CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN FLOURISHING AS AN IDEAL AIM OF EDUCATION
1.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate contemporary educational theories that propose human flourishing as an ideal, overarching aim of education. These theories defend that education should be seen (also) as a means to contribute to a child’s (chances of a) flourishing life, and that 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 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 Doret de Ruyter. For example Harry Brighouse argues that ‘school should see itself as having an obligation to facilitate the long-term flourishing of children’.² And John White argues in his book Exploring well-being in schools:

If we want to base education on well-being, what parents do should be first on our agenda. Good parents have their children’s flourishing at heart – not just in the future, but now, in the games they play with them, the outings they arrange, the intimacies in which they live together.³

Sometimes the concept of flourishing is primarily used as a justification of a certain type of education; for example Daniel DeNicola argues in favour of liberal education, because that will contribute to having flourishing lives, and in her book Not for profit Martha Nussbaum argues that ‘democracies need the humanities’, because such education will contribute to children having flourishing lives.⁴ In these cases, a particular conception of the good life (liberal, democratic) is assumed.

The term flourishing is also much used in theories of positive psychology. Positive psychologists, such as its ‘founding fathers’ Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi, argue for a radical change in what should be the most important aim of psychology. In addition to, or perhaps even instead of, asking how to improve dysfunctional behaviour, they argue, psychology

¹ Cf. White 2011.
² Brighouse 2006, p. 42.
³ White 2011, p. 3.
⁴ DeNicola 2012; Nussbaum 2010.
should focus on how to *optimise* human behaviour, to the level of the flourishing human being. These theories are partly based on the same source (Aristotle) as much contemporary philosophical work on human flourishing, including some of the theories that are the main point of interest in this dissertation. However, positive psychology is also based on empirical research and aims to develop (psychological) interventions with which the flourishing of human beings can be improved. Popularisation of these theories has led to slogans such as “learn how to flourish”, and websites such as [www.howtoflourish.nl](http://www.howtoflourish.nl).

The movement of positive psychology receives criticism from the field of philosophy of education. For example Ruth Cigman argues that embedding ‘the positive ideal’ in educational policy-making is problematic. She gives the example of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme that teaches children to be positive about themselves. But, Cigman argues, when these aspects are taught as ‘life skills’ (which contribute to children’s flourishing), ‘we may be missing the vital detail, the needs of particular children in the circumstances of their lives’. Should for instance a child who has just bullied another child be encouraged to praise herself for who she is, or what she did? I share these concerns, and although they are not the primary interest of this dissertation, part of what motivates me to investigate current philosophical theories on flourishing as an aim of education is to be able to argue that perhaps some of these ‘how to flourish’ theories make assumptions that are not in accordance with the concept of human flourishing. Moreover, if these psychological theories in part use the same philosophical literature concerning flourishing, I wonder whether the current philosophical theories on education for flourishing can be sharpened or made more clear, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of human flourishing and of how it can best serve as an aim of education and/or optimal human development in general.

This dissertation is a work in philosophy of education, and concentrates on educational philosophy. White, Kristjánsson, Brighouse, and De Ruyter explicitly explore the concept of human flourishing. They see it as their task to clarify what is meant by flourishing as an aim of education, and discuss which conceptions of flourishing are fruitful as an aim of education and how education can further the child’s development into a flourishing adult. The bulk of their work on human flourishing as an aim of education focuses on what educators and parents should do to equip children to be able to lead flourishing lives.

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5 See Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi 2000, and see Bohlmeijer et al. 2013, for an up-to-date overview of well-being/flourishing research.

6 See for example this recent article in a Dutch newspaper: [https://www.trouw.nl/home/somberen-hoeft-niet-meer~a9438396/](https://www.trouw.nl/home/somberen-hoeft-niet-meer~a9438396/).

7 See Cigman 2008 and 2012, and see for example also Suissa 2008.

8 Cigman 2012, p. 453.
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Why this interest in human flourishing as an ideal, overarching aim of education? One reason may be that a widely shared discontent with current aims of education in schools stimulates thinking about other, larger, and more ideal(istic) aims. A much heard objection is for instance that these goals focus too much on efficiency and effectivity, meaning that education is too much seized by an economic (technocratic) language of input and output, and even described in terms of profit and loss. A ‘good’ school for example is in this discourse a school that has the most children passing their exams. One of the effects of this technocratic emphasis is an interest in ‘evidence-based’ education; education that is proven to be ‘effective’. Gert Biesta points out that ‘effectiveness’ is an instrumental value; it says nothing about which effect is desired. This means, among other things, that it is meaningless to talk about effective teaching or effective schooling; the question that always needs to be asked is effective for what? As also White argues, the most important question to ask about schools is ‘what are they for?’ Why is our curriculum the way it is today? The purpose of learning biology is surely not merely to pass the biology exam, but children learn biology, because we think that with such knowledge they are better able to do well in the world. White argues that education these days lacks such a rationale, an overarching aim of education. Or to be more precise, it lacks an overarching aim that is not an ‘add-on’ but gives actual direction to educational policy and the curriculum. White calls for making explicit that schools are to equip children to be able to do well in the world. And above that, it is questionable whether education can be captured in a technological, causal model at all. In chapter 4 it will be argued that due to the inherent risks of education, it cannot.

That education is re-evaluated particularly in the light of the overarching, ideal aim of human flourishing, is in part influenced by the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics. In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle asks what would be the most complete aim of life one can think of; that which everything in life is aimed at. He argues that this must be endaimonia (a good (en) spirit or soul (daemon). Endaimonia is traditionally translated as ‘happiness’, but recently ‘human flourishing’ has become a favoured translation. The most obvious reason for translating endaimonia with human flourishing instead of happiness is that nowadays happiness seems to refer primarily

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9 I am focusing here on education in Western Europe and the USA, or more generally in the Western world. The literature that is used throughout this dissertation, unless explicitly specified otherwise, tends to focus on Western Europe and America as well.
10 See Wolbert 2018.
12 Ibid., p. 8.
15 For example Sir David Ross, who translated the Nicomachean Ethics in 1925, translates endaimonia with happiness, but Martin Seligman (2011) explains in his book Flourish: A new understanding of happiness, well-being – and how to achieve them why he chooses flourishing instead of happiness as a translation of Aristotelian endaimonia to express his ideas on positive psychology.
to a subjective feeling, which can occur any moment, and also only for a moment, and can only be assessed properly by the person who feels it (or not).\textsuperscript{16} This equation of happiness with hedonism is not at all what Aristotle has in mind with \textit{eudaimonia}. Flourishing, which commonly is more associated with success, development, thriving, and the like, seems to be more in line with Aristotle’s ideas.\textsuperscript{17}

Philosopher Richard Kraut argues that it is ‘an illusion (..) to think that we foster a better understanding of Aristotle if we use “well-being” or “flourishing” as our translation of \textit{eudaimonia}, rather than “happiness”’.\textsuperscript{18} This is, of course, true, in the sense that happiness need not necessarily only refer to subjective feelings, and in any sense, a translation remains a translation, which has limitations, especially when the original language is not used anymore and the text is written in a historical context that we can no longer fully understand. However, in my opinion it is not wise to ignore the common sense meaning of words. To take my own associations as an example, with happiness I think of the song \textit{Happy} by Pharrell Williams (\textit{..Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth -Because I’m happy- Clap along if you know what happiness is to you..}), which I see as an illustration of how in the English language the word happiness is often interpreted as a subjective feeling.\textsuperscript{19} I also associate happiness with a momentary feeling. With flourishing on the other hand, I first of all think of success and achievement, and of blooming, vibrant people (which I tend to visualize, for some reason, running and laughing at the same time, as they do in a Nike or Adidas commercial).\textsuperscript{20} But also, whereas happiness and well-being seem to be concepts independent of morality, for the concept of flourishing this is not the case. To live a flourishing life while being a successful but ruthless businessman who exploits his employees does not sound right to me. Flourishing lives are generally thought of as (at least) morally decent lives. Although I do not wish to suggest that my associations are always the same as those of everyone else, I think the above examples do illustrate common conceptions of happiness and flourishing.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, contrary to Kraut, I think that the (contemporary) associations that come along with certain words, certainly can contribute to, or distract from, how we, in our day and age, understand older, translated texts.\textsuperscript{22}

According to Aristotle \textit{eudaimonia} is not achieved by striving for wealth or momentary pleasures, but by the ongoing effort to become a better human being, live a worthwhile life, and by striving for the good for oneself and others. \textit{Eudaimonia} is defined by Aristotle as a combination of

\textsuperscript{16} See also De Ruyter 2004, p. 378.
\textsuperscript{17} This does not imply that every conception of flourishing is in fact a version of Aristotelian \textit{eudaimonia}, as will be discussed in chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{18} Kraut 1979, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{19} See http://www.songteksten.nl/songteksten/364669/pharrell-williams/happy.htm.
\textsuperscript{20} Which can only indicate that I am not flourishing, for I have never run and laughed at the same time.
\textsuperscript{21} See also Haybron 2008 and De Ruyter 2015 for a comparison of these concepts.
\textsuperscript{22} Whether the successful, blooming associations with flourishing aren’t problematic as well is discussed in chapter 2.
virtuous activity and external goods.\textsuperscript{23} These external goods (e.g. good birth, beauty, health) are largely beyond the agent’s control, i.e. are subject to luck.\textsuperscript{24} An \textit{eudaimon} life refers to both a successful and morally good life, which is topped off with subjective happiness. Its success is partly dependent on one’s own effort, and partly on being lucky in life.

1.2 **UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS, OR THE QUESTION OF HOW MUCH LUCK A GOOD HUMAN LIFE NEEDS**

Human efforts to create a flourishing life for themselves or others can be undone by bad luck, as we all know. The question of how much self-sufficiency - how much control over luck - and how much openness to the unpredictability of life a good human life needs has been a central debate in Greek ethical thinking.\textsuperscript{25} According to Kristjánsson the current flourishing paradigm ‘takes a strength-based approach to student well-being’, furthering students’ talents and helping them to develop the character qualities that we deem important for living a good life.\textsuperscript{26} As such, this flourishing paradigm thus has a strong focus on the ‘effort-side’ of flourishing, as opposed to on the ‘luck-side’.

Throughout this dissertation I aim to show the importance of paying attention to the fragility of flourishing - both flourishing in itself and the process of aiming for a flourishing life for one’s children. Focusing on the things that we \textit{are} able to cultivate takes the spotlight away from the fact that we as human beings \textit{also} are actually pretty vulnerable, dependent creatures. And in my own experience, raising children, becoming a parent, is the one thing that instantly makes me aware of my vulnerability.\textsuperscript{27} The relationship that I have with my children is one of the most important, complex and intimate relationships that I have. True, intimate relationships (such as, but not limited to, the parent-child relationship) require of human beings that they depend on and trust each other, because it is not possible to ‘secure’ such relations. These relationships can come to an end and this is painful. Furthermore, when we really engage with other humans, the suffering of the other becomes our suffering. So, to me it felt uncomfortable to write about fostering children’s development, \textit{striving for} flourishing, \textit{cultivating} children’s skills and talents, without searching for a way to put weight on the other side of the scale; namely fragility, vulnerability, dependence, the existential risk of raising a child, and luck.

\textsuperscript{23} ‘It needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment’ Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics, 2009, book I.8.

\textsuperscript{24} Kristjánsson 2017, p. 91.

\textsuperscript{25} See Nussbaum 1986.

\textsuperscript{26} Kristjánsson 2017, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{27} And to a lesser extent also being a teacher.
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_Luck, dependency, fragility_

Nussbaum defines luck as that which ‘just happens to [one], as opposed to what [one] does or makes’, comparable to how the Greek word _tuché_ has been used.28 From an epistemological perspective, Coffman argues that a plausible account of luck entails roughly that ‘an event that constitutes a stroke of (good or bad) luck for you (a) has some objective evaluative status for you, (b) lies beyond your direct control, and (c) is such that there was a large chance no event like it would occur’.29

Alasdair MacIntyre draws our attention to what he calls _the virtues of acknowledged dependence_, as a necessary counterpart to the virtues of independence. He argues that

if we are to understand the virtues [such as justice, temperateness, courage] as enabling us to become independent practical reasoners [and as such be able to flourish], just because they also enable us to participate in relationships of giving and receiving through which our ends as practical reasoners are to be achieved, we need to extend our enquiries a good deal further, by recognizing that any adequate education into the virtues will be one that enables us to give their due to a set of virtues that are the necessary counterpart to the virtues of independence, the virtues of acknowledged dependence. (..) [These virtues] require from us characteristically types of action that are at once just, generous, beneficent, and done from pity. The education of dispositions to perform just this type of act is what is needed to sustain relationships of uncalculated giving and graceful receiving.30

In care ethics, dependence is seen as central to human life and development.31 In the introduction to _The subject of care; feminist perspectives on dependency_ Ellen Feder and Eva Feder Kittay state that ‘while theoretical prominence has been given to interactions among equals in the canonical works of political and moral philosophy, relations among unequals in fact dominate our social life’.32 The teacher-pupil relationship and the parent-child relationship, central to education, are paradigmatic examples of unequal relationships. Elsewhere Feder Kittay argues that dependency should not be regarded as a factor in evaluating whether or not human beings can lead flourishing lives – people who are more dependent on others should not be considered to be less able to flourish. On the

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28 Nussbaum 1986, p. 3.
30 MacIntyre 1999, p. 120-121.
contrary, she suggests that the ways in which some people excel in depending on each other, or the ways some people excel in caring for each other, can also be seen as ways in which they flourish.\footnote{Feder Kittay 2005, p. 468.}

I agree with MacIntyre and Feder Kittay that due to the common suggestion that flourishing human beings are individuals who ‘make it on their own’, there is too little attention for dependency, which is so central to what it means to be a human being. I agree with MacIntyre that we should ‘nurture’ our abilities to care for each other. However, MacIntyre’s virtues of acknowledged dependence are described as ideals, in the sense that they describe the excellent, or even perfect characteristics of the agent who faces situations in which she is dependent upon others. It is particularly these complex situations in human interactions in which we often do \textit{not} succeed to behave perfectly, for example because of conflicting values (for example between one’s own and other people’s interests). To act ‘at once just, generous, beneficent, and from pity’\footnote{MacIntyre 1999, p. 121.} is exactly what is the incredibly difficult thing to do as a human agent in a vulnerable, complex, intimate relationship. Instead of offering a ‘solution’ in the sense of cultivating the virtues of acknowledged dependence, i.e. again focusing on the effort-side of flourishing, I believe it important to pay attention to the ways in which we are not in control, i.e. look at the luck-side.

I also agree with Feder Kittay that dependency is not necessarily a deciding factor in whether or not human beings are able to lead flourishing lives, in the sense that in so far as every human being and every human life is dependent on other human beings, this means that dependency in itself, without further qualification, cannot be used as a criterion of anyone’s flourishing. I disagree with Feder Kittay, however, that dependency should not be a factor in evaluating someone’s chances of a flourishing life, because there are degrees of dependency of which we can say that they are below a certain objective threshold of the capacities necessary to speak of someone being able to live a flourishing life.\footnote{See Merriam 2010 who discusses anencephaly as a paradigm case of non-flourishing.} But that does not affect the fact that dependency (which renders our flourishing fragile) is valuable – not in itself, but because it is an inherent aspect of what we deem a good human life, namely a life filled with intimate relationships and love.\footnote{See Nussbaum 1986.} I think it is important to be aware of the inescapable fact that if we would seek to eradicate all vulnerability from a human life, i.e. see that as perfect flourishing, we would necessarily have to adopt a conception of flourishing that does not (cannot) value things that render us vulnerable, such as friendship, and love.\footnote{Nussbaum 1986, see also Wolbert 2018.}
1.3 Central Question

The aim of this dissertation is to critically investigate contemporary educational theories that propose human flourishing as an ideal, overarching aim of education. These theories defend that education should be seen (also) as a means to contribute to a child’s (chances of a) flourishing life and that education should equip children to have the best chance of a flourishing life. I make a distinction between theories that defend flourishing as an aim of education, and theories on education for flourishing, that is theories which discuss how education could or should contribute to children’s (chances of a) flourishing life. The first type is more concerned with what exactly flourishing is or ought to be, and why it is worthwhile as an aim of education. The second type of theory is rather concerned with theorising education; how should parents and teachers equip children to be able to lead flourishing lives?

The central question of this dissertation is: how should we think about human flourishing as an aim of education? I ask if human flourishing should be seen as an ideal, overarching aim of education, and if so, in what way it should be theorised and what it implies for education, particularly for parents.

The first part of answering the central question is a reflection on how we can think about flourishing and what flourishing as an aim of education means. Addressing these issues is necessary to be able to discuss and evaluate ways of thinking about human flourishing as an ideal aim of education. Chapter 2 provides a conceptual clarification of the concept of human flourishing. It is therefore mainly focused on theory on flourishing as an aim of education (as opposed to theory on education for flourishing).

Second, to evaluate the interpretations of education for human flourishing implies the use of a certain principle or standard to evaluate them with. As noted, an important underlying consideration throughout this dissertation is the acknowledgment that (aiming for) human flourishing is fragile. Whereas fragility is not necessarily included in educational theory, it is characteristic of ‘real’ educational practices, such as schools and homes. Therefore I will evaluate current educational theories on human flourishing in light of their bearing on ‘real’ educational practices, which are always complex, fragile, and risky. I suggest that educational theory can only be worthwhile if it has value for the educational practices which it theorises about. The proponents of education for flourishing that were analysed in this dissertation underline this by explicitly stating
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that it is their aim to guide educational practices. That said, there are many ways in which educational theory can guide educational practices.

Real practices

When I speak of ‘real’ educational practices the meaning of ‘real’ ranges from what is actually happening – at this moment – in actual educational practices, to what is and could be possible in the educational practices of this world, but excludes ideas about what might be possible in a different (probably: better) world. Bernard Williams makes a distinction between ‘real’ and ‘notional’ options. Something is a real option for someone if she already does it or could go and do it, without having to change human history, and while keeping a hold on reality, not engaging in extensive self-deception, and so on. Notional options on the other hand are options that one can contemplate, but never really execute, like for example living as a medieval knight. This is something that is perhaps possible in a ‘different world’, but not in ours, due to our ‘human condition’. We can think of how that might be, but the fact that we cannot time-travel excludes the option as a real possibility.

A slightly different approach to what are ‘real’ options can be found in Gavin Lawrence’s claim that Aristotle’s question to what the ultimate aim of human beings is (the flourishing life) can (and should actually) be differentiated into two questions. The first question one can ask is what a human life ideally would look like, i.e. what would ideally happen in such a life, if anything is possible. This is what Lawrence calls ‘the ideally circumscribed ideal’. But a second interpretation of ‘the best life’ is asking: what would be ideal given the particular circumstances of a human life? Lawrence calls this ‘the however circumscribed ideal’. For example, if a teacher could create her own classroom without any restrictions, she would perhaps have six children in her class, make her classroom and herself available at any time, and have all the material available the children might possibly ask for, so that every child can learn at her own pace. However, the fact that the teacher is restricted ‘in the real world’ by time (how would she logistically and physically organise a 24/7 open classroom and teaching job), and money (just to name a few things) inspires a different question, namely ‘What would be the best option for the teacher given these restrictions?’ This would come down to for example making sure that every child gets enough attention (even though there are 25 children in the classroom and not enough computers), so that she – ideally – can let

38 See chapter 3.
39 Williams 1985, p. 178
40 See also Emmet 1994, p. 7.
41 Lawrence 1993.
42 Ibid., p. 8.
43 Ibid., p. 7.
them learn at their own pace. Note that this is still a question about ideals, i.e. what would be the best conceivable option for this teacher. These distinctions are referred to in chapter 3 as the difference between utopian idealism (ideally circumstanced ideal) and realistic idealism (however circumstanced ideal), which are two forms of ideal theory, and they are compared to nonideal theory.44

The next logical question then is how the ‘however circumstanced ideal’ relates to actual practices. In the example of the teacher and her ideal classroom it is possible that in reality particular actual problems (e.g. having to teach 35 children, all from different cultural and social backgrounds, and no money for assistance), or inherent aspects of teaching (e.g. the complexity of the teacher-pupil relationship) prevent her from even approximating the (however circumstanced) ideal situation. The pressing concern here would be not ‘what is ideal given these circumstances’, but ‘how we can improve the actual, nonideal, situation’. This question lies outside the scope of this dissertation, but I do touch upon it in chapter 3. Whereas ideal theory is mostly concerned with questions about (however circumstanced) ideals, nonideal theory takes into account the actual, nonideal situation and suggests ways to make a transition from this situation, thereby addressing this last question.

Four sub questions
In order to be able to answer the central question of this dissertation, four sub questions have been formulated:

- What characterises the concept of human flourishing (particularly as an ideal aim of education)? (CH2)
- How should we theorise about it? (CH3)
- How can we understand the existential risk of parenthood in relation to (aiming for) flourishing? (CH4)
- How should parents relate to flourishing as an ideal aim of education? (CH5)

The first question, as already discussed, asks how we can think about human flourishing and as such does the preliminary work of providing conceptual clarification on the subject of human flourishing as an aim of education. It also gives us a first insight in how the ‘effort-side’ of flourishing is central to the content of current theories on education for flourishing.

The second question addresses what kind of theory current theories on education for flourishing are (i.e. ideal theory or nonideal theory), and what kind of theorising is being done, and

44 See Schmidt 2016, p. 2.
asks, in light of its relevance to real educational practices, whether there are arguments in favour of or against certain forms of theorising. Again, it comes to light that certain forms of theorising (i.e. ideal theorising) are prone to ignore questions about fragility and luck, and as such contribute to a focus on ‘effort’.

The third question discusses a ‘real’ educational practice, namely that of parents, to show that part of the fragility of aiming for a flourishing life is due to the fact that child-rearing can be described as taking an existential risk. This existential risk arises, on the one hand, from the fact that the child is always free to not do what their parents intend in raising them, and on the other, from the fact that whether a child becomes a flourishing adult or not is to an important extent up to luck. All of the theories on education for flourishing analysed in this dissertation pay more attention to formal education (schooling) than to parents, although all of the theories explicitly state that what they argue applies to parents as well. Because parents are arguably the most important, or in any case the primary ‘educators’ of children, and because the fragility of the real educational practice of parents is more visible or more easily recognised/acknowledged than in formal education, I have chosen in this dissertation to focus on the practice of parenthood. If parents should aim for a flourishing life for their children, it is important to address (also in theory) how ‘risky’ this endeavour is.

The fourth question takes this one step further by not only discussing the practice of parenthood, but asking what it means for parents when philosophers of education argue that parents should aim for the flourishing life of their children. If the effort-side is central to the theories posited by these philosophers of education, what does that imply for the complex and fragile practice of parents who aim for a flourishing life for their children? I show that this can be problematic for child-rearing practices, as it increases parents’ expectations of themselves, and in turn of their children. A second implication of the fourth question is that by writing about flourishing as a desirable aim of education, theorists make normative claims about what parents ought to do. Even though educational philosophy is seldom addressed directly at parents, theorists ought to realise that their theories might be translated into policy, or teaching or parenting methods, which parents might come to read as advice on how they should aim for their children’s flourishing lives. If there is not enough attention to fragility in theory, this might have undesirable consequences in terms on what subsequent, derivative texts ‘impose’ on parents. I will return to this in the conclusion (CH6), in which I draw up the results of the questions addressed in this dissertation.

45 ‘Parents’ should be read throughout this dissertation as ‘parents as well as other main caretakers in the role of parents’.
46 Here I would have preferred to use the word  *opvoeders* instead of ’educators’; see section 1.4 of this introduction.
A question of professional ethics

Evaluating theory by means of a criterion of practical relevance as I describe it here can be understood as a methodological or meta-theoretical reflection in the sense that one evaluates which method of theorising provides the best possibility to think about ‘real’ educational practices. But such an evaluation can also be seen as part of a reflection on professional ethics for philosophers of education. By this I mean that the question in what way educational theory should think about/be related to educational practice can be discussed as part of the question of what the moral demands are of the vocation of an educational philosopher.\footnote{Frazer 2016.} Political philosopher Michael Frazer states that

if the community of academic political theorists and philosophers cannot help us navigate the problems we face in actual political life, they have not lived up to the moral demands of their vocation.\footnote{Ibid., p. 177.}

In my opinion, this applies, or should apply, to educational theorists and philosophers too. Compared to other professionals in the educational domain theorists and philosophers have great freedom to address the problems faced in educational practices and how to ‘navigate’ these. Yet, arguably we are given time and resources to do exactly that, not to do something that is completely disengaged from education in the real world. By this I mean that it is never self-justifying for educational theorists (because they are theorists) to theorise about some abstract, educational utopia, without a concern for the problems of actual educational practices.\footnote{Ibid., p. 175.} There might be good reasons to ‘disengage’ sometimes, for example in order to imagine a wholly different world and education to create an ‘out of the box’ perspective on ours. But such an exercise needs to be well-argued for. I am not claiming that this dissertation will provide a definitive standard of the ‘appropriate bearing on educational practice’, but I do see the search for such a standard as part of ‘the moral demands’ of my vocation.

A second question of professional ethics is reflected in the question frequently asked of philosophers: what is the use of philosophy, or theoretical research (in general)? During the review process of the article that is published here as chapter 3, one of the anonymous reviewers remarked that all theorists who write about flourishing know that there are many children who are ill-fed or travel to school through unsafe areas, in other words that there are many problems in the real world. They also know that policy-makers should be working out ways to reduce those evils. In
other words, defenders of flourishing as an ideal aim of education all know that the world is far from ideal and that a lot of children do not even come close to fulfilling the basic needs that are necessary to even go to school, let alone get a chance to lead a flourishing life. This reviewer questioned whether the changes that are required to make the world more equal require theories and theorising. Writing proposals, making action-plans, yes, but theorising?

I agree with the reviewer that theory by itself does not change the world. No child will become happier, or less poor, or more successful, because I wrote this dissertation.\(^{50}\) Then why insist on theory, or philosophy of education, as a means to contribute to the improvement of education? Because I believe that it is important to ask the ancient philosophical questions: ‘What do you mean?’ and ‘How do you know? For example, in my academic work environment where the bulk of the research is empirical, research to determine whether a certain intervention is effective is ubiquitous. But the question ‘effective for what?’ is rare.\(^{51}\) While a ‘bland statement of the obvious’\(^{52}\) is often given in the form that the proposed intervention will contribute to ‘the optimal development of children’, a discussion of what optimal development is and why that is worthwhile is often absent. Yet, certain implicit assumptions, i.e. hidden normative claims, influence the hypotheses of such research. It is important that these are explicated, so that it becomes clear whether, for example, a particular cultural and normative conception of what constitutes and what contributes to ‘optimal development’ actually benefits certain children or parents who adhere to this conception, and disadvantages others who do not. This is all the more important because research that aims to contribute to the optimal development of children can also have an influence on policy in education and child care practices. An example is the importance of parents’ involvement in their child’s school, which is claimed to contribute to the optimal development of children. When a parent isn’t involved in school as much as others, this is seen as doing something ‘wrong’, or at least as something that can be ‘improved’. Assumptions about what ‘optimal development’ means and how parents can best contribute to this are normative assumptions. To me, the role of philosophy of education and as such one of the ‘moral demands’ of being a philosopher of education, is to expose and interpret such hidden assumptions. Only then are we able to uncover and discuss what ‘it’ (whether it is the optimal development of children or what their flourishing lives should look like) should mean, and which implications it should and shouldn’t have.

\(^{50}\) Except perhaps my own children, because I was happily occupied (and got paid) during the writing of this dissertation.


\(^{52}\) White 2011, p. 2.
1.4 Limits of translation

The (British or American) denominators for the kind of research presented in this dissertation are often ‘educational research’, ‘educational science’, or ‘philosophy of education’, or an equivalent of one of these. This doesn’t always correspond well with the Dutch (and also German) academic discipline of Pedagogiek, which concerns itself with the guiding role adults play and should play in raising children to adulthood. The word that is used in Dutch for what these adults do is opvoeding (German: Erziehung), which is less informal than what the word ‘child-rearing’ usually implies, but also not equal to, or primarily about, education or teaching (onderwijs). It does not have an obvious, wholly adequate translation in English. One could perhaps say that ‘parenting’ is a better translation, albeit that opvoeden is not limited to parents.\(^53\) Every adult who is in an opvoed-relation – a pedagogical relationship – with a child is, in that role, an opvoeder (German: Erzieher). And this pedagogical relationship is considered to be a dimension of the parent-child relationship next to other dimensions which together form the complexity of the parent-child relationship. I suppose one could call this opvoeder an educator, but intuitively then something of the richness of the term opvoeder seems lost in translation.

Although Pedagogiek will often carry out the kind of research one would expect under the denomination of educational research/science, the difference in approach between Pedagogiek, which tends to study the activity of child-rearing (be it in school, at home, or elsewhere) and educational science that tends to study the activities in the domain of education, sometimes causes small problems.\(^54\) To me, this brings to light the limits of translation, and the (inevitable) limitations of not writing a dissertation in one’s mother tongue. To be clear, this does not mean to imply that I wish I had written this dissertation in Dutch, because I am eager to be able to communicate ‘across borders’ (both literally and figuratively). But, it does show that opvoeding as well as education is culture-bound and language bound, which again underlines how in every way implicit (normative) assumptions are interwoven in discussing education, and it does show that it is sometimes difficult to express oneself in a language one is not raised in. Throughout the chapters I take education to refer to both formal schooling and informal child-rearing, but on some occasions it has proven useful to explain (in the chapter itself) what I mean by ‘pedagogical’.\(^55\)

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\(^53\) The objection to the word ‘parenting’, as if being a parent can be reduced to a series of tasks and skills, sometimes heard in philosophy of education (e.g. Suissa 2006, Ramaekers and Suissa 2012), can therefore be avoided in languages that have a word like opvoeden.

\(^54\) And on top of that, ‘pedagogics’/‘pedagogy’ does exist in English, but refers to how teachers teach (in Dutch that would be: didactiek). This could cause additional misunderstandings.

\(^55\) In chapter 4.
1.5 **Short Outline of the Chapters**

**Chapter 2** provides a conceptual clarification of the concept of human flourishing. The chapter asks what is meant by ‘human flourishing’ and discusses the formal characteristics of the concept of human flourishing. It takes Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* as a prototype to argue that any conception of human flourishing fulfils five formal criteria: (1) human flourishing is regarded as intrinsically worthwhile; (2) flourishing refers to the actualization of an agent’s potential; (2a) flourishing is about a whole life; (2b) it is a ‘dynamic’ state, and (2c) flourishing consists in satisfying certain objective goods.

**Chapter 3** asks how we should theorise about human flourishing as an ideal aim of education. What kind of theory should educational theory on flourishing 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. Subsequently it looks at problems with ideal theory and discusses the merits of nonideal theory on education for flourishing.

**Chapter 4** argues that parenthood can be characterised as involving (the taking of) 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*. The chapter argues that Bollnow’s description of existential risk (i) contributes to the understanding of child-rearing and striving for flourishing as inherently uncertain; (ii) contributes to a clarification of the ways in which the concept of risk is being used in educational theory and policymaking; and (iii) leads us to recognise trust as a key concept in discussing risk-taking and child-rearing.

**Chapter 5** discusses what attitude parents should have towards their children’s future flourishing. What is meant by *aiming* for the flourishing of children? What can and should parents *expect* with regard to the flourishing of their children? The chapter argues that an attitude of *hope* is the best way to give expression to how parents should relate to (striving for) the flourishing of their children.

**Chapter 6** presents a general discussion. The chapter provides an answer to the question whether flourishing should be defended as an ideal aim of education and what kind of theory and what kind of conception of flourishing are defensible and worthwhile as an ideal aim of education. Furthermore I will discuss possible implications of this answer to the *language in which* we write about flourishing as an aim of education, and I will give suggestions for further research.