

Learning to Live, Not Just to Qualify: Education, Life Skills, and Harmony with People and Planet

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary education systems remain overwhelmingly structured around degrees, diplomas, and certificates as primary indicators of success. While such credentials serve labour market signalling functions, they increasingly fail to equip learners with the life skills, ethical dispositions, and ecological consciousness required to sustain livelihoods, communities, and the planet. This paper critically examines the limitations of credential-centric education models in addressing the interconnected social, economic, and environmental challenges of the 21st century. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature spanning human capital theory, capability theory, education for sustainable development, and Indigenous and relational knowledge systems, the study argues that formal qualifications alone are insufficient for fostering human flourishing and planetary wellbeing. The paper advances a re-conceptualisation of education that prioritises life skills, relational learning, environmental stewardship, and socio-emotional competence alongside academic knowledge. It highlights how current schooling and higher education structures often marginalise practical wisdom, ethical responsibility, and community-embedded learning, thereby producing graduates who are technically qualified yet insufficiently prepared for real-world complexity. The paper concludes by proposing a shift from qualification accumulation to capability-based and life-centred education frameworks, calling for systemic reforms in curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, and education policy to better align learning with the demands of sustainable living and harmonious coexistence with people and the planet.

Keywords: Life skills; Credentialism; Education for sustainable development; Human flourishing; Capability approach; Indigenous knowledge systems; Holistic education; Environmental stewardship.

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been positioned as a primary pathway to personal advancement, economic mobility, and national development. Degrees, diplomas, and certificates have become the dominant markers of educational success, social legitimacy, and employability within modern societies. Rooted in industrial-era logics of efficiency, standardisation, and labour market alignment, credential-based education systems have historically served important economic and administrative functions (Collins, 1979; Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). However, as the world confronts accelerating social inequality, ecological degradation, climate instability, and profound transformations in work and human relationships, the adequacy of credential-centric education models is increasingly being questioned (UNESCO, 2021; Sachs, 2022).

Despite unprecedented expansion in global participation in formal education, many graduates find themselves ill-

equipped to navigate the complexities of contemporary life. Rising youth unemployment, underemployment, mental health challenges, social fragmentation, and environmental irresponsibility suggest a widening gap between what education systems certify and what societies genuinely need (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023; OECD, 2022). As Nussbaum (2011) argues, education systems that prioritise narrow economic outcomes risk producing individuals who are technically trained but ethically underdeveloped, civically disengaged, and disconnected from the social and ecological consequences of their actions. This growing disjuncture raises a fundamental question: *What is education for in the 21st century—qualification or the capacity to live well with others and within planetary limits?* The dominance of credentials as proxies for competence has reinforced a form of educational credentialism, where formal qualifications are often valued more highly than practical wisdom, adaptability, ethical reasoning, and relational skills (Collins, 2019). While human capital

theory has framed education primarily as an investment in productivity and economic growth (Becker, 1993), critics increasingly argue that this instrumental view has narrowed the purpose of education, subordinating human wellbeing and ecological sustainability to market imperatives (Tikly, 2015; Unterhalter, 2019). In many contexts, learners accumulate qualifications without acquiring the life skills necessary for meaningful livelihoods, resilient communities, or environmentally responsible living.

At the same time, global crises have exposed the fragility of systems that privilege certification over capability. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate-induced disasters, and technological disruptions have highlighted the importance of adaptability, emotional resilience, collective responsibility, and problem-solving in uncertain conditions (Fullan, Quinn, Drummy, & Gardner, 2020; Sterling, 2021). Yet such competencies are often marginalised within formal curricula, assessed inconsistently, or relegated to extracurricular spaces. As Biesta (2015) cautions, education that is reduced to measurable outputs and credentials risks losing its ethical, relational, and democratic purposes.

Education for sustainable development (ESD) has sought to address these shortcomings by advocating for learning that integrates environmental stewardship, social justice, and economic viability (UNESCO, 2017). However, the integration of ESD principles into mainstream education systems has been uneven and frequently superficial. Sterling (2010) notes that sustainability is often treated as an “add-on” rather than a foundational orientation shaping curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Consequently, learners may graduate with sustainability knowledge but lack the dispositions and skills required to translate that knowledge into sustainable practices and everyday decision-making.

Parallel critiques have emerged from capability theory, which shifts the focus of education from credential attainment to the real freedom’s individuals have to live lives they value (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). From this perspective, education should enhance learners’ capabilities to secure livelihoods, participate meaningfully in community life, care for the environment, and exercise ethical judgement. Formal qualifications, while valuable, are insufficient indicators of such capabilities. As Walker (2006) emphasises, an education system that neglects agency, voice, and relational wellbeing risks reproducing inequality and social exclusion, even as participation rates increase.

Indigenous and relational knowledge systems further

challenge the dominance of qualification-driven education by foregrounding learning as a lifelong, community-embedded, and ecologically grounded process. Scholars such as Smith (2012) and Cajete (2015) argue that Indigenous epistemologies emphasise knowing how to live—how to relate to land, ancestors, community, and future generations—rather than merely knowing how to perform in institutional settings. These perspectives expose the limitations of education systems that prioritise certification over wisdom, competition over cooperation, and individual achievement over collective wellbeing.

In many regions, particularly in the Global South and Small Island Developing States, the consequences of credential-centric education are especially pronounced. Formal qualifications may not translate into secure employment, while local knowledge, subsistence skills, and community resilience—critical for survival and sustainability—are often undervalued or excluded from formal learning frameworks (Connell, 2019; Thaman, 2009). This tension underscores the need to rethink education not only as preparation for employment, but as preparation for life in socially and environmentally vulnerable contexts.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that education must move beyond a narrow fixation on degrees, diplomas, and certificates toward a life-centred, capability-oriented paradigm. Learning to live—ethically, sustainably, and relationally—must be recognised as a core purpose of education rather than a peripheral outcome. By critically examining the limitations of credentialism and drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from human capital theory, capability theory, education for sustainable development, and Indigenous knowledge systems, this paper seeks to reposition education as a transformative force for human flourishing and planetary wellbeing.

The paper contends that unless education systems reorient curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, and policy toward life skills, ecological responsibility, and social harmony, they risk producing generations of learners who are formally qualified yet fundamentally unprepared for the realities of the 21st century. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing global debates on the future of education, offering a timely and ethically grounded call to reimagine what it truly means to be educated in an age of social and environmental uncertainty.

Shifting Educational Priorities: From Credential-Centric to Life-Centred Education

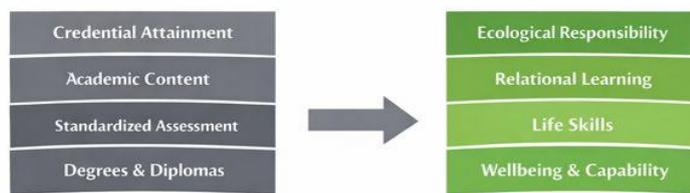


Figure 1. Shifting Educational Priorities: From Credential-Centric to Life-Centred Education.

Note. Conceptual illustration synthesised from Collins (2019), Biesta (2015), Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2011), and Sterling (2021). Lower segments indicate current emphasis in credential-based education, and upper segments indicate life-centred priorities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Credentialism and the Dominance of Qualification-Centred Education

Modern education systems are deeply shaped by credentialism, the social process through which degrees, diplomas, and certificates function as primary signals of competence, status, and employability. Collins (1979) argues that credentials often operate less as indicators of actual skills and more as mechanisms of social stratification and labour market closure. Over time, the expansion of formal education has intensified qualification inflation, whereby increasingly higher credentials are required for work that previously demanded fewer formal qualifications (Brown et al., 2011; Collins, 2019).

Human capital theory has significantly influenced this trend by framing education as an economic investment designed to increase productivity and earnings (Becker, 1993). While this perspective has contributed to expanded access to education globally, critics contend that it has narrowed educational purposes to economic outcomes, marginalising broader human, social, and ecological dimensions of learning (Tikly, 2015; Unterhalter, 2019). As a result, education systems often prioritise credential accumulation over the development of life skills, ethical reasoning, and adaptive capacities essential for navigating real-world complexity.

Empirical studies suggest that formal qualifications do not consistently translate into employability, wellbeing, or social cohesion, particularly in contexts marked by economic precarity and labour market volatility (OECD, 2022; WEF, 2023). This growing mismatch has prompted renewed scrutiny of the assumption that more education, measured in credentials, automatically produces better life outcomes.

Life Skills, Employability, and the Limits of Formal Qualifications

Life skills, including critical thinking, communication, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving, are increasingly recognised as essential for sustainable livelihoods and social participation. However, these competencies are often insufficiently embedded within formal curricula or assessed in meaningful ways (UNESCO, 2021). While policy discourse frequently emphasises “21st-century skills,” implementation tends to remain superficial, fragmented, or disconnected from learners’ lived realities (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Fullan et al., 2020). The employability literature highlights that employers value transferable and relational skills as much as, if not more than, formal qualifications (Yorke, 2006; Jackson, 2016). Yet graduates frequently report feeling underprepared for workplace demands, civic engagement, and personal wellbeing, despite holding recognised credentials (OECD, 2022). This suggests that qualification-based education alone is insufficient for fostering the capabilities required to sustain livelihoods across rapidly changing economic and technological landscapes.

Furthermore, life skills extend beyond employability to encompass the capacity to manage health, relationships, finances, and ethical decision-making across the life course. Nussbaum (2011) contends that education systems that neglect these dimensions risk producing individuals who are economically functional yet socially disconnected and ethically fragile.

Education, Sustainability, and Ecological Responsibility

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has emerged as a global response to the failure of conventional

education models to address environmental degradation and social injustice. UNESCO (2017) positions ESD as transformative learning that empowers learners to make responsible decisions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society. However, scholars argue that ESD has often been integrated into education systems in limited and instrumental ways (Sterling, 2010; Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015).

Sterling (2021) notes that sustainability education frequently emphasises awareness rather than behavioural change, resulting in learners who understand environmental problems but lack the skills, values, and agency to act upon them. This disconnect reflects deeper structural issues within education systems that prioritise assessment, standardisation, and certification over experiential, relational, and place-based learning.

Research further indicates that environmental education divorced from ethical reflection and community engagement struggles to foster long-term commitment to sustainable living (Orr, 2004; Sachs, 2022). As such, education that remains focused on credentials risks perpetuating ecological harm by failing to cultivate responsibility, stewardship, and intergenerational thinking.

Capability Theory and Human Flourishing

Capability theory offers a powerful alternative to credential-centric conceptions of education. Sen (1999) defines capabilities as the real freedom’s individuals have to pursue lives they value, shifting attention from inputs (such as years of schooling or qualifications) to meaningful outcomes. Nussbaum (2011) extends this framework by identifying core human capabilities, including practical reason, affiliation, and respect for nature, all of which are directly relevant to education.

From this perspective, formal qualifications are not ends in themselves but means that may, or may not, expand individuals’ capabilities. Walker (2006) argues that education systems overly focused on credentials risk reproducing

inequality by ignoring learners’ diverse contexts, aspirations, and social constraints. Capability-oriented education, by contrast, foregrounds agency, voice, and relational wellbeing.

Studies applying capability theory to education policy highlight the need for curricula and assessment models that value ethical judgement, community participation, and ecological awareness alongside academic knowledge (Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Unterhalter, 2019). These insights reinforce critiques of education systems that equate success with certification rather than with lived wellbeing.

Indigenous, Relational, and Holistic Knowledge Systems

Indigenous and relational epistemologies present a profound challenge to Western credential-based education models. Scholars such as Smith (2012) and Cajete (2015) emphasise that Indigenous education prioritises learning how to live well within relationships, with people, land, ancestors, and future generations—rather than acquiring abstract, decontextualised knowledge.

Thaman (2009) highlights that in Pacific contexts, education traditionally integrates moral, spiritual, ecological, and communal dimensions, all of which are marginalised in formal schooling systems dominated by Western standards and certification regimes. Connell (2019) further argues that global education reforms often impose universal credential frameworks that disregard local knowledge systems and survival skills.

The exclusion of Indigenous and community-based knowledge from formal education not only undermines cultural continuity but also weakens learners’ capacity to respond to local environmental and social challenges. These perspectives underscore the need for education models that value wisdom, relational accountability, and ecological harmony alongside formal learning outcomes.

Table 1: Contrasting Credential-Centric Education and Life-Centred Education

Dimension	Credential-Centric Education	Life-Centred Education
Primary Purpose	Qualification attainment and labour market signalling	Human flourishing, sustainable livelihoods, and social-ecological harmony
Dominant Theoretical Basis	Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993)	Capability Theory (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011)

Indicators of Success	Degrees, diplomas, certificates, grades	Capabilities, wellbeing, adaptability, ethical responsibility
Curriculum Orientation	Disciplinary, standardised, content-heavy	Interdisciplinary, contextual, problem- and life-oriented
Treatment of Life Skills	Peripheral or “soft skills”	Central and foundational
Relationship to Environment	Often abstract or additive (e.g., sustainability modules)	Embedded ecological responsibility and stewardship
Learner Identity	Individual achiever and credential holder	Relational, ethical, and community-embedded actor

Source: Synthesised from Collins (2019), Biesta (2015), Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2011), and Sterling (2021).

Literature Gaps

Despite extensive scholarship critiquing credentialism, employability gaps, sustainability education, and human capability development, several significant gaps remain in the literature.

First, much of the existing research examines credentials, life skills, sustainability, and wellbeing in isolation. There is a lack of integrative frameworks that critically examine how credential-centric education simultaneously undermines life skills development, human flourishing, and ecological responsibility. Few studies explicitly connect qualification-driven education to broader crises of social fragmentation and environmental degradation.

Second, while education for sustainable development is widely promoted, there is limited critical analysis of how credential-focused assessment and certification systems structurally constrain the transformative potential of ESD. The literature often assumes that sustainability outcomes can be achieved without fundamentally rethinking qualification regimes.

Third, capability theory is frequently applied at a conceptual or policy level, but fewer studies explore its implications for challenging credentialism and redefining educational success

beyond formal qualifications. The tension between capability development and qualification accumulation remains under-theorised.

Fourth, Indigenous and relational knowledge systems are commonly discussed in parallel with mainstream education reforms, yet they are rarely positioned as foundational critiques of credential-based education itself. There is insufficient scholarship that foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies as alternative paradigms for “learning to live” rather than merely complementary perspectives.

Finally, there is a notable gap in literature that explicitly frames education as preparation for harmonious living with people and the planet, rather than primarily for employment or economic growth. While this idea appears implicitly across sustainability and ethics literature, it remains underdeveloped as a central organising purpose of education.

Addressing these gaps, this paper contributes a holistic and interdisciplinary critique of credential-centric education, advancing a life-centred, capability-oriented framework that repositions education as a means of sustaining livelihoods, communities, and ecological systems in an increasingly uncertain world.

Table 2: Key Theoretical Perspectives Informing the Critique of Credentialism

Theoretical Lens	Key Scholars	Core Contribution	Relevance to This Study
Human Capital Theory	Becker (1993)	Education as investment for economic productivity	Explains dominance of credentials and labour-market focus

Credentialism	Collins (1979, 2019)	Credentials as social signals rather than skill indicators	Highlights qualification inflation and symbolic value of degrees
Capability Theory	Sen (1999); Nussbaum (2011)	Focus on freedoms to live valued lives	Reframes education beyond certificates toward lived outcomes
Education for Sustainable Development	UNESCO (2017); Sterling (2010, 2021)	Learning for environmental, social, and economic sustainability	Reveals limits of add-on sustainability within credential systems
Indigenous & Relational Epistemologies	Smith (2012); Cajete (2015); Thaman (2009)	Learning as relational, ethical, and place-based	Provides alternative paradigms to qualification-driven education

Source: Author synthesis based on reviewed literature.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Structural Limitations of Credential-Centric Education

The findings emerging from the literature point to a fundamental structural limitation within contemporary education systems: the conflation of educational success with credential attainment. As Collins (2019) argues, credentials have become symbolic currencies that signal social legitimacy rather than reliable indicators of capability or readiness for life. This symbolic function reinforces educational inflation, where learners are compelled to pursue ever-higher qualifications without commensurate gains in life skills, wellbeing, or employability (Brown et al., 2011).

From an analytical standpoint, credentialism privileges standardisation and measurability over contextual relevance and human development. Assessment regimes designed to produce certifiable outcomes often marginalise relational learning, ethical reasoning, and ecological awareness because such outcomes are more difficult to quantify (Biesta, 2015). As a result, education systems tend to reward compliance, performance, and academic reproduction rather than adaptability, creativity, and responsibility, qualities essential for navigating contemporary social and environmental uncertainty (Fullan et al., 2020).

Moreover, the emphasis on credentials reinforces narrow definitions of merit that disadvantage learners whose strengths lie in practical, communal, or ecological knowledge. This dynamic is particularly evident in contexts where formal employment opportunities are limited, and survival depends on diverse livelihood strategies that are poorly recognised by qualification frameworks (Connell, 2019). Thus, credential-

centric education not only fails to prepare learners for life but may actively undermine alternative forms of knowledge critical for resilience and sustainability.

Life Skills as Marginal Outcomes Rather Than Core Educational Purposes

Although policy discourse increasingly acknowledges the importance of life skills, these competencies remain peripheral within most formal education systems. Trilling and Fadel (2009) observe that critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability are frequently articulated as aspirational goals but rarely embedded as organising principles of curriculum and assessment. This marginalisation reflects deeper epistemological hierarchies that prioritise academic knowledge over lived competence.

Analytically, this positioning of life skills as “soft” or supplementary perpetuates a false dichotomy between knowledge and living. Nussbaum (2011) cautions that when education neglects emotional intelligence, ethical judgement, and civic responsibility, it produces individuals who may be technically proficient yet ill-equipped for democratic participation and interpersonal relationships. The rise in graduate anxiety, mental health challenges, and social disconnection further underscores the insufficiency of qualification-based preparation (OECD, 2022).

Life skills also encompass the capacity to manage uncertainty, failure, and change—conditions that define the 21st century. However, assessment-driven education systems often penalise experimentation and risk-taking, thereby discouraging the very dispositions required for resilience and innovation (Fullan et al., 2020). This contradiction highlights the need to reposition life skills

not as outcomes to be appended to curricula, but as foundational purposes shaping how education is conceived and delivered.

Reframing Education Through Capability and Human Flourishing

Capability theory offers a robust analytical lens for challenging credential-centric education. Sen (1999) emphasises that education should be evaluated based on the freedoms it enables rather than the qualifications it confers. From this perspective, the central question shifts from *what learners have* (credentials) to *what learners are able to be and do* in their lives and communities.

Applying this framework reveals that formal qualifications often fail to expand learners’ substantive freedoms. Nussbaum (2011) identifies capabilities such as practical reason, affiliation, and respect for nature as essential to human flourishing—yet these are frequently underdeveloped in education systems dominated by instrumental goals. The persistence of social inequality despite expanded access to education suggests that credentials alone are insufficient to ensure equitable life opportunities (Unterhalter, 2019).

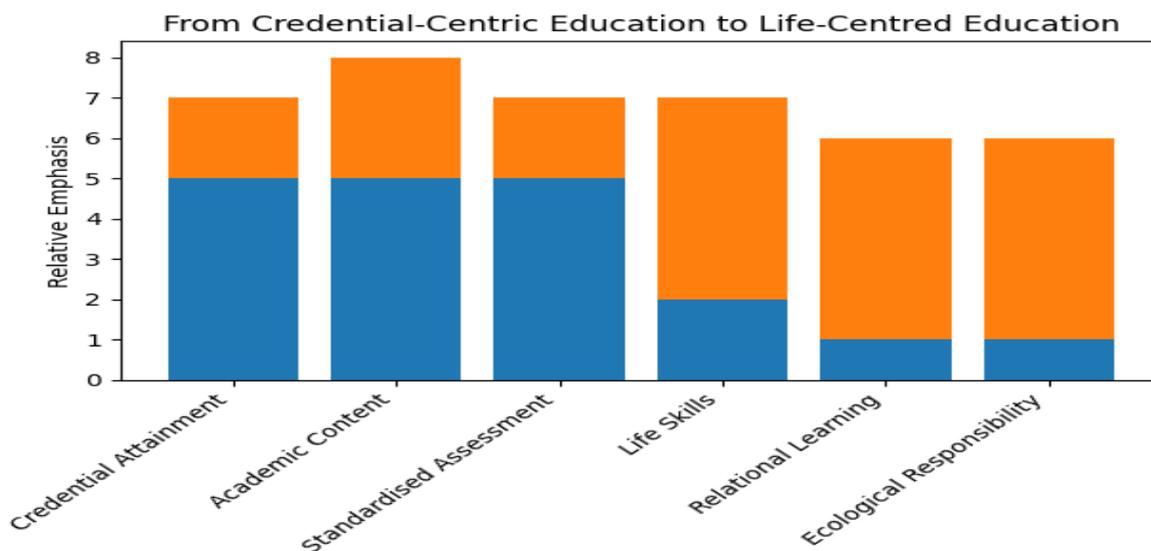
Walker (2006) further argues that capability-oriented education must recognise diversity in learners’ contexts and aspirations. Credential-based models, by contrast, impose uniform pathways and standards that may be misaligned with local realities. This misalignment becomes especially problematic in regions facing environmental vulnerability, economic precarity, and cultural marginalisation, where the capacity to live well depends on adaptive, relational, and ecological competencies rather than formal certification alone.

Education, Sustainability, and the Failure to Translate Knowledge into Action

The analysis reveals a persistent gap between sustainability knowledge and sustainable living. While ESD has expanded awareness of environmental challenges, it has not consistently transformed behaviours or institutional practices (Sterling, 2010). This limitation reflects the broader problem of education systems that prioritise cognitive acquisition over embodied, ethical, and relational learning.

Orr (2004) argues that ecological literacy must involve learning how to live responsibly within natural systems, not merely understanding environmental concepts. However, credential-oriented education often treats sustainability as a thematic topic rather than a guiding ethic shaping educational values and practices. As Sachs (2022) notes, the failure to cultivate environmental responsibility at the level of everyday decision-making undermines global efforts to address climate change and ecological collapse.

From an analytical perspective, sustainability education constrained by assessment and certification frameworks risks reinforcing superficial engagement. Learners may demonstrate knowledge of sustainability principles without developing the commitment or agency to act upon them. This suggests that meaningful sustainability education requires a shift away from credential-driven accountability toward learning experiences grounded in community engagement, place-based practice, and ethical reflection (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015).



Indigenous and Relational Knowledge as Counter-Paradigms

Indigenous knowledge systems provide a powerful counter-paradigm to credential-centric education. Smith (2012) emphasises that Indigenous education is fundamentally relational, embedding learning within

responsibilities to community, land, and future generations. Such approaches challenge Western assumptions that education is primarily an individual investment for economic gain.

Cajete (2015) argues that Indigenous ways of knowing integrate intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and ecological dimensions, offering a holistic conception of learning that is conspicuously absent from most formal education systems. Thaman (2009) further demonstrates that in Pacific contexts, education traditionally aims to cultivate values, identity, and communal harmony alongside practical skills.

Analytically, the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge within credential-based systems reflects deeper power relations that privilege certain forms of knowledge while devaluing others. Connell (2019) warns that global education reforms often universalise Western credential frameworks, thereby erasing local epistemologies and undermining sustainable ways of living. Recognising Indigenous knowledge not as supplementary content but as foundational philosophy offers a pathway toward education that genuinely prepares learners to live in harmony with people and the planet.

Toward Life-Centred and Relational Education Systems

Synthesising these analytical strands, this discussion argues for a paradigmatic shift from qualification accumulation to life-centred education. Such a shift requires rethinking not only curriculum content but also the values, assumptions, and power structures underpinning education systems. Biesta (2015) contends that education must reclaim its ethical and democratic purposes, resisting reduction to economic utility. Life-centred education foregrounds relational accountability, ecological responsibility, and human dignity as core educational aims. It recognises that learning is inseparable from living and that education systems must prepare learners to navigate uncertainty, care for others, and sustain the natural world. This reorientation aligns with calls for transformative education that addresses root causes of social and environmental crises rather than merely adapting individuals to dysfunctional systems (Sterling, 2021).

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that education systems fixated on credentials risk producing generations who are certified yet disconnected, from themselves, their communities, and the planet. Reimagining education as learning to live, rather than merely learning to qualify, is therefore not an idealistic aspiration but an urgent ethical and practical necessity.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to critically examine the prevailing assumption that degrees, diplomas, and certificates are sufficient indicators of educational success and preparedness

for life in the 21st century. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship across credentialism, human capital theory, capability theory, education for sustainable development, and Indigenous knowledge systems, the analysis demonstrates that credential-centric education models are increasingly misaligned with the social, ecological, and ethical demands of contemporary life. While formal qualifications continue to play an important signalling role within labour markets, they are inadequate as primary measures of human capability, wellbeing, and readiness to live in harmony with others and the natural world.

The discussion reveals that modern education systems have become overly focused on measurable outputs, standardised assessments, and certification regimes, often at the expense of life skills, relational learning, and ecological responsibility. As Biesta (2015) argues, when education is reduced to qualification production, its ethical, democratic, and transformative purposes are diminished. This reductionist orientation has contributed to the growing disconnect between educational attainment and lived outcomes, as evidenced by persistent graduate underemployment, social fragmentation, and environmental degradation (OECD, 2022; Sachs, 2022).

By engaging capability theory, this paper reframes education as a process of expanding learners' freedoms to live lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). From this perspective, credentials are means rather than ends, and their value depends on the extent to which they enable meaningful participation in economic, social, cultural, and ecological life. The analysis further underscores that education systems that prioritise qualification accumulation without attending to learners' agency, wellbeing, and contextual realities risk reproducing inequality and undermining human flourishing (Unterhalter, 2019).

Importantly, Indigenous and relational knowledge systems illuminate alternative educational purposes that are largely absent from dominant credential-based models. By emphasising learning as a lifelong, community-embedded, and ecologically grounded process, these perspectives challenge instrumental conceptions of education and reassert the importance of wisdom, responsibility, and relational accountability (Smith, 2012; Cajete, 2015; Thaman, 2009). The marginalisation of such knowledge systems within formal education not only perpetuates epistemic injustice but also weakens collective capacities to respond to environmental and social crises.

Taken together, the findings suggest that learning to live, ethically, sustainably, and relationally, must be repositioned as a central purpose of education rather than a peripheral aspiration. Without a fundamental reorientation away from credentialism and toward life-

centred educational paradigms, education systems risk producing generations who are formally qualified yet profoundly unprepared for the realities of an uncertain and fragile world.

WAY FORWARD

Repositioning Educational Purpose Beyond Credentials

A critical first step in moving forward is redefining the purpose of education beyond qualification attainment. Policymakers and educational leaders must explicitly articulate human flourishing, ecological sustainability, and social cohesion as core educational goals, rather than treating them as secondary outcomes (UNESCO, 2021). This requires shifting evaluation frameworks from narrow performance indicators toward broader measures of capability development, wellbeing, and community engagement (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

Such a repositioning challenge the dominance of human capital metrics and calls for balanced approaches that recognise education as both a public good and a moral endeavour (Unterhalter, 2019). Credentials should remain part of education systems, but their role must be reframed as supportive rather than definitive indicators of educational success.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Transformation

Curriculum reform is essential for embedding life skills, ethical reasoning, and ecological consciousness at the heart of education. Rather than adding discrete “life skills” or sustainability modules, curricula should be designed around real-world problems, community engagement, and interdisciplinary learning (Sterling, 2021). Pedagogies that emphasise experiential, place-based, and collaborative learning can better support learners in developing practical wisdom and adaptive capacity (Orr, 2004).

Assessment practices must also evolve to value reflection, relational learning, and applied competence alongside academic knowledge. As Biesta (2015) notes, what education

chooses to assess ultimately shapes what it values. Moving beyond high-stakes, standardised testing is therefore critical for fostering meaningful learning.

Integrating Indigenous and Relational Knowledge Systems

The meaningful integration of Indigenous and relational knowledge systems offers a powerful pathway toward life-centred education. This integration should move beyond token inclusion to recognise Indigenous epistemologies as foundational ways of knowing, being, and relating (Smith, 2012). Such an approach can enrich education systems by grounding learning in place, culture, and intergenerational responsibility (Cajete, 2015).

In regions such as the Pacific, where community cohesion and environmental vulnerability are deeply intertwined, recognising local knowledge systems is particularly urgent (Thaman, 2009; Connell, 2019). Education policies that validate and institutionalise these perspectives can strengthen cultural continuity while enhancing resilience and sustainability.

Policy and System-Level Reform

System-level reform is necessary to support life-centred education at scale. This includes rethinking qualification frameworks, accreditation systems, and accountability mechanisms that currently privilege narrow academic outcomes (OECD, 2022). Policymakers should explore flexible pathways that recognise diverse forms of learning, including community-based, vocational, and informal education.

International frameworks such as Education for Sustainable Development and lifelong learning provide useful reference points, but their implementation must be contextually grounded and structurally supported (UNESCO, 2017). Without alignment between policy intentions and institutional practices, transformative education will remain aspirational rather than achievable.

Table 3: Policy and Practice Implications for Repositioning Education Beyond Credentials

System Level	Current Practice	Required Shift	Expected Outcomes
Education Policy	Emphasis on measurable outputs and qualifications	Recognition of wellbeing, capabilities, and sustainability	More holistic accountability and social relevance
Curriculum Design	Content-heavy, examination-driven	Life skills, ethical reasoning, ecological literacy embedded	Learners prepared for complex real-world challenges

Pedagogy	Teacher-centred, performance-oriented	Experiential, relational, and community-based learning	Increased agency, resilience, and adaptability
Assessment	Standardised testing and certification	Diverse, reflective, and applied assessment approaches	Recognition of multiple forms of competence
Knowledge Systems	Dominance of Western academic knowledge	Integration of Indigenous and local knowledge	Cultural relevance, community resilience, sustainability

Source: Adapted from UNESCO (2021), Biesta (2015), Sterling (2021), and Smith (2012).

Toward Education That Enables Learning to Live

Ultimately, the way forward lies in reclaiming education as a relational, ethical, and life-sustaining endeavour. Learning to live, within communities, economies, and ecosystems, must be recognised as a fundamental educational outcome. As Sterling (2021) argues, education systems that fail to confront unsustainability at their core risk perpetuating the very crises they seek to address.

By moving beyond credentialism and embracing life-centred, capability-oriented, and relational approaches, education can better prepare learners not only to qualify, but to live well, care for others, and sustain the planet. Such a transformation is not merely desirable; it is essential for navigating the social and environmental challenges of the present and the uncertainties of the future.

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