

RETHINKING THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Creating conditions for thriving in India, Peru,
and South Africa

*Sreehari Ravindranath, Anne Mc Lennan, Valeria Duarte, Natasha Luther, and Modupe Olateju,
with Shilpi Saini and Abhijeet Mishra*



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ACRONYMS

CUE	Center for Universal Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EIB	Educación Intercultural Bilingüe (Intercultural Bilingual Education)
NEST	Network for Education Systems Transformation
NOC	Narratives of Change
UGEL	Unidad de Gestión Educativa Local (Local Educational Management Unit)

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition used in this study
Agency	The capacity of learners, educators, and communities to influence decisions, participate meaningfully, and shape their own futures.
Belonging	The experience of being recognized, accepted, included, and connected within education communities.
Dignity	The recognition of every learner as inherently valuable and worthy of respect, regardless of performance or achievement.
Education purpose	The underlying aims, values, and aspirations that education systems seek to achieve, including but not limited to academic achievement, citizenship, well-being, social justice, economic participation, and human flourishing.
Education transformation	Changes in education systems involving shifts in structures, relationships, power arrangements, and underlying assumptions about the purpose of education.
Exploration circles	Structured dialogic spaces designed to surface diverse narratives, assumptions, tensions, and perspectives about education purpose rather than produce consensus.
Global South	Not merely a geographic category, but a set of historically and politically situated contexts shaped by colonial legacies, unequal power relations, and diverse knowledge traditions that contribute important perspectives to global education debates.
Global South paradox	An analytical construct describing how progressive education aspirations coexist with institutional architectures shaped by historically layered education purposes. In many Global South contexts, contemporary aspirations for wellbeing, agency, and holistic development often struggle for legitimization within governance systems shaped by colonial legacies, nation-building, and human capital agendas.
Mindsets	Often invisible assumptions, beliefs, and cultural narratives that shape how actors understand learners, teachers, knowledge, success, and the purpose of education itself.
Narratives	Socially shared systems of meaning that shape how actors understand the purpose of education, define success, identify problems, and imagine desirable futures.
Power	The distribution of authority, legitimacy, and decision-making within education systems.
Purpose (thriving dimension)	The extent to which learning is experienced as meaningful and connected to personal aspirations, community, and collective futures.
Relationships	The everyday interactions through which education purposes are enacted, negotiated, and experienced.
Social justice	An orientation toward addressing inequities through recognition, redistribution, representation, participation, and transformation of structural barriers.
System transformation	Changes that extend beyond programs and policies to alter underlying assumptions, relationships, incentives, power structures, and institutional arrangements.
Thriving	A systemic and relational condition in which individuals and communities have opportunities to experience dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose. Thriving is viewed as a property of systems and environments rather than an individual trait.
Thriving-oriented education system	An education system that intentionally creates conditions for dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose while balancing other legitimate education goals.

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ABOUT NEST

The Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST) is a global impact network¹ co-led by CUE at The Brookings Institution and 10 civil society organizations across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia. NEST's goal is to understand how education systems can transform to prioritize a “breadth of skills”: an integrated set of academic, social and emotional, and transversal competencies that enable all children and young people to thrive (Care et al. 2016; UNESCO n.d.).

To pursue this goal, NEST adopted a phased approach to inquiry. The first phase consisted of 10 country-level studies. Each study explored how systemic transformation toward a breadth of skills was—or was not—taking shape within each local context.

These studies drew on two complementary frameworks: the 3Cs of education systems transformation (commitment, capacity, and cohesion) and the 4Ps (purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power) (CUE 2022; Sengeh and Winthrop 2022; Winthrop et al. 2023). Through our collective inquiry, we arrived at a definition of education systems transformation as the intentional, continuing and values-driven renegotiation of what an education system is for, and the coherent repositioning of every component behind that refreshing of purpose. It begins with an understanding of whether the goals of the system meet the moment, address equity and build resilience for a changing world, and whether these goals are fully context aware, and collectively owned by a diversity of education system actors.

Central to our work is a shared exploratory question: How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? This question acknowledges that, while concepts like “education systems,” “opportunities,” and “what matters” may differ across contexts, what binds the network is our collective commitment to understanding how education systems can transform to prioritize the development of a breadth of skills in all children and young people.



¹ Impact networks are complex living systems, made of interacting people, organizations, and ecosystems. In contrast to traditional organizations with linear processes and standard operating procedures, networks are dynamic, interconnected, and variable. For details about the model of impact networks, see Ehrlichman (2021).

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Based on the 10 country studies, NEST undertook the second phase of research. This second phase focused on three collaborative, cohort-based research initiatives to further examine the patterns, tensions, and opportunities that emerged across contexts.

The three initiatives examined the what, who, and how of education systems transformation:

What

The breadth of learning opportunities (BOLO) study asked what young people have the opportunity to learn.

Who

The youth agency (YA) study examined who gets to shape those decisions and whether young people are meaningfully included.

How

The narratives of change and the purpose of education (NOC) study explored how deeply held beliefs about the purpose of education influence policy, practice, and the possibilities for systemic transformation.

Together, the three lines of inquiry address the core of NEST's shared research focus: **How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters?** The three study reports contribute to emerging learning from the Global South on what it takes to transform education systems toward a breadth of skills and further build the field of education systems transformation.

While drafting this report, the authors used generative AI tools such as Anthropic's Claude, Microsoft's Co-Pilot, OpenAI's ChatGPT, and Perplexity AI. We used these tools, in limited cases, to summarize research articles, locate sources, condense and edit text, and produce graphics. We reviewed and revised the outputs for factual accuracy and checked for plagiarism prior to publication. The AI tools did not contribute any original ideas to the report.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Health Media Lab, Inc., Washington, D.C., USA.

About Dream a Dream

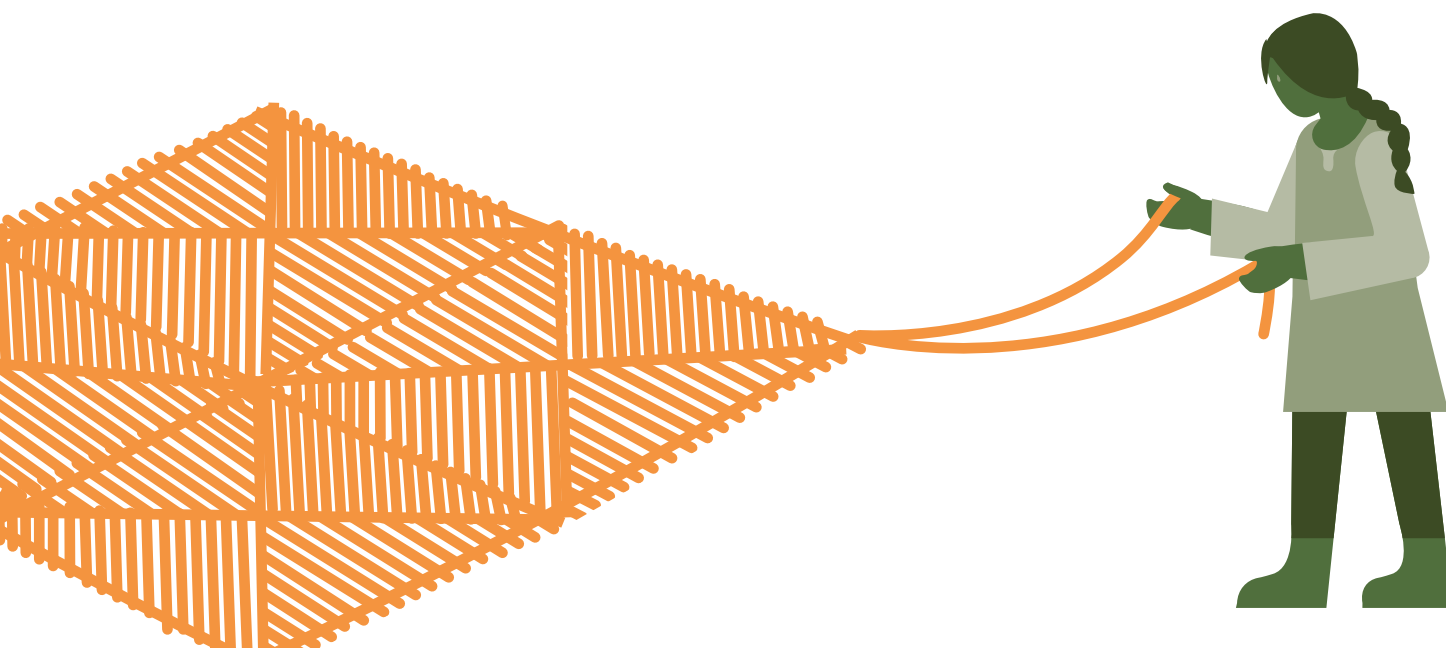
Dream a Dream is a nonprofit organization in India transforming the experience of education for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since 1999, the organization has worked to mainstream life skills and socioemotional learning as critical components in helping children overcome adversity and learn to thrive. Dream a Dream aims to shift the purpose of education toward the idea of thriving for every child.

About Enseña Perú

Enseña Perú (EP) is a nonprofit organization of Teach for All that believes in the power of education and the potential of all Peruvians. It works towards ensuring that by 2032, at least 8 out of 10 children and youth receive a high-quality education. Grounded in trust, shared purpose, and joint responsibility, EP accompanies learners at different stages of their education journey to strengthen agency and contribute to community-driven education transformation.

About SmartStart

SmartStart is South Africa's largest network of quality, affordable early learning providers, each week serving over 160,000 children ages 3 to 5 through a model that positions local women as franchisees, delivering early learning in their communities. SmartStart establishes program resources for affordable home- and community-based learning and operates through a central hub alongside decentralized nonprofit partners, prioritizing problem-solving powered by local actors' agency in diverse contexts.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As education systems are increasingly expected to promote economic participation, foster democratic citizenship, support wellbeing and inclusion, and prepare young people for uncertain futures shaped by inequality, technological change, migration, climate pressures, and democratic fragility, the scope of their responsibilities continues to expand. Yet education reform remains heavily influenced by accountability frameworks, standardization, and an emphasis on measurable learning outcomes (Biesta 2009, 2010; OECD 2019; UNESCO 2021). In this context, a foundational understanding of what education is for often remains insufficiently examined. To meaningfully transform education systems and meet today's complex demands, it is essential to critically question and clarify their underlying purpose.

In this study we explore the following research question:

How do prevailing narratives of the purpose of education shape systemic transformation, and in what ways do their interactions enable or constrain every child's opportunity to thrive across diverse contexts?

Education systems transformation cannot be understood without questioning the purpose of education. Education systems are not merely collections of policies, institutions, programs, and assessments. They are also shaped by narratives: socially shared systems of meaning that define what education is for, what counts as success, whose knowledge is valued, and what futures are considered desirable. Historically, education has carried multiple and sometimes competing purposes, including economic participation, citizenship, cultural transmission, social mobility, nation-building, moral development, social justice, and human flourishing. Contemporary systems layer newer aspirations for well-being, agency, inclusion, sustainability, and holistic development onto older institutional architectures designed for performance management, selection, standardization, and accountability.

This report conceptualizes this tension as the Global South paradox: the coexistence of progressive education aspirations with institutional architectures that continue to privilege standardization, accountability, credentialism, and performance management. Colonial legacies, post-independence nation-building, human capital development, accountability reform, and aspirations for holistic development coexist within the same systems, often without being reconciled. As a result, education systems describe thriving in policy documents but fail to integrate it into institutional and operational structures. The study used thriving as a normative and analytical lens. Understood as a systemic and relational condition in which young learners and communities have opportunities to experience dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose.

To identify purposes of education, the study used Exploration Circles, a dialogic space developed by Dream a Dream that brings together diverse education actors to surface narratives, assumptions, tensions, and aspirations about education

Education systems transformation cannot be understood without questioning the purpose of education.

purpose. Across India, Peru, and South Africa, Exploration Circles were conducted with educators, school leaders, policymakers, civil society actors, researchers, parents, and young people.

Findings

Across India, Peru, and South Africa, the findings show that education systems carry plural and expansive narratives of purpose. India's National Education Policy 2020 articulates holistic development, creativity, citizenship, empathy, well-being, and aspiration to become a "global knowledge superpower" (Government of India, 2020). Peru's National Curriculum for Basic Education and National Education Project 2036 emphasize competency development, democratic coexistence, intercultural dialogue, collective well-being, and social participation (MINEDU 2017; CNE 2020). Peru's intercultural bilingual education policies further introduce concepts such as critical interculturality and Allin Kawsay, linking education purpose to reciprocity, territorial belonging, and the transformation of unequal social relations (MINEDU 2024). South Africa's early childhood care and education policies position early learning as a rights-oriented project tied to holistic development, redress, democratic transformation, and social justice (Department of Basic Education, South Africa 2011).

These purposes do not carry equal institutional power. Across all three contexts, purposes associated with economic productivity, readiness, academic achievement, employability, measurable learning, and compliance are strongly embedded in governance, accountability, funding, and assessment systems. In contrast, dignity, belonging, learner agency, cultural continuity, and collective wellbeing are widely expressed as education aspirations but are less consistently embedded within institutional arrangements, pedagogical practice, and accountability systems. Consequently, these purposes are less likely to be systematically nurtured, rewarded, measured, or recognized within the everyday functioning of education systems.

In examining different perspectives of the purposes of education, a relational systems framework for thriving conditions emerged:

1. **Narratives of purpose** across the three countries are reproduced through the interplay of mindsets, power, and relationships. Mindsets shape what becomes normalized and externalized through definitions of learning quality—determining which learners are seen as capable, which languages are valued, and which futures are worth preparing for—while power decides whose narratives become institutionalized and whose remain marginal. These dynamics are lived and reinforced through relationships and everyday experiences. In India, formal access to education can coexist with routine experiences of indignity; in Peru, students who are expressive and authoritative in their mother tongue may become silent when instruction shifts to Spanish; and in South Africa, practitioners and parents bear responsibility for children's development within under-resourced systems while remaining peripheral to decisions about purpose, funding, and quality.

These dynamics are lived and reinforced through relationships and everyday experiences.

Agency is consistently named as essential but rarely supported by institutional arrangements that redistribute authority.

2. **Relationships and power** across the three countries reveal that participants locate the meaning and value of education in relationships—with teachers, caregivers, peers, families, communities, territories, languages, and themselves. In Peru, learners recalled teachers who inspired them, visited families' homes, created a sense of safety, and recognized their potential. In South Africa, early learning was described as embedded in networks of care, storytelling, grandparents, extended family, and community life, while in India participants reflected that education had provided “some great teachers” but also distanced them from relationships with nature, communities, parents, friends, and even the self. Across contexts, relational conditions—safety, trust, care, respect, and recognition—were central to dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose; yet these conditions were unevenly sustained, often depending on individual actors rather than being structurally supported through system design.
3. **Governance and measurement** across the three countries show that systems primarily reward attendance, examination scores, compliance, credentialing, reporting, and adherence to budgets, while struggling to recognize less measurable but equally critical dimensions such as the quality of relationships, trust between learners and educators, cultural responsiveness, dignity in everyday interactions, learner agency, and belonging. In South Africa, early childhood care and education practitioners described compliance with registration systems as the primary pathway to securing government funding, reinforcing administrative priorities over relational ones. In India, participants observed that achievement, memorization, attendance, and narrowly defined skills are systematically measured, while friendships, joy, curiosity, trust, creativity, and agency remain largely invisible within formal assessment structures. In Peru, participants expressed strong value for indigenous language, territorial belonging, and intercultural learning, yet pointed to systems that insufficiently prepare teachers for bilingual and intercultural education and fail to recognize local priorities as indicators of education success.

Together, these dynamics produce a contested space in which thriving is negotiated. Dignity is widely affirmed but often structurally undermined. Agency is consistently named as essential but rarely supported by institutional arrangements that redistribute authority. Belonging is valued not merely as access but as recognition and connection, yet systems often reduce inclusion to participation in existing structures. Purpose is strongly articulated by learners, families, communities, and practitioners, but the purposes they name are not always treated as legitimate objects of education investment.



Reopening the Purpose Question: Toward Socially Just Education Systems

1. Make Education purpose an ongoing governance question: Education purpose should be continuously revisited through policy, funding, curriculum, and accountability decisions, making explicit which aims are prioritized, which are sidelined, and how trade-offs are made.
2. Move from participation to democratic influence: Engagement must shift from consultation to decision-shaping power, with stakeholder input directly informing priorities, resources, and accountability through embedded governance mechanisms.
3. Treat relationships as Education infrastructure: Trust, belonging, and care are foundational system conditions for learning and thriving and should be intentionally resourced, protected, and treated as core infrastructure—not optional add-ons.
4. Evaluate system conditions, not only reform delivery: Evaluation should examine the institutional conditions, incentives, and power dynamics that shape how reforms are enacted and experienced, not just whether they were implemented.
5. Use tensions as sites of inquiry and transformation: Competing education purposes should be surfaced and examined—rather than hidden—so systems can make explicit, ethical choices about whose priorities are advanced and at what cost.

Introduction

This report is for education practitioners, policymakers, funders, civil society actors, researchers, and others working to reshape education systems around a clearer sense of their purpose for children and young people. It asks readers to move beyond “transformation” efforts that start with programs, policies, or delivery mechanisms, and instead to reopen the question of what education is for.

The report proceeds in four chapters. Chapter 1 sets the conceptual foundation, grounding the inquiry in a reflexive, relational approach and introducing three guiding concepts: narratives, thriving, and the Global South paradox. Chapter 2 outlines the Exploration Circles methodology and the iterative movement between theory and evidence across India, Peru, and South Africa. Chapter 3 presents the findings, organized around narratives of purpose, governance and measurement, and relational conditions, with a comparative synthesis across cases. Chapter 4 closes with an invitation: five implications for treating educational purpose as an ongoing question of democratic governance, along with practical reflection tools. Appendices include facilitation resources for Exploration Circles.

01.

EDUCATION PURPOSE, THRIVING, AND AN EMERGING GLOBAL SOUTH PARADOX

This chapter provides the conceptual foundation for the inquiry, situates it within a reflexive and relational understanding of education research, resurfaces the purpose question as central to education systems transformation, and introduces the key concepts that guide the analysis. The chapter also presents the analytical framework, situates the inquiry in its geographical contexts, and presents the study's comparative orientation.

Any inquiry into the purpose of education carries assumptions about values, power, and the kinds of futures that education systems seek to create.

Education research is never entirely neutral. Questions about the purpose of education, what constitutes success, whose knowledge counts, and whose futures matter are normative, political, and ethical, reflecting particular assumptions about societal development, human flourishing, and the role of public institutions in society. Any inquiry into the purpose of education carries assumptions about values, power, and the kinds of futures that education systems seek to create.

This study adopted a reflexive approach, recognizing that researchers' identities, perspectives, and biases shape their interpretation of qualitative data. These interpretations were grounded in the lived experiences of researchers and practitioners working within education systems in India, Peru, and South Africa. Across and within these contexts, authors have observed education systems striving to address complex and often competing priorities such as expanding access while improving quality, responding to labor market demands while promoting citizenship, strengthening accountability while nurturing creativity, and advancing holistic development within systems that remain deeply shaped by performance pressure.

These experiences have revealed a tension at the heart of contemporary education reform. Across policy documents, reform agendas, and public discourse, there is growing recognition that education should contribute to academic achievement and to well-being, agency, inclusion, sustainability, social cohesion, and holistic human development (OECD 2019; UNESCO 2021; UNESCO MGIEP 2022). However, the institutional structures through which education systems operate often continue to prioritize standardization, measurement, accountability, credentialism, and forms of success that privilege what is easily measurable over what is deeply meaningful (Biesta 2009, 2010; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Verger et al. 2018).

This tension is not unique to any one country. It has been observed across diverse education contexts, where expanding aspirations for holistic development coexist with institutional arrangements historically designed around performance, selection, and accountability (Tikly 2016; UNESCO 2021; OECD 2019). These patterns suggest the need for a deeper inquiry into the purposes that education systems are attempting to serve and the conditions under which those purposes become institutionalized.

Therefore, this study was informed by an interdependent understanding of education systems. We do not view education systems as collections of policies, organizations, programs, or interventions. Instead, education systems are understood as dynamic social and political arrangements shaped by the interaction of mindsets, power, and relationships.

By examining how different narratives of education purpose are articulated, negotiated, and institutionalized across diverse contexts, this study sought to generate insights into how education systems can better navigate competing priorities and create conditions that support dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose for all learners.

1.1 WHY IS THE PURPOSE QUESTION IMPORTANT AGAIN?

Globally, education systems are increasingly called upon to respond to complex challenges, including climate change, democratic fragility, widening inequality, large-scale migration, mental health concerns, and rapid technological change. These interconnected challenges are reshaping the conditions within which young people live, learn, and imagine their futures, raising important questions about whether existing education systems are adequately equipped to respond (OECD 2019; UNESCO 2021).

Education systems are organized around particular visions of valued knowledge, successful learners, responsible citizens, and desirable futures. Consequently, debates about education quality and reform are inseparable from deeper questions concerning what societies believe education ought to achieve and whose aspirations, values, and futures are ultimately prioritized (Duarte et al. 2026; Mc Lennan et al. 2026; Ravindranath et al. 2026).

Historically, education purposes are not singular. Across societies and historical periods, education has been expected to fulfill multiple and sometimes competing functions. Education has been viewed as a mechanism for transmitting cultural knowledge, building national identity, promoting economic development, cultivating democratic citizenship, advancing social mobility, reproducing social order, fostering moral development, and enabling personal fulfillment. Philosophers, sociologists, educators, and policymakers have theorized and debated how to balance and prioritize these purposes (Dewey 1916; Durkheim 1922; Freire 1970; Biesta 2010; Labaree 1997).

Meanwhile, a growing body of scholarship has further expanded the conversation about what education should accomplish. While literacy, numeracy, and academic learning remain essential (World Bank 2025), researchers have recently highlighted the importance of well-being (White 2017), social and emotional development (Jones et al. 2019), agency (Sen 1999; Biesta 2020), belonging (Allen et al. 2021), creativity (Robinson 2011), ethical reasoning and civic engagement (Nussbaum 2010), and adaptability to social and technological change (OECD 2019) as important dimensions of education success.

Conventional explanations often frame the tensions that emerge from competing education purposes as implementation challenges. Education systems are frequently described as failing to translate progressive policy aspirations into practice (Angrist 2024; Benavides et al. 2025). However, such explanations may overlook the deeper structural challenges that systems face when pursuing multiple purposes simultaneously.

Purpose matters. Purpose shapes what education systems choose to value, measure, reward, and ignore (Biesta 2009, 2010). Purpose influences whose

knowledge is recognized, whose aspirations are legitimized, and whose futures become visible in education policy and practice (Apple 2004; Fraser 2008; Kumar 1992; Balarin 2010 Young 1990). Through discourse and institutional arrangements, education purposes define what counts as success, establish priorities for reform, and shape the boundaries of what is desirable and possible within education systems (Schmidt, 2008). Education transformation is not simply an issue of improving systems but also of determining which systems to improve and how and toward what ends.

Guided by this premise, the central research question of this study was: How do prevailing narratives of the purpose of education shape systemic transformation, and in what ways do their interactions enable or constrain every child's opportunity to thrive across diverse contexts?

The study examined how different purpose narratives are articulated in policy and practice; how they interact through systems of power, relationships, and institutional arrangements; and how these interactions shape the conditions for thriving. Focusing on the cases of India, Peru, and South Africa, the study adopted a comparative and relational approach to understanding how global and local dynamics intersect in shaping education transformation.

1.2 WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN GLOBAL EDUCATION REFORM THAT MAKES THIS QUESTION IMPORTANT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH?

Education transformation is not simply an issue of improving systems but also of determining which systems to improve, how, and towards what end.

Over the past three decades, education reform agendas have increasingly been shaped by transnational policy networks, international assessment regimes, global development frameworks, and evidence-based approaches to education improvement. International organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, and UNICEF, together with philanthropic foundations and other non-state actors, have played influential roles in shaping reform priorities across countries. These actors have facilitated the circulation of policy ideas and normative frameworks concerning education quality, accountability, learning outcomes, competencies, and system effectiveness (Meyer et al. 1997; Steiner-Khamsi 2014; Verger et al. 2018).

Although these developments have generated important advances in access, learning, and system performance, global reform movements have also contributed to a growing convergence around understandings of education success. Contemporary education systems continue to rely heavily on industrial-era governance tools such as standardization, benchmarking, performance

These shifting and competing education purposes make the Global South paradox a constitutive feature of contemporary education transformation.

metrics, and large-scale assessments to define education success. While effective for monitoring foundational outcomes at scale, these tools are often less well suited to deepening the broader skills and competencies that are increasingly valued in contemporary societies (Meyer et al. 1997; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Verger et al. 2018).

The result is that many education systems operate as repositories of accumulated aspirations rather than as coherent expressions of a single education vision. New purposes are added to existing systems without reconfiguring the institutional arrangements through which education is governed and delivered. For example, holistic development can be introduced into curricula while examinations remain unchanged. Learner agency may be promoted through policy discourse while decision-making structures remain highly centralized. Well-being may become a reform priority, while accountability systems continue to reward measurable performance above all else. This is the paradox: the outcome goes against the progressive aspiration. In fact, the aspiration hides or legitimizes the narrower focus.

This framing is particularly relevant for countries in the Global South, where a historical layering of multiple education projects persists in contemporary systems. Colonial administrations established systems designed to serve administrative and political functions. Post-colonial governments often repositioned education as an instrument of nation-building, citizenship formation, and social integration. Subsequent periods of economic liberalization introduced concerns about human capital development, productivity, competitiveness, and workforce preparation. Recent approaches to education reform often reflect global conversations around well-being, inclusion, sustainability, and holistic development. These shifting and competing education purposes make the Global South paradox a constitutive feature of contemporary education transformation.

1.3 WHY DO NARRATIVES MATTER IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Narratives are mechanisms through which people interpret reality and shape beliefs, identities, relationships, and actions. If education transformation is shaped by competing visions of what education is for, then understanding transformation requires understanding the narratives through which those visions are articulated, legitimized, contested, and institutionalized.

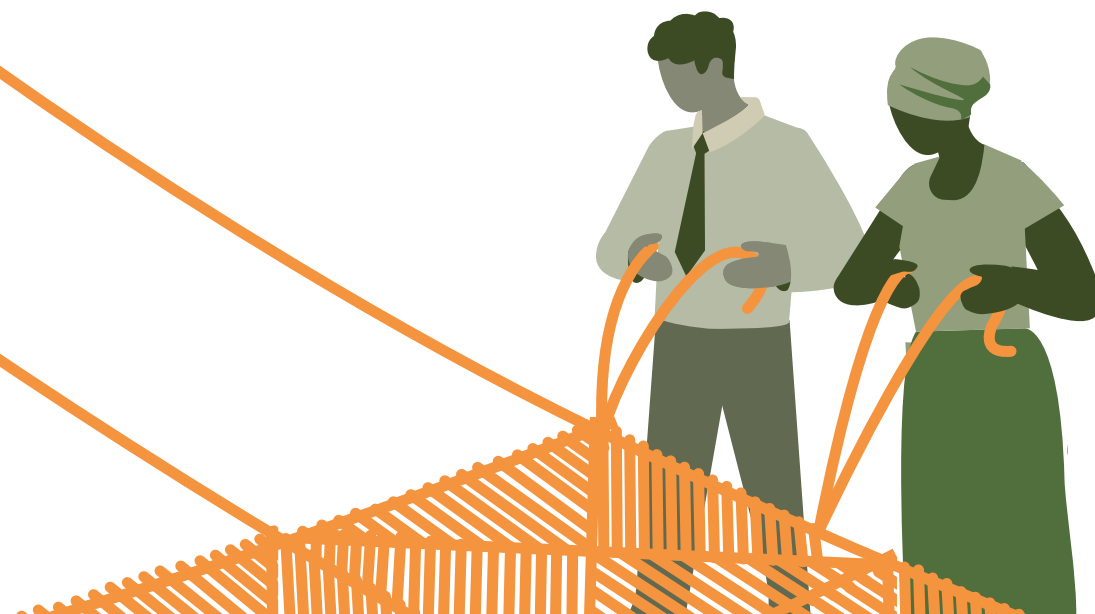
Education transformation can be examined through a range of perspectives, including institutional arrangements, governance structures, political economy, policy processes, and organizational change. However, because this study focuses specifically on how educational purposes are defined, negotiated, and enacted,

narratives provide a particularly useful analytical lens. Education purposes are not directly observable within institutions alone; they become visible through the interpretive frameworks, meanings, and assumptions through which actors understand what education is for. Narratives therefore offer a means of examining how different visions of education gain legitimacy, shape decision-making, and influence educational change over time.

Narratives move beyond stories, as socially shared systems of meaning through which individuals and institutions understand the world. Narratives organize experiences, establish legitimacy, define priorities, and shape collective action (Bruner 1991; Somers 1994; Schmidt 2008). They provide answers to fundamental questions, such as: What is education for? What counts as success? What kind of learners should schools cultivate? What knowledge is valuable? What futures are worth preparing for?

Narratives rarely exist in isolation from one another. Rather, contemporary education systems are characterized by the coexistence of multiple and often competing narratives that interact in complex ways (Somers 1994; Schmidt 2008). Some narratives reinforce one another, whereas others compete for legitimacy and influence. Over time, certain narratives become institutionalized through policy frameworks, governance arrangements, assessment systems, and professional norms, while others remain peripheral, contested, or largely aspirational (Schmidt 2008; Steiner-Khamsi 2014; Verger et al. 2018). The resulting landscape is frequently characterized by negotiation, tension, compromise, and contradiction, reflecting the layered and historically contingent nature of education change (Ball 1993; Fullan 2007; Verger et al. 2018).

These layered narratives help explain why education transformation is often experienced as both progressive and constrained in nature. They illuminate how systems can simultaneously pursue inclusion and exclusion, agency and control, well-being and performance, innovation and compliance. Narratives bridge the study's central analytical dimensions of mindsets, power, and relationships. This is discussed in chapter 3.



1.4 THRIVING AS AN EMERGING SYSTEMIC CONDITION AND A NORMATIVE EVALUATIVE LENS

If education systems simultaneously pursue multiple and sometimes competing purposes, on what basis can we assess whether particular configurations contribute to more equitable, humane, and desirable education futures? Thriving, which is commonly seen as an individual and static outcome of education reform, was used in this study as a normative and evaluative lens against which prevailing narratives of education purpose, and their institutional manifestations, were assessed (see Figure 2, Chapter 2).

Thriving is a higher-order systemic condition. Thriving is not an individual outcome or additional indicator but the emergent quality of an education system in which dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose are structurally enabled. As a condition for socially just transformation, thriving reorganizes education purposes, power, relationships, and institutional arrangements around the possibility that all children and communities can flourish with dignity.

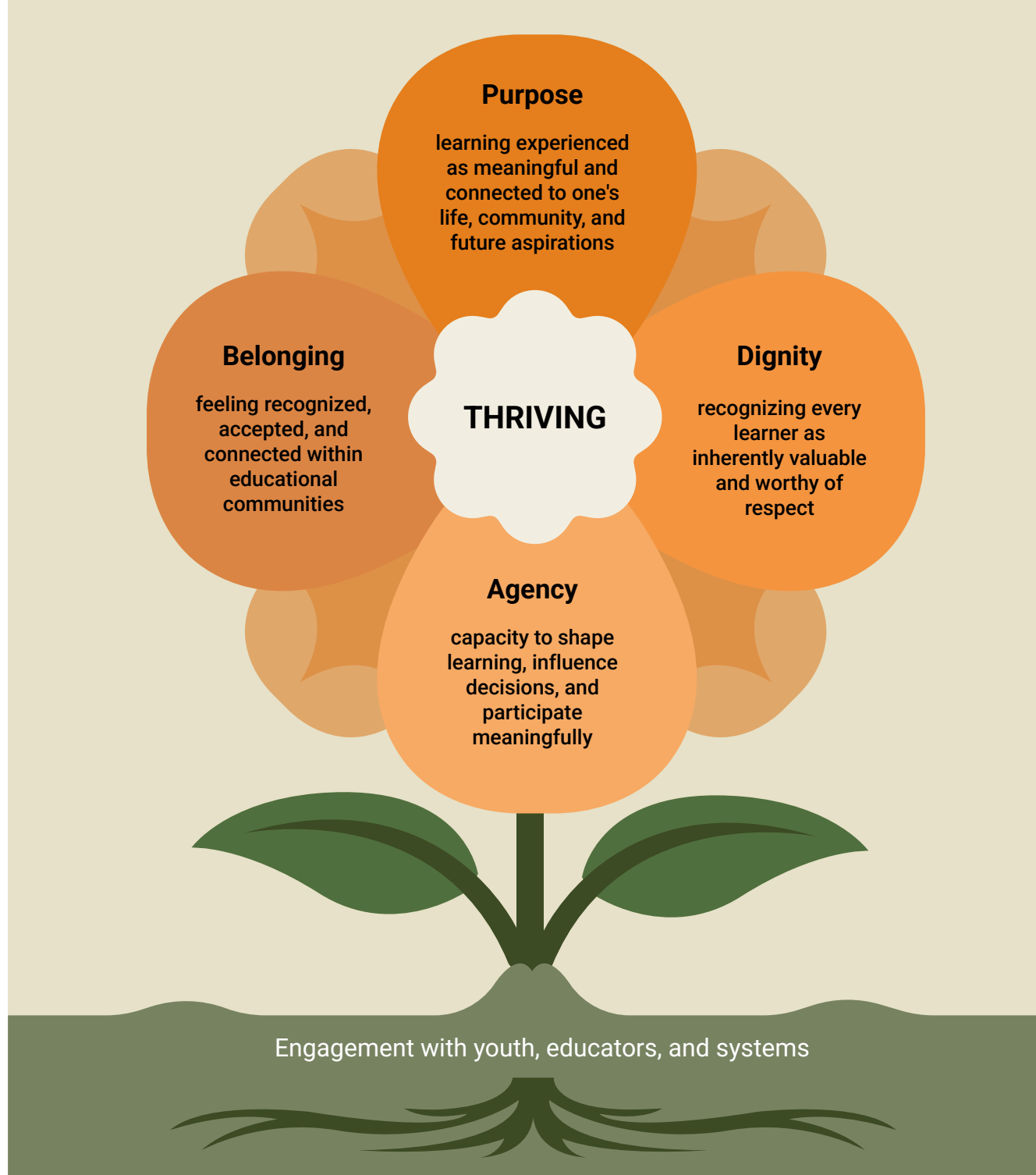
Thriving is a contested concept. Emerging debates around artificial intelligence, technological change, climate disruption, democratic citizenship, and social cohesion highlight how the definition of thriving is neither static nor universally agreed upon (UNESCO 2021; UNESCO MGIEP 2022; Selwyn 2019).

Therefore, this study's understanding of thriving was drawn from several intellectual traditions. Capability theory emphasizes the importance of expanding people's substantive freedom to pursue lives they have reason to value (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). Relational approaches to well-being argue that well-being emerges not simply from individual attributes but from social relationships, recognition, participation, and the quality of institutional environments (White 2017). Critical and decolonial perspectives highlight the importance of dignity, voice, recognition, and justice in shaping opportunities for flourishing, particularly for historically marginalized communities (Fraser 2008; Santos 2014). Together, these traditions suggest that thriving is best understood as a condition produced through social, political, institutional, and relational arrangements.

In this study, the evaluative criterion of thriving was applied through four interconnected dimensions, shown in Figure 1: dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose. Rather than being derived from a single theoretical tradition, these dimensions emerged through ongoing dialogue with young people, educators, practitioners, and education systems. By adopting thriving as its central evaluative criterion, this study moved beyond binary debates about education success and failure, toward an understanding of the kinds of education systems that do, and do not, create the conditions under which all children and young people can thrive.

FIGURE 1: FOUR DIMENSIONS OF THRIVING

By adopting thriving as its central evaluative lens, this study moved beyond binary debates about education success and failure, toward an understanding of the kinds of education systems that do and do not create conditions under which all children and young people thrive.



1.5 EXPLORING EDUCATION PURPOSE ACROSS INDIA, PERU, AND SOUTH AFRICA

We explored these dynamics in India, Peru, and South Africa. Each context brings a distinct history, governance structure, and policy trajectory, offering a different manifestation of the Global South paradox and a valuable basis for comparative inquiry. The findings identified in this report should be understood as illustrative rather than representative of the Global South as a whole.



INDIA: Holistic transformation within a large and diverse education system

Home to one of the largest education systems in the world, India has experienced substantial expansion in access to schooling over recent decades, while simultaneously grappling with questions of quality, equity, relevance, and inclusion.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is one of the most ambitious education reform efforts in India's recent history. The policy explicitly calls for a shift away from rote learning and narrow academic achievement toward holistic development, competency-based learning, multidisciplinary education, flexibility, creativity, critical thinking, socioemotional well-being, and twenty-first-century competencies. The policy envisions education as a means of fostering economic participation, constitutional values, citizenship, ethical reasoning, and human development (Government of India 2020).

However, these aspirations coexist with enduring institutional realities. Examination cultures remain deeply embedded in the system. Competitive entrance processes continue to shape students' education aspirations (Punjabi 2022; Boucher 2024). Questions concerning employability, economic mobility, and workforce readiness remain influential in public discourse (Varghese and Khare 2019; Bhoi 2022). Simultaneously, India's immense social, linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity introduces additional complexities regarding inclusion, representation, and education equity (Saluja 2022).



PERU: Competency-based reform and the search for holistic learning

Over the past two decades, Peru has implemented significant reforms aimed at improving education quality while broadening the understanding of what learning should achieve.

The National Curriculum for Basic Education places a strong emphasis on competency development, learner-centered pedagogies, citizenship, ethical participation, intercultural understanding, and socioemotional competencies. Education discourse increasingly highlights the importance of preparing learners for democratic engagement, social coexistence, and personal development (Ministerio de Educación del Perú 2016).

At the same time, Peru continues to confront persistent inequalities associated with geography, language, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Significant disparities remain between urban and rural communities and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Therefore, efforts to promote intercultural and inclusive education operate within broader struggles concerning recognition, representation, and education justice.



SOUTH AFRICA: Education, justice, and the legacy of historical inequality

South Africa's education system continues to be shaped by the enduring legacies of apartheid, making questions of equity, inclusion, citizenship, and transformation particularly salient.

Since the democratic transition, education has been positioned as a central mechanism for addressing historical injustices, expanding opportunities, and fostering democratic participation. Successive reforms have sought to promote equity, redress, social cohesion, inclusion, and learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning. The curriculum explicitly emphasizes democratic values, human rights, social responsibility, and active citizenship, reflecting broader national aspirations for social transformation (Department of Basic Education 2011).

However, substantial challenges remain. Persistent inequalities in education quality, resource distribution, infrastructure, language policy, and learner outcomes continue to shape the education experience. Questions regarding accountability, employability, education quality, and social mobility coexist with aspirations for justice, inclusion, and democratic participation.

Comparative foundations for the study

India, Peru, and South Africa provide an opportunity to explore education purpose from a Global South perspective. While each country reflects distinct histories and policy trajectories, all three are engaged in efforts to move beyond narrow definitions of education success while remaining accountable to demands for quality, equity, and economic relevance.

02.

EXPLORATION CIRCLES AS DIALOGICAL AND RELATIONAL INQUIRY

This study adopted a qualitative, participatory research design oriented toward collective meaning-making, dialogue, and interpretive inquiry rather than the measurement of predefined variables or causal relationships (Creswell and Poth 2018; Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Reason and Bradbury 2008). We compared how narratives about the purpose of education emerge across India, Peru, and South Africa and what these narratives reveal about the conditions under which children can thrive. Grounded in participatory research that treats knowledge as relational, this study positioned participants as co-inquirers whose lived experiences constitute evidence rather than data to be extracted. The study sought to reframe how education purpose is understood, moving from a fixed or technical construct to one that is socially produced, contested, and continuously reimagined through narrative and practice.

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN, ANALYTICAL ORIENTATION, AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The study's comparative design enabled both within-case understanding and cross-case conceptual analysis. This approach allowed similarities, differences, and recurring patterns to emerge while preserving the integrity of each of the three national contexts.

The analysis adopted an iterative inductive–deductive approach, combining concept-driven and data-driven analysis to strengthen both theoretical sensitivity and empirical openness (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006; Braun and Clarke 2022; Miles et al. 2020). The deductive component drew upon the conceptual and policy review undertaken in Chapter 1, which identified dominant narratives of education purpose frequently reflected within global and national education discourse, including human capital development, nation-building, citizenship, employability, academic achievement, holistic development, and thriving. These narratives provided an initial analytical framework that guided early coding and interpretation.

The inductive component remained open to meanings, tensions, and narratives that emerged from participants' experiences but were not adequately captured by existing conceptual categories. Rather than treating the initial framework as fixed, the analytical process moved iteratively between theory and empirical data, allowing categories to be refined, expanded, combined, or challenged through repeated interpretation. This approach was appropriate because the study sought not to test predefined theories of education purpose but to understand how different actors construct, negotiate, and prioritize education purposes across diverse contexts.

Narratives served as both the methodological foundation and primary method of analysis in this study. Narratives are mechanisms through which people interpret reality and shape beliefs, identities, relationships, and actions. As a method of inquiry, narratives provide access to these understandings, enabling analysis of how individuals and groups construct education purposes, priorities, and futures. Narratives were identified through participants' descriptions of what education should achieve, what they believed education systems currently prioritize, what forms of success they considered legitimate, and how they interpreted concepts such as thriving, learning, achievement, citizenship, employability, wellbeing, and inclusion. Rather than treating narratives as individual opinions, the analysis examined how these understandings reflected broader institutional, cultural, and policy discourses operating within and across education systems. Coding therefore focused not only on the presence of particular narratives but also on how they interacted, competed, reinforced, or challenged one another.

Cross-country comparison was undertaken across four interconnected analytical dimensions: (1) dominant narratives of education purpose; (2) institutional

Narratives are mechanisms through which people interpret reality and shape beliefs, identities, relationships, and actions.

conditions through which these narratives were enacted; (3) tensions and contradictions between competing purposes; and (4) implications for creating the systemic conditions that enable children and young people to thrive. Comparison was used not to identify best practices or rank education systems but as a process of analytical defamiliarization, placing national narratives in dialogue to illuminate assumptions that might otherwise remain invisible within individual contexts (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017). A shared coding framework, regular cross-country analytical discussions, and iterative refinement of themes supported conceptual synthesis while preserving contextual specificity.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis revealed how different historical trajectories, governance arrangements, and institutional logics shaped the ways education purpose was imagined, negotiated, and translated into practice. The analysis therefore generated conceptual rather than statistical generalization, contributing to the development of the Global South paradox as an analytical construct.

2.2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter 1 introduced the central concepts that underpin this inquiry: education purpose, the Global South paradox, narratives, mindsets, power, relationships, and thriving. Together, these concepts form an integrated analytical framework for understanding how education purposes emerge, become institutionalized, shape education systems, and influence the conditions under which children and young people are able to thrive.

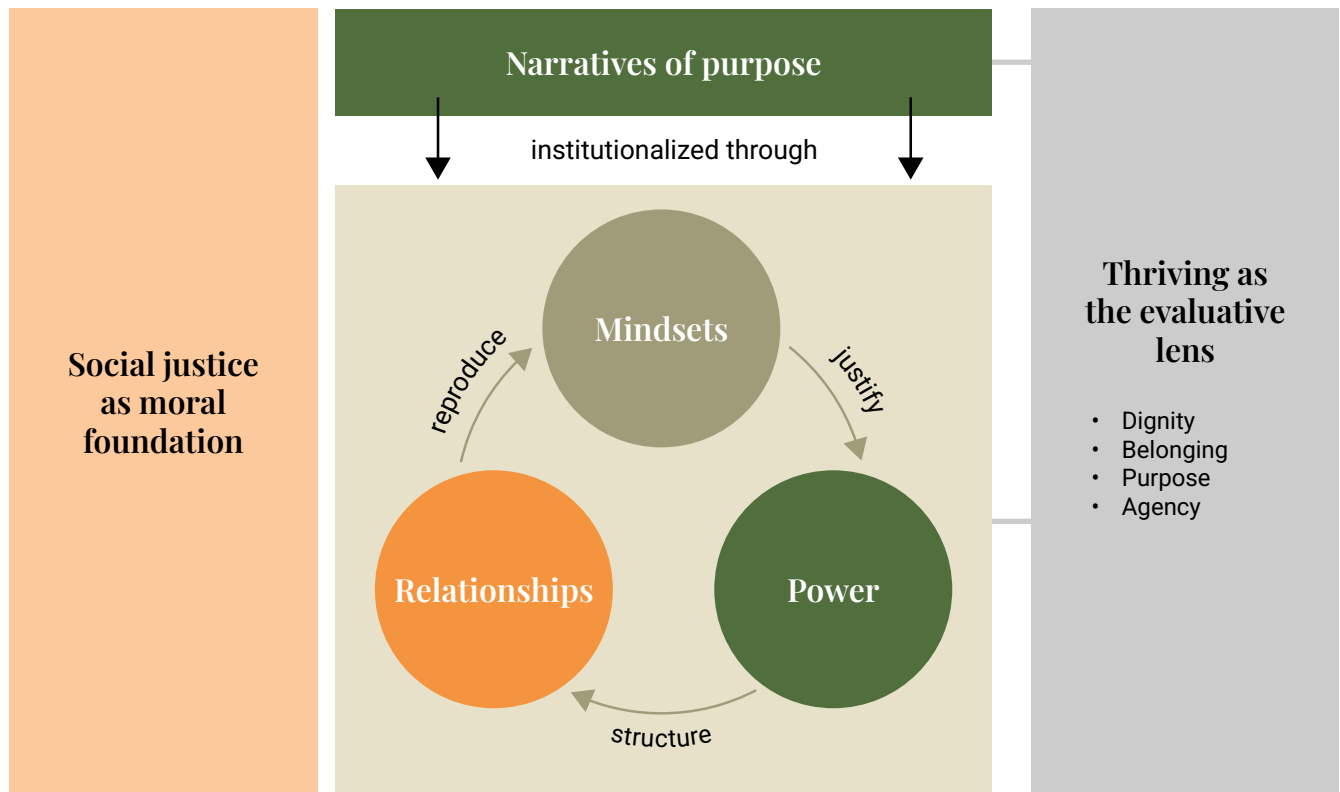
TABLE 1: HOW NARRATIVES OPERATE ACROSS THREE ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS OF MINDSETS, POWER, AND RELATIONSHIPS

DIMENSION	HOW NARRATIVES OPERATE	KEY MECHANISMS	WHERE THE CHANGE HAPPENS
Mindsets	Shape assumptions about learners, teachers, intelligence, merit, success, and failure	Influence which problems appear real and which solutions appear legitimate; are embedded in professional identities, institutional cultures, and common sense	In how actors understand and frame education
Power	Determine whose purposes become institutionalized and whose remain marginal	Acquire legitimacy through policy, assessment systems, funding, and public discourse; exclude or silence others	In defining education purposes, which is not an equally distributed ability
Relationships	Shape how education purposes are experienced and enacted in everyday practice	Influence teacher–learner interactions, classroom culture, expectations, participation, and belonging	In the translation of narratives into lived education realities

The analytical framework presented in Figure 2 emerged through an iterative engagement between the literature, policy review, empirical inquiry, and reflexive dialogue within the research team. The framework was then progressively refined through sustained engagement with participants across India, Peru, and South Africa. Participants' perspectives frequently challenged, extended, and reshaped our interpretations, leading to successive iterations of the framework throughout the research process. Consistent with the study's reflexive orientation, the framework should therefore be understood as a situated and evolving analytical construct rather than a universal representation of education systems transformation.

The framework begins from the premise that education systems are shaped by competing narratives about education purpose. These narratives influence how education challenges are understood, which solutions become legitimate, how institutional priorities are established, and how education transformation is imagined and enacted.

FIGURE 2: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THRIVING



The framework seeks to understand how education systems create, reproduce, negotiate, and transform dominant narratives of education purpose. It provides a structured lens for examining how these narratives become embedded within governance, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional relationships, and how they ultimately shape the conditions under which children and young people are able to experience dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose.

2.3 EXPLORATION CIRCLES

Exploration Circles formed the methodological and epistemological core of this study. They are a participatory, dialogue-based methodology developed by Dream a Dream to create a structured “third space” where diverse education stakeholders collectively explore complex questions that do not lend themselves to singular or predetermined answers. Drawing on broader traditions of dialogic inquiry, participatory research, and critical pedagogy (Freire 1970; Reason and Bradbury 2008), Exploration Circles bring together young people, educators, policymakers, researchers, community leaders, and civil society actors to examine education purpose, lived experiences, wellbeing, thriving, and systems transformation through collective reflection.

While sharing a commitment to dialogue and participation with approaches such as Freire’s culture circles, Exploration Circles differ in both purpose and design. Rather than being primarily oriented towards critical consciousness or collective mobilization, they function as reflexive spaces that bring together actors occupying different positions within education systems. The emphasis is on surfacing multiple narratives, exploring tensions and contradictions, and generating conceptual insights across the intersections of research, policy, and practice. Dialogue is therefore treated not as a mechanism for achieving consensus but as a means of illuminating plurality, complexity, and competing understandings of education purpose.

For this study, Exploration Circles consisted of facilitated, in-person dialogues lasting between 1.5 and 4 hours. As shown in Table 2, participants were purposively selected to reflect the diversity of actors who both shape and experience education systems across the three countries. This ecosystem-based approach recognized that education purpose is negotiated across multiple levels of the system and that meaningful understanding requires engaging voices with different forms of authority, expertise, and lived experience.

The Exploration Circles in Peru also included students, whose participation provided an important perspective on how education systems are experienced by those they are intended to serve. Their reflections on aspiration, identity, belonging, relationships, and future hopes both complemented and challenged the perspectives of policymakers, educators, families, and community actors, enriching the comparative analysis.

Within the research design, Exploration Circles served a dual purpose. They functioned as a method for generating qualitative data while also creating democratic spaces for collective meaning-making. Their dialogic structure encouraged participants to move between personal experience, institutional observation, and systemic reflection, enabling narratives to emerge through interaction rather than individual interviews alone. Facilitation was intentionally non-directive and reflexive, resisting the pursuit of consensus and recognizing disagreement, ambiguity, silence, and contradiction as analytically significant. In

keeping with the study’s methodological commitments, these interactions were understood not simply as sources of data but as sites where meanings were collectively constructed, negotiated, and contested.

TABLE 2: EXPLORATION CIRCLES AND KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

COUNTRY	EXPLORATION CIRCLES BY REGION AND PARTICIPANT COUNTS	PARTICIPANT TYPES REPRESENTED
India	Bengaluru Circle 1: 10	Bureaucrats (working in government agencies or departments), practitioners, academics, researchers, policy advisors, NGO practitioners, philanthropists, donors
	Delhi Circle 1: 26	
	Mumbai Circle 1: 18	
Peru	Huari, Áncash Circle 1: 8 Circle 2: 10	Circle 1: UGEL (Unidad de Gestión Educativa Local) specialist, principals, community leaders, civil society representative Circle 2: Teachers, parents, students
	Imaza, Amazonas Circle 1: 8 Circle 2: 10	
	Huamanga, Ayacucho Circle 1: 7 Circle 2: 9	
South Africa	Ennerdale Circle 1: 14 Circle 2: 14	Circle 1: Parents, practitioners, Grade R teachers Circle 2: District education officials, faith leaders, NGOs, social workers, municipal officials, community leaders, traditional leaders
	Klerksdorp Circle 1: 10 Circle 2: 12	
	Vhembe Circle 1: 9 Circle 2: 14	

2.4 INDUCTIVE–DEDUCTIVE ANALYSIS

Analysis proceeded through an iterative inductive–deductive process. Initial coding drew on conceptual categories identified in prior policy reviews, shown in Table 3, while remaining open to emergent themes arising from the data. Coding was conducted across country datasets using a shared framework, enabling both within-case and cross-case analysis.

Analytic work involved identifying narrative patterns, tensions, and contradictions, as well as tracing how these were shaped by contextual factors. Particular attention was paid to how narratives aligned with, diverged from, or reconfigured dominant frameworks of education purpose.

TABLE 3: POLICY REVIEWS

COUNTRY	POLICIES REVIEWED
India	• National Education Policy (Government of India 2020)
Peru	• National Curriculum for Basic Education (MINEDU 2017) • National Education Project 2036 (CNE 2020) • Sectoral Policy on Intercultural Education and Intercultural Bilingual Education (MINEDU 2016) • Intercultural Bilingual Education Service Model (MINEDU 2024) • Regional Education Project of Áncash (Gobierno Regional de Áncash 2024) • Regional Education Project of Ayacucho (Gobierno de Ayacucho 2024) • Local Education Project of Huari (Gobierno de Huari 2025)
South Africa	• National Early Learning and Development Standards (NELDS) for Children Birth to Four Years (Department of Basic Education 2009) • The South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four (Department of Basic Education 2015) • South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes: Every Child Matters (Department of Basic Education 2023) • Bana Pele Shared Blueprint to Achieve Universal Access to Quality Early Learning (Department of Basic Education 2025) • Education and Training in a Democratic South Africa: First Steps to Develop a New System (Department of Basic Education 1995) • National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (DSD et al. 2015) • The Bana Pele 2030 Roadmap: ECD Leadership Summit. Opinion Piece (Baloyi 2025) • South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 1996) • Manifesto for Early Childhood Development in South Africa (Real Reform for ECD Movement n.d.)



2.5 LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, Exploration Circles were not audio-recorded, requiring the analysis to rely on detailed field notes and contemporaneous documentation. While this approach fostered open dialogue and psychological safety, it limited the level of linguistic and conversational detail available for subsequent analysis. Second, key constructs such as purpose, thriving, agency, and wellbeing may carry different meanings across contexts. The comparative inquiry across India, Peru, and South Africa required careful attention to linguistic translation, cultural interpretation, and conceptual equivalence.

In addition to these methodological considerations, the study acknowledges the influence of the research team's own positionalities on the inquiry. The questions we asked, the concepts we considered significant, the analytical framework we developed, and the interpretations we reached were inevitably shaped by our backgrounds, disciplinary traditions, and professional engagement with education systems transformation. Consistent with the reflexive orientation of the study, these influences were not treated as sources of bias to be eliminated but as perspectives to be critically examined through ongoing dialogue within the research team and with participants across the three countries. The comparative and dialogic design therefore functioned not only to generate data but also to challenge our own assumptions and refine our interpretations throughout the research process.



03.

INSIGHTS AND LEARNING ON NARRATIVES AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

This chapter presents the findings of the study, examining how competing narratives of education purpose shape education systems and, in doing so, influence the conditions under which children and young people are able to thrive.

Consistent with the analytical framework described in Chapter 2, the findings are interpreted through the interaction of narratives, mindsets, power, and relationships, recognizing that education systems are not neutral structures but socially constructed and continually negotiated through institutional practices, governance arrangements, and everyday interactions (Apple 2004; Schmidt 2008; Verger et al. 2018). Specifically, the analytical framework draws on the 4Is of Oppression (Laspa Centre for Leadership n.d.) as a heuristic for understanding how narratives become embedded across individual, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological levels. This study extended this perspective to examine not only processes of reproduction but also the conditions under which transformation becomes possible (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. NARRATIVE REPRODUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION ACROSS EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Mechanisms lens: Questions to ask at each level

	What each level helps us see	Mindsets	Power	Relationships
Depth lens: Level of the system	Ideological The purposes that seem normal, natural or common sense.	What are dominant beliefs and assumptions that show as common sense?	Whose purposes count as common sense or legitimate knowledge?	What expectations shape dominant assumptions of how system actors should behave?
	Institutional The narratives that are institutionalised in policy, rules, funding, assessment and governance.	Which mindsets are formalized into standards, indicators or structure?	Who has authority, resources, voice, recognition, and decision-making power?	Who has authority over whom - who is invited, consulted, monitored, or trusted?
	Interpersonal The system logics that are lived in everyday interactions and encounters.	How do people show up and what is considered normal or acceptable?	What is the power asymmetry - who speaks, is deferred to, silenced or overlooked?	What is the lived space of dignity, belonging, trust, fear, care, respect, or alienation?
	Internalized System actors self-concept and purposes as shaped by system dynamics and narratives.	What ideas about worth, ability, failure, aspiration, and legitimacy are evident?	How is power self-regulated through silence, low expectations or low self-esteem?	How is confidence, agency, shame, belonging, identity, and sense of purpose shaped?

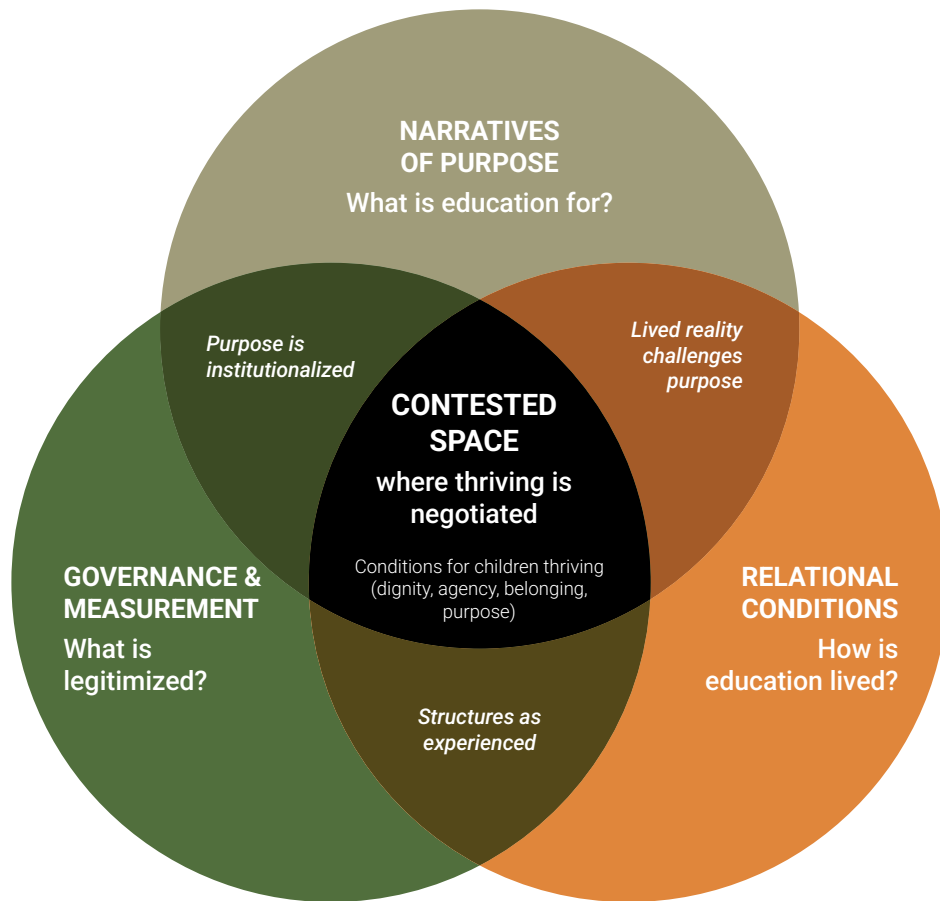
Source: adapted from 4Is of Oppression (Laspa Centre for Leadership n.d.)

The analysis across India, Peru, and South Africa demonstrates that narratives of education purpose are negotiated through governance, assessment, institutional arrangements, power relations, and everyday education interactions. These processes shape not only what education systems formally prioritize but also whose aspirations, identities, and forms of success become recognized, legitimized, or marginalized.

The findings are organized around three interconnected domains: (1) narratives of education purpose; (2) governance and measurement; and (3) relational conditions. These domains should not be understood as separate components of education systems but as mutually constitutive dimensions through which education purposes are interpreted, enacted, and institutionalized. Together, they create the conditions through which dominant narratives may be reinforced, negotiated, or transformed over time.

Within this study, thriving is understood not as the object of negotiation itself but as an emergent condition shaped by the ways education purposes are translated into governance arrangements, institutional practices, and everyday relationships. The findings therefore examine how the conditions that enable dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose are either strengthened or constrained through interactions between narratives, institutional arrangements, and human agency (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: A RELATIONAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK FOR THRIVING CONDITIONS



Across the three country contexts, the findings reveal that education systems carry multiple and often competing education purposes. However, these purposes do not possess equal institutional legitimacy. Some become embedded within governance structures, assessment systems, funding arrangements, and accountability mechanisms, while others remain largely aspirational despite widespread support among educators, young people, families, and communities.

Rather than suggesting that systems intentionally constrain thriving, the findings indicate that prevailing institutional arrangements continue to privilege education purposes that are more readily standardized, measured, regulated, and governed. As a consequence, aspirations related to dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose frequently coexist with institutional architectures that make these conditions difficult to sustain consistently across education systems.

This tension reflects the central argument of the study. The Global South paradox does not arise because education systems lack ambitious aspirations but because multiple legitimate education purposes coexist within institutional arrangements that continue to privilege some forms of education success over others. The remainder of this chapter examines how these tensions are reproduced and negotiated and, importantly, where the empirical data reveal possibilities for transformation.

3.1 NARRATIVES OF PURPOSES

Across India, Peru, and South Africa, education systems carry plural and expansive narratives of purpose within their policy frameworks. India's NEP 2020 articulates holistic development, citizenship, creativity, wellbeing, and empathy alongside its framing of education as the engine of a “global knowledge superpower” (MHRD 2020). Peru's National Curriculum and National Education Project 2036 frame schooling as a process tied to democratic coexistence, intercultural dialogue, and collective wellbeing. Meanwhile, Peru's intercultural bilingual education policies introduce concepts such as critical interculturality and Allin Kawsay, positioning education in relation to reciprocity, territorial belonging, and the transformation of unequal social relations (Gobierno Regional de Ayacucho 2024). South Africa's ECCE policies are strongly rights-oriented and position early childhood education as a vehicle for holistic development, redress, and democratic transformation.² These aspirations are genuine across all three systems, and they are present across policy, stakeholders' articulation, and community expression.

At the same time, the three contexts reveal how these purposes exist on unequal institutional terms. Economic productivity, measurable learning, readiness, and employability often carry stronger operational force, while dignity, belonging, agency, cultural continuity, and collective wellbeing, though present in policy language, receive weaker institutional backing. In India, an experienced practitioner of alternative education described a system in which “educators are talking about one thing, while the money system is doing something else.” Strikingly, when participants collectively identified the purposes they most valued—wellbeing, citizenship, creativity, critical thinking, social justice—these were precisely the purposes least institutionalized in schools. Meanwhile, the purposes they chose not to prioritize—academic achievement, discipline, employability, economic productivity—were those most strongly embedded in institutional practice. In South Africa, a similar tension appeared between holistic development and school readiness. Holistic development was described as being “like tea, coffee, milk, sugar—it can't be separated” (Klerksdorp stakeholders) and received the strongest endorsement across all Exploration Circle sites. Yet, school readiness was consistently identified as the most operationally visible purpose. In Peru, concepts such as Allin Kawsay and critical interculturality, which expand education purpose toward communal wellbeing and territorial belonging, remain less predominant within the broader policy landscape even as they are articulated in EIB frameworks.

This first tension is compounded by a second: the purposes that communities and learners articulate from within their lived realities conflict with what systems formally recognize, while also holding the economic- and measurement-oriented logics that systems most reward as materially necessary.

The purposes that communities and learners articulate from within their lived realities conflict with what systems formally recognize.

² An analysis of 13 national policy and position statements showed 427 coded segments: sociopolitical purposes accounted for 167 and individual/child development for 136. Of these coded segments, 252 were institutionalized at the level of systems and documents rather than practice.

The three-country data show that education systems carry plural, humanistic, and culturally grounded aspirations.

For example, across Peru's territories, participants expressed purposes rooted in community formation, cultural continuity, and territorial belonging. A UGEL specialist in Imaza described the Awajún education tradition in these terms: "The Awajún world, from birth, committed itself to forming integral persons in every dimension. They must know how to keep the forest, how to hunt animals, how to make a home. No Awajún should not know how to make a canoe, weave a basket, or fish—and that is not happening now, it is being lost." In Huamanga, a caregiver framed schooling as a form of collective support: "Education is so they learn to write—so they can write the actas, so they help those who cannot read, so they know the laws. For us, school is a kind of help." In Huari, a student connected education to family pride and local leadership: "I think education here is mostly to fulfill our family—especially our parents who are from a rural zone, who are campesinos. Through education they can feel proud of us, and we can become new people who lead our place, our town, and improve it." However, these purposes are not fully recognized or measured by formal systems as educational success.

In South Africa, ECCE participants located education purpose in children's everyday lives, such as, safety, food, affection, care, identity, belonging, and the hope of a better future. One Ennerdale stakeholder reached for rights language from within material precarity over policy abstraction: "I chose it because it's a child's right. Most kids aren't accessing ECD because they are surviving on grants, their parents not working." In India, an education researcher articulated a vision of education as cultivating "a sense of community—I don't thrive alone but we thrive together." Participants across the circles recognized this purpose as meaningful yet institutionally marginal in experience.

These broader purposes sit alongside economic and credential-oriented aspirations as layered necessities. In Peru, a student from Imaza explained: "For me, studying means becoming a professional. And when the day comes, I have to help my parents and my siblings." In Huamanga, a family described the sacrifice required to access schooling as protection against a future of "herding cattle on a cold hill." In India, an academic observed that "'Purpose and meaning in life' was competing with employability because most young people did not have the privilege to reflect on the former, when they had to do the latter." In South Africa, the school readiness narrative endures partly because it carries genuine community aspiration: parents and practitioners who want children to be "ready" are also expressing what security looks like from within conditions of deprivation and structural exclusion.

Seen through the narrative dimension of the framework, the three-country data show that education systems carry plural, humanistic, and culturally grounded aspirations, while the pathways through which these purposes are institutionalized, rewarded, and made visible remain uneven. Measurable learning, readiness, employability, and economic mobility often travel more easily through these pathways. Other purposes—including dignity, agency, belonging, cultural identity, and freedom of mind—remain ethically valued yet weakly protected in the ordinary life of schooling.

3.2 GOVERNANCE AND MEASUREMENT

What a system measures is a governance decision. Measurement determines which purposes become visible, fundable, and legitimate. Across the three countries, despite different histories, policy architectures, and levels of the education system, participants identified the same structural pattern: the purposes most valued by those closest to children are less likely to be institutionalized. What is measured and rewarded is what is useful to states operating at scale and therefore is what becomes visible. Less visible are the lived effects of governance and measurement on the relationships in centers, schools, and communities that enable children to thrive. Across contexts, systems recognize plural purposes rhetorically while governing through narrower architectures of visibility, comparability, and administrative control.

In every context, systems reward what is legible to those governing from a distance: attendance, registration compliance, examination scores, credential verification, and budget adherence. The systems struggle to recognize what requires proximity to observe: the quality of a practitioner's relationship with a child, the cultural responsiveness of pedagogy, the dignity with which a learner is held, and the trust that makes a classroom a place of belonging. When accountability runs upward, what can be counted and reported becomes institutionalized. Relationships cannot be reported as easily. Care cannot be audited. Belonging does not appear in a subsidy application.

In South Africa, ECCE practitioners described the logic of compliance-as-reward directly: "Only if you comply with the registration system do you get funding from the government. Compliance gets rewarded." In India, participants said the system measures achievement, memorization, attendance, and narrowly defined skills, while friendships, trust, joy, agency, curiosity, and creativity remain largely invisible. South Africa also highlights the political economy of provision: when funding is tied to registration and attendance, centers compete for children, and parents often choose where to register according to fees and proximity rather than pedagogical quality. One stakeholder described this as "gambling with kids," while urban practitioners observed: "Crèches are in competition with each other in a wrong way, not for the progress of the children."

In Peru, the territorial and cultural purposes participants valued most deeply, including Indigenous knowledge systems, bilingual education, and relational community formation, were largely absent from the measurement architecture that shaped recognition and resource allocation. Participants described systems that insufficiently prepare teachers for bilingual and intercultural education and define success through indicators that do not reflect local priorities.

This mechanism is consistent across all three contexts, though it takes different forms. Scale creates real constraints, as one policy advisor in India noted, but the challenge is not whether systems should create common structures.

The challenge is how to do so without allowing those structures to harden into rigid hierarchies that suppress learner agency, contextual knowledge, and democratic participation.

“Even if we aspire for an education...keeping in mind learners’ preferences, with the size of the population, the school system [is] bound to adopt some patterns.... You can’t give freedom to all 500 children in the school to do whatever they want [in terms of subjects they want to study]....Sometimes, we have to adopt a structure.”—Policy advisor, India

Across all three countries, participants articulated strong commitments to holistic child development. But as an education purpose, holistic development is structurally unsupported. The issue is not that measurement is irrelevant or that safety, academic learning, or attendance do not matter. The issue is that visible and measurable dimensions begin to stand in for quality itself. Once measurement becomes the primary pathway to legitimacy, systems can confuse what is countable with what is valuable for education.

“What is celebrated contradicts the purposes: obedience is celebrated, but citizenship is not obedience; individual achievements are celebrated, but what is needed is a collective process; what we measure makes invisible the vision of community—which runs through all the purposes but is not celebrated and not measured.”—Community leader, Peru

“What gets measured is numbers, not what children are experiencing”—Exploration Circle participant, South Africa

Across contexts, those closest to children often had the least power to define what quality, success, or thriving should mean. This finding is consistent with broader research showing that education priorities are frequently shaped by actors operating at greater institutional distance from classrooms, while the voices of teachers, young people, families, and communities are comparatively less influential in defining education purpose, quality, and success (Ball 1993; Levin 2000; Mitra 2004; Steiner-Khamsi 2014; Verger et al. 2018). In India, participants described a bureaucratic pyramid where teachers are not consulted. The government was repeatedly identified as the primary holder of power in South Africa despite a mixed mode of delivering education.

“The government decides on the curriculum, policies, guidelines, implementation, compliance, training practice.”—Provincial education official, South Africa

“Orders from above...[practitioners] are able to see how things affect students badly but are not able to do anything....It is never about asking for suggestions.”—Participant reflection, India

Often, voice is formally acknowledged without the institutional power to shape decisions. For example, without redistributed authority and resources, inclusion remains a policy and moral aspiration that lacks legitimacy. Peru’s intercultural

commitments require teacher preparation, territorial resourcing, and the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into curriculum and practice. India's inclusion commitments expand access within existing competitive structures rather than transform them.

System actors who describe compliance being rewarded over care are describing the system working as designed. The invisibility of relational quality is a consequence of accountability structures that privilege what can be reported upward over what can be observed up close. If this gap is treated as an implementation problem, the response is administrative. If it is understood as a governance challenge, the response must be structural: redesign what systems measure, fund, authorize, and recognize.

"Policies require resources and the commitment of authorities, because otherwise everything stays as discourse. The State demands EIB but does not provide the resources to bring it to life in the territory."—School principal, Imaza, Peru

Thriving is a systemic condition that education systems make possible or foreclose through how they organize power, express values, and structure relationships. Dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose are not add-ons. They are conditions of meaningful learning. Across all three countries, governance architectures remain misaligned with this understanding of thriving. Accountability therefore needs to be interrogated for what it makes visible and what it renders invisible. If thriving depends on dignity, agency, belonging and relational trust, then governance systems need ways of recognizing and sustaining these conditions without reducing them to narrow indicators.



3.3 RELATIONAL CONDITIONS

Relational conditions emerged as one of the clearest sites where the gap between education purpose and education system design becomes visible. While policy frameworks and governance systems often define education quality through measurable outcomes, participants across contexts locate the meaning and value of education in relationships with teachers, caregivers, peers, communities, territories, languages, and themselves. Education was described not simply as something delivered through institutions but as something lived through relationships. In this report relationships refer to the connections learners experience with teachers, caregivers, peers, communities, territories, languages, and themselves, while relational conditions refer to the qualities (such as safety, trust, care, recognition, and respect) that shape whether those relationships support learning and thriving.

Many of the most powerful education memories shared across the study were relational rather than instructional. In Peru, a school principal reflected: “From primary school until now I still remember my teacher Hellen. When she entered the classroom, you wanted to learn. Always with the goal in mind that the students, when they become professionals, will remember the good teacher, the one who supported us and was our inspiration.” Similarly, a student described a teacher who regularly visited families’ homes and shared everyday life with the community: “One strength was that the teacher who taught used to go to his parents’ little house, and they would share together.”

South African participants similarly located education value within relationships of care, belonging, and community. Many described their earliest education experiences not through formal institutions but through grandparents and extended family networks. Learning occurred through storytelling, shared responsibilities, practical activities, and participation in everyday community life. The recurring figure of the gogo (a granny) represented a form of relational and culturally embedded pedagogy through which children learned not only skills and knowledge but also belonging, identity, and ways of being with others. Yet participants also recognized that these forms of care, while central to children’s development, often remain invisible within formal systems of quality assurance, funding, and accountability.

Across the Indian Exploration Circles, participants similarly described the education experiences that mattered most through relationships. However, participants also articulated a profound sense of relational loss. In one circle, participants reflected that education had given them “some great teachers,” while simultaneously taking away “relationship with nature, with communities,” “friendships because it taught us to compete with friends,” “relationship with parents, which was reduced to conversations and negotiations about marks,” and even “relationship with myself, since it made me see myself as an object.” The perceived losses were not primarily academic but social, emotional, ecological, and existential.

According to this view, education systems increasingly frame wellbeing as an individual achievement rather than as a collective or relational condition.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that relationships function as a largely institutionally invisible form of education infrastructure. While they are rarely recognized, measured, or explicitly prioritized within formal governance, accountability, or assessment systems, relational conditions emerged consistently through participants' narratives as fundamental to shaping education experience and thriving. Across contexts, participants described safety, trust, care, recognition, and respect as enabling learners to participate meaningfully and realize their potential. In Peru, this was expressed through the idea that when girls feel valued and safe, they are able to "realize their full potential," and through descriptions of school as "a safe space" where students find people whom they trust and who help them discover their abilities. In India, participants identified relationships, friendships, trust, support systems, and respect for the learner as dimensions that remain largely invisible within formal measures of education success, while attendance and performance dominate institutional attention. In South Africa, the same tension was captured in the observation that "what gets measured is numbers, not what children are experiencing." The findings therefore suggest not simply that relationships matter but that some of the conditions most closely associated with thriving remain institutionally marginal despite being consistently recognized by participants as central to education purpose.

Participants also described how prevailing priorities, assumptions, and incentives of education systems can actively damage relationships. Across contexts, education systems were frequently experienced as organized around competition, performance, compliance, and individual achievement. Rather than simply neglecting relationships, this approach to organization appeared to weaken or reconfigure them. In India, one practitioner observed that "academics today hinged on competition, which took away compassion and care, and caused alienation." Another participant argued that "communities should be something that education creates, but instead education was destroying communities." According to this view, education systems increasingly frame wellbeing as an individual achievement rather than as a collective or relational condition.

Similar tensions appeared in Peru and South Africa. In Peru, a community leader reflected that "individual achievements are celebrated, but what is needed is a collective process," suggesting that education systems often recognize and reward individual success more readily than collective forms of participation, contribution, and community life. In South Africa, practitioners described ECCE centers operating within competitive funding environments in which centers compete for enrollment and survival. While these dynamics emerge from different historical and institutional contexts, they reveal a common tension between education systems organized around performance, compliance, and competition and participants' aspirations for education as a space of connection, care, and collective flourishing.

The findings also suggest that education relationships extend beyond interpersonal interactions. Across contexts, relationships functioned as a bridge between individuals and wider forms of collective life. Participants frequently described education in terms of its capacity to connect learners to communities, territories, languages, cultures, histories, and shared futures. In Peru, schools were valued when

they were experienced as part of the community. In India, participants reflected on how education experiences sometimes created distance from communities, nature, and other relationships they considered important to their sense of belonging. In South Africa, learning was often described as embedded within networks of family, neighborhood, and cultural belonging. These accounts suggest that relational conditions are about not only how individuals interact with one another but also how education sustains connections between people and the social worlds they inhabit.

Importantly, transformative relationships were rarely described as the product of education system design. Instead, producing relationships often depended on individual teachers, caregivers, practitioners, or community members who created conditions of trust and belonging despite broader systemic pressures. Across countries, participants consistently described relational care as essential to learning while simultaneously recognizing its fragility. Meaningful relationships frequently relied on personal commitment, informal practices, and community effort rather than on governance structures designed to sustain them. This tension reveals a deeper paradox. Relationships are expected to carry the weight of education transformation while remaining peripheral to the institutional architectures through which education quality is defined and governed.

Seen through the relational dimension of the framework, the three-country data show that relationships are not peripheral to education quality. They are part of the infrastructure through which dignity, agency, and belonging become possible in everyday education life. Yet relational conditions are also among the least protected in the system. Across contexts, they depended heavily on individual teachers, practitioners, caregivers, and community members, rather than on formal arrangements designed to sustain them. This matters because thriving cannot be made reliable if the conditions that make learners feel safe, recognized, trusted, and connected remain informal, and sometimes invisible. Sustaining these conditions is therefore not only a pedagogical concern but also a governance concern.

3.4 MINDSETS, POWER, AND RELATIONSHIPS IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The preceding sections traced how narratives of purpose are hierarchically ordered across policy and governance and how relational conditions carry the meaning of education while remaining structurally invisible. This section turns to the dynamics through which these patterns are sustained. Mindsets are the taken-for-granted assumptions through which systems define what is normal, legitimate, and possible; power determines whose assumptions become institutionalized; and relationships are where mindsets and power are lived.

Dominant purposes are sustained not only through policy and measurement logics, a tension that surfaced in earlier sections of this report, but also through the assumptions that the system actors and stakeholders collectively come to hold about what education is for, what success looks like, and which futures are worth preparing for. These assumptions operate as common sense, shaping what reforms feel possible and what counts as quality without requiring explicit articulation.

In South Africa, this dynamic emerged in the understanding of school readiness: a good early childhood center is one that produces children who can sit, follow routine, write their name, count, and enter Grade 1 successfully. These aspirations are held by practitioners, parents, and stakeholders alike; however, they systematically marginalize play, cultural continuity, and relational care as legitimate indicators of quality. The hegemonic common sense of schooling, as the South Africa case argues, has partially colonized early childhood purposes, making holistic learning invisible. In that sense, holistic development is not rejected but is confined by a system organized around attendance, registration, and compliance. The education system stakeholders hold both values and feel the tension between them, without the tools to resolve it.

This compartmentalization, in which dominant and humanistic purposes are held side by side without necessarily being reconciled, is precisely how the mindsets reproduce or get embedded. The tension is never resolved because it is never confronted as a tension within the system. The same pattern surfaced in Peru, where shared education language frequently masked distinct ways of understanding what forms of success, knowledge, and contribution should be valued. In Imaza, Awajún pride coexisted with recognition of the instrumental power of Spanish. One UGEL specialist captured how the institutional hierarchy of languages travels into family reasoning: “Parents say: why teach Awajún? Will the university ask for the Awajún language?”

In India, participants similarly held instrumental and humanistic logics together without integration: even as they articulated education as community and emancipation, they recognized that, for many children, schooling for job attainment remains one of the routes to socioeconomic security. The question that then becomes important to ask is whether the dominant logics of standardization, employability, and measurement should become the organizing logic through which all other purposes are benchmarked.

Across the three country contexts, dominant narratives of purpose are metabolized into how learners and adults understand themselves. This internalized level is where lived reality constantly contends with stated purposes and where the system’s reproduction becomes most difficult to observe.

In India, this dynamic was articulated as a narrowing of imaginative possibility. One participant reflected on education through their lived experience as a queer person: “The fundamental core of education is that it should be about dignity, equity and freedom. ... I couldn’t imagine anything—I did not draw. Because my education did not offer me what I deserved.” The harm here is not only exclusion from opportunity but the constraint of self-recognition and the ability to envision alternative futures.

The education system stakeholders hold both values and feel the tension between them, without the tools to resolve it.

This is internalization reproducing the system: when those harmed by a system understand its failures as personal shortcomings.

In South Africa, internalization took the form of structural responsibility absorbed as personal obligation. Participants were fully aware of structural problems, yet when asked what should change, they positioned themselves as the agents of change, taking on responsibilities that belong to the state or the system. Ennerdale stakeholders said, “we cannot blame the system, we are to be blamed,” while practitioners described their work as combining the roles of “a social worker, nurse, police, and think out of the box,” absorbing the failures of underfunding and inequality as their own. This is internalization reproducing the system: when those harmed by a system understand its failures as personal shortcomings. Similar logics are applied to the children within the system as well. They are often imagined as needing to adapt to the school system rather than as entitled to a system responsive to their developmental, linguistic, cultural, and relational needs.

In Peru, internalization operated through mobility and language. The institutional hierarchy of languages was carried into the most intimate decisions of family life. For example, in Huamanga, pride in Quechua coexisted with decisions not to transmit it to younger generations, “often rooted in lived experiences of discrimination”—the language most associated with identity becoming the one withheld from children for their protection. The same internalized logic extended to social mobility itself. As one community leader observed, “There are some who become professionals and forget—they get proud and forget where they came from.” Across all three contexts, the pattern is consistent: the performative and economic logics of schooling are not only imposed from above but absorbed within, shaping what people believe they are worth, what they allow themselves to want, and what they pass on.

The dynamics established through mindsets, power, and internalization are lived through daily education relationships and primarily reproduced at the interpersonal level. Here the question shifts from what structures do in aggregate to what they produce for particular children and young people, shaped by caste, class, race, gender, language, geography, and cultural legitimacy. These are the conditions through which the same institutional structure produces profoundly different experiences.

In India, the contradiction between formal inclusion and relational dignity found its sharpest illustration in a single encounter. A practitioner described helping a child from a slum enroll in school, only for the child to be humiliated the next day by a teacher who said: “Your clothes are stinking. Make sure you bathe before coming to school tomorrow, or don’t come at all.” Access had been administratively secured while dignity was undermined through everyday interaction. Caste, class, and gender dynamics enter schooling through the structures, norms, and rules that shape everyday interactions.

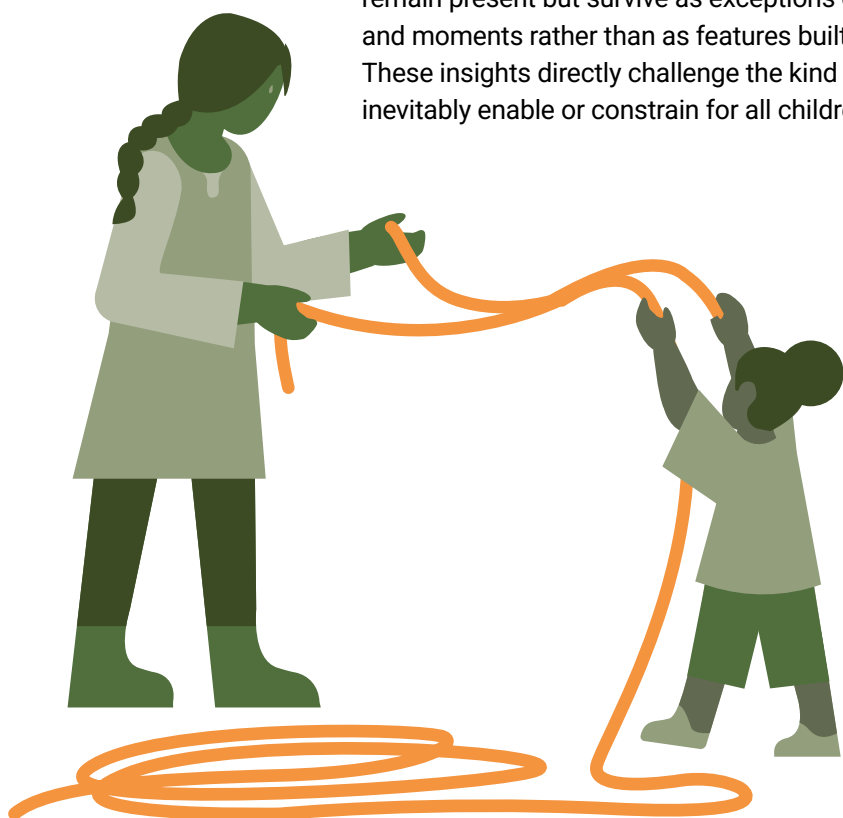
In Peru, the same relational reproduction operated through language. Students who could not express themselves in Spanish were overlooked, presumed not to know, or left at the back of the classroom, yet the same students came alive in their mother tongue. As one student in Imaza described it: “When the native-language class comes, they are the ones who speak most. But when the teacher comes who

Progressive purposes centered on dignity, agency, belonging, and freedom of mind remain present but survive as exceptions carried by particular individuals, spaces, and moments rather than as features built into the ordinary design of schooling.

stays in Spanish, they go quiet again. They stay at the back—or at least the teachers do not take them into account.” The silence is not evidence of incapacity but the relational consequence of a linguistic hierarchy enacted in the classroom.

In South Africa, the interpersonal level revealed how relationships are shaped by power asymmetry. The practitioner–parent relationship operates as a structural fault line rather than a personal failure: the practitioner is central to children’s experience yet peripheral to institutional authority, while the parent, responsible for children’s development, is often positioned as an absence rather than a partner. These dynamics are deeply gendered. The care economy of early childhood education is built on women’s formal and informal labor, while the power holders who define purpose and funding are predominantly male and institutionally positioned. The asymmetry of voice extended into the deliberative spaces of the study itself: in the exploration circles, government officials and traditional leaders frequently spoke first while others held back, such that what is offered as community voice may reflect authorized voices rather than the full range of community experience. Most starkly, when participants mapped power, they placed government at the center and children at the edge. One group, having drawn children on the outside, “agreed that they wished children were in the middle, but children are indeed on the outside.” People recognize that children are not centered and accept it.

Together, these dynamics show how prevailing narratives of purpose are reproduced across the system. Economic and performance-oriented logics are sustained by institutional authority, transmitted through relationships of comparison and judgment, and internalized by learners and adults alike. Across all three contexts, progressive purposes centered on dignity, agency, belonging, and freedom of mind remain present but survive as exceptions carried by particular individuals, spaces, and moments rather than as features built into the ordinary design of schooling. These insights directly challenge the kind of conditions that education systems inevitably enable or constrain for all children and young people to thrive.



3.5 THE CONTESTED SPACE: WHERE THRIVING IS NEGOTIATED

The contested space is a zone in which every structural force identified in the preceding sections of this chapter simultaneously operates: where a South African practitioner tries to hold relational care within a compliance-based registration system; where an Awajún student in Peru is expressive and authoritative in their mother tongue but silent when the Spanish-speaking teacher arrives; where an Indian educator records wellbeing on a progress card designed to make wellbeing invisible. This space is where the complexity of education purpose becomes visible and where the conditions for thriving are negotiated, constrained, and occasionally made real.

“We used to live focused on taboos, on the belief that women are only good for the field. But when education comes, we have a different mind. Not just having a paper title and saying I am this—but the way we hold our minds.”—Student, Imaza

Across the three countries, this contested space revealed both constraint and possibility. On the one hand, performative governance, standardization, competition, and unequal power relations often narrowed the conditions for thriving. On the other hand, participants repeatedly articulated alternative visions for education grounded in care, dignity, community, identity, participation, and collective wellbeing. These visions were not marginal to education. They revealed what many actors believe education must protect if children are to live meaningful and flourishing lives.

FIGURE 5: ARTIFACT FROM ONE OF THE EXPLORATION CIRCLES IN INDIA: INVOKING THE YOUNG PEOPLE WE HAVE ENCOUNTERED AND WHAT THEY ARE TELLING US.



WHAT THE IMAGE SAYS:

“You ask me to come to school every day but....

I am the eldest daughter of my house, and I have to care for my siblings.

I have to cook and clean.

I have to take care of my dadi [grandmother].

I have to help my mother in the evening.

I want to become a police officer.

I want to study hard and make my parents proud.

I want to make my siblings study well.”

The contested space suggests that thriving is currently negotiated within contradictions:

Dignity

is held as an aspiration across all three contexts and structurally undermined at the interpersonal and internalized levels with remarkable consistency.

Agency

is the dimension of thriving most consistently named across all three country contexts and most consistently absent from the institutional arrangements. Authority travels up, not down or across.

Belonging

is deeply valued, not as formal access, but as connection and being seen as you are, but its structural fragility is starkly visible in the data. Systemically, belonging is access, not inclusion.

Purpose

reveals the core tension the study set out to examine. Participants in all the countries give strong, coherent, and moving accounts of what meaningful education would make possible. But institutional architectures do not recognize or sustain these accounts as legitimate objects of education investment.

The main constraint on thriving is that dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose are widely recognized by education actors as central education purposes, yet these dimensions remain only weakly reflected in the governance, accountability, and institutional arrangements that shape education practice. The contested space shows that education systems need to hold these tensions as part of democratic education systems. Thriving cannot be added to existing reform architectures as another outcome, competency, or indicator. If thriving is relational and systemic, then systems transformation requires attention to the conditions that make thriving possible. The challenge is whether systems can engage those conditions more openly, ethically, and relationally, rather than allowing narrow measures of success to silently determine what education is for. In this sense, thriving-oriented transformation depends not on resolving the purpose question once and for all but on creating the democratic and institutional conditions through which societies can continue to negotiate it.

“What I want is for that education to nurture people so that they feel safe...And all of this leads to the kind of world that people are building, which is full of love, peace, and compassion. That’s the imagination of education that brings people to create a world full of love and compassion, rather than competition and things like that.”—A philanthropy lead

3.6 HOW THE GLOBAL SOUTH PARADOX EMERGES ACROSS INDIA, PERU, AND SOUTH AFRICA

Across India, Peru, and South Africa, the Global South paradox emerged as a structural condition: systems hold plural, humanistic, and culturally grounded aspirations yet govern through architectures of measurement, compliance, and comparability that institutionalize only a narrower set of purposes. The relational conditions become the sites where this paradox becomes conspicuous and palpable. The countries differ in history, language, and level of schooling, but progressive purpose language travels widely while the conditions to sustain dignity, agency, belonging, and purpose do not follow. For systems to transform, it is imperative to look beyond implementation and performance alone, to the deeper conditions through which education enables or constrains thriving.

What is shared across all three contexts is more significant than what is different. In each case, progressive purpose language is real but institutionally fragile. Compliance and measurement logics are entrenched and self-reproducing. Relational conditions are essential but structurally invisible. Care work is foundational but under-resourced and unrecognized. Teachers and practitioners are central to children's experience but peripheral to purpose-setting authority.

These shared conditions point toward a common structural explanation: the Global South paradox is not primarily produced by inadequate reform ambition or insufficient progressive intention. It is produced by a mismatch between the institutional architectures through which systems govern themselves and the conditions through which children actually thrive. Transformative change requires altering the incentive structures, resource flows, accountability mechanisms, and legitimacy systems through which purpose is translated into institutional practice. This is a governance and political challenge, requiring deliberate redistribution of power, resources, and recognition across education ecosystems.



3.7 WHAT DOES THE INDIA CASE CONTRIBUTE?

India illustrates how education systems can simultaneously embrace ambitious visions of holistic development while remaining governed through institutional arrangements that continue to privilege academic achievement, standardization, accountability, and credentialism. Rather than representing a failure of policy implementation, the Indian case demonstrates how contemporary education reforms are layered upon historically embedded governance structures, creating tensions between emerging aspirations and established institutional logics.

India's NEP 2020 represents one of the world's most ambitious attempts to redefine the purpose of education. It articulates a vision that extends beyond academic achievement to include creativity, critical thinking, social and emotional development, constitutional values, multilingualism, inclusion, and holistic human development. However, participants across the Exploration Circles consistently described how examination cultures, competitive entrance systems, performance pressures, and accountability mechanisms continue to shape everyday educational experiences. As a result, educators and learners often navigate multiple and sometimes competing understandings of success.

The Indian case also highlights the importance of viewing education systems as relational rather than purely technical. Participants repeatedly emphasised that dignity, belonging, trust, meaningful relationships, and learner agency are central to educational experiences, yet these dimensions remain largely invisible within prevailing systems of measurement and accountability. This suggests that educational transformation cannot be achieved solely through curricular reform or policy innovation; it also requires attention to the relational and institutional conditions through which educational purposes are enacted in everyday practice.

At the same time, India's scale, diversity, and federal governance make it a particularly important context for understanding education systems transformation. Multiple languages, cultures, social identities, and governance arrangements coexist within a single national system, requiring educational purposes to be continuously interpreted and negotiated across different contexts. This complexity demonstrates that systems transformation is not a linear process of implementing a predefined vision but an ongoing process of balancing competing priorities, values, and institutional demands.

Taken together, the Indian case contributes a distinctive insight to this comparative inquiry. It shows that education systems may articulate progressive aspirations while remaining institutionally organised around historically dominant purposes. This coexistence does not simply reflect implementation gaps; rather, it illustrates how multiple educational purposes become layered within the same system. In doing so, the Indian experience provides a compelling empirical foundation for the Global South Paradox developed in this report and reinforces the importance of reopening the purpose question as a prerequisite for meaningful education systems transformation.

This complexity demonstrates that systems transformation is not a linear process of implementing a predefined vision but an ongoing process of balancing competing priorities, values, and institutional demands.

3.8 WHAT DOES THE PERU CASE CONTRIBUTE?

Peru demonstrates that educational purpose cannot be understood solely through national policy aspirations but must also be examined through questions of culture, language, identity, and recognition. While the country's competency-based reforms articulate ambitious goals around democratic citizenship, holistic development, social participation, and learner agency, the Exploration Circles revealed that these aspirations are experienced differently across diverse cultural and linguistic communities. The Peruvian case therefore highlights how educational purpose is inseparable from whose knowledge, language, and ways of being are recognised as legitimate within education systems.

A distinctive contribution of the Peru case is its emphasis on interculturality. Participants consistently described education not only as preparation for employment or academic achievement but also as a means of sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems, strengthening cultural identity, fostering collective wellbeing, and maintaining relationships with community and territory. These expand conventional understandings of educational success by foregrounding reciprocity, collective responsibility, and living well within community rather than focusing exclusively on individual achievement.

At the same time, participants highlighted persistent tensions between these aspirations and institutional realities. Although intercultural education is recognised within national policy, implementation remains uneven. Indigenous languages, local knowledge systems, and territorial identities continue to occupy a marginal position within teacher preparation, assessment, and accountability structures. Learners often described experiencing confidence and agency in their mother tongue while becoming less visible and less participatory when learning shifted to Spanish. These experiences illustrate how governance arrangements can unintentionally privilege some forms of knowledge and participation while constraining others.

The Peru case also demonstrates that educational purpose is fundamentally relational. Across the Exploration Circles, participants emphasised education as a shared social endeavour grounded in dialogue, community participation, cultural continuity, and mutual responsibility. Rather than positioning schools as isolated institutions, participants described education as emerging through relationships among learners, families, communities, educators, and territories. This broader understanding challenges individualised and performance-oriented conceptions of educational success and reinforces the importance of belonging, recognition, and cultural identity as conditions for thriving.

Taken together, the Peru case contributes a distinctive perspective to this comparative inquiry by demonstrating that education systems transformation requires more than expanding access or improving learning outcomes. It requires

The Peruvian case therefore highlights how educational purpose is inseparable from whose knowledge, language, and ways of being are recognised as legitimate within education systems.

recognising diverse epistemologies, legitimising multiple ways of knowing, and creating institutional conditions in which cultural, linguistic, and territorial identities are not peripheral but integral to educational purpose. In doing so, Peru illustrates how the Global South Paradox is expressed through tensions between progressive commitments to interculturality and the enduring institutional dominance of standardised governance, assessment, and accountability systems.

3.9 WHAT DOES THE SOUTH AFRICA CASE CONTRIBUTE?

South Africa demonstrates that education systems transformation cannot be understood without confronting the historical, political, and structural conditions that shape educational opportunity for young children. More explicitly than the other cases, participants viewed education not simply as a mechanism for learning, but as a project of justice, redress, democratic participation, and social transformation. The case illustrates how educational purpose is inseparable from broader societal efforts to address historical inequality and create more equitable futures.

A distinctive contribution of the South African case is its emphasis on relationships as the foundation of educational quality within a largely privatised, informal early learning sector. Across the Exploration Circles, participants described education as emerging through networks of care involving practitioners, families, communities, and children rather than through schools or formal institutions alone. Early childhood education was seen as embedded in relationships of trust, care, belonging, and community participation which were seen as central conditions for children's learning and development.

This perspective broadens conventional understandings of education systems by recognising that learning is embedded within wider social and community relationships.

At the same time, participants described tensions between these relational aspirations and institutional realities. While policy frameworks emphasise children's rights, inclusion, holistic development, and democratic participation, governance systems continue to prioritise compliance, registration requirements, administrative accountability, and resource constraints. Practitioners are responsible for children's wellbeing, but have limited influence over decisions concerning funding, quality standards, and the broader purposes of education. These experiences illustrate how institutional arrangements can unintentionally constrain the relational conditions that policy seeks to promote.

Equitable education system transformation requires redistributing not only

The South African case contributes a distinctive perspective to this comparative inquiry by showing that education systems transformation is a question of relational justice.

resources but also legitimacy and voice. Participants emphasised that families, practitioners, and communities possess valuable knowledge about children’s development, yet these perspectives are not always reflected in decision-making processes. Educational purpose therefore becomes a shared societal endeavour that depends upon recognising multiple forms of expertise and strengthening participation across the education ecosystem.

The South African case contributes a distinctive perspective to this comparative inquiry by showing that education systems transformation is a question of relational justice. It demonstrates that creating opportunities for children to thrive requires more than improving programmes or strengthening institutional performance; it requires building systems that recognise care, trust, participation, dignity, and shared responsibility as essential features of educational quality. In doing so, South Africa shows how the Global South paradox is expressed through the coexistence of transformative aspirations for justice and inclusion alongside institutional arrangements that continue to privilege compliance, administrative accountability, and an unequal distribution of power.

3.10 COMPARATIVE CONTRIBUTION OF THE THREE COUNTRY CASES

The three country cases contribute more than contextual variation; together, they provide complementary analytical lenses through which to understand education systems transformation. Rather than offering parallel descriptions of national contexts, each case illuminates a distinct dimension of the Global South Paradox—demonstrating how tensions between progressive educational aspirations and enduring institutional logics manifest in different yet interconnected ways.

COUNTRY	DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMPARATIVE INQUIRY
India	Institutional layering – demonstrates how ambitious holistic reforms coexist with historically embedded governance structures centred on examinations, accountability, and credentialism, revealing how competing educational purposes become layered within the same system.
Peru	Epistemic justice – demonstrates that educational purpose depends upon recognising whose languages, cultures, identities, and knowledge systems are considered legitimate, highlighting that systems transformation also requires transforming what counts as valued knowledge.
South Africa	Relational justice – demonstrates that education systems transformation depends not only on institutional reform but also on redistributing care, voice, participation, dignity, legitimacy, and shared responsibility across the education ecosystem.

The Indian case reveals the challenge of institutional layering, where new visions of holistic education are superimposed upon governance systems historically organised around examinations, accountability, and credentialism. The Peru case foregrounds epistemic justice, illustrating that reopening the purpose question also requires recognising whose knowledge, languages, identities, and ways of being are legitimised within education systems. The South African case highlights relational justice, demonstrating that systems transformation depends not only on policy reform but also on strengthening relationships of care, trust, participation, dignity, and shared responsibility.

Together, these three perspectives suggest that education systems transformation cannot be understood solely as a technical process of improving learning outcomes or implementing policy reforms. Rather, meaningful transformation requires simultaneous attention to institutional, epistemic, and relational dimensions of change. The comparative analysis therefore provides the empirical and conceptual foundation for this report's central argument: that education systems transformation begins by reopening the purpose question and recognising that educational purposes are continuously negotiated within historically embedded systems of power, governance, knowledge, and social relationships.



04.

REOPENING THE PURPOSE QUESTION

This study concludes not with recommendations, but with an invitation. While it brings greater clarity to the purpose of education, that purpose remains unresolved. We invite you to reflect on the implications below. Across India, Peru, and South Africa, participants articulated aspirations that extend beyond measurable achievement and employability. They described education as a means of enabling dignity, agency and meaningful lives. These purposes were understood as fundamental to what education should make possible. Yet these purposes remain protected to varying degrees within education systems.

The findings argue the importance of measurable learning, accountability, and standardization as enduring goals of education. At the same time, they signal a broader challenge: building educational systems that can balance multiple purposes transparently, ethically, and in partnership with those who experience their consequences. Rather than elevating any single objective, such systems recognize and negotiate the tensions among academic learning, economic opportunity, civic participation, well-being, and other educational aims.

Six implications follow from this argument.

4.1 MAKE EDUCATION PURPOSE AN ONGOING GOVERNANCE QUESTION

The purpose of education is not fixed once it is stated in a policy document. It is continually interpreted and reshaped through funding decisions, curriculum design, assessment systems, institutional practices, professional norms, and everyday interactions. Understanding what education is for therefore requires examining which purposes are reflected in the allocation of resources, are embedded in systems of accountability and treated as legitimate priorities - and which remain rhetorical commitments.

Conversations about educational purpose should be integrated into policy design, implementation, review, budgeting, and evaluation, and should involve education actors who shape and experience education. These discussions are valuable not because they produce consensus, but because they surface the assumptions, priorities, and trade-offs that influence policy decisions. Questions such as the following can help make those choices explicit:

- What purposes does the system publicly articulate?
- Which purposes are actually protected through funding, regulation, assessment, and accountability?
- Whose aspirations shape these priorities, and whose are absent?
- What does the system currently make possible for different groups of children and young people?
- Where do stated commitments conflict with everyday institutional practice?

Leaving these questions open acknowledges that the purpose of education is political, relational, and subject to change over time. and continually evolving.

4.2 MOVE FROM PARTICIPATION TO DEMOCRATIC INFLUENCE

Across the three contexts, conversations about education purpose became richer when they included people who shape and experience education systems: policymakers, system leaders, educators, practitioners, researchers, young people, families, civil society organizations, and communities. Each contributed forms of knowledge that challenged dominant assumptions and expanded collective understanding.

However, inclusion in a conversation is not the same as influence over a decision. Voice can be acknowledged while authority remains concentrated elsewhere. Democratic ecosystem engagement therefore requires attention not only to whom

is invited to speak but also to whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, who sets the agenda, who interprets what is heard, and who has the authority to act on it.

Exploration Circles and other similar deliberative forums can support this work when they are embedded in institutional processes rather than treated as one-off consultations. Their value lies in creating opportunities for people to exchange perspectives, question assumptions, disagree constructively, and consider alternatives. Equally important, these conversations should inform policy priorities, resource allocation, conceptions of quality, and mechanism of accountability.

4.3 TREAT RELATIONSHIPS AS EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Across all three countries, participants located much of education's meaning and value in relationships. Often, these relational conditions are seen as personal qualities of exceptional educators or desirable additions to the formal work of education. However, the findings suggest a different interpretation: relational conditions are part of the infrastructure through which learning and thriving become possible. Yet, unlike buildings, attendance, examinations, and compliance requirements, relational conditions are rarely protected systemically.

Making relational conditions visible does not mean reducing care, trust, or belonging to another narrow set of indicators. It means examining whether staffing, professional development, workload, school culture, funding, assessment, and accountability enable or erode these conditions. It also means recognizing the profoundly human and emotional labor by teachers, practitioners, families, and communities and asking whether they have the professional dignity, resources, time, and agency needed to sustain this labor.

4.4 EVALUATE SYSTEM CONDITIONS, ALONGSIDE REFORM DELIVERY

Education systems transformation involves more than implementing reforms as designed. Similar reforms can produce markedly different experiences and outcomes depending on the institutional conditions through which they are interpreted, legitimized, resourced, and enacted. A policy that appears coherent on paper may be narrowed or distorted within systems marked by inequality, limited participation, mistrust, weak professional agency, or restrictive definitions of success.

Evaluation should therefore examine both the implementation of a reform and the system conditions that shape how it is interpreted, enacted, and experienced. Relevant questions include:

- How do existing incentives affect the interpretation of the reform?
- Who carries its administrative, relational, and emotional burdens?
- Which forms of knowledge and professional judgment are legitimized?
- How does the reform redistribute or further concentrate resources, authority, and recognition?
- What does implementation feel like in the everyday lives of learners, educators, families, and communities?

This approach shifts attention from technical delivery alone to the governance, power relations, institutional cultures, and lived experiences through which reform becomes consequential.

4.5 USE TENSIONS AS SITES OF INQUIRY AND TRANSFORMATION

Education systems do not typically pursue just one purpose. Academic achievement, economic opportunity, citizenship, wellbeing, belonging, dignity, participation, discipline, identity, cultural continuity, and social cohesion coexist as legitimate aspirations. In practice, however, some purposes carry greater institutional weight than others, while the trade-offs between them are often obscured by broad policy language..

Rather than attempting to eliminate all tensions or replacing one dominant purpose with another, transformation requires strengthening the capacity of systems to identify and negotiate those tensions ethically, democratically, and reflexively. A tension-oriented inquiry asks:

- Which purposes are in tension in this context?
- Which purpose becomes dominant when difficult decisions are made?
- Who benefits from the existing hierarchy of purposes, and who bears its costs?
- Which values are celebrated rhetorically but weakly funded, measured, or protected?
- What changes in authority, resources, accountability, and recognition would enable a different balance?

Seen this way, tensions are not merely implementation problems to be administratively resolved. They are sites where the politics of education purpose become visible and where alternative institutional arrangements can be imagined.

4.6 INVITE EDUCATION ACTORS TO ASK DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

No single actor can hold these tensions alone. Because education purpose is negotiated relationally across policy, governance, institutions, and everyday practice, addressing these challenges depends on coordinated reflection and action across roles. The following questions are intended as suggested entry points for different education actors, inviting examination and dialogue rather than serving as an exhaustive checklist.

Polymakers and system leaders

Policy and system leadership commonly focus on performance, coordination, and implementation. The findings point to a complementary task: attending to the role of different purposes and voices.

- Which purposes receive funding, regulatory protection, and accountability attention?
- What purposes remain difficult to measure but important to sustain?
- Whose knowledge is absent from policy design and review?
- How can participation influence decisions rather than merely validate them?

School leaders

Rather than focus school improvement on operational efficiency, school leadership should question the culture that improvement itself depends upon.

- Do learners and educators experience the school through trust or compliance?
- How and what kind of relationships are intentionally nurtured rather than assumed?
- Whose voices shape school priorities?
- What conditions support teacher trust, motivation, and professional agency?

Teachers, practitioners, and educators

Curriculum delivery and classroom management are necessary but incomplete accounts of the work. The findings ask teachers to hold harder questions in daily practice.

- What forms of success do I value most in everyday practice?
- Which learners feel most recognized and included and which least?
- What meaningful opportunities exist for learner voice and agency?
- How do classroom relationships enable or constrain learning and belonging?

Researchers and evaluators

Measuring outcomes captures only part of what participants described as meaningful. Researchers and evaluators need to treat conditions, processes, and lived experience as legitimate evidence and interrogate whose voices and forms of knowledge current evidence systems overlook.

- What education experiences remain invisible in current evidence systems?
- What assumptions shape what we measure and treat as credible evidence ?
- Whose voices and forms of knowledge are missing?
- How can evaluation examine power and institutional conditions without reducing them to decontextualized indicators?

Donors and philanthropic actors

Funding tends to follow interventions and scalable models. The findings suggest that donors and other philanthropic actors need to scrutinize how funding priorities reinforce the purpose of education.

- Which aspirations are reinforced through current funding priorities?
- What remains underfunded because it is relational, contextual, or difficult to measure?
- How might investment strengthen ecosystem conditions, institutional legitimacy, and locally grounded capacity?
- Who has authority to define success and adaptation within funded work?

Civil society organizations

Program delivery and service provision are visible contributions, but the findings point beyond those contributions to the role of civil society organizations in enabling democratic participation in education systems.

- Whose experiences and aspirations remain peripheral in reform conversations?
- How can participation become more meaningful, plural, and consequential?
- How can local knowledge shape policy, institutional practice, and definitions of success?
- What alternative education futures are being imagined within communities?

Communities and families

Support for access and achievement is only one dimension of the role communities already play. The findings invite communities to be recognized as co-authors of education purpose.

- What does education success mean within our community?
- What futures do families hope education enables?
- How are our community knowledge, languages, identities, and aspirations reflected within schools?
- Through what mechanisms can communities shape education priorities and decisions?

Young learners

Participation initiatives and future-preparation frame most systems' engagement with young learners. The study suggests a further step: shared ownership.

- What makes you feel valued, heard, and recognized within education?
- Where do you experience belonging, and where do you experience exclusion ?
- What kinds of futures do you hope education helps create?
- When are you able to influence decisions that affect your learning and everyday life?



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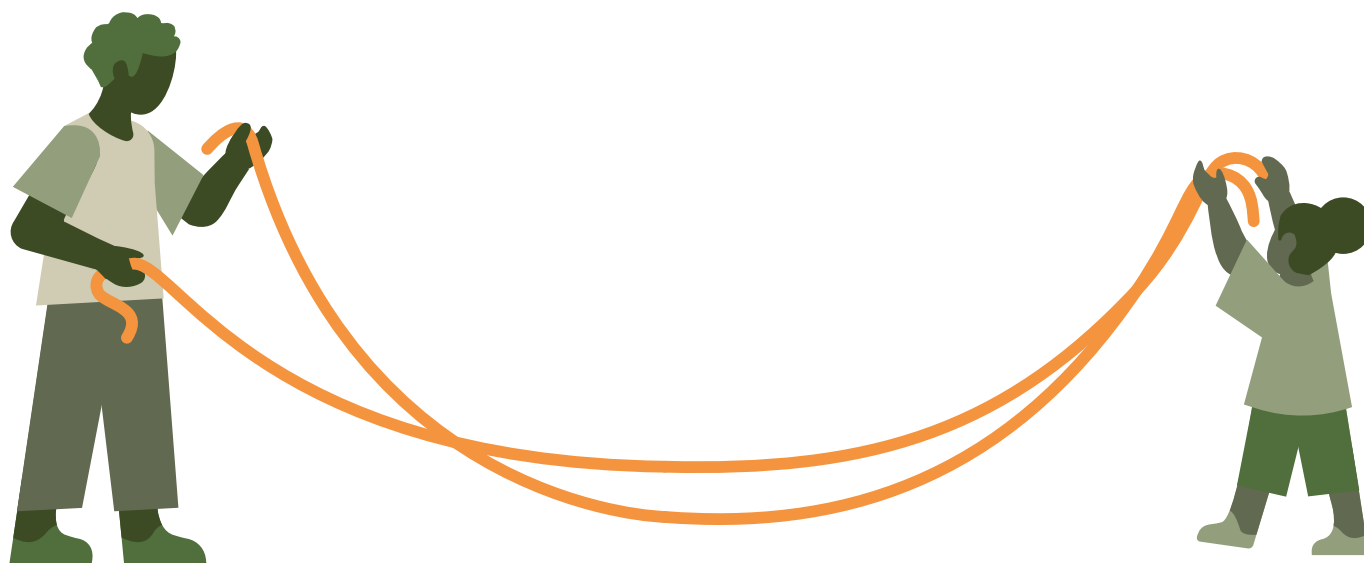
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APPENDIX A. EXPLORATION CIRCLES: PURPOSE, PRINCIPLES, AND FACILITATION APPROACH

The Exploration Circles, or ECs, were designed as a reflective, creative, and dialogic process through which participants could explore the purposes of education from personal, collective, and systemic perspectives. As described in the methodology section of this report, ECs were intentionally selected as a data collection method because they created a non-hierarchical space for participants to surface lived experiences, examine dominant and alternative narratives about education, and consider what these narratives mean for children and young people's ability to thrive.

The ECs were also adopted because the research sought to move beyond extractive or purely interview-based approaches. The process invited participants to reflect, create, interpret, and make meaning together. This enabled participants to engage with complex and sometimes deeply personal questions about education in ways that were relational, embodied, and accessible.

The process described here should be understood as illustrative rather than prescriptive. Across country and community contexts, facilitators adapted the flow, timing, activities, language, and facilitation style in response to local needs, participant groups, cultural norms, logistical constraints, and emerging dynamics in the room. The purpose of this appendix is to describe the core intentions and principles that guided the ECs, alongside examples of how those principles were enacted in practice.

CORE PRINCIPLES GUIDING THE ECs

Across contexts, the ECs were guided by several facilitation principles. These principles shaped the design of the process, even when specific activities or sequences differed.

1. Creating a safe and non-hierarchical space

A central purpose of the ECs was to create a space where participants could engage honestly and thoughtfully with their own experiences and with the perspectives of others. Facilitators worked to reduce hierarchy within the group by emphasizing voluntary participation, consent, accessibility, care, and the legitimacy of different forms of expression.

This included making clear that participants could choose how and when to participate, that silence was acceptable, and that no one was required to share more than they wished. Facilitators were encouraged to avoid forcing participation, to normalize pauses and quiet reflection, and to remain attentive to power dynamics among participants.

For example, some ECs began with participants sitting in a circle and responding to a light check-in prompt. In other settings, participants created name tags or shared a question they might ask someone else in the group. These opening activities served the broader purpose of helping participants transition into the space, begin building trust, and establish a sense of shared presence.

2. Beginning with lived experience

The ECs were designed to begin from participants' own educational experiences before moving toward broader collective or systemic analysis. This reflected the belief that narratives about the purpose of education are shaped not only by policy, public discourse, or institutional expectations, but also by memory, aspiration, disappointment, family history, social position, and lived experience. Participants were invited to reflect on questions such as: Why did I get educated? What did education make possible for me? What was difficult or impossible within my educational experience? What do I wish had been different?

In some contexts, this reflection was supported through a milling exercise in which participants moved around the room and responded to prompts in pairs or small groups. The prompts often began with lighter memories, such as favorite subjects, teachers, people, or school moments, before moving toward more complex or difficult experiences. In other contexts, facilitators adapted this portion to better suit the group, using individual journaling, small-group conversation, or oral reflection.

The purpose of this stage was to help participants connect the question of educational purpose to their own experiences and to notice how those experiences shaped their assumptions, hopes, and critiques.

3. Supporting multiple forms of expression

The ECs intentionally included creative and arts-based methods to support reflection beyond verbal discussion alone. These methods provided participants with alternative ways to explore and communicate complex ideas, particularly when those ideas were difficult to express directly or when participants processed meaning visually, symbolically, or collectively. In some ECs, participants engaged in layered drawing exercises to explore questions such as: What is the purpose of education now? What does education currently enable for a child or young person? What might an outsider see when looking at the education system? What is missing? What should the purpose of education be?

For example, in one version of the activity, one participant began a drawing representing the purpose of education, and another participant added a new layer in a different color. This helped surface how narratives are expanded, contested, or reinterpreted by others. In another version, participants used a single page to represent multiple layers, such as personal experience, perceived public narratives, and desired futures for education.

These examples should be read as illustrative. The central principle was the creation of a non-verbal or multimodal space in which participants could explore meaning, tension, and imagination.

4. Moving from individual reflection to collective sensemaking

A key feature of the ECs was the movement from personal reflection into shared analysis. Participants were invited to consider how individual experiences connected to broader narratives, systems, and structures of power. This collective sensemaking process helped surface the diversity of educational narratives in the room, including where they converged, conflicted, or left certain children and young people out.

Facilitators used prompts such as: What narratives about education are emerging? Which narratives feel familiar or resonant? Which narratives feel distant, incomplete, or exclusionary? Who is seen in these narratives, and who is not? Who gets to decide the purpose of education? What do these narratives mean for children's ability to thrive?

In some contexts, participants used colored stickers to map resonance and exclusion. For instance, green stickers were used to mark narratives that felt personally resonant or inclusive, while red stickers were used to mark narratives participants rejected or felt did not serve all students. This visual mapping helped reveal patterns, tensions, and gaps. It also encouraged participants to notice that a narrative may resonate with some people while excluding or limiting others.

The specific activity varied across contexts. The deeper purpose was to support participants in collectively examining how narratives about education can reproduce or challenge power, inclusion, and belonging.

5. Attending to power, silence, and positionality

Throughout the ECs, facilitators were encouraged to remain attentive to power dynamics within the room and within the narratives being discussed. This included noticing who spoke often, who remained quiet, whose experiences were treated as common or authoritative, and whose perspectives were absent or marginalized.

Participants were invited to reflect on what they believed about education, and how their own positions shaped those beliefs. Prompts such as “What informs my position?” or “Where am I located in relation to this narrative?” helped participants examine the relationship between personal experience, social identity, institutional power, and educational purpose.

Silence was also treated as meaningful. Facilitators were encouraged not to rush to fill silence or interpret it as disengagement. In some cases, silence offered participants time to process, protect themselves, or remain with complexity. Honoring silence was therefore part of the ECs’ broader commitment to care and voluntary participation.

6. Keeping the process adaptive and responsive

The ECs were intentionally flexible. While facilitators often worked from a guiding structure, the process was adapted based on the participants, setting, available time, language, and local context. Some groups needed more time for trust-building; others moved more quickly into collective analysis. Some participants responded strongly to creative activities; others preferred dialogue, storytelling, or written reflection.

This flexibility was central to the design. The ECs were designed as an adaptive exploratory process guided by shared principles. Facilitators used judgment and care to determine how best to support reflection, participation, and collective meaning-making in each context. Post-session debriefs with facilitators and notetakers were used to improve the design and process of future circles.

ILLUSTRATIVE FLOW OF AN EC

Although the process varied, many ECs followed a broad arc of gradual deepening:

Opening and grounding

Participants were welcomed into the space, introduced to the purpose of the EC, and invited to engage with shared agreements around consent, care, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respect.

Personal reflection

Participants reflected on their own educational experiences, including what education made possible, what it constrained, and what they wished had been different.

Creative exploration

Participants used drawing, mapping, or other arts-based methods to explore prevailing, emerging, and desired narratives about the purpose of education.

Collective sensemaking

Participants interpreted the narratives that emerged, discussed patterns and tensions, and examined questions of inclusion, exclusion, power, and children's ability to thrive.

Closing reflection

Participants were invited to share what they were carrying forward, what had shifted in their thinking, or what the conversation suggested about the purposes education systems should serve.

This flow was meant to support a gradual movement from individual memory to collective analysis. However, the sequence, timing, and activities were adapted in practice.

ROLES OF FACILITATORS AND NOTE-TAKERS

The ECs relied on careful facilitation and documentation. Facilitators were responsible for holding the space, explaining the purpose of activities, supporting voluntary participation, attending to group dynamics, and guiding reflection without over-directing meaning-making. Their role was to create the conditions for participants to surface and examine their own narratives.

Note-takers played an important role in documenting the process without reducing it to only spoken responses. They captured key phrases, recurring themes, tensions, questions, and moments of shift or resonance. In arts-based activities, note-takers focused on words or explanations participants voluntarily shared rather than interpreting drawings on participants' behalf. They also paid attention to how participants connected educational narratives to children's thriving, inclusion, exclusion, and future possibilities.

Both roles required attentiveness to consent, care, and interpretation. The process depended on documenting meaning as it emerged from participants, rather than imposing meaning from outside.

APPENDIX B. REFLECTION TOOLS FOR REOPENING THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

Toward Thriving-oriented and Democratic Education Systems

The purpose of education is rarely a settled question. Across policy, governance, classrooms, and community life, some questions are continually negotiated: what education is for, whose aspirations it serves, which forms of thriving it protects, and what it makes possible, and for whom. This toolkit is designed to support readers in reopening that question deliberately and collectively. The toolkit offers practical entry points for collective sense-making and democratic engagement around educational purpose, governance, legitimacy, thriving, participation, mindsets, power, and relationships. The proposed tools could be used within policy dialogues, leadership retreats, exploration circles, school-and-system reflection processes, research conversations, donor and philanthropy discussions, community engagements, and youth consultations.

This toolkit moves through three parts: a shared reflection lens, entry points organised by role, and a deeper question bank for longer or facilitated sessions.

THRIVING-ORIENTED SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK

This lens offers a shared way of looking before readers turn to their individual roles within the education system. It sets out eight domains through which education system transformation is shaped and thriving of children and young people is enabled or constrained. Each domain below is paired with a single guiding question:

REFLECTION DOMAIN	GUIDING QUESTION
Education purpose	What is the system ultimately organised to value and protect?
Governance and accountability	How do governance structures shape educational behaviour and possibility?
Mindsets and legitimacy	What assumptions shape educational decision-making, and whose knowledge counts?
Power and participation	Who influences educational priorities, and whose voices remain marginal?
Relationships and school culture	What relational conditions—trust, belonging, dignity, and care—are being produced?

REFLECTION DOMAIN	GUIDING QUESTION
Equity and social justice	Who benefits, who remains excluded, and how is difference recognised?
Thriving and human flourishing	Is thriving treated primarily as an individual outcome or as a systemic condition?
Future orientation	What kinds of futures are education systems making possible to imagine?
Ecological and collective well-being	How are human flourishing, collective well-being, and planetary sustainability connected?

Interpreting the Framework

The domains above come alive through a set of recurring tensions. These are not problems to be solved once and for all, but live trade-offs that education systems navigate continuously. The most useful reflection happens not by resolving a tension, but by making it explicit.

TENSION	REFLECTIVE QUESTION
Performance ↔ Thriving	What forms of success are prioritised, and why?
Accountability ↔ Participation	How are decisions made, and who is involved?
Standardisation ↔ Contextuality	How much space exists for local realities, cultures, and diverse needs?
Efficiency ↔ Relational complexity	What relational dimensions become difficult to see within performance-driven systems?
Inclusion ↔ Justice	Does access translate into recognition, dignity, belonging, and agency?
Human Capital ↔ Human flourishing	What broader purposes of education are supported or constrained?
Certainty ↔ Uncertainty	How well do systems prepare young people for complexity, change, and an uncertain future?

A thriving-oriented education system has tensions that we must engage with openly, democratically, and relationally, recognizing that educational purpose is never settled but continually negotiated in response to changing contexts, aspirations, and futures.

ENTRY POINTS BY ROLE: A REFLECTION MATRIX

Different system actors may hold different assumptions and levers of change. This reflection matrix invites each actor to consider reframing what they already do, alongside a small set of questions. These reframes are offered as invitations to expansion, not judgements of current practice.

ECOSYSTEM ACTOR	CURRENT FOCUS → REFLECTIVE EXPANSION	QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION
Policymakers and system leaders	From driving performance and monitoring implementation → toward creating the conditions that make learning, dignity, participation, and flourishing possible.	• What purposes of education are most institutionally protected? • What remains difficult to measure but important to protect? • Which voices are absent from policy conversations?
School leaders	From school improvement and operational efficiency → toward the culture, belonging, and human experience that improvement depends on.	• Do students experience the school through trust or through compliance? • How are relationships intentionally nurtured? • Whose voices shape school priorities? • What conditions support teacher trust, motivation, and professional agency?
Teachers and educators	From delivering curriculum and managing classrooms → toward enabling meaningful learning, agency, and the development of the whole person.	• What forms of success do I value most in everyday practice? • Which students feel most recognised and included—and which least? • What opportunities exist for student voice and agency? • How do relationships shape learning?
Researchers & Evaluators	From measuring outcomes and quantifying change → toward understanding conditions, processes, and lived experience, and expanding what counts as evidence.	• What educational experiences remain invisible in current evidence systems? • What assumptions shape what we measure? • Whose voices are missing from research?
Donors and philanthropic actors	From funding interventions and scaling models → toward strengthening ecosystem conditions, legitimacy, and contextual adaptation.	• What educational aspirations are reinforced through current funding priorities? • What remains under-funded because it is hard to measure? • How might investment support thriving rather than only performance?

ECOSYSTEM ACTOR	CURRENT FOCUS → REFLECTIVE EXPANSION	QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION
Civil society organisations	From programme delivery and service provision → toward democratic participation, community agency, and challenging dominant assumptions.	• Whose experiences and aspirations remain marginal in reform conversations? • How can participation become more meaningful, plural, and contextual? • How can local knowledge shape educational futures? • What alternative visions of educational success emerge from communities?
Communities and families	From supporting educational achievement and school access → toward nurturing holistic flourishing and participating in shaping educational purpose.	• What does educational success mean within our community? • What futures do we hope education enables? • How are our aspirations reflected within schools? • How can communities contribute to shaping educational priorities?
Young people	From participating in student-voice initiatives and preparing for the future → toward shared ownership, belonging, purpose, and co-creating educational experiences.	• What makes you feel valued, heard, and recognised within education? • Where do you experience belonging? • What kinds of futures do you hope education helps create? • When do you feel able to influence decisions that affect your learning?

GOING DEEPER: CROSS-CUTTING REFLECTIVE PROMPTS

For longer or facilitated sessions, the prompts below extend the thriving-oriented systems framework. They are a reservoir to draw from rather than a sequence to complete and may be used to explore a single cluster or move across multiple clusters. These questions are designed to surface assumptions, tensions, exclusions, and possibilities rather than to produce settled responses or consensus.

EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE—WHAT IS EDUCATION ULTIMATELY FOR?

- What purposes of education are currently most visible within our system?
- Which aspirations remain rhetorically present but weakly supported in practice?
- How do different stakeholders define educational success?
- What kinds of human beings, citizens, relationships, and futures are we attempting to cultivate?
- What tensions emerge between different purposes and visions of educational success?

GOVERNANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY—HOW DO SYSTEMS SHAPE POSSIBILITY?

- What forms of success become measurable, governable, and fundable?
- What dimensions of educational experience remain difficult to see?
- What behaviours and practices are rewarded or discouraged?
- What tensions emerge between accountability, participation, and flourishing?
- What becomes easier to manage but harder to nurture within prevailing governance arrangements?

MINDSETS, POWER & LEGITIMACY—WHO GETS TO DEFINE WHAT MATTERS?

- Whose knowledge, experiences, and aspirations become legitimate?
- Which narratives dominate reform conversations, and which remain marginal?
- How do power relations shape educational priorities and decision-making?
- What assumptions have become difficult to question within prevailing reform architectures?
- What forms of local, community, indigenous, or lived knowledge remain undervalued?

RELATIONSHIPS & PARTICIPATION—WHAT CONDITIONS SHAPE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE?

- How do children and young people experience relationships within the system?
- What conditions strengthen trust, belonging, recognition, dignity, and emotional safety?
- What opportunities exist for meaningful participation and shared decision-making?

- Who feels heard, valued, and recognised within the system—and who does not?
- How are disagreement and difference held within educational relationships and communities?

THRIVING & HUMAN FLOURISHING—WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO THRIVE?

- Is thriving viewed primarily as an individual outcome or as a systemic condition?
- How do dignity, belonging, participation, agency, and care shape thriving?
- What forms of flourishing remain difficult to support within current systems?
- What tensions emerge between performance, wellbeing, and flourishing?
- What dimensions of thriving remain difficult to measure yet important to protect?

EQUITY, JUSTICE & RECOGNITION—WHO BENEFITS AND WHO REMAINS MARGINAL?

- Which groups continue to face barriers to participation and recognition?
- How do historical and structural inequalities continue to shape educational experience?
- How are language, culture, identity, disability, class, race, caste, gender, or geography recognised?
- What does meaningful inclusion look like beyond access alone?
- Which forms of exclusion remain normalised or difficult to name?

EDUCATIONAL FUTURES—WHAT FUTURES ARE SYSTEMS MAKING POSSIBLE?

- What kinds of futures are children and young people being prepared for?
- Whose futures become institutionally imaginable and supported?
- How are uncertainty, sustainability, democracy, and collective wellbeing reflected?
- What futures remain difficult to imagine within current reform architectures?
- How might education contribute to ecological and planetary flourishing alongside human flourishing?

REOPENING THE PURPOSE QUESTION

A closing cluster for drawing a session together:

- If educational purpose were to be revisited today, what conversations would need to happen—and who would need to be in the room?
- What assumptions about success and learning might need reconsideration?
- What tensions or disagreements have become more visible through this dialogue?
- What conditions are necessary for systems to support thriving rather than merely performance?
- What is one conversation, commitment, or small experiment that participants wish to carry forward from this reflection?
- How might societies create greater space for ongoing democratic engagement with the purpose of education?

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