death in childbirth, mothers’ education means better child nutrition, girls who have higher education are also more likely to delay marriage and childbirth, educated

women are more likely to earn more and to find work (UNESCO, 2013). All of this results in families – and ultimately society – doing better as a whole. Policy and agreements can result in changes here, for example, it has only been since 2002 that primary school in Tanzania has been compulsory, and this was a result of the government adopting the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) (UN Chronicle, 2007). Yet there are things – values and expectations – broader than policy changes or changes in cultural acceptance of educated girls that are needed in order for real, lasting change to take place. These elements penetrate each level of the ecological system and can be taught through international and cross-cultural educational opportunities.

Values that transcend each of these systems

The following values or ideals are necessary for us to live in a world where all can flourish: freedom, justice, and peace. While these must exist at each level of the ecological system, it is the macro level that sets the tone for these to exist and establishes the laws to reinforce their existence.

Freedom. The basics of human flourishing must begin with human freedom and the protection of it. Government cannot privilege some individuals' freedoms over others. Government exists to protect the freedom of the people within its borders, while limiting the misuse of or “overstep” of that freedom so that it does not become too powerful. A government for the people, by the people, where all have the ability to exercise their rights, and those rights are protected, is ideal. While the United States (U.S.) provides for such freedom and equality in the U.S. Constitution, institutionalized discrimination, lack of power and education, and cyclical poverty prevent many in the U.S. from fully realizing such freedom. Sometimes students who

grew up in more privileged households do not realize the level of inequality and injustice in the world until they are exposed to cross-cultural experiences.

Additionally, government can (and often does) fail to perform its duty to protect when it is characterized by power and corruption. Historically, we have seen regimes fall when some groups are privileged over others or when power is unbalanced. The quest for power among leaders has led to the crumbling of nations. For example, recent history has witnessed a crumbling of the Syrian government because President Bashar al-Assad was so reluctant to make changes within his government that there was an uprising against him. Rather than working with rebels to reach an agreement, he instead systematically destroyed them, along with any civilians that were in the way. In 2021, the world watched as the Taliban regained control in Afghanistan and the United States military left. At the time of this writing, women and girls are again facing oppression and discrimination and are no longer able to pursue freedom, education, or basic human rights.

A lack of stability among leaders leads to a lack of equity and flourishing among people; countries with such instability continue to remain at the bottom of the United Nation's Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI was created "to emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone," (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Another organization, Transparency International, ranked 168 of the world's countries in 2015 on their "perceived level of public sector corruption." Interestingly, eight of the fifteen most corrupt countries fall within the UNHDI's lowest human development category. Protection against corrupt governments is one of the first ways we can create an environment that cherishes freedom, which ultimately would

support the health and flourishing of people. However, ensuring justice can be received and is upheld is required for there to be true freedom.

Justice. Michael Sandel, author of *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* and Harvard professor, defines a just society as one that distributes duties, rights, power, opportunity, income, and wealth in the right way (2009, p. 19). The just society “gives each person his or her due” (2009, p. 19), but must be achieved by ensuring that people have the opportunity and ability to dialogue and reason together, leaving room for disagreements. But what is each person’s due? This needs to come with a foundation of human dignity. Christians believe that people are made in the very image of God. The first book of the Old Testament in the Bible, Genesis chapter 1 verses 26 and 27 says,

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

If that’s the case, then we should treat other people as though they are God’s likeness. Not that we should worship them, but that we should care deeply about their well-being if nothing else, because God loves us enough to create us all in His image! Then, when we see people hurting or in need, we are led to compassion and want to do what we can to help bring their situation to healing and wholeness. One of the best examples of what this could and should look like today is a hospitable and compassionate response to the current refugee crisis. If we currently were seeking refuge due to war, conflict, or famine, we would want other governments to welcome us with open arms. We would long for safety, shelter, food, protection. Jesus also discusses this in

Matthew chapter 25 when talking about the final judgement. He says that the Father will bless those that fed him when hungry, those that gave him a drink when thirsty, welcomed him when a stranger/wanderer. Is this not what we too would want?

In a sermon by Tim Keller (2016), he sums up justice as including three things: 1) people are treated equally regardless of their race, ethnicity, or social standing; 2) the poor and most vulnerable (orphans, widows, sojourners, etc.) are cared for and that we speak for them; and 3) that we are willing to humble ourselves and identify ourselves with the poor, and spend ourselves for them, as Christ Jesus did. Keller claims that biblically, we are under obligation to help the poor if we claim to be Christians. He bases this definition of justice from a passage from the Bible, Isaiah 58: 1-14. In this passage, the LORD condemns his people for not honoring Him with their hearts and says that although they are religious, true worship would include seeking justice. The thought can be summed up in verses 6-7,

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

Jesus challenges those who follow him to demonstrate their love for him keeping his commandments (John 14) and feeding his sheep (John 21).

A society that is willing to seek justice at all levels -- within government, among communities, within neighborhoods -- where doing justly becomes normalized within the culture, is a society that lays the groundwork for all people within it to flourish. As Kleinig and Evans (2012) claim,

The social character of flourishing, and the universalization of human dignity, grounded in our status as normative, self-legislating beings, carry with them the implication that

although the options open for our flourishing are indeterminate, they will be bounded not only by physical limitations...but also by certain moral constraints (our flourishing generally needs to have regard to the possibilities of others' flourishing). (p. 558)

Ultimately, Sandel (2009) argues that justice is not only society working to distribute duties, rights, etc., but that it includes reasoning “together about the meaning of the good life” and creating “a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise” (p. 261). Such reasoning is not possible unless all people are treated with respect and dignity -- whether or not we agree with them.

Peace. Peace goes beyond lack of war between countries or conflict (internal or external), but must include lack of racial discrimination and prejudices, gender discrimination, classism, ableism, etc. A country can be “at peace”, in terms of not being involved in any conflict, but still not feel like a place of peace when prejudice and discrimination exists. There is a Swahili proverb that says “Peace has no aversion” [Raha haina karaha]. Societies that are characterized by peace are those that are accepting of differences, those that do not limit people’s opportunities because of the color or their skin or whether they are female or not. According to Lynch and Lynch (2012), “there is no political, social, environmental, or ethical factor that does not contribute to peace, or that could possibly disturb an existing peace or hinder the achievement of peace.” In sum, this means that the existence of or lack of peace penetrates every level of our lives, our students’ lives, and the people with whom and where our students will eventually work.

Individual response

Isaiah 58 has words for individuals, too. At the beginning of verse 9, the LORD makes this promise:

If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. (Isaiah 58:9-11)

Here, the Lord is not only talking to a nation, but he is also talking to individuals within that nation. We must pour ourselves out for the hungry, satisfy the desire of the afflicted. And if we do that, the Lord will guide us and bless us. He again will identify himself with us.

Kleinig and Evans (2012) connect human flourishing with human dignity and claim that part of human dignity is recognizing that we can author our obligations but that when we do that, we also should be willing to *subject ourselves* to those obligations (p. 562). They claim that this, demands authenticity. That is, what we recognize as our obligations we recognize as ours in the sense that we do not merely adhere or conform to them, but own or commit to them as expressions of who and what we are. (p. 562)

Thus, when we recognize that others are in need, what is required of us to help meet that need? The God of the Bible would say that our responsibilities are to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him (Micah 6:8). Our responsibilities to others in need are to partner with them to seek justice and to seek mercy alongside them.

Our Duty as Educators

With this as our grounding, are there ways we can ensure human flourishing in peoples' lives at each of these levels is something our students want to pursue? The importance of access to justice in laying the foundation for health and human flourishing cannot be understated.

Exposure to injustices in the classroom and during global experiences (service-learning, study abroad, or cultural exchanges) can alert students to modern day injustices and put the desire in their heart and mind to do something about it. While all students may not have the opportunity to participate in international education abroad, we can bring the international community to our classrooms by inviting guest lecturers from other cultures, utilizing case studies set in different parts of the world, or even exposing students to cultures that are different than their own within our own region of the globe. Lack of ability to travel does not need to impede our ability to expose our students to global issues of injustice and the need for all people to have access to conditions that will uphold human dignity and allow for human flourishing.

Recognizing Flourishing

How do we know when we have reached flourishing? *Flourishing* would be synonymous with what some call, “the good life” (Sandel, 2009). Some would say that it is characterized by joy, which is “the emotional dimension of life that goes well and that is led well, a positive affective response to life going well and life being led well...” (Volf, 2015, p. 135). In his essay on “Joy and Human Flourishing,” Volf says that,

For the most part, segments of our life, often entire chunks of it, aren't going well and much of it we don't live well. Given that joy attaches to life going well and being lived well, must joy be lost to us? It need not be. We can rejoice over the many small good we experience, and for those of us who are religious, we can find joy in the One Good that is both the source and the goal of our existence. Though fragmentary, all small joys celebrate goods in our lives that are and remain wonderful, at times no more than tender plants in the cracks of our otherwise heavily cemented and gray lives. And in all true joys

we yearn for, and perhaps also faintly experience, a world in which all things and all manner of things shall be well. (Volf, 2015, p. 135)

Returning to the question raised earlier – how do we help our students contribute to the creation of a world where human flourishing is the norm? How do we mitigate the negative impacts of situations that are outside of their control, such that often come from the exo- or macro-system? We can do this by exposing them to opportunities to pursue justice and by seeking justice and mercy alongside them, helping them learn to identify areas to rejoice over in their lives, and helping them integrate faith as a strength to tap into in their lives. While creating global classroom experiences is not the “ultimate”, in that there are other ways to pursue peace and justice in the world that can lead to flourishing, international education does have the potential to build bridges and tear down walls of difference. Ultimately, flourishing must take place in communities with conditions that allow us all to have joy. All of us must learn to pursue this together, for “joy is best experienced in community” (Volf, 2015, p. 135). As educators, we must be doing this in our own lives, too, in order to be able to sustain a community-oriented and joyful classroom. Let us cultivate communities that promote an atmosphere and provide society structures where flourishing is possible—both in the classroom and beyond.

References

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In *International Encyclopedia of Education, Vol. 3, 2nd Ed.* Oxford: Elsevier. Reprinted in: Gauvain, M. & Cole, M. (Eds.), *Readings on the development of children, 2nd Ed.* (1993, pp. 37-43). NY: Freeman.
- Cicchetti, D. & Toth, S. (2000). Developmental processes in maltreated children. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 46*, 85-160.
- Dukto, P., Ver Ploeg, M., & Farrigan, T. (2012). Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts. *Economic Research Report Number 140., U.S. Department of Agriculture.*
Retrievable at:
https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/err140/30940_err140.pdf
- BLIND (2017) *Will add reference after blind review is completed.
- BLIND (2019) *Will add reference after blind review is completed.
- Keller, T. (20 March 2016). Doing justice and mercy. From the sermon series, *Where are we going: The city and the mission.* Retrievable at: <http://rise.redeemer.com/sermons/>
- Kleing, J. & Evans, N.G. (2012). Human flourishing, human dignity, and human rights. *Law and Philosophy (2013) 32:539–564.* DOI 10.1007/s10982-012-9153-2
- Jeff Levin. (2001). *God, Faith, and Health : Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection.* Wiley.
- Lynch, C., & Lynch. (2012). Peace. In H. K. Anheier, & M. Juergensmeyer (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of global studies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. National Association of Social Workers (2021). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers.* Retrievable at:

<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>

Sandel, M. (2009). *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Center for African Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (n.d.) *Swahili Proverbs*.

Retrieved <http://swahiliproverbs.afrst.illinois.edu/war.html>

Thrive. (2011). In The Editors of the American Heritage Dictionaries (Ed.), *The American Heritage dictionary of the English language*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. UN

Chronicle. (2007). Towards Universal Primary Education: The Experience of Tanzania. *UN Chronicle*, XLIV(4). Retrieved

<https://unchronicle.un.org/article/towards-universal-primary-education-experience-tanzania>

UNESCO. (2013). Girls Education: The Facts. Retrieved

<http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/girls-factsheet-en.pdf>

United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Human Development Index*. Retrieved

<https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>

VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(31), 8148–8156.

Volv, M. (2015). The crown of the good life: A hypothesis. In, Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Eds.), *Joy and human flourishing: Essays on theology, culture, and the good life* (pp. 127-135). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.