Summary

The aim of this dissertation is to (critically) reflect upon contemporary educational theories that propose human flourishing as an ideal, overarching aim of education. Prominent advocates of flourishing as an ideal aim of education in the domain of philosophy of education are John White, Kristján Kristjánsson, Harry Brighouse, and Dorei de Ruyter. They defend that education should be seen (also) as a means to contribute to a child’s (chances of) a flourishing life, and that both schools and parents should equip children to have the best chance of a flourishing life. Human flourishing, in a broad sense, refers to living an optimal life, in which people are free (enough) to make their own choices, fill their time with meaningful and successful activities and relationships, and feel happy or satisfied with that.¹ Education in these theories mostly refers to formal schooling, but also includes parents and child-rearing. Yet, this dissertation focuses on parents, precisely because the complex practice of parenthood receives less attention, while parents are arguably the most important, or in any case the primary ‘educators’ of children.²

Most theories on flourishing hark back to Aristotle’s virtue ethics and his conception of eudaimonia in some way, either implicitly or explicitly. According to Aristotle we cannot guarantee a good life for ourselves. Human efforts to build up towards a flourishing life can be undone by bad luck, as we all know. Thus, human flourishing is for a significant part up to luck. The question is how much self-efficiency – how much control over luck – and how much openness to the unpredictability of life a good human life needs. Notably, Aristotle did not see it as given that human beings should have as much control as possible, i.e. that it would be most desirable to leave nothing up to luck, which seems opposed to the prevailing view in our modern society.

The current flourishing paradigm can be said to have a ‘strength-based approach’.³ As such, this flourishing paradigm thus has a strong focus on the ‘effort-side’ of flourishing, as opposed to on the ‘luck-side’, i.e. it emphasises how much control human beings have by developing their abilities to achieve flourishing lives, as opposed to how ‘lucky’ they might also need to be to make it. Throughout this dissertation it has been an implicit aim to foster attention for the fragility of (striving for) flourishing. Focusing on the things that we are able to cultivate takes the spotlight away from the fact that we as humans also are actually pretty vulnerable, dependent creatures. Therefore, to put weight on the other side of the scale, in addition to writing about fostering children’s development, striving for flourishing, cultivating children’s skills and talents, this

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¹ Cf. White 2011.
² ‘Parents’ should be read throughout this summary as parents or other main caretakers in the role of parents.
³ Kristjánsson 2017, p. 88.
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dissertation sought ways to write about fragility, vulnerability, dependence, existential risks, and
luck.

The central question of this dissertation is; **how should we think about human flourishing as an aim of education?** The first part of answering the central question is discussing how we can think about flourishing as an aim of education. What does an interpretation of flourishing as an *ideal, overarching aim* imply? And what does flourishing as an aim of education mean? The second part of answering the central question is concerned with how we *should* think about human flourishing as an aim of education, in other words, what is important to take into account when construing a worthwhile theory of flourishing as an aim of education. An important consideration here is how these theories relate, and should relate, to the educational practices they describe. Therefore, throughout the chapters, current educational theories on human flourishing are evaluated in the light of their bearing on ‘real’ educational practices. It is claimed that educational theory can only be worthwhile if it has value for the educational practices it theorises about. That said, there are many ways in which educational theory can be relevant to educational practices, and it is one of the purposes of this dissertation to discuss in which ways theory on education for flourishing is best able to do so. In other words, evaluating current theories on education for flourishing by formulating a standard of practical relevance is the method chosen to be able to answer how we should think about human flourishing as an aim of education.

In order to approach an answer to the central question, four research questions are formulated:

- What characterises the concept of human flourishing (particularly as an ideal aim of education)?
- What kind of theory should theory on education for human flourishing be?
- How can we understand the existential risk of parenthood in relation to (aiming for) flourishing?
- What attitude should parents have towards their children’s future flourishing?

**Chapter 2** discussed the first research question. It is observed that human flourishing is the topic of an increasing number of books and articles in educational philosophy, and that flourishing is regarded as an ideal aim of education. If this is defended, the first step should be to clarify what is meant by human flourishing, and what exactly the concept entails and excludes. It is argued that five formal criteria to assess conceptions of human flourishing can be distinguished: (1) human flourishing is regarded as something that is intrinsically worthwhile; (2) it refers to the actualisation
of an agent’s potential; (2a) flourishing is always about a whole life; (2b) it is what we’ve called a ‘dynamic state’; and (2c) the concept of human flourishing implies a reference to objective goods, in the sense that there are human capacities that are objectively good for a person as well as certain external goods people need in order to live well. These criteria can be used, for instance, to distinguish flourishing from ‘well-being’ or ‘happiness’.

However, these criteria also make clear that human flourishing is characterised by ongoing development, striving and effort to sustain it, and as such emphasises the ‘effort-side’ of flourishing as opposed to the ‘luck-side’. There seems to be an implicit assumption in the ‘strength based paradigm’ that setting high aims implies demanding aims (demanding of an individual human being), but this doesn’t necessarily follow. Human flourishing can for example also be regarded as a high (as in: difficult or impossible to realise) aim, because one has to be incredibly lucky to achieve this dynamic state of being (for example with the family one is born in, or how healthy one is, etc).

**Chapter 3** asked what kind of theory educational theory for flourishing should be. The chapter distinguishes between nonideal and ideal theory, and argues that, although mostly not explicated, current educational theory on flourishing is often ideal theory. It is characteristic of ideal theory to construe theory around the ideal, and to centralise the ideal as such, as opposed to nonideal theory, which constructs its theory around the actual situation. An example of ideal educational theory would be to theorise what the perfect classroom would look like, for instance a classroom filled with healthy, awake and motivated children, a dedicated teacher and challenging materials. With such a ‘picture perfect’ in mind, theorists as well as teachers can begin to reflect accordingly what it would require of teachers, the school and the pupils to create this perfect classroom.

It is argued that an exclusive reliance on ideal theory when theorising education for flourishing is problematic, because (a) it is also important to know how to deal with the ideal when moving to the nonideal level; (b) ideal theory on education for flourishing makes (has to make) idealising assumptions about children’s lives and their chances of receiving good education which do not reflect reality; and (c) ideal theory is often formal and abstract, and therefore ‘unpopulated’, which raises the question in what sense this theory is applicable to real people. Therefore, to create a better balance, there is a need for nonideal theory on education for flourishing. Chapter 3 suggests two worthwhile ways in which this can be done; (1) prioritising theory on the improvement of basic needs (such as for example safety, health, good housing, etc.) over theorising the ideal education for flourishing, and/or (2) the less radical option of starting from the actual world in theorising what might be ideal. In the classroom example this would imply beginning with the daily practice in which many teachers are faced with children coming to school who haven’t had breakfast, whose
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personal or family circumstances overshadow their interest in learning, and/or where the teachers face a (too) heavy teaching and administration load. The pressing questions here would be: how should teachers deal with these circumstances, and what would be ideal given these actual circumstances?

In Chapter 4 the perspective changes from comparing forms of theorising to comparing theory to the ‘real’ practices it describes. It does not ask what role theory should have with regard to practices, but it rather describes aspects of a certain real practice, in this case parenthood, and asks what implications these aspects might have or should have for theory on education for flourishing. Chapter 4 argues that parenthood inevitably involves taking an existential risk. The chapter uses the distinction that German pedagogue Otto Friedrich Bollnow makes between attempts and (avoidable) risks on the one hand and existential (inevitable) risks on the other hand. The second type of risk is distinctive because the person who engages in an existential risk risks herself.

Bollnow’s description of existential risk contributes to an understanding of child-rearing in relation to human flourishing in three ways. First, it contributes to the understanding of child-rearing and striving for flourishing as inherently uncertain, because it makes clear that parents cannot ensure that the child will become what they had intended in raising her. This does not necessarily mean that when the parents fail in raising her as they had intended, the child does not or cannot flourish, but it does mean that parents’ aiming for a flourishing life of their children must be typified as a Wagnis (taking an existential risk). Moreover, aiming for flourishing can also be seen as a Wagnis in a broader sense. When parents aim for a flourishing life for their children, all sorts of things will happen that are beyond the control of the parents (including but not limited to the child’s response to their parenting), because flourishing is for a significant part up to luck (as opposed to effort). Therefore aiming for the flourishing of children can, for that reason alone, also be seen as a Wagnis. Second, Bollnow’s understanding of Wagnis also contributes to a clarification of the ways in which the concept of risk is being used in educational theory and policymaking. Contrary to the way in which ‘risk’ in these discourses is usually interpreted – as something that should be avoided – there is a way in which risk in education is inevitable, namely in the way in which parents risk themselves in raising a child (to live a flourishing life). It is helpful to make this distinction in an educational context. Third, the idea of Wagnis leads us to recognise trust as a key concept in discussing risk-taking and child-rearing. The acceptance of vulnerability, of being ‘at risk’ in the above two senses, is what we mean by trust. An emphasis on risk-avoidance can therefore be seen as an implicit denial of the importance of trust, while a conception of risk as an

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4 Baier 1986.
inevitable \textit{Wagnis} rather affirms the importance of trust in the parent-child relationship. Trust is important, first and foremost because it ‘is a condition for the development of the capacities of children’.\textsuperscript{5}

\textbf{Chapter 5} discusses what attitude parents should have towards their children’s future flourishing. The proponents of education for flourishing discussed in this dissertation do not tend to write for parents, so the claim that parents ought to aim for the flourishing life of their children is not likely to be intended or read as direct advice to them. Nevertheless, the idea that flourishing is the (ideal) aim of education does suggest that parents should pursue the ideal of a flourishing life for their children, which leads to the question in which way they should do that.

It is argued that the theoretical claim that parents should aim for the flourishing life of their children does not necessarily imply that parents have to be aware that they do so, i.e. have to strive for flourishing in a deliberate or active way. The concept of flourishing, due to its significant features such as being an ultimate, multi-interpretable aim, which is never really finished, is the type of concept that is best conceptualised as a (regulative) ideal. When perceived as an ideal, there is no expectation of complete fulfilment, and there is, in principle, no precise prescription available for how one should reach a flourishing life. The chapter argues that it is problematic to think of the concept of human flourishing as if it were an achievable goal (a type of aim of which it is known how it can be effectively realised), and to aim for flourishing as such. Moreover, a combination of parental expectations, which involve the belief that it is possible that the object of the expectations will come true, and aiming for flourishing as if it were a goal creates tensions.

There is a legitimate place for (flexible) expectations towards things that can be considered goals, such as particular goods that might contribute to flourishing (e.g. finding a good school). However, with regard to the flourishing life of children, a parental attitude of hope, which involves the belief that it is possible that the object of one’s hopes will come true, is more appropriate, because ‘hope’ implies a recognition of the limitations of one’s powers to contribute to realising ultimate aims.

On the basis of these four research questions and answers, it is concluded that human flourishing can only be meaningfully defended as an aim of education in a theory that gives due acknowledgment to the educational practices it describes. This implies that:

\textsuperscript{5} Speecker 1990.
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(a) It should be clear that a flourishing life cannot be achieved by human effort alone, it is for a significant part up to luck, i.e. it should be clear that (striving for) flourishing is inherently fragile.

(b) It should be taken into account that child-rearing, as a necessary part of aiming for a flourishing life of children, inherently involves taking an existential risk, in the sense that 1) there is always the risk that the child does not become what the parent intended, and 2) the parent risks herself in undertaking this endeavour.

(c) It should be made clear in what way flourishing is conceptualised, and what consequences that has for aiming for the future flourishing life of children. Flourishing is best conceptualised as an ideal, but it should always be made clear that there is a gap between a perfect flourishing life and what is realistically possible, and between those two and what is actually happening in the world at this moment.

(d) There should also be nonideal theory on education for flourishing, to counterbalance the ideal theory that is currently available. A combination of ideal and nonideal theory on education for flourishing is most desirable, because this allows both a description of ideal education and a necessary focus on actual problems that threaten even getting anywhere near(er) this ideal.

Points (a) and (b) are important for what I regard to be a good conception of flourishing, whereas points (c) and (d) set a standard for the theory in which flourishing is being defended as an aim of education. If these criteria are met, I do think it is worthwhile to think about human flourishing as an ideal aim of education.