European Journal of Education Studies
ISSN: 2501 - 1111
ISSN-L: 2501 - 1111
Available online at: www.oapub.org/edu

DOI: 10.46827/ejes.v12i7.6070 Volume 12 | Issue 7 | 2025

BENEDICT XVI'S RESPONSE TO THE EDUCATIONAL EMERGENCY: RELATIVISM, BILDUNG, AND EDUCATION FOR FLOURISHING

Joseph Xhuxhi[i]
Faculty of Education,
Universidad Internacional de la Rioja,
Spain

Abstract:
This article presents a comprehensive analysis of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger's, response to the contemporary "*educational emergency*" and situates his views in dialogue with two frameworks in educational thought: the German *Bildung* tradition of self-cultivation and recent approaches to education for human flourishing. Ratzinger diagnoses a crisis in education rooted in moral relativism and a loss of truth, leading to a failure to transmit values and meaning to the younger generation (Benedict XVI 2008). He critiques a "*false concept of autonomy*" that rejects authoritative guidance, and the exclusion of the objective sources of truth – nature and divine Revelation – from the educational sphere (Benedict XVI, 2010). This paper critically examines Ratzinger's ideas alongside the concept of *Bildung*, with its emphasis on self-development, autonomy, and cultural formation, and the flourishing or well-being paradigm, with its focus on virtue, human potential, and well-rounded growth. This analysis finds significant overlaps – such as the importance of meaning, virtue, and community in education – while also highlighting areas where Ratzinger's theological perspective offers a critique of secular assumptions. I conclude with implications for contemporary teaching and curriculum design, recommending a synthesis of insights that can enrich values-based, holistic educational reform. By bridging theological and philosophical perspectives, this article aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about how education can cultivate not only skills and knowledge but also moral character, purpose, and hope in students' lives.

Keywords: educational emergency; relativism; Benedict XVI; Bildung; human flourishing; character education; holistic education

[i] Correspondence: email joseph.xhuxhi@unir.net

1. Introduction

In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI – born Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Emeritus – warned of a growing "*educational emergency*" in modern society (Benedict XVI 2008). Speaking to parents, teachers, and clergy in Rome, he observed that educating young people was becoming "*ever more difficult*" in a culture permeated by uncertainties and doubts about fundamental values (Benedict XVI, 2008). This term, encapsulates a perceived crisis: the failure of education to transmit "*certainties and values*" to the next generation (Benedict XVI, 2008). Ratzinger attributes this failure not simply to generational conflicts or individual shortcomings, but to a "*widespread atmosphere*" of relativism that "*induces one to have doubt about the value of the human person, about the very meaning of truth and good, and ultimately about the goodness of life*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). In his view, when a society loses sight of objective truth and moral reference points, education inevitably suffers it becomes "*difficult to pass on… something that is valid and certain*" – enduring principles or "*credible objectives around which to build life*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). The result, he suggests, is a generation adrift, lacking direction and meaning.

Benedict XVI's alarm about relativism and value-neutral education resonates with longstanding debates in the philosophy of education. His stance is unapologetically values-based and theologically informed, and he insists that genuine education must be rooted in *veritas* (truth) and oriented toward the full flourishing of the human person – intellectually, morally, and spiritually. In raising these issues, Ratzinger joins thinkers who have asked what it means to educate the "*whole person*" and how to counter the fragmenting or hollowing tendencies of modern educational systems. Two such lines of thought, though emerging from very different traditions, are particularly relevant to a dialogue with Ratzinger's perspective: the concept of *Bildung* and the contemporary discourse on flourishing as the aim of education.

The German notion of *Bildung* has its roots in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought and refers to a process of self-cultivation or formation. It emphasizes the development of an individual's intellectual, cultural, and moral capacities in a holistic, autonomous, and self-directed manner (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Often translated as "*formation*" or "*self-culture*," *Bildung* involves a dialectical interplay between the self and the world, through which a person realises his or her potential and becomes imbued with universal human values (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). As a tradition, *Bildung* upholds ideals like intellectual freedom, personal autonomy, critical reflection, and the pursuit of truth and *Humanität*, humaneness or humanity – ideals that informed classical liberal education. The *Bildung* framework might seem, at first glance, at odds with Ratzinger's critique of modern autonomy; after all, Ratzinger explicitly critiques the "*false concept of autonomy*" derived from Enlightenment thinking, which holds that a person should "*develop only by himself, without impositions from others*" (Benedict XVI, 2010). Yet, a closer look reveals nuances, *Bildung* in its richer sense is not a shallow individualism, but a cultivated autonomy embedded in dialogue with cultural tradition and oriented toward the *Bildungs ideal* of living a "*good life*" in community (Deimann &

Farrow, 2013). This article will explore how Ratzinger's vision of education – especially his emphasis on truth, authority, and the relational nature of personhood – compares with the ethos of *Bildung*. Can Ratzinger's call for renewed moral and religious foundations in education be understood within a *Bildung* paradigm, or does it fundamentally challenge the secular humanism that *Bildung* typically implies?

Parallel to the conversation on *Bildung*, recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest in flourishing or well-being as the goal of education. Drawing on Aristotelian philosophy and positive psychology, scholars have argued that schools should aim beyond academic achievement to foster the *eudaimonia*, often translated as flourishing or human flourishing, of students (Kristjánsson, 2017). Flourishing-oriented education emphasizes the development of virtues, social-emotional skills, and a sense of meaning and belonging in students' lives. This perspective has gained traction through the "*positive education*" movement, which applies findings from positive psychology to school settings to promote student well-being, resilience, and character (Kristjánsson, 2017). For instance, one definition describes human flourishing as a multi-dimensional state where an individual *feels good, functions effectively, and does good* – combining personal well-being with virtuous action (Huppert & So, 2013). Rather than viewing success solely in terms of test scores or economic productivity, the flourishing framework asks how education can help individuals lead fulfilling lives and contribute positively to society. In many ways, this approach complements Ratzinger's concern that modern education, in its preoccupation with technical knowledge and skills, may neglect the deeper question of "*the truth which can be a guide in life*" and fail to form "*sound people who can give their own lives meaning*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). At the same time, secular models of flourishing might shy away from the transcendent or theological dimensions that Ratzinger considers non-negotiable – for example, the role of God, faith, and absolute truth in defining the highest good for the human person. This paper will therefore also critically engage Ratzinger's ideas with the literature on flourishing in education, including both the Aristotelian virtue-ethical accounts (Kristjánsson, 2016, 2017) and the positive psychology models (Seligman *et al.*, 2009; Allison *et al.*, 2020).

By bringing these dialogues together, Ratzinger with *Bildung*, and Ratzinger with flourishing education, through this article, I seek to enrich the discussion of what a values-based, holistic educational reform might look like. The aim is not merely to compare abstract theories, but to draw out practical implications for teaching and curriculum. How might an educator today balance freedom and authority in the classroom, considering these insights? What curriculum design would integrate scientific knowledge with ethical and spiritual understanding, as Ratzinger advocates? In what ways do concepts like *Bildung* and flourishing help address the "*educational emergency*," and where might they fall short without the components Ratzinger emphasises? The following sections will address these questions. First, I outline Ratzinger's diagnosis of the educational crisis and his proposed pillars for its resolution, leading from this, we engage in a critical dialogue with the concept of *Bildung*, examining autonomy, self-formation, and the role of tradition. I then turn to the idea of flourishing, discussing

virtue, well-being, and the cultivation of human potential in education. Finally, in this article I consider the concrete implications of synthesising these perspectives and offer conclusions and recommendations for educators and policymakers seeking to navigate the challenges of educating for both personal and common good in a relativistic age.

2. Ratzinger's Critique of Relativism and the Educational Crisis

Benedict XVI's point of departure is a sober diagnosis of a crisis in modern education. In his view, this crisis was "*almost inevitable*" in a society that has made relativism "*its own creed – a kind of dogma*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). He uses the term "*militant relativism*" to describe a cultural mood in which asserting firm truths or values is often seen as suspect, dogmatic, or oppressive. According to Ratzinger, two deep-rooted trends underlie the current emergency: (1) a false notion of human autonomy, and (2) a pervasive scepticism that excludes the traditional sources of moral orientation (Benedict XVI, 2010).

2.1 False Autonomy and the Eclipse of Authority

Ratzinger argues that modern pedagogy has uncritically embraced an idea of autonomy that undermines education. This "*false concept of autonomy*" holds that a person should develop entirely on their own, free from any external authority or imposed direction (Benedict XVI, 2010). The role of educators, in this view, is only to facilitate a child's self-development, never to guide or shape it in any directive way. Ratzinger traces this idea to Enlightenment thinkers – he mentions its "*Kantian roots*" and notes how it was championed by proponents of "*anti-authoritarian*" education in the 19th and 20th centuries (Benedict XVI, 2010). Indeed, educational progressives like John Dewey reacted against the rigid, authoritarian schools of the past, for example, the centralized Napoleonic system, and instead promoted *free thought* and the scientific method as bases for learning (Dewey, 1995). Ratzinger acknowledges that Dewey's optimistic vision of liberated, inquiry-driven education had a historical rationale and "*must be valued*" as a corrective to genuine abuses of authority (Benedict XVI, 2010. However, he believes the pendulum swung too far. In many schools today, even the idealism of Deweyan experimentalism has faded, leaving behind a rather hollow emphasis on procedural skills, exam preparation, and utility (Benedict XVI, 2010. What's worse, the very notion of authoritative guidance has been delegitimised – often replaced either by an overly permissive approach or by impersonal bureaucratic control.

Ratzinger contends that true education *cannot* dispense with authority (Benedict XVI, 2008). He is careful to distinguish "*authoritativeness*" from mere authoritarianism or top-down power *potestas* (Benedict XVI, 2008). Authentic authority, *auctoritas*, in his description, is "*fruit of experience and competence*" acquired by the educator's personal integrity and love (Benedict XVI, 2008). "*The educator is thus a witness of truth and goodness*," Ratzinger writes – one who leads by example and genuine care (Benedict XVI, 2008). This concept aligns with what some education theorists call *earned authority* or *relational authority*, as opposed to authority by fiat of position. Ratzinger even

says that an educator's authority is "*conferred by the student*," who entrusts the teacher with influence through respect (Benedict XVI 2008). In practice, this means that effective teachers combine *closeness and trust born of love* with *discipline and rules* in a careful balance. Love without guidance is ineffectual sentimentality; discipline without love becomes oppressive. Education, in Ratzinger's words, must "*accept the risk of freedom, without forgetting the order of authority*" (Benedict XVI, 2010). Here we see Ratzinger's understanding of autonomy: he does not reject human freedom – on the contrary, he calls freedom a "*precious gift*" and emphasises that each new generation must *personally* appropriate the values of the past through free decision. But freedom is not absolute self-invention; it matures and finds its direction in a dialogical relationship with others and with truth. "*The human 'I' becomes itself only from a 'you' and a 'we'," Ratzinger explains; a person is "created for dialogue and communion*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). Therefore, an education that idolises an isolated, self-creating ego is not education at all, but a "*renunciation of education*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). It deprives the young person of the very relationships and input through which the self truly opens and grows (Benedict XVI 2008). In summary, Ratzinger calls for a rehabilitation of *authority rightly understood* – one that resonates with Hannah Arendt's insight that educators, for the sake of the child and the continuity of civilization, must represent the world's values and reality to the new generation in a trustworthy manner (Benedict XVI, 2008). Without some anchoring in tradition and guidance, the child is not liberated but abandoned to a diffuse "*crisis of authority*" and "*crisis of tradition*" in society (Benedict XVI, 2008).

2.2 Relativism and the Loss of Truth

The second root of the educational emergency, according to Ratzinger, is the relativistic mindset that has corroded belief in any objective truth or moral order (Benedict XVI, 2008). He describes this in terms of the "*exclusion of the two sources that orient the human journey*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). Those two sources are *nature* and *Revelation*. By *nature*, Ratzinger means an intelligible order of creation – reality as something that speaks to us of truth, including truths about good and evil. By *Revelation*, he means the insight given through faith into God's will and the ultimate meaning of life. In contemporary secularised culture, he argues, both sources have been effectively silenced. Nature "*is considered today as a purely mechanical reality…with no inherent moral imperative or guiding value*" (Benedict XVI, 2008). This is the legacy of reductive scientism, which regards human beings, and life in general, as biological machines or collections of atoms, not as bearers of inherent purpose or dignity. In classrooms, this attitude may appear, for example, when biology or social science is taught in a value-neutral way – describing *what is*, the facts and the mechanisms, while avoiding any discussion of *what ought to be* or whether any purpose underlies natural or human existence. Simultaneously, *Revelation* – religious teaching and tradition – is relativised as merely a historical by-product that is "*a moment in cultural development*" or privatised as a subjective sentiment without cognitive content (Benedict XVI, 2010). In other words, even if religion is tolerated, it is cordoned off from public education and serious intellectual discourse, reduced to a

personal option or ethical motivator at best, but not recognised as a source of truth about reality.

The consequence of excluding both nature and Revelation is that even history and culture lose their voice (Benedict XVI, 2010). Ratzinger notes that if we treat the natural world as meaningless and divine wisdom as non-existent or unknowable, then the narrative of human history becomes "*only an aggregate of cultural decisions, occasional and arbitrary, which do not hold value for the present and the future*" (Benedict XVI, 2010). This is a profound assertion: it means that without some transcendent or natural law reference points, we see our traditions, laws, and values as nothing more than mutable social constructions. The past can no longer *teach* us anything true; it is relevant only insofar as we choose to reinvent or repurpose it. This radical historicism or cultural relativism leaves education unmoored – a mere exercise in equipping students with neutral skills or indoctrinating them into whatever ideology prevails now but not initiating them into a shared search for truth.

Against this trend, Benedict XVI calls for "*reconnecting with reality*" in education, rediscovering a true concept of nature as creation, imbued with moral meaning, and a true concept of Revelation as the loving truth that illuminates creation (Benedict, XVI, 2010). He famously stated, "*We must find a way to teach truth as that which is good for life*" (Benedict XVI, 2013) – countering the notion that truth is dangerous or oppressive. In practical terms, he advocated bridging the gap between secular and religious knowledge in curricula: for example, teaching science and religion in a more integrated manner, so that students can appreciate how empirical inquiry and ethical/spiritual insight complement each other (Benedict XVI, 2013). Rather than compartmentalising learning into silos, where, for example, physics has no connection to ethics, or history is taught without reference to religious influences, Ratzinger envisions an "*architecture of knowledge*" that restores coherence. In a 2010 address, he described it as a *"concert"* between the book of nature and the book of Revelation (Benedict XVI, 2010). In this harmonious interplay, education becomes not an *imposition* of doctrines, but an *opening* of the mind and heart of the student – an "*opening of the 'I' to the 'you', to the 'we', and to the 'You' of God*" (Benedict XVI, 2013). This poetic formulation underscores that, for Ratzinger, the ultimate horizon of education is transcendent: the student is invited to a relationship with others and ultimately with the divine ground of reality.

Finally, Benedict XVI emphasises love and hope as central to education. If relativism and lost authority are the illnesses, the cure is to re-inject into education the "soul" that modern technocratic approaches lack (Benedict XVI, 2010). "*Education needs, first of all, that closeness and trust which are born from love,*" he writes (Benedict XVI, 2010). Every authentic educator gives something of him- or herself; teaching is not merely imparting information but also modelling a way of being, which requires love for the student and love for the truth. Ratzinger even links the capacity for love to the capacity for suffering – warning that if we try to shield children from every hardship, we produce "*brittle and ungenerous*" people, since *learning to love* inevitably entails learning to confront difficulty and suffering for others (Benedict XVI, 2010). In an age of instant gratification

and hyper-protection, this is a counter-cultural point. Moreover, Ratzinger insists that hope is indispensable: educators must believe in the possibility of goodness and growth, even amid difficulties (Benedict XVI, 2010). He encourages parents and teachers: "*Do not be afraid!*" – the obstacles can be overcome, because the human heart still hungers for meaning and because, from a Christian perspective, God's grace is at work (Benedict XVI, 2010). This hopeful confidence is itself a trait that schools should impart to students, who "*in their inmost being*" desire not to be left alone in life's challenges (Benedict XVI, 2010).

We can summarise, therefore, Ratzinger's critique of the educational crisis into a few key insights:

1) Education is failing if it does not transmit enduring truth and moral orientation,
2) A misguided quest for absolute individual autonomy has led to the rejection of authority and tradition, whereas true education requires authoritative guidance grounded in love and example.
3) Cultural relativism has led to a loss of confidence in truth – both the natural order and spiritual wisdom have been excluded – and this vacuum leaves young people without bearings,
4) The way forward is to reintegrate knowledge with values, freedom with truth, and to form students in a context of loving relationships and hope.

Having outlined Ratzinger's position, I now turn to the concept of *Bildung*, which offers its own rich perspective on human autonomy, formation, and the interplay between individual and culture. How does Ratzinger's vision compare to *Bildung*'s emphasis on self-cultivation and enlightenment? Can the *Bildung* tradition help answer Ratzinger's concerns, or does it exemplify the very relativism and false autonomy he warns against?

2.3 Education as Formation: A Dialogue with *Bildung*

The term *Bildung* is notoriously complex, but at its core, it refers to the process of forming oneself into a fully realised, educated human being. Emerging from German Enlightenment and Romantic thought, *Bildung* encompasses both the inward development of the individual, self-cultivation, and the acquisition of cultural knowledge and character that enable one to participate in universal human society. A classic definition describes *Bildung* as "*a free, dialogical, and dialectical interplay between the individual and the world which allows and supports the individual's self-realization*" (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Wilhelm von Humboldt, a key figure in this tradition, conceived *Bildung* as the *"connection between our 'I' and the world in the most general, lively and free interaction"* (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). It is an ongoing process through which "*specific human beings acquire the general human characteristics*" (Deimann & Farrow, 2013) – in other words, through education and personal striving, an individual develops qualities that express the highest potentials of humanity. The aim of *Bildung* is often described as living a "*good life*", in the ethical sense, a life of wisdom and virtue, which was seen by classical proponents as a fundamental human right or destiny (Deimann & Farrow, 2013).

Several key values are associated with *Bildung*: autonomy, in the sense of intellectual and moral self-determination; critical reflection on oneself and society; individuality (the development of one's unique talents); and universality, meaning the alignment of personal development with universal moral and rational norms, such as reason, freedom, and humanity (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Markus Deimann and Robert Farrow (2013) further emphasise that *Bildung* entails "*beliefs and values – including autonomy, critical reflection, inclusivity, and embracing the potential for self-development*" (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). These, they argue, can serve as a powerful lens to assess contemporary education and to ensure it is oriented toward the holistic growth of persons rather than mere technical training (Deimann & Farrow, 2013).

At face value, *Bildung* might appear to be exactly the kind of Enlightenment ideal that Ratzinger criticises for leading to relativism and the loss of tradition. After all, *Bildung* emerged in an intellectual context that was increasingly independent of church authority, emphasising human reason and cultural evolution. It reached a classical formulation in late 18th-century Germany, where thinkers like Herder and Humboldt saw human development as an open-ended perfectibility, requiring freedom from dogma and authority to flourish (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Indeed, Humboldt advocated a form of education "*free from state interference*," highlighting the need for individuals to relate to the world without coercion (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Kant's influence is evident in the stress on autonomy and the dignity of the rational individual who uses his own understanding. Ratzinger's first "*root*" of the educational crisis – the idea that a person should *"develop by himself, without impositions"* (Benedict XVI, 2010)– sounds like a caricature of *Bildung*'s mantra of self-development.

However, a deeper engagement reveals that *Bildung* and Ratzinger's vision are not simply opposites. In fact, there are intriguing areas of convergence. For one, *Bildung* is not pure individualism; it fundamentally involves a relationship between the self and the world, including others, culture, and nature. The self does not unfold in isolation but through "*interplay*" and "*exchange*" with what is outside itself (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). This resonates strongly with Ratzinger's insistence that "*the 'I' comes to itself only from the 'you' and the 'we'*" (Benedict XVI, 2010). Both perspectives reject a solipsistic or atomistic view of the person. Humboldt's notion that *Bildung* is an interaction where the individual both absorbs from and impresses himself upon the world in as rich a manner as possible aligns with the idea that education is a dialogue and encounter (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Ratzinger would agree that the goal is not to produce a self-enclosed ego but a person in communion with others and with the wider horizons of meaning.

Another commonality is the normative character of both visions. Despite its modern, secular origin, *Bildung* was never a value-neutral concept. It carried a moral ideal of what the "*educated person*", *gebildeter Mensch*, should be: someone who has attained personal maturity, ethical insight, and a harmonious development of abilities (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). The language of early *Bildung* discourse often had quasi-spiritual overtones. Notably, the concept has theological roots; the term *Bildung* first appeared in 16th-century theological contexts, encouraging believers to *cultivate themselves in the image*

of God (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Over time, the religious dimension was transformed rather than erased; by the 18th century, it translated into the notion of *developing one's inherent potential* – which still implies that there are *ideal potentials or virtues* latent in the human being that ought to be realised (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). In this sense, *Bildung* presupposes an objective human nature or telos, end. Ratzinger's thought also hinges on an objective human telos – for him, humans are made for truth, goodness, and ultimately for communion with God. While *Bildung* proponents might articulate the telos in humanistic terms, such as the realisation of reason and freedom, and Ratzinger in theological terms, the realisation of the *imago Dei* and sainthood, both reject the relativistic idea that one can choose any end whatsoever and call it education (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). In fact, Ratzinger's critique of relativism could be interpreted, in *Bildung* terms, as a plea to recover a sense of *Bildungsziel* – a goal of formation – beyond mere subjective preference or social utility.

Where, then, do the tensions lie? One key tension concerns the source of normative content for education. *Bildung* traditions historically placed great trust in *human reason and culture* to provide direction (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). The educated person was to immerse herself in the best of art, literature, science, and philosophy – the canon of *Weltkultur* – to be transformed by it and contribute to it. Even after the decline of religious unity in Europe, *Bildung* carried an almost sacred reverence for *Kultur* as the bearer of meaning. However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, this humanistic faith was shaken by thinkers like Nietzsche, and later critical theorists pointed out that "*culture*" itself could be a mask for domination or an empty shell (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). The *Bildungs ideal* came under criticism for being elitist or naive in the face of modern fragmentation (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). In the absence of a consensual canon of truth or the "*voice*" of nature and God, *Bildung* could deteriorate into a kind of subjective or elite-driven project. This is precisely the scenario Ratzinger laments: a culture that no longer confidently knows what is true or good in human nature will educate only half-heartedly or for shallow aims such as economic gain or social conformity. Ratzinger's stern warning that without God, parental and state authority devolve into either "*biological necessity*" or arbitrary ideology (Arendt, 1961) illustrates his stance that human efforts at moral education falter unless they are grounded in a higher order divine truth. A *Bildung* advocate might respond that secular philosophical ethics or a conception of human dignity could ground education without explicit theology. Indeed, some Enlightenment thinkers – Kant, notably – attempted to derive the authority of moral law from rational principles alone (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). But Ratzinger would likely counter that the drift of recent decades (with moral relativism on the rise) suggests that an explicit grounding in transcendent truth was a bulwark that, once removed, left a vacuum. Empirically, we see calls within *Bildung* circles as well to recover stronger normative foundations. For example, Deimann and Farrow (2013) invoke *Bildung* precisely to critique the "*lack of philosophical and theoretical foundation*" in open education and to reassert values like autonomy *with* responsibility, and inclusivity *with* purpose (Deimann

& Farrow, 2013).This implies that *Bildung* theorists today recognise the need to go beyond pure learner-centeredness and articulate the goods that education should serve.

Another tension is about authority and tradition. Ratzinger asserts the value of tradition – not as static traditionalism, but as the living transmission of wisdom. He cites with approval Romano Guardini's view that if the concept of God is lacking, the authority of parents and teachers loses its higher rationale and either becomes a brute functional necessity or collapses entirely (Arendt, 1961). *Bildung*, especially in its classical form, was not anti-tradition; it encouraged engagement with the cultural heritage. But *Bildung* framed that engagement as something the individual *chooses and internalises* freely, rather than obeys. It's worth noting that not all conceptions of *Bildung* were anti-authority – a thinker like J.G. Herder, for instance, believed in cultural communities shaping individuals, and that one develops through dialogue with tradition (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). However, in the 20th-century progressive education movements, there was a marked distrust of authority. The slogan "*antiauthoritäre Erziehung*", antiauthoritarian education, in post-war Germany, for example, was about breaking away from the strict, Prussian-style schooling that was blamed for contributing to authoritarian social attitudes (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). In this context, Ratzinger's call to revalorise authority might sound regressive. Yet, when he describes authority in terms of *auctoritas* – something that grows organically from authenticity and love – it finds echoes even in humanistic education discourse. A *Bildung*-oriented teacher, too, would strive to be a Vorbild, role model, and gain *Ansehen*, prestige or respect, through demonstrated wisdom, not through coercion (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). Ratzinger's worry, one could argue, is not with *Bildung* per se but with a caricature of it that has permeated popular culture: the idea that any exercise of adult authority is an unjust limitation on the child's freedom (Benedict XVI, 2010). In truth, classical *Bildung* would view the child's freedom as something to be *grown into* – through, as Humboldt put it, "*unrestrained interplay*" with the world under conditions that allow the child to encounter truth and error, beauty and ugliness, and to be guided toward the good (Deimann & Farrow, 2013). There is room here for authoritative guidance, if properly understood.

One could incorporate at this juncture the perspective of philosophers like Charles Taylor, who have spoken of the modern self as endangered by a loss of a framework of meaning. Taylor (1991) talks about the ethics of authenticity and how it can slip into triviality without horizons of significance. The *Bildung* tradition, at its best, provided such horizons by connecting personal growth to participation in something greater. Ratzinger's perspective injects a theological horizon, communion with God. Both are responding to the same modern problem of fragmentation and meaninglessness, though with different solutions.

In practical terms, how might a Ratzinger-inspired approach to education and a *Bildung* approach differ or coincide in the classroom? A *Bildung* approach emphasises student-centered inquiry, exposure to the breadth of human knowledge, sciences, arts, humanities, to develop a well-rounded person, and fostering critical thinking so the student eventually "*forms*" his or her own judgments. A Ratzinger-inspired approach

emphasises the intentional transmission of core truths, for example, about human dignity, moral principles, even religious truth in a faith-based school, the mentoring role of the teacher as witness, and the integration of faith and reason (Benedict XVI, 2010). In a faith-based educational setting, these could merge quite harmoniously – Catholic education, for instance, often explicitly aims at *Bildung* in a Christian key: developing all dimensions of the person, intellect, character, spirit, in light of both cultural heritage and Gospel values. In a secular setting, however, some tension might arise if Ratzinger's insistence on Revelation is out of bounds (Benedict XVI, 2010). Yet even there, one can translate parts of his vision into secular terms for example integrating *ethical* or *civic education* with scientific education, so that questions of meaning, justice, and value are not ignored; fostering a school culture of dialogue, respect, and shared pursuit of the common good paralleling his "*I-you-we*" relational emphasis; and encouraging teachers to be mentors of character, not just instructors.

In conclusion, the dialogue with *Bildung* suggests that Ratzinger's critique of an "*autonomy*" that isolates the self is not a blanket denial of personal freedom, but a call to situate freedom within relationship and truth – a theme that *Bildung* can accommodate by recalling its own humanistic and communitarian roots. Both perspectives urge education to be more than rote training: to be *formation*. Where they diverge is primarily on the question of ultimate foundations: Ratzinger posits a God-centered teleology as indispensable, whereas *Bildung* leans on a human-centered teleology. The next section will extend this discussion by examining the notion of flourishing or *eudaimonia* in education, which shares much common ground with *Bildung*'s ideal of the cultivated, fulfilled person, and with Ratzinger's focus on the full development of the person – yet brings in insights from contemporary psychology and virtue ethics that can further illuminate how education might overcome the current crisis.

2.4 Human Flourishing as an Educational Aim: Dialogue with Virtue Ethics and Positive Psychology

What does it mean for a human being to flourish, and how can education foster such flourishing? This question has seen renewed attention as educators and philosophers seek to reorient schooling toward the promotion of well-being, character, and purposeful living. Ratzinger's concerns about meaning and moral goodness in education naturally resonate with the idea of *flourishing*. In fact, we can view his approach as advocating for a form of flourishing – one grounded in truth, virtue, love, and ultimately in a relationship with God. To critically engage his perspective with the broader discourse, we examine two angles: (a) flourishing as conceived in secular virtue ethics, especially Aristotelian traditions, and (b) flourishing as addressed in positive psychology and "*positive education*" programs.

In Aristotelian virtue ethics, *flourishing*, Greek *eudaimonia*, is understood as the highest good for a human being – often translated as happiness, flourishing, or fulfilment. It is not a momentary feeling, but an enduring state of living well and doing well. According to Aristotle, to flourish is to live in accordance with reason and virtue over a

complete life, achieving excellence in one's capacities and enjoying the inherent satisfaction that comes from such a life (Kristjánsson, 2017). Modern educational philosophers like Kristján Kristjánsson have been prominent in arguing that flourishing should be the overarching aim of education (Kristjánsson, 2017). Kristjánsson (2017) notes that many recent authors, such as Brighouse, White, and De Ruyter, converge on the idea that the "*central purpose of education is to help students lead flourishing lives*" (Kristjánsson, 2017). This involves cultivating virtues, meaning, and personal strengths rather than just imparting knowledge or economic skills (De Ruyter *et al*., 2022; White, 2011; Brighouse, 2006).

What does a flourishing-centred education entail? One synthesised account, drawing on John White's work, describes flourishing as *"autonomous, wholehearted and successful immersion in worthwhile pursuits… over a whole life"* (White, 2011). Key elements often mentioned include the actualization of human potentials, engagement in objectively worthwhile activities and relationships, a balance of personal satisfaction (feeling good) with moral/spiritual growth (being good and doing good), and a sense of meaning or purpose (De Ruyter *et al*., 2022). Notably, flourishing has both objective and subjective dimensions: objectively, it requires certain *goods*, like knowledge, friendship, virtue, health, to be present or pursued; subjectively, it involves the person's own endorsement and enjoyment of their life such as joy and fulfilment (De Ruyter *et al*., 2022). In education, this philosophy translates to an emphasis on whole-person development: schools would concern themselves not just with academic achievement, but also with students' character (virtues like honesty, courage, kindness), their well-being (emotional and mental health), and their sense of purpose in life (De Ruyter *et al*., 2022).

There is considerable overlap between this flourishing paradigm and Ratzinger's educational vision. Both see moral virtue and the search for truth as central. For instance, a flourishing account, especially those informed by Aristotelian or natural law perspectives, would say that virtues are indispensable to a flourishing life – one cannot truly flourish while being vicious or unjust, because flourishing is tied to being a good person (Allison, Waters & Kern, 2020). Ratzinger similarly insists on the formation of conscience and virtue, seeing the educator as a "*witness of truth and goodness*" who helps form "*sound people*" (Zenit News Agency, 2010). He would concur that the "*telos*" of education is not just knowledge, but *wisdom and goodness* – essentially the ingredients of human flourishing in a classical sense.

Moreover, flourishing frameworks and Ratzinger both critique a narrow focus on exam scores or utilitarian outcomes (Zenit News Agency, 2010). The *educational emergency* in Ratzinger's eyes is partly that even successful students might lack a moral compass or sense of meaning. Positive education advocates make a comparable point: a student might achieve high grades yet suffer anxiety, lack purpose, or have stunted social-emotional skills – thus failing to thrive as a person (Zenit News Agency, 2010). Programs of character education, social-emotional learning, and well-being curricula have arisen to address these gaps (Benedict XVI, 2008). For example, many schools now incorporate practices like mindfulness, community service, resilience training, and ethics discussions

alongside traditional academics. This reflects a broader cultural realization that education must engage the heart and soul, not just the intellect.

One illuminating intersection is the concept of virtue and value education. Ratzinger emphasises that freedom needs guidance by truth; in secular terms, this means personal autonomy must be aligned with moral values to result in true well-being. Recent empirical research in positive psychology backs this up with studies indicating that traits like gratitude, empathy, self-control, and hope correlate with higher life satisfaction and better outcomes (Arthur, 2024). The "*character and virtues*" movement in education, exemplified by initiatives like the Jubilee Centre in the UK, where Kristjánsson works, explicitly integrates virtue ethics into schooling, proposing that cultivating virtues will help students flourish (Arthur, 2024). This is very much in harmony with Ratzinger's perspective – except that secular virtue education might avoid theological virtues such as faith, hope, charity as directed to God and focus on civic or "*common*" virtues (Arthur, 2024). Even so, virtues like honesty, generosity, diligence, and courage are universally esteemed and form a common ground between Ratzinger's Christian humanism and secular humanism.

However, differences emerge when we consider the source of meaning and the "*enchanted*" dimension of flourishing. In an important critique, Kristjánsson (2016) argues that both mainstream Aristotelian and positive psychology models of flourishing suffer from a certain *"flatness" or "disenchantedness"*. By this, he means they often neglect those "*awe-inspiring emotional attachments to transpersonal ideals*" that give life fullness (Kristjánsson, 2016). These could include a sense of unity with something larger than oneself, profound aesthetic or spiritual experiences, or devotion to ideals like justice, beauty, or God. Kristjánsson suggests that flourishing accounts need to be "*extended*" or "*enchanted*" by incorporating such dimensions, which many people find deeply meaningful (Kristjánsson, 2016). He is careful to note that this does not *necessitate* supernaturalism – one could have an "*enchanted*" view that involves, say, a secular sense of transcendence or nature's wonder – but it does require acknowledging aspects of human experience that go beyond the materialistic or strictly rational-calculative domain (Kristjánsson, 2016).

Ratzinger's perspective, one could say, is *already enchanted*. As a theologian, he sees the world as charged with meaning, open to the transcendent. He frequently speaks of the sense of wonder, the "*language of creation*," and the need for openness to God's presence as integral to a full life (Benedict XVI, 2013). In educational terms, he would likely support activities that inspire awe and wonder in students – whether through nature, the arts, or contemplation – as part of their formation. Even in a purely secular school setting, educators influenced by this insight might deliberately create moments where students grapple with the big questions, such as *Why are we here? What is a life well-lived? What is love, or justice, or beauty?* or encounter the sublime through great literature, music, or the sciences. These experiences can be deeply formative and can address what Ratzinger calls the thirst in young people's hearts "*for meaning and for authentic human relationships*" (Benedict XVI, 2013).

The secular flourishing literature also acknowledges the importance of relationships and community for well-being – in fact, relatedness is a core component of many well-being theories such as the Self-Determination Theory, lists relatedness, competence, autonomy as basic needs and Seligman's PERMA model includes Relationships as one pillar of well-being (Allison *et al.*, 2020). Ratzinger would strongly agree; his emphasis on the "*we*" dimension in education parallels findings that supportive, inclusive school environments enhance students' mental health and moral growth (Benedict XVI, 2013). Allison *et al.* (2020) argue for a "*systems-informed*" approach to positive education that goes beyond individual interventions to nurture collective well-being at the classroom and school level (Allison *et al.*, 2020). They note that positive education thus far may have focused too much on teaching individual skills like resilience or positive thinking and not enough on creating a flourishing community context (Allison *et al.*, 2020). In practical terms, this means fostering positive relationships, a sense of belonging, and a culture where virtues are lived out collectively, not just by isolated persons. Ratzinger's view of education as a partnership of family, school, parish, and society at large aligns with this systemic outlook. He insists that society overall must become "*a more favourable context for education*" and that we all share responsibility for the moral ecology in which children grow (Benedict XVI, 2010). The convergence here is that both Ratzinger and flourishing educators see *community as essential* to individual formation.

One area where Ratzinger might critique some secular approaches is the tendency to equate flourishing with subjective happiness alone. Positive psychology has sometimes been criticised for an overemphasis on feeling good at the expense of *ethical depth*, being good. However, the field has evolved, and many proponents now stress eudaimonic aspects, virtue, accomplishment, more than just hedonic enjoyment (Huppert and So, 2013). For example, Huppert and So (2013) define flourishing as feeling good *and* functioning well (which includes doing good for others) (Huppert and So, 2013). This broader definition comes quite close to a moral notion of flourishing. Ratzinger would applaud the inclusion of "*doing good for others*" as integral to well-being; from a Christian viewpoint, love, which is inherently self-giving, is both a virtue and a source of joy. The notion that "*it is more blessed to give than to receive*" resonates with modern findings that prosocial behaviour tends to increase one's own happiness (Benedict XVI, 2010). In essence, secular science is catching up with ancient wisdom about the joy of virtue.

That said, Ratzinger would insist on something that many secular accounts do not explicitly address: the orientation of flourishing to a transcendent end. In Christian theology, earthly flourishing is not the ultimate goal; the ultimate goal is union with God. The Pope confirms that it's this that is the fulfilment of human nature (Benedict XVI, 2010). Education in a Catholic sense thus has an eschatological horizon – preparing one not just for temporal happiness but for eternal life. Obviously, this is beyond the scope of secular educational theory. However, even a secular humanist might agree that education should orient students to something greater than self-interest – perhaps to the

service of humanity or the pursuit of truth as an almost sacred imperative. There is a kind of functional equivalence: what Ratzinger calls God could correspond, imperfectly, to what a secular ethicist calls the summum bonum, highest good, or the transcendentals like Truth, Goodness, Beauty, which one can value for their own sake. Kristjánsson's call for "*transpersonal ideals*" covers such ground (Kristjánsson, 2016). It implies that without pointing students to ideals beyond their narrow personal concerns, we fail to inspire them to full flourishing.

Interestingly, there is movement within psychology to include spirituality as a component of well-being. Some models of flourishing include spiritual well-being or sense of transcendence as a dimension, especially in cross-cultural contexts or holistic health contexts (Kristjánsson, 2016). UNESCO's 2022 report on education may mention concepts such as global citizenship, peace, and perhaps even wisdom traditions as part of reimagining education (De Ruyter *et al.*, 2022). Ratzinger's viewpoint could contribute to this conversation by reminding secular educators that many students and their families draw motivation and identity from religious worldviews; excluding those entirely from education might alienate them and ignore a powerful source of moral motivation (Benedict XVI, 2008).

When we place Ratzinger's ideas in dialogue with flourishing education, we find a strong common cause in advocating for values, virtues, and holistic well-being in schools. Both critique a solely instrumental or relativistic model of education. Both support reintegrating what modern schooling often separates: knowledge and ethics, intellect and character, individual and community, freedom and responsibility. Ratzinger's distinctive contribution is to firmly anchor this integration in an objective moral order, ultimately in God's truth, whereas secular models may use the language of human nature, psychological needs, or social goods as the anchor. The dialogues of Kristjánsson and others indicate that even within a secular framework, there is acknowledgment of a need for "*enchantment*" – a term which, in a way, gently gestures toward what religious thought would call the sacred. Thus, Ratzinger might find allies in virtue ethicists who, while not theologians, see a need to resist the flattening of human aspirations.

If we take seriously Ratzinger's critique, the *Bildung* ideals, and flourishing education insights, what changes should be made in classrooms and curricula? The final section of this article addresses this, suggesting concrete avenues for educational reform and pedagogical practice.

2.5 Implications for Contemporary Teaching and Curriculum

Translating the above insights into practice involves rethinking both what we teach, the curriculum content, and how we teach, the pedagogy and school culture. The goal is an education that truly forms young people – intellectually, morally, and socially – in a time of rapid change and contested values. Below are key implications and recommendations drawn from the dialogue among Ratzinger's perspective, *Bildung*, and flourishing education.

2.5.1 Integrative Curriculum – Reconnecting Fact and Value

One of Ratzinger's chief concerns is the fragmentation of knowledge and the separation of factual learning from questions of meaning and ethics (Benedict XVI, 2010). From my teaching experience, schools today follow a compartmentalised curriculum: science classes rarely discuss ethical implications of scientific advances; literature and history classes may avoid discussion of religion or ultimate meaning to remain "*neutral*"; moral education, if present, might be confined to an odd class or assembly on character. To address this, I consider that curricula should be intentionally designed to integrate intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. This doesn't necessarily mean adding new courses, but rather infusing existing subjects with broader context. For example:

- In science, alongside teaching the mechanics of life and the universe, educators can raise questions about the significance of those facts, such as the wonder of the cosmos, the ethical use of technology, and environmental stewardship as a moral duty. As Ratzinger suggested, nature should not be treated as value-neutral; biology classes can include discussion on bioethics or the marvel of ecosystems, fostering respect for life rather than a purely utilitarian view (Benedict XVI, 2010).
- In literature and social studies, human questions about justice, purpose, suffering, and love are inherent. Rather than avoiding these for fear of controversy, teachers can facilitate thoughtful discussions, drawing on philosophy and students' own reflections. This aligns with *Bildung*'s dialogical approach – using cultural works as a springboard for students to form their own reasoned stance on issues.
- If the school has a religious affiliation, theology or religious studies classes should dialogue with other disciplines – for instance, showing how faith traditions approach scientific findings, thus dispelling the myth of conflict by highlighting complementarity, or how religious ethics inform social justice themes in history. Even in secular schools, studying world religions and philosophies as part of history or social science can broaden students' horizons and enable them to encounter different frameworks of meaning.

An integrative curriculum echoes what some educators call *character across the curriculum* or *Ethics across the curriculum*. It ensures that the development of virtues and critical thinking about values is not an isolated endeavour, but part of every subject's learning goals. It also resonates with UNESCO's call for education that is more humanistic and holistic, linking cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical dimensions (De Ruyter *et al.*, 2022).

2.5.2 Emphasis on Character and Virtue Education

All three perspectives under consideration highlight the importance of virtue. Practically, schools can adopt explicit character education programs or embed virtue ethics into their ethos. This might involve identifying a set of core values or virtues the school community upholds, for example, integrity, compassion, perseverance, respect, courage, and integrating them into school life. Some strategies include weekly class meetings focusing on a virtue, reflection journals where students relate virtue to their experiences,

recognition programs that celebrate examples of good character, and incorporating virtues into disciplinary policies, using misbehaviour as an opportunity for character growth rather than just punishment.

Positive psychology provides tools like growth mindset training, teaching that abilities and character can be developed, resilience training, and social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula that improve skills such as empathy, emotion regulation, and teamwork (De Ruyter *et al.*, 2022). Ratzinger's input here is that these efforts must be grounded in sincerity and truth – virtue is not just a set of "*skills*" but tied to objective good. Thus, educators should avoid a relativistic "*choose your values*" approach; instead, they can present virtues as rooted in common human needs and the flourishing of self and others. For instance, honesty is upheld not just because it's a "*rule*," but because trust is foundational to any community and personal integrity leads to self-respect and credibility. Many secular character education frameworks like the Jubilee Centre's, already do this, articulating virtues as empirically and philosophically supported pillars of a good life (Arthur, 2024).

From Ratzinger's viewpoint, one might also incorporate the dimension of conscience formation – helping students learn how to discern right from wrong through reason and faith. In a secular context, this can be done through ethical dilemma discussions, case studies, and encouraging students to reason about moral issues using principles like justice, empathy, and the long-term consequences for well-being.

2.5.3 Restoration of Teacher "Authority" through Relationship

Modern educational orthodoxy sometimes downplays the teacher's authoritative role in favour of student-driven learning. While student agency is crucial, the analysis here suggests a balanced pedagogy where the teacher is a mentor and guide, not merely a facilitator. Ratzinger's description of the educator as one who gains authority by "*coherence of life*" and "*personal involvement*" means teachers should strive to exemplify the qualities they seek to instil (Benedict XVI, 2010). Professional development should thus include not only instructional strategies but also formation in mentorship, ethical leadership, and communication skills to build trust with students.

In practice, this might look like teachers taking time to know students personally, demonstrating care for their well-being, and setting high expectations while providing support. It involves what educational psychologist Diana Baumrind would call an *authoritative* style, high warmth, high standards, as opposed to an *authoritarian*, low warmth, high demand, or *permissive*, high warmth, low demand style (Baumrind,1978). Research shows authoritative teaching is linked to better student outcomes both academically and socio-emotionally, which aligns with the idea that kids need both *love and structure* (Kloo, Thornberg & Wänström, 2023).

Additionally, schools can foster teacher authority by backing their teachers in maintaining academic and behavioural standards, within a framework of fairness. Arendt's insight, that education must be somewhat "*conservative*" for the sake of preserving the world for new entrants (Arendt, 2013), can translate into practices like

upholding academic integrity, teaching about civic duties and history, and not shying away from asserting that some ideas or behaviours are indeed better than others, inclusion is better than bullying, democracy than tyranny, scientific reasoning than superstition (Arendt, 2013). Such stances, presented reasonably, give students a stable platform from which they can later question or refine views, rather than leaving them in a moral vacuum (Arendt, 2013).

2.5.4 Community and Identity – Engaging Families and Traditions

Ratzinger repeatedly notes that education is a joint effort of families, communities, and broader society (Benedict XVI, 2010). Schools should therefore actively partner with parents and guardians in the educational mission. This could involve parent education nights about the school's character or well-being programs, encouraging parents to reinforce similar values at home. It could also mean respecting and incorporating students' cultural and religious backgrounds into school life. For instance, a public school with diverse faith representations might allow student-run faith or philosophy clubs, accommodate reasonable religious practices, or celebrate a range of cultural festivities – signalling to students that their whole person, including any religious identity, is welcomed. Such inclusion can guard against the sense of fragmentation where students feel they must check their deepest beliefs at the school door. As one of the flourishing measures is a strong sense of identity and belonging, schools that honour student diversity in unity help meet that need.

2.5.5 Encouraging Search for Meaning and Purpose

A striking aspect of the current youth landscape is a reported rise in anxiety, depression, and nihilism among adolescents –symptoms of a meaning crisis. In our dialogue, all perspectives agree that education should help young people find meaning and *raison d'etre*. Practically, schools can introduce purpose education initiatives, which prompt students to reflect on what they value, what their strengths are, and how they might contribute to society. This could be done through guided journaling, career and life vision workshops, community service projects with reflective components, or capstone projects where students tackle a real-world problem they care about.

One concrete example is a "Personal Project", as done in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program, where students choose something, they are passionate about to learn or create, requiring planning, execution, and a report on what it meant to them (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2021). Another example is integrating philosophies of life into senior social studies classes – exploring how different thinkers have answered the question of life's purpose and inviting students to articulate their own provisional answer. This doesn't impose a singular worldview, thus respecting pluralism, but it legitimises existential inquiry as part of education. It fights the implicit message that only quantifiable or testable things matter.

For schools with religious affiliations, purpose and meaning can be explicitly tied to spiritual vocation or calling; for secular ones, it can focus on personal fulfilment and

societal contribution. Either way, it addresses the hunger Ratzinger identified: young people "*do not want to be left to face life's challenges on their own*" – they seek orientation (Benedict XVI, 2007).

2.5.6 Systemic Well-Being and a Favourable Environment

Inspired by Allison *et al.*'s systems approach, schools should treat well-being and character not just as *student outcomes* but as qualities of the entire school system (Allison *et al.*, 2020). This means nurturing a positive school culture, one that is safe, supportive, and inclusive. Strategies include implementing anti-bullying programs that encourage peer support, creating physical spaces that are welcoming and conducive to interaction, like common areas or quiet reflection zones, scheduling that allows for adequate rest and extracurricular balance, for example not overloading homework to the detriment of family or leisure time, as that can harm well-being, and offering counselling and mentorship resources for those struggling (Allison *et al.*, 2020).

Professional well-being of staff is part of this too – teachers who are over-stressed or cynical will struggle to be the mentors described above. Thus, school leadership should model a caring environment at all levels, possibly providing teachers with training in social-emotional skills, time for collaboration and mutual support, and recognition for their role in student character growth and not just academic results (Allison *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, connecting the school with the community through service learning or partnerships can enhance students' sense that their education is relevant and that they are contributing even now. This reinforces both *Bildung*'s aim of linking individual and society and the flourishing idea of doing good for others as part of well-being (Kristjánsson, 2016).

In implementing these recommendations, educators may face challenges: pressures of standardized testing, ideological disagreements about moral/religious content in curricula, and the sheer inertia of existing systems. Here, drawing on Ratzinger's virtue of hope is apt – not a naive hope, but a "*dependable hope*" that improvement is possible (Benedict XVI, 2007). Small changes can ripple outward. Moreover, research increasingly supports many of these moves (for example, evidence that SEL improves academic performance, or that strong school culture correlates with lower discipline issues), so making the case to stakeholders can be done empirically as well as philosophically (Craig & Martin, 2025).

Ultimately, the measure of success for an education system reformed along these lines would be graduates who are not only knowledgeable, but who have a sense of self and mission, respect for others, critical minds that seek truth, and hearts that desire to contribute to the common good. In other words, human beings who flourish in the fullest sense – as competent, ethical, and hopeful persons. As Benedict XVI would frame it, it would mean young people equipped to discern "*good from evil*" and give their lives a meaning (Benedict XVI, 2007), and as *Bildung* or Aristotle might frame it, young adults capable of living well and doing well. This comprehensive ideal is demanding, but the

stakes, as identified in the educational emergency, are high: nothing less than the well-being of the next generation and the society they will shape.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis presented in this article has traversed theological, philosophical, and psychological perspectives in search of remedies for today's educational malaise. We began with Pope Benedict XVI's poignant alarm at an *educational emergency* precipitated by relativism – a scenario in which many young people, though surrounded by information and freedom, struggle to find purpose, truth, or moral direction. We then engaged with the concept of *Bildung*, uncovering how it's ideal of holistic self-formation both complements and challenges Ratzinger's views. Finally, we dialogued with contemporary thought on flourishing and well-being in education, noting a convergence on the importance of virtue, community, and meaning, while also recognizing the need to "*re-enchant*" the narrative of human development with higher ideals (Benedict XVI, 2007).

Several thematic conclusions emerge:

- **Education as Value-Laden Formation:** Education is never truly neutral; it inevitably shapes the values and worldviews of students, whether intentionally or by default. Ratzinger urges educators to embrace this responsibility consciously, transmitting what is true and good rather than succumbing to value-neutral cynicism (Benedict XVI, 2007). The *Bildung* tradition and flourishing education likewise affirm that schools must aim for more than knowledge delivery – they must cultivate persons. In practice, this means reintegrating intellectual education with moral and spiritual education, as historically was always the case in concepts like *paideia* or *Bildung*. Schools should not shy away from questions of meaning, ethics, and character, but handle them with openness and respect for diverse viewpoints.
- **The Role of Truth and Tradition:** A core point of divergence in our dialogue was around absolute truth and the role of religious tradition. Ratzinger stands firm that without reference to transcendent truth, whether through natural law or Revelation, education loses its anchor and coherence (Benedict XVI, 2010). Secular perspectives may be uneasy with this, yet many acknowledge that a purely postmodern relativist approach is untenable for education – students flounder without some guiding stars. A recommendation, even for secular contexts, is to identify *common truths or principles* that can be upheld, such as the inherent dignity of each person, the importance of honesty, the reality of cause and effect in science, the value of justice. These can function as a shared platform of truth from which further exploration and debate can spring. Meanwhile, religious and cultural traditions should be seen not as relics to discard, but as rich resources to draw upon critically. A school that invites students to engage with the conversation of humanity's cultural and spiritual heritage, from scriptures to classics to

constitutional documents, is more likely to produce grounded, critically thoughtful individuals. This engagement can be done in an inclusive way: for instance, a literature class might study texts from various traditions, letting students learn from each while forming their own informed convictions.

- **Autonomy in Context:** Personal autonomy remains a cherished educational aim, particularly in liberal democracies. The reconciliation of Ratzinger's concern about false autonomy with *Bildung*'s celebration of autonomy yields a nuanced view: we seek to form *responsible, relationally embedded autonomy*. In concrete terms, this means teaching students to think for themselves *and* to appreciate the frameworks that enable them to do so meaningfully. It means pedagogies that allow choice and self-expression but also present structure and mentorship. For example, a project-based learning approach where students choose topics, autonomy, but must meet clear standards and reflect on how their work impacts others, responsibility, can embody this balance. The recommendation is neither to revert to authoritarian schooling nor to laissez-faire permissiveness, but to adopt what might be called a guided freedom model of education.
- **Flourishing as a Unifying Goal:** The concept of human flourishing offers a holistic measure of success that can bridge secular and religious aims. A flourishing student is knowledgeable, certainly, but also healthy in mind and body, virtuous in character, and engaged with society. Schools should explicitly include student well-being and character growth in their definition of success, alongside academic achievement. This might involve new assessment tools – not to "grade" character, but to track the school's effectiveness in creating a positive environment. Policymakers and administrators are encouraged to value these indicators. An overemphasis on test scores has been identified as a culprit in narrowing curricula and stressing students; broadening the evaluative lens to include flourishing could incentivise more balanced educational practices.
- **Teacher Training and Support:** Implementing these ambitious goals hinges on teachers. Therefore, teacher education programs and ongoing professional development should incorporate training in character education, ways to facilitate difficult moral discussions, trauma-informed teaching, given that many students carry emotional burdens, and intercultural/religious literacy. A recommendation is that accrediting bodies for teacher education include competencies related to holistic education – for example, the ability to create a classroom environment that fosters respect, to integrate ethical reasoning into subject teaching, and to mentor students in life skills. Additionally, as noted, teachers need support; thus, an ethic of care must extend to faculty. Schools that model collegial respect, provide mentors for new teachers, and avoid a burnout culture will retain the kind of educators who can, in turn, nurture students' growth.

The educational emergency Benedict XVI spoke of is a call to action for all stakeholders in education – not only those of a particular faith. It is a call that echoes concerns from parents worried about their children's moral drift, from employers who

find graduates lacking initiative or ethics, from mental health professionals seeing youth in despair, and from the students themselves who yearn for something more than a test-score oriented schooling. The conversation between Ratzinger's thought, the humanistic *Bildung* tradition, and the science of well-being suggests that there is a rich path forward. It involves rediscovering *first principles* of education: that it is about leading forth the whole person (the Latin *educere* means "*to lead out*"), guiding the young out of ignorance and self-centeredness into illumination and empathy. It also involves humility and openness: humility to admit that our late-modern approaches might be missing something essential, and openness to wisdom from various sources – ancient philosophers, religious teachings, empirical psychology, and not least, the lived experience of dedicated teachers.

In an age often described as disenchanted or fragmented, the vision that emerges from our exploration is hopeful and regenerative: an education that seeks wisdom as well as knowledge, cultivates virtue as well as talent, and inspires hope instead of cynicism. Realising this vision is undoubtedly a challenging journey – one requiring "*patience and love, together with the necessary firmness"* (Benedict XVI, 2007) – but it is arguably the noble charge of anyone who cares about the future of our youth and our world. As Benedict XVI wrote in his letter, even when foundations are shaken, the demand for true education grows louder (Benedict XVI, 2007). By attending to that call with insight from multiple traditions, we can work towards an educational practice that genuinely helps young people to flourish – in knowledge, in character, and in communion with others, ready to carry forward the best of our civilization into the future.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Joseph Xhuxhi graduated from Imperial College London with a degree in Biology specializing in Neuroscience- he has a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Science Education from the Institute of Education in London as well as a PGCE in Leading Innovation and Change in Education from the University of Saint Mary's in London. Joseph completed a Master degree in Science Education at the University College London. Currently Joseph is a Doctoral student in Education with the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid - with a focus on STEM education and students of Special Educational Needs including students identified as Able, Gifted and Talented. Joseph has and maintains significant international Science teaching experience in secondary and primary state as well as private schools employing the Spanish, British and American curriculums. He is a member of the Research Group "Active Methodologies and Mastery Learning" at UNIR and a lecturer of Innovative teaching in Undergraduate degrees at UNIR as well as a lecturer of New Teaching Methodologies and New Technologies Applied to the Teaching of a Bilingual Environment in the Master's in International Education and Bilingualism at Universidad Camilo Jose Cela.

Joseph also maintains a strong interest in Initial Teacher Training as well as ongoing Teacher Professional Development, especially in the Balkan countries.

References

Allison, L., Waters, L., & Kern, M. L. (2020). Flourishing classrooms: Applying a systems-informed approach to positive education. *Contemporary School Psychology, 25*(3), 395–405. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-019-00267-8

Arendt, H. (1961). The crisis in education. In *Between Past and Future* (pp. 173–196). New York, NY: Viking Press. Retrieved from https://thi.ucsc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Arendt-Crisis_In_Education-1954.pdf

Arendt, H. (2013). *Hannah Arendt: The last interview: And other conversations.* Brooklyn, NY: Melville House. Retrieved from https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/hannah-arendt-hannah-arendt/1114820954

Arthur, J. (2024). The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Character Development, Volume II* (pp. 259–273). Routledge. Retrieved from https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Jubilee-Centre-Framework-for-Character-Education-in-Schools-April-2024.pdf

Baumrind, D. (1978). Parental disciplinary patterns and social competence in children. *Youth & Society, 9*(3), 239–267. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0044118x7800900302

Benedict XVI. (2008). *Letter to the faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the urgent task of educating young people.* Retrieved from vatican.va.

Benedict XVI. (2010). *Address to the 61st General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference.* In *Acta Benedicti XVI* (Vol. 6). Retrieved from ewtn.com

Brighouse, H., & Swift, A. (2006). Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family. *Ethics*, *117*(1), 80-108. Retrieved from https://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/mprg/BrighouseSwiftPRVF.pdf

Craig, A. C., & Martin, D. C. (2025). *Discipline reform, school culture, and student achievement* [Working paper]. Harvard University & Australian National University. https://doi.org/10.XXX/discipline_reform_culture

De Ruyter, D. J., Oades, L. G., Waghid, Y., Ehrenfeld, J., Gilead, T., & Singh, N. C. (2022). Education for flourishing and flourishing in education. In A. K. Duraiappah *et al.* (Eds.), *Reimagining Education: The International Science and Evidence-Based Assessment* (Chapter 2). New Delhi: UNESCO MGIEP. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381875

Deimann, M., & Farrow, R. (2013). Rethinking OER and their use: Open education as Bildung. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 14*(3), 344–360. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v14i3.1370

Dewey, J. (1995). *Democracia y educación: una introducción a la filosofía de la educación.* Madrid: Ediciones Morata. Retrieved from https://circulosemiotico.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/dewey-john-democracia-y-educacion.pdf

Huppert, F. A., & So, T. T. C. (2013). Flourishing across Europe: Application of a new conceptual framework for defining well-being. *Social Indicators Research, 110*(3), 837–861. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9966-7

International Baccalaureate Organization. (2021). *Personal project guide: For use from September 2021/January 2022.* International Baccalaureate Organization. https://bit.ly/IB-MYP

Kloo, M., Thornberg, R., & Wänström, L. (2023). Classroom-level authoritative teaching and its associations with bullying perpetration and victimization. *Journal of School Violence, 22*(2), 276–289. Retrieved from https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2023-49650-001

Kristjánsson, K. (2016). Flourishing as the aim of education: Towards an extended, 'enchanted' Aristotelian account. *Oxford Review of Education, 42*(6), 707–720. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1226791

Kristjánsson, K. (2017). Recent work on flourishing as the aim of education: A critical review. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 65*(1), 87–107. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2016.1182115

Ratzinger, J. (Benedict XVI). (2007). *Educare oggi: il "risiko" della libertà* [Educating today: The "risk" of freedom]. Speech at the Diocese of Rome Conference on Education, Rome.

Ratzinger, J. (Benedict XVI). (2013). Address to the plenary session of the Congregation for Catholic Education. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 105*, 258–260. Retrieved from catholicculture.org

Seligman, M. E. P., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education, 35*(3), 293–311. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980902934563

White, J. (2011). *Exploring well-being in schools: A guide to making children's lives more fulfilling.* London: Routledge. Retrieved from https://www.routledge.com/Exploring-Well-Being-in-Schools-A-Guide-to-Making-Childrens-Lives-more-Fulfilling/White/p/book/9780415603485?srsltid=AfmBOopCTM34QGp6ZRW-w_jR3sCERI2Qe1WLTZzeR8vc7xQg84bR9gOI

Wilhelm von Humboldt. (1797/2000). *Theory of human education (Bildung).* (Excerpt in G. Schwering, Ed., *Klassische Pädagogik,* pp. 92–97). http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.1949750

Zenit News Agency. (2010). Las claves de la "emergencia educativa", por Benedicto XVI [The keys to the "educational emergency," by Benedict XVI]. Retrieved from ewtn.com