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# Equity-Centered Thriving

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## Executive Summary

Thriving and equity hold out promise for a better world, but they are stubbornly elusive goals. Efforts to achieve both have suffered from attempts to narrow, rather than expand, goals and standards. Thriving and equity are dynamically interdependent, cumulative, and culturally influenced. Our capacity to address one depends on our capacity to address the other. Interventions and decisions, however, often focus on one outcome, apply to one system, are timed for quick impact, and ignore cumulative effects. This is because conceptualizations, especially in the global North and in much of the global South, treat thriving and equity in a delimited, segmented, disciplinary-specific, ahistorical, culturally evasive, linear, individualist, and reductionist manner.

In this paper, we open a door to new thinking, research, and practice. We synthesize the scholarship across multiple disciplines and review work from indigenous scholars and community-responsive researchers and practitioners. We present expansive definitions of thriving and equity separately and in their context-dependent and dynamically interdependent wholeness. We introduce robustness into our conceptualizations of both. We further address the collective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal processes and structures that contribute to or undermine thriving and equity, contrasting expansive and narrower definitions. We summarize key points that underlie both terms and use these definitions to examine the factors and conditions that promote or constrain thriving and equity.

Our application of these more expansive definitions leads us to propose four areas for further exploration:

- Aligning frameworks and developing consensus on defining and operationalizing thriving across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood;
- Developing common indicators for thriving;
- Understanding different pathways to thriving that individuals and groups who experience adversity take;
- Examining how service systems and learning and development ecosystems can support robust equity and thriving across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

These four areas are critical to the advancement of new research formats and focuses to ensure that research and evidence applied in policy and practice are consistent with the expansive definitions.

**Key Words:** Thriving, equity, learning, race, conditions, collective identity

## Introduction

Equity in thriving has been contested in the Americas since the first Europeans arrived. Not only has equity been limited, but so has the conceptualization of what individual and collective thriving and equity are and how they can be realized. Although these challenges have always been important to those who are at the pain points of inequality, the issues are nationally salient now due to the impacts of rising wealth; continued health and education disparities; environmental degradation; and political challenges to diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts. At the same time, opportunities to change this dismal situation have burgeoned in recent decades, offering us ideas, tools, and hope for a better world. Thriving and equity are the cornerstones of these opportunities, and we explore them here.

Thriving and equity are interdependent, cumulative, culturally influenced, and capacity dependent, but thriving-related interventions and equity policies often focus on one outcome or apply to one domain at one moment in time. The results of each intervention, however, are affected by individual and collective thriving and equity in all life domains. In addition, although people need to thrive in the moment, they need to thrive throughout their life course and to be on track to do so.

There is no consensus regarding how to define and operationalize thriving and equity or how to align them. If equity in thriving is to be realized, researchers, funders, organizers, advocates, and policymakers must address the reality that dominant conceptualizations treat thriving and equity in a segmented, ahistorical, culturally evasive, and linear manner. These constricted approaches

- limit our ability to envision both positive and negative human potential;
- limit our understanding of the nature and the dynamic contexts within which people operate;
- reinforce and are reinforced by frameworks, methodologies, and research designs that limit understanding of individual and collective phenomena and behavior;
- reinforce and are reinforced by research and analysis that strip away context and sociocultural dynamics in service of generalized conclusions; and
- constrain human learning and development by focusing on organization-driven control and management concerns.

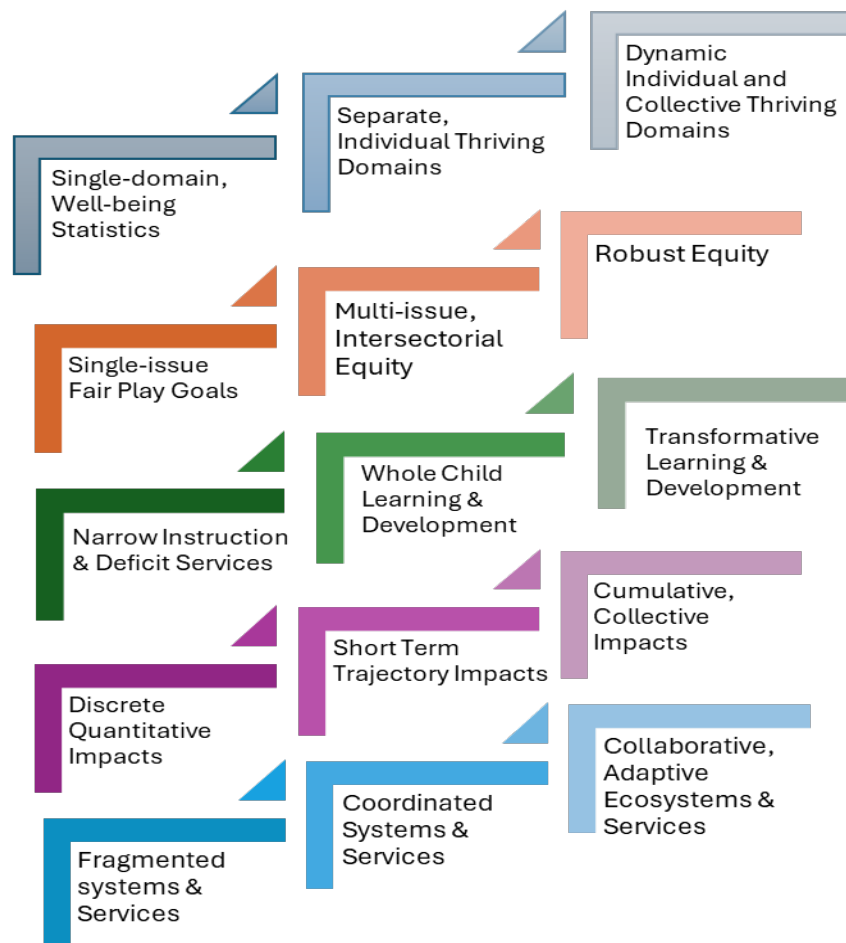
The interdependent and cumulative nature of thriving and equity (and their absence) is exemplified by the disproportionate impacts of the global climate crisis and COVID-19 on certain groups, as well as by an increasing body of evidence that well-intended but narrow approaches to education, health, and wealth inequities have not addressed chronic disparities.

The time is ripe for new standards to aspire to and benchmark against and new tools to realize these standards.

Our expansive and more inclusive conceptualizations of thriving and equity build upon those analyses as well as upon advances in the understanding of sociocultural factors and dynamic systems.

The figure below provides a visual summary of the advances that already underway in practice, policy, and public opinion to reject and move beyond incomplete individual, isolated definitions of thriving and equity and narrow definitions of learning (left column), to more innovative approaches (middle column), toward the conceptualizations recommended in this paper (right column) including the need to consider cumulative, collective impacts and adaptive ecosystem support for robust thriving and equity.

**Figure: From Traditional to Expansive Definitions of Thriving, Equity, and Learning**



This paper employs *robustness* as a standard and epistemological tool to expand and sharpen the lenses we bring to thriving and equity. We draw upon the convergence of scientific and practice-based knowledge about how children grow and develop. This knowledge highlights the interconnectedness of social, emotional, and cognitive growth; the nuanced impact of culture and intersectionality; and the importance of relational context. We illuminate how contextual factors nourish or hinder development and how institutionalized privilege and prejudice constrain thriving and equity. We use this standard to guide our reviews of research on thriving and equity and to formulate definitions that reflect the research and challenge current practices and assumptions.

Our definition of *robust thriving* builds directly on the literature, which we review. While deepening the conceptualization of individual thriving, we also emphasize the collective and cumulative dimensions of thriving and the importance of the conditions that facilitate it.

***Robust thriving*** is a strengths-based, multidimensional concept that takes people and communities on a path toward optimal development. It spans domains and emerges in the moment and over time. Thriving is more than just being competent, resilient, and without problems. Thriving involves achieving appropriately high levels of well-being, groundedness, and agency. Thriving is also inextricably linked to equity and other the conditions that support it.

Thriving is both individual and collective. A person’s motivation to thrive is influenced by and influences their perception of levels of thriving in the people they identify with.

Robust thriving is not easily achieved in highly inequitable environments and societies.

Our definition of *equity*, however, introduces new dimensions. We use the term “robust equity” to signal the extent of reframing needed.

***Robust equity*** is a multisystemic and cumulative concept—collective as well as individual—and assessed with attention to both in the moment and over time. It sets high standards regarding what people can or do experience in varied settings, places, and times. Robust equity is embodied and realized when individuals and groups have the socially buttressed capacity to thrive in all life domains, both as socially nested individual beings and with others.

Robust thriving and robust equity are possible, but they are hard to envision and even harder to embody in societies historically shaped by inequity, ethnocentrism, individualist ideologies and mindsets, and narrow conceptualizations of life possibilities (Cantor & Osher, 2021a; Haney, 1982; Macpherson, 1989; Miringoff, 1996; Ryan, 1972). Powerful definitions of both are sorely needed. Definitions become particularly salient as we confront pressures to limit expectations

in the face of the challenges created by environmental degradation, pandemics, and privilege and bias (Osher & Young, 2020).

Syntheses of convergent findings from history, sociology, neuroscience, systems theory, ecological theory, developmental science, and other fields helps us understand the multiple contexts in which robust thriving and equity can be realized. These syntheses also contribute to our understanding of the biological, neurobiological, cultural, social, emotional, and cognitive components of thriving. They enhance our understanding of the importance of meaning making and of the emotional salience of experience. These findings have been synthesized in studies related to learning and development and the cultural foundations of learning (e.g., Cantor & Osher, 2021b; Lee et al., 2020; 2024 in press; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019).

The paper builds on this knowledge and on a broader array of scholarship and theorizing that includes the work of indigenous scholars and researchers and community-responsive practitioners (e.g., Terry Cross, Ananda Marin, Roberto Rivera). We leverage the scholarship of those who have learned with and from communities in creating or synthesizing path-breaking work—research addressing the science of learning and development and the cultural foundations of learning.

## **Organization of the Paper**

We begin by defining and operationalizing thriving and its components, highlighting scholarship and practices that support more expansive approaches to thriving. We present our concept of robust thriving from an equity-centered perspective that emphasizes the dynamic interconnections between and among individual thriving, collective thriving, and robust equity. Our perspective addresses how these interconnections are historically nested, sociologically structured, and influenced by the dynamic interactions between and among contexts; biological, physical, social, emotional, and cognitive processes; perceptions of the self, tasks, settings, meaning making; and the emotional salience of experience (Bransford et al., 2000; Cantor & Osher, 2021b; Cantor et al., 2019; Lee, 2017; Lee et al., in press a & b; Nasir et al., 2021; NASEM, 2019; Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020).

We then describe the dynamic set of factors and conditions that enable or undermine robust thriving and equity. A Spotlight on transformative learning illustrates the applications of those factors and conditions in one domain. Finally, we conclude the paper by highlighting the research, policy, and practice implications and challenges of adopting robust thriving and robust equity as goals.

## Robust Thriving

We start by examining thriving because we cannot define robust thriving and robust equity meaningfully without first conceptualizing and operationalizing thriving and its components.

Thriving is a dynamic process that involves whole children, youth, and adults influencing each other in every moment as well as over time in ecologically nested contexts (Osher & Boyd, 2019). The conceptualization and dominant uses of the term *thriving* in the global North trace to important work in youth development, positive psychology, and resilience that started in the 1990s. This work was seminal and helped move research and practice away from focusing on preventing and treating problems to focusing on assets, flourishing, and resilience. Although this work was important, and to some extent “liberating,” thriving approaches were often applied in narrow domains, did not focus on the link between individual and collective thriving, and did not address the realities of many who have been systemically marginalized and othered (e.g., Cueva et al., 2021; McCubbin et al., 2021; Rountree & Smith, 2016). In addition, dominant approaches to thriving did not build upon important work in the global South that focused on transformative approaches to individual and collective capacity (e.g., Freire, 1970, 1973, 1976, 1994; Nussbaum, 1992, 2003, 2006; Sen, 1992, 2009; Snauwaert, 2011).

Thriving-related research and practice burgeoned during the past two decades, and an increasing body of research highlights the links between thriving and equity. It is now time to reconceptualize thriving in a culturally inclusive manner that addresses how thriving is experienced individually and collectively, across life domains, in the moment and over time, and how it is supported or undermined within and across service systems and domains (Cantor & Osher, 2021; Cantor et al., 2021a; Lerner et al., 2019; Osher, Pittman, et al., 2020).

### Thriving is multidimensional.

Thriving is experienced and embodied at subjective and cultural, whole-body, sociological, and historical levels and is influenced by all levels of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020). Thriving is dynamically linked to many individual and interpersonal factors. Learning provides an example. Our health at any moment affects our capacity to learn, as do our emotions, our trust in others, and the effects that others have on us. Our capacity to learn is affected by our social, emotional, and cognitive competencies and those of our peers and teachers. While individual competencies are important, they are moderated and enabled by the conditions for learning and teaching (Osher, 2018).

Thriving is amplified or attenuated by microaggressions and/or microaffirmations (Compton-Lilly, 2020; Solórzano & Huber, 2020), economic ease or challenge, and support from social networks (John-Henderson & Ginty, 2020; Kirmayer et al., 2009; Wills & Ainette, 2012) and the bandwidth slack we have that enables us to think, be strategic, and take risks (e.g., Mullainathan & Shafir,



2013). As global warming and pandemics make palpably clear, there are inseparable relationships between and among individual, collective, and environmental thriving (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Izenberg & Fullilove, 2016; Landrigan et al., 2020; Pabayo et al., 2020; Ryff & Singer, 2000).

### **Thriving is more than well-being, although well-being is essential to thriving.**

Earlier youth development approaches were critiqued because they did not sufficiently address the situations of people who disproportionately experience socially structured adversity and risk, although recent approaches are more likely to address these critiques (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2021; Rogers & Way, 2021). Our conceptualization of thriving includes well-being because intentional support for well-being, which is sometimes ignored in thriving-related work, is necessary to address the impacts of adversities, no matter what the cause (Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008; Rivas-Drake et al., 2019).

### **Thriving is not determined solely or predominantly by genetics.**

Genetics is not destiny (Cantor, Lerner, Pittman et al., 2021; Cantor & Osher, 2021b; Condit, 2011; Lerner & Overton, 2017). Human development represents the interconnectedness of experiences, gene expression, gene regulation, epigenetics, neurobiological and biological systems, perceptions, meaning making, and behavior. Human development takes place within dynamic social and physical ecological contexts where relationships that are culturally situated drive development.

Opportunity structures and supportive conditions enable people to meet challenges and realize their potential (Cantor & Osher, 2021a; Hugot & Davis, 2018; Osher, 2018, 2020; Witherington & Lickliter, 2017). Malleability is natural and normative. It includes biological change, as in the case of epigenetic change; neurobiological change, as in the case of how positive and negative learning are neurobiologically embodied (e.g., Cantor & Osher, 2021b; Hoban et al., 2016); conscious and unconscious human learning and adaptation (Cantor et al., 2019); and cultural production (Lee et al., 2020).

### **Thriving is culturally contextualized and specifically situated.**

People thrive or languish in culturally infused contexts that affect and inform how they think, feel, and act. Contexts that promote thriving enable people to experience grounding and affirmation and think, feel, and act in healthy, productive, and mutually supportive ways. Culture is dynamic, not static, and experienced, shaped, and reshaped individually and collectively in all forms of social grouping. Most learning is shaped through culturally organized activities of daily life, and informal learning is shaped by meaning making with others who matter. This learning occurs in families and clans, socially constructed settings and spaces such

as schools and youth centers, and community rituals and settings (Lee et al., 2020; Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020).

### **Thriving is both individually and collectively embodied and experienced.**

People affect each other; they experience well-being and enact aspects of thriving individually, collectively, and in groups (e.g., Garcia et al., 2020; Tuason, Güss, Boyd, 2021). Examples of collective effects include disease transmission; collective support for healing; health promotion; support for people experiencing stress; and social networks that allow people and groups to grow. We experience the importance of collective thriving when people who are dear to us are ill or when organizations that are important to our life or work are compromised.

### **Thriving is experienced in and across all well-being domains, as well as across all the social contexts and fields that people contribute to and make meaning about.**

Thriving develops and is realized through dynamic two-way processes. These include how individuals and groups make sense of their experiences; how thriving and risk are amplified or attenuated in different contexts and times (Cantor et al., 2019, 2021; Lerner et al., 2015; Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020; Spencer & Swanson, 2016; Subica & Link, 2022); how risks and assets affect net results; and how individuals and group members can positively and negatively experience and contribute to what is experienced (Spencer et al., 2019).

This richer, high-level reconceptualization of thriving sits on top of numerous efforts to define the specific components of thriving. Our review identified three key dimensions of thriving, which can be used to group the multiple mechanisms and their indicators that contribute to thriving (Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020; Osher, Pittman, et al., 2020). We address those next.

### **Dimensions of Thriving**

Thriving is more than the absence of ill-being or problems or the development of basic competencies; thriving is a dynamic holistic process that involves children, youth, and adults influencing each other in every moment and over time (Benson & Scales, 2009; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007; Kendziora & Osher, 2016; Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2003). People and their communities individually and collectively learn, develop, and thrive in and across three interactive dimensions: (1) multifaceted *well-being*; (2) *groundedness* in self and community; and (3) *agency* that equips people to address challenges and improve their and others' lives.

- **Well-being:** Experiencing and feeling physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe and fulfilled. This includes how well people and communities are doing—physically, environmentally, mentally (including emotional and spiritual well-being), and having the resources to meet needs.

- **Groundedness:** Feeling connected, rooted in time and place, and knowing who you and your families, clans, and communities are—including individual and collective awareness, identities, belongingness, spirituality, cultural rootedness and senses of meaning, purpose, and civic engagement.
- **Agency:** Having the social and emotional competencies, intellectual skills and knowledge, and beliefs and habits of mind that equip you and people connected to you to meet life’s demands and challenges, and to work individually and collectively to promote thriving.

The dimensions of thriving and the components of each dimension are dynamically linked, mutually reinforcing, and both individual and collective. We present the dimensions separately for heuristic purposes and because they are conceptually distinct and because they have mostly been studied as distinct mechanisms or outcomes.

### **Well-Being**

Well-being has physical, mental, emotional, psychological, spiritual, cognitive, social, environmental, and economic dimensions. Individual well-being is affected by the well-being of others with whom individuals interact, particularly in routine and repeated ways. The well-being of groups depends on the well-being of the individuals who make up the group, as in the collective benefits of universal vaccination versus the spread of an epidemic.

**Physical and Environmental Well-Being.** Physical and environmental well-being (or the lack thereof) also affects cognitive, social, and emotional development, experiences, and outcomes (Chaddock-Heyman et al., 2014; Dipietro et al., 2019; Falck et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2015; Pascoe & Parker, 2019; Reed & Ones, 2006; Salmon, 2001; Weiss et al., 2012). As the benefits of conservation and the challenges climate change and pandemics illuminate, the physical health and well-being of all living things and the planet are intertwined.

Access to physically and emotionally safe environments, quality health care, green space, and safe and nurturant recreational opportunities fosters physical and emotional well-being (Bratman et al., 2019). Economic inequality and racism undermine wellbeing (e.g., Bogan et al., 2022) both by what they contribute to (e.g., environmental pollution and racial stress) and what they minimize (e.g., access to green space and quality health care (Needleman et al., 2002; Paradies et al., 2015; Rigolon et al., 2018). Addressing these well-being facilitators improves well-being. For example, experimental research indicates that green spaces can support mental health and reduce violence (Moyer et al., 2019; South et al., 2018).

**Mental Well-Being.** Mental well-being includes the psychological ability to engage in productive activities and fulfilling relationships and to adapt to change and to cope with adversity (Preboth, 2000). Mental wellness, abilities, and expectations are culturally situated,

experienced, defined, and exhibited (Immordino-Yang & Gotlieb, 2017; Satcher, 2001). Mental well-being builds on physical, economic, and spiritual well-being (Park, 2005; Scales, 2014; VanderWeele, 2017). Psychological, social, and emotional well-being are all part of mental well-being and are affected by positive relationships with others, connectedness, life satisfaction, hope, and optimism (Giroux, 2010; Keyes, 2002, 2005, 2007; Marques & Lopez, 2014; McInerney, 2009; Sapp & Cohen, 2019; Shek et al., 2016; Snyder et al., 1991).

Mental well-being is not the absence of mental illness; in fact, mental well-being can co-exist with mental illness (Keyes, 2005, 2013; Keyes & Waterman, 2003). Nonetheless, mental well-being is undermined by aversive experiences with others in unsupportive environments and by life stresses such as economic worries or a family member's illness.

While safe and supportive relationships at home, school, and in the community are primary drivers of mental well-being, mental well-being and thus thriving is also supported by access to promotive, preventive, treatment, and palliative interventions (Coleman et al., 2022; Heumann, 2020; Osher et al., 2014).

Interventions should be personalized, strengths building and strengths based, consumer driven, and culturally and linguistically competent (e.g., Francis & Osher, 2018; Kendziora et al., 2001; McCammon, 2012; Osher & Osher, 2002; 2004; Turner & Mueller, 2021; van Agteren et al. 2021). It is critically important to address young people's trauma and mental health needs and to do so in a healing-oriented and capacity-building manner that supports caregivers, staff, and peers that youth interact with (Ginwright, 2018; Osher et al., 2021). Untreated and poorly treated individual mental health problems cascade throughout the life course and affect family members, teachers, friends, classmates, and others (Leone et al., 2002; NASEM, 2019; Osher, Quinn, et al., 2002).

**Economic and Material Well-Being.** Economic and material supports include wealth, income, public social benefits, and social networks and resources. These supports foster well-being by reducing stresses and providing access to activities that are palliative and/or promote mental well-being (e.g., personal trainers). Economic well-being includes being able to meet basic needs, absorb financial shocks, build financial assets, and access necessary resources throughout life. While economic well-being is experienced by individuals, families, and communities, it is affected by public policy (e.g., tax policy) and systematic factors (e.g., institutionalized racism (Council on Social Work Education, 2016; Hahnel et al., 2022; Osher et al., 2022; Pages et al., 2022)).

Poverty and inequality create stresses that drive long-term ill-being through physical and neurobiological change (e.g., canalization) and through limited access to quality care (Blair & Raver, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007a, 2007b, 2008). Economic and social inequality can

undermine thriving by limiting access to the array of experiences and opportunities that contribute to social, emotional, academic, and behavioral health (Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020; Osher & Chasin, 2016; Rothstein, 2004; Spencer & Swanson, 2016).

Thriving-oriented responses to adversity should include individual and collective solutions that enable people to draw upon their social networks, spiritual and cultural resources, and other assets to buffer the effects of material ill-being and injustice (DiMaggio & Garip, 2012; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Ebersöhn, 2012; Ginwright, 2015; McGee & Spencer, 2015; Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016; Neblett & Carter, 2012; Ortega-Williams et al., 2018; Rivas-Drake & Marchand, 2016; Wang & Benner, 2016).

### **Groundedness**

Grounding is experiencing connectedness and feeling anchored by knowing who you and your groups are, the roles that you play, and the purposes you can fulfill. People develop groundedness in relation to other people and groups with whom they share statuses, memberships, geographies, and histories. Being grounded also involves understanding and being positively anchored and enriched by shared cultural, spiritual, and environmental connections (e.g., Cohen, 2020; Tarr et al., 2014; Turner, 2020).

**Identity.** People have multiple identities. Identity formation is a socially and culturally situated, dynamic interpersonal process influenced by micro and macro factors (Greenhow & Askari, 2015; Kerpelman et al., 1997; Stevenson, 1997; Verhoeven et al., 2019). Identity development is ongoing; it includes defining oneself in relation to friends, classmates, coworkers, teammates, and people who share common values, experiences, and statuses. Identity development is also affected by sociocultural factors such as language, oral histories, books, music, and art. Identity builds on our unique individual and collective experiences in the physical and social world and the sense we and others make of these experiences, particularly when we share them with people or groups that matter to us.

While identity develops across the life span, adolescence is a particularly key developmental period (Hoffman, 2018; McAdams & Cox, 2010; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Nagaoka et al., 2015; National Research Council [NRC], 2011). Identity encompasses self-identities (how we define and understand ourselves as individuals and as members of our groups) and social identities (statuses and roles, both chosen and ascribed) in relation to other people. There are multiple and often intersectional elements of identity—including but not limited to gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, cultural, religion, and disability (Crenshaw, 2017; Hernández-Saca et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2015; Spencer, 2017).

Emotionally and identity-safe environments support identity development and contribute to both well-being and thriving (Rivas-Drake et al., 2019; Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019;

Salinger & Osher, 2018; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013; Swanson et al., 2002; Verhoeven et al., 2019). We develop our sense of self in interaction with others and groups. For example, interactions between and among youth and adults support identity formation and provide opportunities to test and receive feedback on emergent identities (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010).

Healthy identity development is particularly important for young people who are marginalized and colonized and who consistently face microaggressions, overt prejudice, and acculturative stress (Crocetti et al., 2008; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Rivas-Drake et al., 2019; Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). Efforts to promote thriving should provide experiences that promote positive senses of self and of ethnic identity, racial identity, and bicultural identity, which also serve protective purposes (Jagers et al., 2019; Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016; National Scientific Council on Adolescence, 2021; Rivas-Drake, Seaton, et al., 2014; Rivas-Drake, Syed, et al., 2014; Rivas-Drake et al., 2019; Rivas-Drake & Witherspoon, 2013; Safa & Umaña-Taylor, 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

**Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality.** Our sense of meaning involves our ability to understand our history and life circumstances, to be aware of our motivations, and to feel that our life and group memberships are important (Martela & Steger, 2016). A sense of meaning serves to both promote and protect well-being (Dulaney et al., 2018; Halama & Dedova, 2007; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). For individuals, a sense of purpose can contribute to physical and mental health, reduced risk behaviors, increased prosocial behaviors, goal-directed orientations, hope, positive affect, and happiness. It also serves to buffer against adverse circumstances (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Burrow et al., 2010, 2018; Machell et al., 2016). Thus, there are multiple connections between meaning and purpose and thriving.

Religious identity or participation and spirituality can provide sources of self-images, as well as role models, ideals, world views, and meaning—all of which support identity and youth development. Spirituality can include engagement with what we and others believe is sacred as well as bonding with others through shared religiosity or religious history (Eliade, 1959; Kim & Esquivel, 2011). Spirituality also includes beliefs and connections with our inner selves and others, including in our past and future and/or transcendent experiences (Saroglou, 2011). Religious participation and spirituality support well-being through emotional and psychological health and educational and civic benefits. Religious and spiritual growth can be fostered by supports across one's social ecology (Barry et al., 2010; Kim & Esquivel, 2011).

**Civic Engagement.** Civic engagement includes participating in and contributing to the school and community, including activism and organizing (Ginwright, 2007; Lee, White, & Dong, 2021). It supports identity development and the development of skills, social capital, and feelings of purpose and meaning (Lerner, 2004; Michelsen et al., 2002; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009).

Equity-focused civic engagement must address how citizenship has been historically constructed and contested in the United States as well as how citizenship is experienced in everyday life (Banks, 2017; Foner, 2013; Molina, 2014). These civic challenges, which rest on generations of policies of structural and systemic racism (e.g., Brundage et al., forthcoming), range from denial of the right to vote and being othered, *caricatured*, or symbolically marginalized in ritual and narratives (Cummings, 2019; Osher, 1992; Phillips, 2022; Powell & Toppin, 2021). Political othering is particularly salient as youth develop meaningful civic identities. While youth often experience disrespect and challenges to their autonomy, the challenge is pronounced for youth of color who are demonized, surveilled, punished, and experience and witness micro- and macroaggressions directly in their daily lives. These hurtful experiences and the sense youth make of them shape their civic engagement or disengagement as do opportunities to develop critical perspective at home, at school, or in the community (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Spencer et al., 2015; Osher, 2015). For example, Black youth engage more civically and politically when they have a broad, structural understanding of why inequities exist, not just a belief that the system is unfair and the government is biased against them (Ginwright, 2010a, 2010b; Heberle et al., 2020; Stevenson et al., 2005).

Meaningful engagement requires shifting power and voice from adult-centric decision-making models to approaches that actively embrace youth perspectives. When this happens, youth develop a greater sense of belonging, greater knowledge of decision-making processes, and increased capacity and confidence in promoting change (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2021). Providing equitable and inclusive opportunities for young people to engage in shaping their classrooms, schools, and organizations helps realize these goals (Mayo & Osher, 2018; Noguera et al., 2013).

Civic engagement exemplifies how the dimensions and components of thriving fuse in life and practical experience. For example, civic engagement builds and leverages transformative social and emotional skills and collective efficacy. Collective action provides an outlet for grief and contributes to healing, particularly when organizers purposively attend to healing through the development of collective hope, self-care, and agency (Gibbs, 2020; Ginwright, 2006; Ortega-Williams et al., 2018). Collective action and organizing can build and build off a sense of community and common history among youth and adults and leverages as well as develops analytical and group-related skills. Together, these opportunities build social capital and a repertoire of experiences and skills that can support well-being, groundedness, and agency in the future (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2021; Cohen & Sapp, 2019).

### **Agency**

Agency includes a sense of individual and collective efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Bandura et al., 1999; Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2001) and the grounded belief of



individuals and/or group members that they can act on the world because they have already done so successfully and/or they have the skills and capacities to take on challenges.

Agency is both attitudinal and skill based. The attitudinal component is related to individual and collective social, emotional, cognitive, and technical skills and competencies that support a sense of efficacy when they are understood and adaptable. Fungible competencies enable people and groups to work in solidarity to address challenges, navigate social contexts, develop social capital, and work with others to address individual and collective problems.

**Social and Emotional Competencies.** Social and emotional competencies include individual and collective skills and dispositions that help people understand and manage their emotions and relationships. They involve understanding and managing selves, understanding and handling interpersonal and group relationships, and solving and addressing problems in a culturally and situationally competent manner (Casillas et al., 2022; Cipriano et al., 2023; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2021; Osher et al., 2016). Social and emotional competencies are developmental and malleable, with major windows of opportunity for development occurring during early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Approaches to supporting the development of social and emotional competencies have changed. Social and emotional learning (SEL), the dominant approach in the United States, provides an example. Until recently, most SEL advocates defined equity as equitable access to SEL programming and only infrequently addressed equity concerns. Its uptake often focused on compliance and culturally bounded approaches. For example, a comparative analysis of the 136 frameworks for developing youth social and emotional capacities (Berg et al., 2017) determined that most frameworks did not explicitly address privilege, bias, and cultural competency.

The frameworks also failed to address the disconnect between individualistic approaches to SEL and collectivist cultural strengths. In contrast, the ethnic-specific and disability-driven frameworks reviewed addressed privilege and cultural competence as well as how culturally and linguistically diverse parents, families, tribes, and groups promote healthy development (e.g., Jagers, Williams, & Osher, 2019; San Pedro, 2021; Vizenor, 2009). These gaps are starting to be addressed by transformative SEL approaches through which youth and adults build healthy relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences; learn to critically examine root causes of inequity; and develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Rivas-Drake et al., 2019). A Spotlight on transformative learning explores this issue in more depth.

**Cognitive and Intellectual Contributors.** Cognitive skills, competencies, capacities, and accumulated experiences can be liberatory (Hammond, 2021; Rincón-Gallardo, 2019) and equip



individuals and group members with tools to support them in navigating and resolving challenges. For this to happen, though, people need higher order cognitive skills and the ability to use the skills critically and reflectively. They also need to develop metacognitive and related social-emotional competencies to harness these skills. Thriving and robust equity require transformative skills and knowledge.

While the development of these foundational skills and experiences is important, opportunities to develop them are not frequently available to students who face social and economic disadvantage and who often experience a compliance-oriented pedagogy of poverty (Fataar, 2012; Haberman, 2005, 2010). All learners can benefit from stimulating environments that allow them to individually and collectively explore, muse, and express their ideas in different ways—inspiring opportunities that are all too infrequently available due to resource constraints or deficit-based mindsets (Brookhart, 2013; Daniel, Quartz, & Oakes, 2019; Hernandez et al., 2019; Osher & Young, 2020; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority/Department for Education and Employment, 2000; Tsai, 2012).

Cognitive and intellectual contributors to agency and thriving include deeper learning, metacognition, and creativity, which have individual and collective components.

***Deeper Learning.*** Deeper learning involves active engagement that allows young people to continuously explore, critically reflect on content, and understand and produce complex thought and models (Mehta & Fine, 2019; Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015). Deeper learning can build off and improve social and emotional competencies and transformative learning experiences (Quinn et al., 2019). Deeper learning develops higher level and cognitive processing, analytical and critical thinking, and the ability to synthesize and interpret diverse information. It also enhances ability to communicate knowledge and apply skills and knowledge in new circumstances. Deeper learning stands at variance to surface learning and drill-and-kill instruction that draw upon lower-level cognitive functions, such as simple memorization or rote learning ( Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

***Metacognition.*** Metacognition, the ability to think about one’s learning and thinking, is not just individual; metacognition involves individual and group reflection and self-assessment (Hogan, 2001; Schuler, 2015). Peers can support each other’s abilities to be metacognitive (Andersen, 2004; Chiu & Kuo, 2009). The capacity to plan, monitor, regulate, refine, and adapt one’s learning and performance is fundamental to leveraging opportunities and skills (NRC, 2000).

Metacognition facilitates effective learning and project work, helps individuals and groups prevent mistakes and learn from their experiences, and aids them in applying knowledge to new situations, and supports neural integration (Bransford et al., 2000; Marcovitch & Zelazo, 2009; Malone & Bernstein, 2022; Müller et al., 2008). Conditions and strategies that facilitate

metacognition enable learners to reflect individually and collectively about their thinking and learning. This includes how well they are learning and developing necessary skills, how their learning is influenced by their affective states, and how new knowledge fits into or challenges their existing knowledge (Clark, 2009; De Corte, 2003). Metacognition is facilitated by self-awareness and the ability to regulate emotions, particularly the ability to stop and think about how one's positionality and emotions affect one's thinking and actions in a particular situation and to cognitively control for the effects of these cultural, positional, and emotional biases (Chick et al., 2009; Greenberg, 2006; Sanchez et al., 2019).

***Creativity.*** Creativity involves complex, multifaceted, and dynamically interactive (i.e., co-influential) processes that can be fostered and realized in all life domains and disciplines (Cachia et al., 2010; Glăveanu, 2014, 2015; Lai & Viering, 2012; Lucas et al., 2012; Treffinger et al., 2002). Creativity is not an individual trait or an a priori stable property of only special people (Moran & John-Steiner, 2004). Rather, creativity is individual and collective, is malleable, and can be developed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sternberg, 1995).

Creativity involves cognitive skills, dispositions, social and emotional competencies, and strong conditions for learning and creativity (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Lai & Viering, 2012; Lave, 1988; Lucas et al., 2012; Osher et al., 2017; Simonton, 2000; Sternberg, 2006; Wenger, 1998). For example, originality often involves perspective taking, the willingness to pursue ideas that others do not promote, and the ability to assess which ideas are worth pursuing. Creativity, like deeper learning, involves risk taking and the ability to handle failure and can be affected by the same factors that affect deeper learning (Hammond, 2014, 2021). Further, creativity can have collective components that enable individuals with complementary skills to create a common understanding that none of them had previously had or could have developed on their own (Reiter-Palmon & Paulus, 2020; Schrage, 1990).

## **Robust Thriving From an Equity-Centered Perspective**

Thriving is the product of dynamically interactive connections between and among people and contexts. Robust thriving acknowledges these connections and their centrality to robust equity—connections that require us to emphasize the whole over subsets of the parts. We offer five key points that illustrate the importance of the whole and can help offset the temptation to pick and choose thriving dimensions.

### ***Robust thriving depends on ecological assets.***

Ecological assets, which include social support, prevent or mitigate adversity and its effects (Bethell et al., 2019; Gartland et al. 2019; Traub & Boynton-Jarrett, 2017)—reducing net-adversity, net-vulnerability, and net-victimization. They help people navigate harsh

circumstances; the logic of the modifier “net,” is key to understanding and addressing adversity (Spencer et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2019).

***Robust thriving builds as well as builds upon assets that prevent or buffer risk.***

Earlier scholarly discourse about thriving often separated risk-based prevention approaches from asset-based approaches. Our approach aligns the two by leveraging Spencer’s conceptualization of *net* adversity and risk and by incorporating additional research on resilience that emphasizes the importance of social support (Osher, 2006; Spencer et al., 1997). Risk exists and is socially structured and inequitably and disproportionately experienced (Kendziora & Osher, 2004). The assets people have and develop, both collectively and individually, function as prevention factors by averting or buffering the experience of risk and its effects.

***Expansive and all-inclusive approaches to robust thriving address the social and cultural dimensions of thriving, which are often neglected or underemphasized.***

Thriving (and the lack of it) can best be understood from three perspectives that can be aligned (Osher, Pittman, et al., 2020; Lee et al., in press, b; Spencer et al., 1997, 2020): (1) phenomenological perspectives that focus on how people experience actions and environments, (2) relational developmental perspectives that focus on dynamic bidirectional processes, and (3) bio-ecological perspectives that focus on the dynamic links between whole people and ecological systems longitudinally.

Although thriving is linked to a person’s individual characteristics, thriving is not just a product of individual characteristics. Thriving is affected by external conditions and experiences (Boyd et al., 2022; Osher et al., 2014; Spencer et al., 2015). The social component of thriving is important because people are influenced by and influence other people and the social and cultural contexts they encounter. Relationships with other individuals and in groups support thriving through multiple mechanisms (Barnhart et al., 2022; Chamizo-Nieto et al., 2021; Yoon, 2022).

***Equity-centered thriving strategies minimize adversity and address its effects in a healing manner.***

Most adversities are socially created or situated, and the ease with which individuals can address adversity is socially structured. (For example, poverty can contribute to a learning disability, and it affects the resources available to families to address the disability). Under the right conditions, some people can thrive with adversity and/or develop new capacities by addressing adversity. Still, eliminating socially created adversities and averting and mitigating environmental adversities enable people to realize their full potential more easily. Taking action

to prevent adversity and address its oppressive roots supports well-being while cultivating groundedness and agency in the face of oppression (Ginwright, 2015; Rivera, 2021).

***Robust thriving is inextricably linked to subjective and objective conditions including opportunity structures and resources.***

Although subjective and phenomenological factors are important in promoting thriving and equity, robust thriving is constrained or enabled by the social structuring of opportunity and access to material and human resources that are unequally available. One reason why thriving depends upon equity is that a lack of necessary material resources constrains or undermines thriving (e.g., Osher & Chasin, 2016)

The sidebar, “How Social Structures Promote and Undermine Opportunity” elaborates on the last two of these five points.

**How Social Structures Promote or Undermine Opportunity**

The social structuring of adversity and opportunity should be examined and addressed in all domains. We use health as an example. Although access to physically and emotionally safe environments, quality health care, and safe and nurturant recreation opportunities fosters physical and mental health, access to these opportunities is unequally available. There are social determinants of health disparities, which particularly involve economic inequality and racism (Carter & Reardon, 2014; Lee & Ahn, 2012; Paradies et al., 2015; Subica & Link, 2022).

The mechanisms through which the social determinants work include micro- and macroaggressions, housing insecurity and homelessness, mass incarceration and the problematic policing of communities, food deserts, and poor schools and transportation (e.g., Massey & Denton, 2019). The resulting health disparities reflect human-made environmental toxicities (e.g., lead effect and poisoning; Needleman et al., 2002) and prejudice-related stresses. Disparities also reflect limited access to quality care and the related dependence on constricted, aversive, disaffirming, culturally inappropriate and iatrogenic interventions and how individuals and group members experience and respond to pervasive racism-related stress during the life course (e.g., Chae et al., 2021; Paradies, et al., 2015; Upshaw et al. 2021).

The task of overcoming adversities constrains what individuals and groups can do. Resilience takes a toll, whether it be the mental health impacts of racism-related adverse childhood experiences or cumulative inflammation and allostatic load effects of racism-related stress (Bernard et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2020; Seaton et al., 2022) or depleting emotional and cognitive reserve to deal with stereotype threat, microaggressions, and culturally demeaning environments. Although persevering and overcoming disadvantaging challenges can strengthen people, the biological toll of having to overcome disadvantage can be dear (e.g., allostatic load).

The capacity to thrive is affected by the conditions that support or undermine its development. While individual social, emotional, and cognitive assets are important and should be nurtured, these assets are insufficient; in addition, the development of individual assets (e.g., deeper

learning) is affected by conditions that can be fostered, enhanced, or built. Although the five points we discussed are simple, their intellectual roots are complex.

Our paper reflects efforts to bridge and transcend multiple factors that affect the nature of growth in life and how to support healthy development throughout the life course. The differences between transformative and traditional thinking about learning and development, stated bluntly, include the following:

- Relational ontologies that connect the mind, body, spirit, and environment and whole person approaches in contrast to dualism that separates mind, body, and environment.
- Expansive conceptions and assumptions regarding universal human potentiality and malleability that focus on talent development and growth as opposed to restricted conceptions and assumptions regarding human potentiality that focus on fixed traits and genetic determinism.
- Dynamic ecological approaches that address complex systems in contrast to viewing and addressing people, settings, and problems in a linear static manner that ignores context.
- Attending to heterogeneity of contexts and effects and contextualized individualized trajectories through person-centered approaches as opposed to privileging variable-centered approaches that focus primarily on main effects and averages.
- Culturally responsive and humble approaches that address racism, colonialism, and privilege rather than racial and cultural neutrality and ignoring privilege.
- Collaborative, community-building, restorative, and healing approaches to creating productive environments rather than top-down leadership, management, and control.
- Consumer-driven approaches that support people, fix systems, address root causes, and focus on continuous improvement rather than professional- and agency-driven approaches that fix and blame people, tinker around the edges, and evaluate summatively.

These tensions and others are embodied in conceptual and methodological debates (e.g., Goffman, 1961; Immordino-Yang et al., 2023; Lee et al. in press, b; Osher & Osher, 2002; Ryan, 1972; Valencia, 2012, 2019). They affect the willingness and ability to create supportive conditions for thriving and equity, as well as the willingness to eliminate conditions that undermine thriving and equity. We discuss these conditions in the next section.

## **Robust Equity**

Our robust conceptualization of thriving supports a robust conceptualization of equity. This is important for two reasons:

- The term “equity” has been used in different and contradictory ways.

- Equity has been generally defined in a constricted manner and operationalized with low standards and a narrow reach.

Here we dive into how equity has been viewed, how it is often conflated with equality, and its relationship to thriving. We move on to offer a new conceptualization—robust equity—to address historical problems and suggest a way forward.

Equity has been treated in two fundamentally different ways. One approach views equity mechanistically as formalistic fairness. William Ryan (1982) characterized this approach as *fair play*. Fair play has been operationalized as formal equality at the starting line and formally equal treatment (e.g., color- or gender-blind approaches that ignore the impact of privilege). Fair play approaches do not address the fact that people arrive at the starting line with different socially created resources and the effects of privilege, which influences who gets to the starting line, how ready they are, and whether their ability to “run the race” is affected by resources that are not formally provided, as when affluent parents employ private tutors or create enrichment opportunities for their children.

The second approach conceptualizes and operationalizes equity and fairness differently. This approach addresses the short- and long-term individual and collective impacts of success, as well as the conditions for success (e.g., opportunity standards). This approach also attends to talent development, objective and subjective outcomes and indicators, and how opportunities support groundedness and agency (e.g., culturally affirming student-driven opportunities to learn).

The different implications of these two approaches to equity are culturally and historically situated in the nation that sociologist Herbert Gans in 1968) described as “an unequal society that would like to think of itself as egalitarian” (p. xi).

The implications of the bifurcated approaches cannot be fully appreciated without deeper understanding of our country’s historical notion of *equality*, which the term *equity* was and is often conflated and contrasted with. The need to address equality is rooted in contestations in the United States from its colonizing beginnings, when Indigenous Americans, enslaved Black people and freemen, women, and people without property were subjected to domination, expropriation, exploitation, shaming, and exclusion. In the face of that oppression, these groups found ways to challenge injustices and create spaces for cultural nurturance and cultural resistance (e.g., Camp, 2004; Givens, 2021; Muñoz, 2007; Rawick, 1972). As organizers and advocates, they leveraged the fact that (using the language of W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folks*, 1903) their oppression is “a flat contradiction” to American “beliefs and values.”

Deconstructing the term “equality” is important in our current context, where fair play approaches can be co-opted perniciously, as in the use of “fairness” to challenge the rights of transgender people or equity-oriented policies—challenges based on accusations that these equity-oriented efforts do not treat everyone equally.

Du Bois’s language was part of a push and pull between oppression and attempts to envision, embody, and work for freedom, equality, and equity. Like other social justice advocates he appropriated and extended the meaning of political statements and principles such as the Declaration of Independence’s assertion that “all men are created equal” and “that they are endowed . . . with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Although the Declaration’s authors did not apply this logic to women, Indigenous Americans, Black people, or to those who were not Christian or were poor, equality (not necessarily equity) became fundamental to the “American creed.” This creed created what Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal characterized as “an American dilemma” in his 1944 study subtitled “The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy.”

This dialectic of democratization was not new . Tocqueville noted in his 1835 book, *Democracy in America* (2003), that “equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived” and that “the gradual development of the principle of equality is, therefore, a providential fact.” Although political and social reality contradicted these optimistic observations (and Tocqueville called out the contradiction), the “American creed” provided ethical and ideological grounds for demanding change. For example, the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration and Sentiments appropriated the 1776 language and declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal,” and Martin Luther King invoked the 1776 Declaration in his “I Have a Dream” speech.

Partial success in the struggle for democratization was (in Sam Cooke’s words) “a long time coming,” and when success did come, it was formal legal equality (sometimes incorrectly conflated with equity) grounded in the fifth and 14th amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Operationalizing equity was and is harder than gaining formal equality and the lack of substantive equity has limited the impacts of the legal victories. For example, the standard used to operationalize equal protection of the law in education was equal access to what others received, not to quality education and services. Further, institutionalized privilege subverted or limited the victories, for example, by creating all White private academies, using exclusionary discipline, and moving with all but the “deliberate speed” mandated by the Brown decision (Bell, 2008; Peltason, 1971).



## Equity and Thriving

Inequity systematically and dynamically constrains thriving, whereas thriving leverages, promotes, and enables equity. We need a richer conceptualization of equity that extends beyond narrowly defined indicators, modest standards, and/or just eliminating access disparities. The richer view of equity attends to individual and group effects in the moment and longitudinally. It also addresses multiple factors that contribute to disparities and oppressive policies and practices (Brown & Homan, 2022; Gee & Hicken, 2021; Powell, 2009; Stone et al., 2018).

Although equity decisions often focus on narrow outcomes or outcomes in one domain or system, the results of these decisions are not limited in that way. These narrower outcomes affect and are affected by individual and collective thriving and equity status in other dimensions. Impacts occur across domains, within the moment, during the short and medium term (Gee et al., 2019), over the long term, and have even multigenerational consequences that involve the accumulation and reproduction of risks and assets (Dixon-Román, 2013; Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017; Machlup, 1976; Walter, 1973). For example, the inequity-driven social determinants of ill-being have consequences for students' opportunities to learn, and income inequities drive financial and emotional stress of parents and educators that also affect children's learning (Bottiani, et al. , 2019; Harms & Garrett-Ruffin, 2023; Osher et al, 2022). Research, policy, planning, and monitoring should address cross-system and domain effects.

### ***Robust equity can be conceptualized and defined as the ability of people and groups to thrive, both in the moment and over time, across all of life.***

Our expansive conceptualization of equity—robust equity—is more than equity in one domain or equalized odds for success between specific groups or equity in mediocre outcomes (e.g., surface learning or even access to higher order learning opportunities that do not foster engagement, curiosity, wonder, and critical thinking). Robust equity in each domain is expansive and attends to both the individual and collective dimensions of thriving.

Robust equity intentionally interrogates and counters inequality, institutionalized privilege, and contextual deficits. It studies and/or promotes contextualized and targeted universal approaches that support well-being and equity for everybody (Farmer et al., 2022 ; Powell, 2009; Powell, Ake, & Menendian, 2019). Equity-supportive conditions provide opportunities for people, including people who experience privilege, to build connections, perspectives, and competencies that can transform their lives. Robust equity efforts address psychologically and materially oppressive conditions. The conceptualization of robust equity includes ensuring that people most excluded from power and resources have access to and create for themselves



processes to thrive, grow, and have voice in naming their realities to develop solutions that draw upon and build their strengths.

Robust equity expands current notions of equity as follows.

***Robust equity is more than formal and de jure fairness.***

Equity has been traditionally treated as the condition of fair and just opportunities for all people to succeed regardless of individual or group identity or differences. This definition remains important. Fairness has been operationalized in judicial decisions challenging *de jure* segregation, as well as in important state and national legislation. It has enhanced opportunities for members of many groups. Treating equality and fairness this way, however, does not address the tentacles and resonances of institutionalized racism and privilege. Dr. King made that point when, during the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike (Honey, 2011), he rhetorically asked, “What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?” (King, 1968).

Although fairness is important, when operationalized as formal equality, fairness can be co-opted to serve inequality and inequity. The U.S. Supreme Court did this when it legitimated segregating approaches (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). The “long southern strategy” did this by characterizing federal entitlements as unfair persecution of White Americans (Maxwell & Shields, 2019). White-dominated educational systems employed fairness backed by race-neutral approaches and meritocratic claims to undercut integration by displacing Black educators; segregating students to tracking and, in some cases, special education; and by their use of zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline (Fenwick, 2022; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Oakes, 2008; Osher et al., 2022).

***Robust equity in each dimension is expansive and addresses both the individual and collective dimensions of thriving.***

This expansiveness involves thriving’s multiple subdimensions (e.g., agency + identity + sense of purpose and meaning + spiritual grounding). Robust equity-oriented strategies systemically consider and address factors that enhance or limit equity ecologically—macro, societal, cultural, system, agency, meso-systemic, group, or provider-level factors, as well as whole individuals.

***Robust equity has subjective and material components, both of which relate to thriving.***

Reverend King’s lunch counter metaphor can be extended to address the taste of the hamburger, its nutritional quality, and the experience of eating it at the lunch counter—and, although equity has an important material component (e.g., the ability to buy the hamburger), it has subjective elements as well (e.g., experience at public establishments, Stevenson, 2014).

To draw on a suffragette song that immigrant women organizers appropriated in the Lawrence strike, fairness and equity involve both “bread and roses” (Farrant et al., 2016; Osher & Young, 2020; Robbins, 2012). Material resources—the ability to access the bread and eat it—are important to survival and provide a base for equity, but equity also involves the culinary equivalent to roses—food that is nutritious and a social, emotional, and physical environment that is nurturant.

The subjective elements of equity have been enacted and embodied in fugitive spaces that people create within oppressive conditions. Black educators, for example, found spaces where they could legitimately or covertly (“fugitive pedagogies”) educate Black students under segregation, for example, by creating safe and supportive conditions to work together for change and to help define it (Givens, 2021; Walker, 2000). Indigenous and other culturally marginalized families create analogous spaces when and how they transmit and help sustain their historic culture (e.g., Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Jagers, Williams, & Osher, 2019; San Pedro, 2021).

### ***Robust equity is individual and collective.***

Equity is often treated in individual or aggregate ways that do not address how individuals affect each other or contribute to each other’s equity and to their own equity. Policies that pursue equity materially without addressing aspects of people’s lives that enable them to survive and even thrive may undermine equity by undercutting important existing social networks and social capital. Beyond material resources, robust equity includes supporting families and clans, not just children or adults.

### ***Robust equity is cumulative.***

Mechanistic approaches to equity often assess equity or target shorter term outcomes but they ignore sleeper and fade-out effects of interventions ( Van Aar et al, 2017) as well as the impacts of equity (and of inequity) over the life course and over generations. When research and policy narrowly focuses on the short term, it misses the ripple effects of what was done in the short term. Mechanistic approaches ignore what we now know about the individuality of development, the multiple paths to desired outcomes (Rose, 2016), and the importance of how people experience interventions.

The value of taking a long-term perspective has been demonstrated in many arenas (Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020). Experience with educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012); wealth accumulation (Carter & Reardon, 2014); intergenerational implications of housing segregation and redlining (Charles, 2006; Hagerman, 2020; Pais, 2017); and mass incarceration (Wildeman & Wang, 2017) illustrate the problems with narrowly focused short-term solutions. These examples demonstrate life course and intergenerational impacts on ill-being. They can be

contrasted with the transformative life course and intergenerational impacts of the 1940s GI Bill for white veterans and their families who did not have to navigate redlining and housing and education discrimination (Katznelson & Mettler, 2008).

***Robust equity depends on supportive conditions, including access to safe and affirming resources and opportunities.***

Supportive conditions provide safety, connectedness, affirmation, resources, and opportunities. To maximize their use and retention, opportunities and services must be available and perceived and experienced as being helpful, useful, and respectful. Consumer-driven planning and monitoring, design research, and user-centered redesign can improve service participation and outcomes, particularly when support is provided to build staff motivation and capacity to be empathic, consumer driven, and culturally responsive (Kendziora et al., 2001; Lyon & Bruns, 2019; Suter & Bruns, 2009).

**Why Robust Equity Advances Robust Thriving**

Robust equity creates conditions that support thriving, and it demands attention to standards and relationships required for robust thriving to be achieved and sustained.

***Robust equity creates conditions that operationalize equal access, participation, and outcomes for everyone.***

These include universal design and collaborative and community-based research to address the impacts of institutionalized prejudice and privilege robust equity includes fairness by

- transforming societal structures, systems, rules, practices, and cultural narratives to provide meaningful fairness;
- building on knowledge that people cannot thrive unless they are able to name and address their realities, articulate how systems of oppression play out, and actively contribute to solutions that draw upon and build their assets;
- ensuring that distribution of resources and opportunities is neither determined nor predicted by ascribed status, bias, or demonizing ideology; and
- employing targeted universalism (Perry, 2020; Powell, 2009) and culturally responsive consumer-driven (as opposed to agency-driven) planning and evaluation strategies (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2020; Osher & Osher, 2002).

***Robust equity thinking and action lead to, necessitate, and require high success standards—not just basic, minimal, or mediocre standards.***

The standard of success should be good for broad and comprehensive in a particular area or subdomain (e.g., literacy), going beyond simple proficiency or surviving. Thriving is affected by conditions that build and support individual and collective capacities and buffer against

conditions that inhibit capacities. Hence, robust equity entails high standards for the conditions that support its attainment.

***Robust equity addresses the dynamic relationships between and among privilege, prejudice, opportunity structures, identities, and hegemony).***

Realizing robust equity necessitates addressing and countering the conditions and effects that reproduce inequality and ill-being (Clark et al., 1999; Dixon-Román, 2017; Subica & Link, 2022; Thorius & Tan, 2016) including identities, motivations, and behavior (Bourdieu, 2018; Osher, 2015; Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2017). Strategies must be implemented in a manner that addresses intersectionality, competing oppression, and the capacity of people to grow and heal (Ginwright, 2015, 2018; Goldenberg, 1978; Tefera et al., 2018).

***Robust equity requires active engagement in addressing and eliminating conditions that contribute to inequity and ill-being.***

Although it is important for people who have power and resources to appreciate the importance of robust equity and to support it in policy and practice, they must learn from and collaborate with those most affected by inequity. Previous examples in this paper illustrate these points. Engaging as well as being engaged by the intended beneficiaries of equity interventions helps avoid the pitfalls of narrowly conceived and poorly designed interventions. Organized end beneficiaries can identify material and subjective experiences that must be addressed, while helping avert what are often mischaracterized as “unanticipatable consequences” of interventions (Merton, 1968; Newman et al., 2022).

***Robust equity requires affirming, nurturant, and transformative ecosystems of learning and development that support youth and adult thriving.***

These ecosystems create learning environments that provide active engagement in deeper learning and the critical analysis of texts, media, and proposals to address educational, social, and political issues and policies relevant to learners. (Alim et al., 2020). Building equitable and liberatory ecosystems for learning requires conditions that support emotional and identity safety, conditions that are also necessary for creating inclusive deeper learning opportunities (Hammond, 2021). This in turn calls for trauma-sensitive, culturally affirming learning environments that address how identity and power play out in settings and groups (Boyd et al., 2022; Gutiérrez et al., 2017; Osher et al., 2021). Staff in these environments employ approaches that are community responsive and include culturally sustaining, asset-based teaching (López, 2017; Matthews & López, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017) and restorative approaches to building caring, inclusive, learning communities (Gregory et al., 2016).

## **Bringing Robust Equity to Scale**

Bringing robust equity to scale requires addressing the root causes and systemic factors while avoiding distractions (e.g., Gorski, 2019; Gregory et al., 2021; Osher et al., 2015). Scaling equity also involves drawing upon the lessons of implementation and improvement science, which include developing individual and group readiness and capacity to implement interventions, change practices, and participate in transformative activities (Boyd et al., 2022; Butler et al., 2018; Fullan et al., 2023; Gomez, 2023; Osher, 2018). Addressing robust equity necessitates focusing on systems and processes, not just on individuals, and addressing multiple systems and layers of privilege and oppression. It also demands collaborative planning and monitoring that anticipates situations that people mischaracterize as “unanticipated consequences,” as well as strategies to counter color, cultural, and historical evasive policy and practice (Ko et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2022).

Lastly and importantly, scaling robust equity includes engaging and being engaged by people who are closest to pain points that span bureaucratic and disciplinary silos and doing so in a manner that supports youth, family, and community-driven leadership. To maximize the likelihood this happens, research, as well as policy, planning, and monitoring, must be community responsive and address the conditions for thriving and equity, including the quality of human interaction and immediate as well as longitudinal cross-domain and system effects.

The next section provides some guidance on pitfalls and opportunities for bringing robust equity to scale.

## **Factors and Conditions That Promote (or Constrain) Robust Thriving and Equity**

Thriving occurs, develops, and is expressed or undermined through human action in dynamic local conditions. Local conditions in turn reflect culture and conditions that are dynamically linked to broader ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Moen et al., 1995; Osher, Cantor, et al., 2020; Ryan 1972). These factors play out in contexts that can enable or disable thriving, depending on whether they are strengths based, capacity focused, and culturally responsive and implemented with respect and attention to individuality (McKnight & McKnight, 1995; Osher, Cantor et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2019; Weist et al., 2019).

## **Contributors to Ill-Being and Inequity**

Thriving and equity depend on addressing systematic processes of structuring relationships, distributing resources, and administering power, and eliminating factors and conditions that undermine people’s ability to thrive (e.g., Dawes, 2020; Gregory et al., 2021; Osher et al., 2022). Hurtful macro factors include institutionalized racism, privilege, and related adverse

circumstances, all of which influence and reinforce each other (Bowleg, 2020; Méndez et al., 2020; Mendoza et al., 2020; Metz, Piemonte, & McKay, 2021; Stasiulis et al., 2020) and drive, for example, poor environmental conditions, inadequate transportation, unsafe neighborhoods, underfunded schools, and lack of healthy food and safe recreational options (Dawes, 2020; Osher et al., 2022). Other harmful factors are embedded in more molecular social systems such as inadequate and unsafe housing and how tax and welfare policy influence family structure and dynamics; and still others are interpersonal or intrapersonal, such as the impact of adverse childhood experiences. All, however, co-act and contribute to unhealthy individual and collective lived experiences.

Opportunities to thrive are not systematically available, and even well-intended services can lead to ill-being and inequality. Organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal ingredients contribute to this toxic mix. Organizational factors include inter- and intra- agency fragmentation; cultural and linguistic incompetence; stigma; and deficit-oriented, victim blaming, provider-driven policies and practices (Artiles et al., 2010; Bal, 2016; Osher & Hanley, 1996; Osher, Williamson, et al., 2019). Faced with these conditions, service recipients understandably respond aversively or internalize negative identities (Farmer et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2015) that set up vicious cycles such as school suspension and its consequences (Gregory et al., 2021; LiCalsi et al., 2021; Okonofua et al., 2016; Osher et al., 2004; Stevenson, 1997 ; Welsh & Little, 2018; Yeager et al., 2017). These cycles contribute to and reinforce educational, health, and economic disparities (e.g., Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

As undermining factors are malleable and addressable (Cantor & Osher, 2021a), it is important to build upon, as well as build, individual, community, and systemic assets to address opportunity deficits and disparities at the policy, system, program, and community levels. These assets must include the ecological conditions that foster thriving and equity.

### **Contributors to Thriving and Equity**

Robust approaches to thriving and equity require removing and preventing environmental pollutants and toxicities while simultaneously supporting the physical and emotional well-being of every member of a social ecosystem. These more expansive approaches address the well-being of students, family and clan members, everybody in the neighborhood where people live, and all members of the organizations or groups in which people participate.

The proximal conditions for thriving are in primary systems, including home, school, and community settings (Osher et al., 2014, 2017). Although children and adolescents learn and develop across all social fields (Lewin, 1939; Rogoff et al., 2016; Spier, Gonzalez, & Osher, 2018; Spier, Leenknecht, & Osher, 2018), we will for brevity spotlight schools and community learning settings, highlighting the supports that are provided to foster thriving (Rivera & Arauz, 2019).

We center on these settings because they are relatively universal and resonate through the life courses of individuals, families, and communities (Akiva & Robinson, 2022; Osher et al., 2014).

### **The Positive Youth Development Movement: A Shift in Thinking**

The positive youth development (PYD) movement found scholarly currency in the 1990s as an effective complement to prevention-only approaches to improving life outcomes of youth who are at risk (Pittman, 2000; Pittman & Irby, 1996). A report from the National Research Council (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; NRC, 2002) summarized the research on the personal and social assets that facilitate PYD and identified conditions that promote those assets: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

The NRC's recommendations prioritized investments in community-based settings that have stronger ties to youth, family, and culture as an effective way to address inequities experienced in schools and other systems. The recommendations also laid the groundwork for the development of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, which promotes the use of the PYD approach across all federally funded programs and has identified common thriving indicators across multiple service domains and related life domains (Katz et al, 2022). PYD uptake, while seen in the proliferation of full-service or community schools, has not deeply penetrated many schools approaches to teaching and learning.

Learning opportunities and systems play key roles in promoting or undermining the life course of individuals and groups (Osher et al., 2014). The broad conceptualizations of thriving and robust equity suggest that school and community learning opportunities and services should support

- whole-child well-being and equity;
- individual and collective groundedness;
- transformative individual and collective competencies; and
- the individual and collective well-being, readiness, and capacity of the adults who support children and adolescents.

### **Transformative Learning Environments**

Transformative learning environments build and optimize individual and collective social, emotional, and cognitive competencies and capacities. They develop competencies, skills, and attitudes and provide transformative experiences that students and educators can use to transform their own lives, contexts, and communities. Transformative competencies include



empathy, compassion, perspective taking, and critical thinking (Osher et al., 2021; Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020).

Transformative learning environments extend deeper learning opportunities to include transformative SEL, critical thinking, and collective analyses of the root causes of issues that concern students. Transformational environments center opportunities that are often treated as “extracurricular” or as “add-ons.” These opportunities include aesthetic, expressive, creative, and kinesthetic opportunities; design thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021; Greene, 1995; Halverson & Sawyer, 2022; Southworth, 2022). Transformative learning environments and pedagogies build as well build upon and support learner and teacher strengths and well-being. They are culturally affirming and emotionally and identity safe. They are collaborative rather than competitive and focus on capacity, mastery, and excellence.

Transformative learning requires that pedagogies and approaches emphasize the development of psychological, social, and intellectual assets over rote learning and scripted performance. Learning opportunities develop enhanced senses of self and others and build portable skills, competencies, and experiences that learners can use alone and in interaction with others. Transformative learning opportunities embody agency, community, and the practice of freedom—not passivity, competition, or compliance. Transformative learning environments build academic skills while engulfing students by fostering curiosity, critical thinking, metacognition, and the capacities to work with others in solving tough problems and disagreements. At the same time, these environments provide opportunities for the experience of connectedness, wonder, and awe, along with senses of purpose, responsibility, and agency.

### **Spotlight:**

#### **Transformative Learning That Supports Robust Thriving and Equity**

Transformative approaches to learning (e.g., transformative approaches to SEL and trauma) address healing and need while nurturing and embodying individual and collective capacity, agency, and groundedness. We review three components that promote and support transformative approaches and then offer some learning-centered foundational principles that are particularly relevant to schools.

***Thriving-oriented opportunities to learn.*** Thriving-oriented opportunities to learn are linguistically and culturally competent. They include meaningful, not mechanistic, approaches to rich learning opportunities; instructional supports; and quality instruction over a sufficient duration (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Elliott & Bartlett, 2014; Kurz et al., 2014; Porter, 2002). Thriving-oriented pedagogies employ emotional, relational, cognitive, and identity processes and build upon (as well as build) educator cultural social and emotional capacity and cultural competence. These competences enable teachers to connect with each student individually, to know and expand zones of proximal development, to create culturally responsive and affirming classroom learning communities, and to generate rather than undermine learning vectors (Doyle, 1977, 2013) that engage students emotionally, cognitively, and socially (Doyle, 2006; Milner, 2013, 2021; Osher et al., 2010, 2012).



Time spent learning in transformative environments encompasses much more than time on task or behavioral engagement as educators maximize the time students spend emotionally and cognitively engaged in learning, working in groups, and thinking critically. Transformative environments eliminate exclusionary discipline (LiCalsi et al., 2021; Okonofua et al., 2020; Osher et al., 2022) and supportively prevent chronic absenteeism by improving conditions for learning and providing routine access to school and community supports for students (Chang et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2021).

Relationship-rich settings build supportive, trauma-sensitive, and culturally responsive classroom and school conditions for learning and development (Berg et al., 2017, 2022; Cohen et al., 2019). These conditions reflect and contribute to dynamic interactions among everyone in these settings.

Organizational culture; the physical environment, including the presence or absence of green space; the supports available to youth and adults and the way in which these supports are organized; and the social and emotional conditions for learning and development, are all conditions for thriving.

***Conditions for learning and development that support thriving.*** Schools are emotional, high-stakes, and often high-stress environments. Conditions for learning include those aspects of setting, school, and classroom climate that are proximally related to learning and development. Conditions for learning and development that promote thriving in the face of unjust contexts actively engage youth in examining and addressing disparities. These include youth-led research, creating and assessing procedures that foster predictability and safety (e.g., setting rules, boundaries, and expectations), and relational and restorative approaches to discipline (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Ko et al., 2022). Actively involving youth nurtures agency while respecting their needs to experience voice and autonomy.

The conditions for learning and development, each of which has complexity and nuance, include the following:

- **Safety.** Physical, emotional, and psychological identity and intellectual safety (Cohen et al., 2019; Hammond, 2014; Osher & Kendziora, 2010; Osher et al., 2018). Safety includes the presence or absence of stereotype threat, microaggression, and bullying, and their impacts. Safety is enhanced by the comprehensive supports provided to students (Osher et al., 2008; Osher, Cantor, & Caverly, 2019).
- **Connectedness.** Belonging, membership; feeling part of a warm and caring community that is culturally inclusive and one that embraces, values, and addresses diversity among individuals and groups and their families (Walton & Cohen, 2007).
- **Support.** Instrumental and emotional support for learning and development, availability of effective practical support, experiencing the support of having developmental relationships with adults and peers and experiencing all adults as caring and supportive.
- **Challenge.** The experience of personally relevant learning, developing expectations, and receiving support to realize those expectations, which includes the academic “stretch” youth experience; an emphasis on mastery and intrinsic motivation rather than performance and extrinsic motivation; student agency in experiencing learning as engaging; receiving timely, helpful, and affirmative feedback; and experiencing learning and development as relevant to the current and future lives.
- **Peer and adult social and emotional competence.** Individuals’ social and emotional competencies function as conditions for learning for other members of the community, both individually and in aggregate (Garibaldi et al., 2015; Osher et al., 2014).

- **Cultural competence and responsiveness.** A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable adults and youth to work effectively (ideally proficiently) in bicultural and multicultural interactions and for youth and their families to experience respect and humility, as well as emotional and identity safety (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Francis & Osher, 2018; Gay, 2010; King et al., 2007).

These six conditions dynamically interact, work together, and affect youth identity, civic engagement, and thriving (Barber et al., 2021; Catalano et al., 2004; McNeely et al., 2002; Osher & Kendziora, 2010; Ruus et al., 2007; Shochet et al., 2006). Supportive conditions for learning are particularly important for children and youth who face hurdles, whether the hurdles are developmentally normative, such as transitions between types of schools, or socially created adversities, such as homelessness (Lester & Cross, 2015; Nott & Vuchinich, 2016).

**Addressing barriers to learning in a supportive and affirming manner.** Many students face barriers that limit their opportunities to learn in general, learn in certain areas, or realize their full potential. It is important to address these barriers, but this must be done in an affirmative strengths-based and strengths-building manner. Many barriers are institutionally constructed, are stigmatizing, and produce experiences of othering among marginalized groups of students. These hurtful experiences diminish students' capacity and their motivation to demonstrate their full potential in schools—the places where learning should happen (Powell & Toppin, 2021). School-based student supports and opportunities should actively engage youth in activities to counter these inequities including opportunities for meaning-making and civic engagement regarding educational inequities (Riveros & Immordino-Yang, 2021).

Individual support should focus on whole people, always with an eye on learning, development, and equity. Needs may be physical, financial, social, emotional, or educational and are best addressed through coordinated and aligned multitiered interdisciplinary approaches. Support should be strengths based, personalized, culturally competent and youth- and family driven. Supports should never be stigma priming or disabling (Goffman, 1963; McKnight, 1976). Rather, support should intentionally build as well as explicitly build upon individual, group, family, and community strengths—always doing this in a culturally affirming and capacity-building manner that considers students' specific contexts (Adelman et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2004; Osher et al., 2018; Salinger & Mayer, 2019).

**School-Centered Foundational Principles to Promote Thriving and Equity.** A coherent schoolwide foundation is key to a multitiered approach to thriving and equity (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Osher et al., 2018) and should be enriched to provide universal supports to meet the needs of the school's student population (Yu & Cantor, 2014). This enriched foundation prevents the frustrations that come, for example, when students need to fail before they receive services (Salinger & Mayer, 2019). It also minimizes the time, connections, and learning that are lost when students are pulled out of classes or must take time off from school to receive services. In addition, universal approaches minimize the stigma, learned helplessness, and self-fulfilling prophecies that can accompany an intervention (Salinger & Osher, 2018). A solid foundation makes it easier to get services to students who are at greater levels of need, and focused and targeted interventions work better when they are grounded on a universal base (Clawson & Wu, 2019; Osher et al., 2004).

Universal design, targeted universalism (Powell, 2009), and strategies such as team teaching and cross-age peer tutoring help improve equity and minimize the needs for more focused interventions. Universal design addresses learning variability by building a universal foundation that includes creating

social, emotional, cognitive, and academic curb cuts that eliminate barriers for students succeeding in inclusive environments and the general curriculum (Hitchcock et al., 2002; Williamson & Osher, 2018). Examples of a universal foundation include well-designed curricula and pedagogy; transformative SEL and restorative practices, such as daily class meetings; equity-oriented approaches to behavioral supports; supportive environmental design; home visiting; and ongoing training and support for all adults in the school community, including families. The universal foundation can support more intensive and personalized interventions and build staff capacity to select and employ culturally competent interventions that are family driven, centered on, and guided by the voices of learners (Bradshaw et al., 2019; Clawson & Wu, 2019; Kendziora & Schaffer, 2019; Osher, Cantor, Caverly, 2019).

## **The Dynamic Relationships Between and Among Robust Thriving and Equity and the Conditions That Facilitate Them**

The importance of multiple ecological conditions to thriving is not a new idea. For example, a 1998 research synthesis found that “participation of multiple community forces, persons, organizations, and sectors, serve as important protective factors across multiple domains of child and adolescent health.” Based on these findings, the authors recommended avoiding “silver bullet” approaches “that focus on” a smaller number of assets that regression analyses suggest have predictive utility (Leffert et al., 1998, p. 226).

Subsequent research provides additional support for five propositions that relate to supporting robust thriving and equity:

- Assets are individual and collective, cumulative, and dynamically linked to each other and to robust thriving and equity.
- Developing personal and collective social, emotional, cognitive, and cultural assets matters.
- How these assets are developed is equally important. This includes how people are supported, how that support is experienced, and how contextual conditions and factors affect asset development.
- Although all assets are important, ecological assets that promote well-being, groundedness, and agency are particularly important in countering the cumulative impact of contextual toxicities and eliminating them is particularly important.

We conclude this section by reviewing the cumulative implications of the dynamic links between individual and collective thriving, robust thriving and robust equity.

The directional relationship between inequity and ill being at one end and individual thriving is straightforward and intuitive. Inequity related to sustained or acute limitations on access to supports and opportunities does not make it impossible for individuals to thrive, but such limitations do make thriving more difficult.

The directional quantitative relationship between thriving and equity is less intuitive but no less important. It requires understanding the intersection between individual and collective thriving. Equity affects not only the well-being, groundedness, and agency of individuals in a group but also the group's ability to lift its individual members.

The phrase “a rising tide lifts all boats” is a metaphor that illustrates the cumulative impact of collective thriving increases in individual well-being. It further suggests the effect that the level of collective thriving can have on individual assessments of their level thriving in different communities, cultures, or groups facing the same equitable or inequitable circumstances. Other things being equal, higher levels of collective thriving should increase individuals' senses of groundedness and agency, making them more resilient in the face of individual obstacles and more resourceful in the face of individual opportunities. This interaction between individual and collective thriving should also make individuals more likely to contribute to improving conditions in their community. This is the hallmark of robust thriving.

Robust equity takes the relationship further by dynamically factoring in the broader conditions that affect people's lives and contribute to short- and long-term outcomes. Robust equity cannot be achieved without attention to those broader conditions that affect both thriving and equity; hence, standards for thriving are incorporated into the definition of robust equity. These standards necessitate addressing nonquantitative dimensions of equity and inequity, which have often been ignored.

The subjective impacts of oppression, inequity, and injustice have been described, for example, as double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903; Fanon, 1970) and “the hidden injuries of class” (Sennett & Cobb, 1993). Transformative learning and development opportunities that emphasize affirming meaning-making, identity, and agency help people both deal with subjective assaults while working with others to understand and address the factors that contribute to the subjective assaults.

### **Implications and Challenges of Adopting Thriving and Robust Equity as Goals**

The historical moment necessitates and offers a unique opportunity to critically examine dominant conceptualizations of thriving and equity and their use in research, policy, monitoring, and intervention. We have sufficient evidence from research and practice to broaden our conceptualizations of thriving and robust equity and to inclusively enhance their cultural competence. We know enough to examine and address thriving and equity in relation to each other and in relation to learning and development. Reconceptualizing thriving and equity will help develop more strategies and approaches to address structures and processes constraining them and to construct and nurture pathways to promote them.

Our reconceptualization of thriving and equity has implications for what researchers, policymakers, funders, and practitioners should do or avoid doing when designing, implementing, learning from, and building upon research. These implications apply to design and implementation of research agendas and data collection; how and where the data are collected, analyzed, and synthesized; how findings are interpreted, communicated, and translated into practice; who participates in each activity; and whose voices shape these processes (Mills, 2000; Philip et al., 2018; Rogers, 2019).

Robust thriving includes healing from and being resilient in the face of trauma and adversity and doing so in a manner that fosters groundedness and agency as well as well-being (Ginwright, 2018; Osher et al., 2021). At the same time, equitable opportunities to thrive require eliminating conditions that undermine thriving and establishing opportunity structures that address the impacts of adversity and provide equal access to environments that support thriving (Cantor et al., 2021; Ellis & Dietz, 2017; Osher, Pittman, et al., 2020; Spencer & Spencer, 2014; Spencer et al., 2020).

Interventions that focus on learning and well-being should center robust thriving and equity. This does not mean ignoring consequences of the burdens created by environmental toxicities and inequities. It means that the effects of these ills must be addressed in an affirming manner that builds agency and does so in alliance with those who directly experience the painful impacts of injustice and inequity (Duncan-Andrade, 2022; Garcia et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2015). For example, Smith and Smith Lee (2020) have developed an approach that identifies the breadth and nuance of adversity experienced by black youth; develops assessments incorporating lived experiences; uncovers effects of adversity while recognizing the resilience of youth; and centers youth voices as counter narratives to deficit-based research and practice.

Moving from an individualist and psychological approach to thriving is important because, although individuals and groups actively shape their history, they do so through culturally and historically situated pathways that influence and constrain choices. It is consequently important to attend to the development of individual skills and competencies, but it is also important for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to attend to the collective nature of these processes and to the systems and conditions that constrain or enhance learning and development.

This structural focus is particularly important because many people live within contexts marred by colonialization, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and economically unjust practices. These adversities impose excess risks, stresses, and demands (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; NASEM, 2019; Spencer & Swanson, 2016), which can lead to trauma and toxic levels of stress that constrain thriving. Although individuals and groups develop and draw upon collective mechanisms to overcome these assaults (e.g., Cross, 1998) and socially created or amplified

adversities, we still must target these adversities. The root causes of risk must be understood and addressed with attention to sociocultural dynamics and contexts, including the assets and strategies that individuals and groups employ to survive or even thrive in harsh environments (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; San Pedro, 2021; Spencer et al., 2020).

## **Implications of Our Conceptualizations of Thriving and Robust Equity for Research and the Use of Research and Evidence**

Although sufficient knowledge exists about thriving and robust equity to support policy and practice, researchers have an opportunity to add nuance and extend understanding to address, for example, ecological and social validity of findings, the specificity of effects, and how research findings are applied and supported on the ground (Cantor & Osher, 2021a, 2021b). Expansive conceptualizations of thriving and equity, advances in our understanding of sociocultural and historical processes, and our increased awareness of bioecological processes and systems should inform thinking and action. This includes developing and designing research agendas; the type and sources of data selected; how and where the data are collected and analyzed; how findings are specified, bounded, and synthesized; and how findings are communicated and translated into practice. Careful consideration should be made as to who participates in each activity and whose concerns and voices inform and shape them.

Recent publications offer some guidance by identifying research needs and questions that align with richer conceptualizations of thriving and equity (e.g., Cantor & Osher, 2021b; Lee et al., 2021, in press b; Nasir et al., 2021). For example, the 2023 and 2025 volumes of *Review of Research in Education* address the dynamic complexity in education research; incorporating multiple ways of knowing and diverse forms of evidence in reviews; how thriving can be addressed in the design of academic learning; and what special roles schools and out-of-school settings play to maximize opportunities for thriving in the face of challenge (Osher et al., 2021).

In this section, we suggest and elaborate upon four timely and important areas for exploration:

- Aligning frameworks and developing consensus regarding defining, conceptualizing, and operationalizing thriving across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood
- Understanding different pathways to thriving that individuals and groups who experience adversity take
- Developing common indicators for thriving
- Examining how equity-infused transformative approaches to learning, youth development, and support promote thriving and robust equity



### ***Aligning frameworks and developing consensus regarding defining, conceptualizing, and operationalizing thriving across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.***

The urgency to address inequity and promote thriving and robust equity warrants leaving disciplinary silos in favor of sustained collaboration that includes indigenous scholars, scholars and scholarship from the global South, and researchers with lived experiences with inequity and injustice (García-Carrión, 2023). Collaborations can align frameworks and identify common indicators-- accelerate the accumulation of knowledge, multisystem data collection, and use and improve practice.

There are many frameworks and many more measures in disciplines and research domains (e.g., Berg et al., 2017), and it will be challenging to align research grounded in different ontologies and epistemologies. Measurement alignment should be rigorous, consistent, and address biases that have been baked into frameworks and measures (e.g., Dixon-Román et al., 2020; Osher & Cantor, 2021a). The process to create consistency should avoid easy consensus and jingle-jangle effects that occur, for example, by clustering conceptually distinct or incompatible elements (Dang et al., 2020). Although aligning current data systems is important, it is also important to include new measures and data elements. These measures and elements should be more culturally inclusive and competent and address intersectionality, the individuality and collective nature of thriving, and how learning, resilience, and thriving vary across individuals and groups over time and across places (Marin, 2020; Nesselrode, 2019).

### ***Understanding the different pathways to thriving that individuals and groups who experience adversity take.***

We need to know more about thriving in all its diversity. We should seize opportunities to build upon syntheses of research to better identify and understand the conditions that facilitate thriving for diverse individuals and groups in diverse contexts. For example, how are issues of racialized status, ethnicity, immigrant status, gender identity, disability, sexual orientation, and experiences of poverty addressed on the ground and taken up in studies of resilience? What does thriving look like in marginalized communities; what do positive development and adaptive collaboration look like in harsh contexts; and what are the types of cultural resources that individuals, families, clans, and groups draw upon to nurture and sustain thriving?

Most current knowledge is a product of analyses that do not examine those complexities or the multidimensional nature of development (Lee et al, in press, b). We need to collect and analyze data differently. We must address the dynamic individuality of human development and intersectionality of experience that occurs within ecologically nested, culturally rich, relational contexts.

Our current knowledge is largely based on intervention studies that insufficiently attend to heterogeneity of effects and the specificity of outcomes and contexts. Other knowledge relies on cross-sectional analyses that are not sufficiently nuanced to attend to how people experience and make sense of their lives. We can start to improve our understanding about how to promote thriving and equity by (1) employing or at least including idiographic approaches in our research (Lerner & Bornstein, 2021; Yu et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2022); (2) collaboratively involving families, youth, and practitioners in research design and implementation; (3) addressing the rich dynamic ecological factors that influence the outcomes we discern; and (4) including meaningful longitudinal length in research designs. This research should address the specificity of effects and how to understand these effects within different local ecologies.

Addressing complexity is no small order but is important. Given the multiplicity of factors that influence development, addressing complexity is necessary no matter what the domain. Education and economic development provide examples of how these approaches can help us learn more about the nature of thriving and equity in relation to learning. They can address such key questions as “How do we increase research on effective interventions and programs for improving education and employment outcomes for young adults who are disconnected (not working or in school) and have disabilities and chronic health conditions?” (NRC, 2015, p. 9) and “How do we increase research on effective collaborations between school districts and the actors in the local economy to develop theories of change and to design effective interventions and programs to ensure that youth leave high school with skills, knowledge, and access to meaningful jobs and careers in the local economy, and that they are able to adapt to changing social conditions and be lifelong learners?” (NASEM, 2019, p. 204).

### ***Developing common indicators for thriving.***

Definitions of robust thriving and equity are not sufficient. It is important to develop common indicators that practitioners and policymakers can use to identify needs and monitor progress and to make sure that indicators address the positive aspects of thriving and are sensitive to variation. Common indicators are not a matter for researchers alone; they affect policymakers and funders whose actions affect what researchers do and can do.

Thriving occurs across fields and is affected by multiple service systems that are grounded in different professional disciplines, driven by distinct mandates, and employ divergent definitions and terminology. These systems each are influenced by systemic racism and classism, in a system-specific manner. These fragmented systems collect and use data that are often unaligned across systems, localities, or states. This lack of alignment and redundant data demands burdens practitioners and consumers with excessive demands, limits interagency and cross-stakeholder collaboration, and constrains the potential to leverage machine learning (e.g., natural language processing and simultaneous processing of vast numbers of data points) and



advances in network analyses methodologies and data analytical techniques (Katz et al., 2019). It is important to ensure that machine learning algorithms and indicators are culturally responsive, attentive to intersectionality, and include phenomenological data (e.g., school climate data). They must address strengths and not just needs.

There are examples of efforts to develop common indicators of thriving (Katz et al., 2019, 2022; Osher & Chasin, 2016). For example, as noted earlier, The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs is developing common indicators across 21 federal departments and agencies. Although not easy, doing this responds to stakeholder input regarding how federal efforts can better help communities to support youth development.

### ***Examining how equity-infused transformative approaches to learning, child and youth development, and social support promote thriving and robust equity.***

We have an opportunity to study, evaluate, and contribute to transformative approaches to whole-child learning, youth development and mental health and trauma-informed work. Some advances involve transformative approaches to teaching and learning (Darling Hammond et al., 2021; Hammond, 2014; Osher et al., 2022; Quinn, 2022; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Others involve promotional and prevention approaches to mental health and service coordination (e.g., Ferrara & Jacobson, 2019; Lazarus et al., 2021; Osher, Mayer, et al., 2019; Weist et al., 2023).

Transformative approaches to SEL and trauma-related work (e.g., Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Ginwright, 2015; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Osher et al., 2021) provide two examples. We need to know more about these approaches, their effects, and what contributes to their effects. We also must understand how they can be aligned in the youth ecosystem (e.g., schools or youth centers) or across the youth ecosystem, what the common ingredients are, and how they are affected by contextual and cultural specificity (Akiva et al., 2020; Dymnicki et al., 2016, 2017, 2020).

Better aligned mixed-methods approaches can improve research quality, particularly when they address contextual differences in methods, goals, staffing structures, and youth and family engagement practices in and across settings. The reliability and conceptual and ecological validity of research can be enhanced by participatory and community-design work (Bang et al., 2016; Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Ko et al., 2021), justice-oriented approaches to youth development (Barbarin et al., 2019, 2020; Ko et al., 2022; Murry & Anderson, 2020), and youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2016; Winn & Richards-Schuster, 2019).

## The Time Is Right

We opened this paper by making the case that the present moment demands that we rechart our nation's course and provides us some tools to engage in that work.

The concepts and research explored here introduce some next steps on that path. They also demonstrate that broadening and aligning our conceptualizations of thriving and equity are important and doable.

We are at the right interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary moment (e.g., Cohen et al., 2022; Cronin et al., 2021; Immordino-Yang et al., 2023; Ziervogel et al., 2016). There are sufficiently congruent knowledge bases across many sciences and disciplines; improved data analytic tools; and a hunger for doing things differently. This hunger reflects how the bottom-up documentation of assaults on peoples dignity enhances the visibility of micro and macro aggressions by neighbors and police at a time when Covid's disparate effects heightened the translucence of inequity. The readiness to take on these wicked problems is enhanced by new organizational leadership that is more diverse and understands the impacts of poverty, racism, and trauma, along with the need for healing and equity (e.g., Toppin, 2021). Sometimes, research and ideas are of profound salience but not ready for uptake; this is not one of those times.

The last four decades witnessed advances in the understanding of many key issues and innovative developments in communities and in practice. These developments include but are not limited to resilience, positive youth development, positive psychology, ecological approaches, and cultural competence.

As depicted in Figure 1 (page 6), conceptualizations of thriving, equity, and learning and of the impacts they have on each other, have advanced from static, single-issue, overly quantitative definitions toward the more expansive and more inclusive conceptualizations of thriving and robust equity recommended in this paper.

## Conclusion

Thriving and equity hold promise for a better country and world. Efforts to achieve both have suffered intellectually from linear reductionist thinking that ignores context and from attempts to narrow, rather than expand, how we think about both. These failings make it imperative that we conceptualize and operationalize robust thriving and equity in research, evaluation, policy, and practice.

Thriving and equity are interdependent, cumulative, culturally influenced, and socio-historically structured. Our capacity to address thriving and equity depends on our capacity to address the other. Research, policy, intervention, and practice, however, ignore this interdependence and

focus on one outcome, narrowly operationalized, and in a manner that addresses only one or a few systems, is timed for quick impact, and ignores cumulative and longitudinal effects.

We know enough from the convergence of bodies of knowledge across multiple disciplines, as well as from practice, that if we desire a world in which people thrive and are treated equitably, we can and must do better. If we are committed to thriving and equity, we can and should use robust approaches to set goals, evaluate objectives, and also draw from increasing knowledge about the dynamic ecological underpinnings of thriving and equity to improve the design and implementation of research, policy, and practice.

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