CHAPTER 6

GENERAL CONCLUSION

A WORTHWHILE CONCEPTION OF HUMAN FLOURISHING AS AN AIM OF EDUCATION
Chapter 6

6.1 Conclusions per chapter

The purpose of this dissertation is to critically investigate contemporary educational theories that propose human flourishing as an ideal, overarching aim of education. The central question of this dissertation is **how should we think about human flourishing as an ideal aim of education?** The main question is reflected in four subquestions, each answered in one of the chapters. I will first give concise conclusions per chapter, before I will answer the main question. I end by a reflection upon the possible implications of this answer.

In chapter 2 I analysed the concept of human flourishing and suggested that human flourishing (1) is regarded as something that is intrinsically worthwhile; (2) refers to the actualisation of an agent’s potential; (2a) is always about a whole life; (2b) is what we’ve called a ‘dynamic state’; and (2c) necessarily refers (also) 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 to distinguish flourishing from a hedonic interpretation of ‘well-being’ or ‘happiness’.

They also make clear that human flourishing is characterised by ongoing development, striving and effort to sustain it. The way in which human flourishing is described in this chapter, and the importance that is given to ‘actualising the potential’ of children, refers to a widely shared intuition that children have to ‘make something out of their life’. As mentioned in the introduction, Kristjánsson argues that the current flourishing paradigm is characterised by a ‘strength-based approach’, which emphasises furthering students’ talents and helping them actualise their potential.1 This seems to refer to the same focus on (individual) human effort. The question is whether we have to think about human flourishing in this way, and whether we should. Chapter 2 argued that it is important for both educators and children to aim high, in the sense that these aims are difficult or even impossible to realise. At the same time, it was made clear that setting such aims does not mean that human beings do not flourish until their lives are perfect; flourishing is a matter of degree and it is important to bear in mind the difference between a (regulative) ideal and what one may expect someone to be able to realise given this person’s capacities and circumstances. However, it is one thing to set high aims and be aware of the ‘gap’ between the ideal and the real world, it is another question whether the content of such a high (or even perfect) aim must emphasise the effort-side, as opposed to the luck-side. There seems to be an implicit assumption in the ‘strength based approach’ that setting high aims implies setting **demanding aims** (demanding

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1 Kristjánsson 2017, p. 88.
of an individual human being), but this is not necessarily the case. Human flourishing can for example also be regarded as difficult, or even impossible to realise, because one has to be incredibly lucky (for example with the family one is born in, or how healthy one is) to be able to live such a life, regardless of how much ‘effort’ someone has put in. Also, as for example Feder Kittay argues, flourishing can be seen more in the light of coping with adversity, which, although it does emphasise the ‘effort-side’, does not put much stress on one’s ability to actualise one’s individual potential.  

Chapter 3 discussed current theories on education for flourishing and concluded that these theories are construed around the ideal of human flourishing. This is characteristic of ideal theory, as opposed to nonideal theory, which constructs its theory around the actual situation. In addition to describing the ideal of human flourishing as an aim of education, most theories also theorise about education for flourishing in an ideal-theoretical form. I argue that an exclusive reliance on ideal theory when theorising about 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) assumptions about children’s lives and their chances of receiving good education which do not reflect reality (i.e. they are what Robeyns calls ‘bad idealisations’); and (c) ideal theory is often ‘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. I have suggested two ways in which this can be done; (1) prioritising theory on the improvement of basic needs over theorising about the ideal education for flourishing, and/or (2) the less radical option of starting from the actual world in theorising what might be ideal.

Chapter 4 discussed a good example of a real and actual aspect of the practice of parenthood in relation to theorising flourishing as an aim of education. The chapter argued that parenting inherently involves taking an existential risk (what Bollnow calls a *Wagmål*). Contrary to how ‘risk’ usually is interpreted as something that should be avoided, there is a sense in which risk in education is inevitable, namely the way in which parents risk themselves in raising a child (to live a flourishing life). Parents cannot ensure that children will become what the parents had intended in raising them. This does not necessarily mean that when parents fail in raising their children as they had

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2 See Feder Kittay 2005.
3 Robeyns 2008.
4 Cigman 2018.
intended, children do not or cannot flourish, but it does mean that parents’ aiming for a flourishing life of their children can be typified as a Wagnis (taking an existential risk).

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 the child’s response to their parenting), because flourishing is for a significant part up to luck (as opposed to effort). For that reason alone, aiming for the flourishing of children can also be seen as a Wagnis. Where the first type of riskiness is due to the freedom of children to not do what their parents intended in raising them, the second type is due to the role of chance/luck in the course of a life. The acceptance of vulnerability, of being ‘at risk’ in the above two senses, is what we mean by trust.\(^5\) 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 inevitable 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’.\(^6\)

Chapter 5 argued that the theoretical claim that parents should aim for the flourishing life of their children does not necessarily imply that parents have to do this in a deliberate or active way, i.e. have to be aware that they do so. They may have their children’s flourishing ‘at heart’, without consciously doing things in order to contribute to their child’s (future) flourishing. I have argued that a combination of parental expectations with regard to the flourishing of their children and aiming for flourishing as if it were a goal creates problems. Although there is a legitimate place for expectations, a parental attitude of hope with regard to the flourishing of children is more appropriate, because ‘hope’ implies a recognition of the limitations of one’s powers to contribute to realising aims. Also with regard to the characterisation of parenting as taking an existential risk, it is more appropriate for parents to hope that their child-rearing will contribute to their child’s flourishing than to expect so.

In chapter 4 I argued that parents start their child-rearing from an a priori trusting-belief in their children, by which I mean that parents not so much rationally decide to trust their child, but also do not have reasons to not trust them. Such a trusting-belief or faith is necessary for full-fledged trust, which is a form of trust one cannot and does not decide to have, and is never fully justified by reasons.\(^7\) An a-priori trusting belief can be connected to a parental attitude of hope (with regard to their children’s future flourishing). An attitude of hope involves believing in the possibility that something will be the case in the future as well as desiring that this something will happen. This

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\(^5\) Baier 1986.

\(^6\) Spiecker 1990.

\(^7\) Hieronymi 2008.
belief or faith in a positive future for one’s children, as part of an attitude of parental hope, is also the root of full-fledged trust. One could say that parents aim for the flourishing life of their children because they have faith in, and hope for, and therefore also (a priori) trust in their children, the future and the future flourishing of their children.

6.2 How should we think about human flourishing as an ideal aim of education?

I asked 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. On the basis of the four chapters in this dissertation, I argue 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. By this I mean that:

(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.
Chapter 6

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.

John White argues that the ideal of flourishing is ‘far from a bland statement of the obvious’, by which I assume White means that it entails much more than the observation that if all human actions ultimately aim at a flourishing life, that aim is self-evidently also the aim of our upbringing and education. I keep wondering about this claim. I agree with White that accepting the self-evident point that human flourishing is to be regarded as the ultimate aim of education is not the end of the matter, but a starting point which challenges us to provide a good conception of flourishing, as well as a clarification of what this means for educational practices. I side with Reiss and White’s point of view that the claim that education should contribute to the chances of children’s flourishing lives should not be a hollow phrase – it should not be an add-on without actual implications for actual classrooms and actual school subjects. Constructing an ‘aims-based curriculum’, a curriculum that starts by formulating its ultimate aim (that is: flourishing or a life of well-being) and then works its way back to what the daily subjects should look like if they are to serve this bigger, overarching aim, as Reiss and White propose, is a good example of how this can be done.

A possible problem here is that the ideal, overarching aim of flourishing will come to be interpreted as an achievable goal, and as I have discussed in chapter 5 this is problematic in light of what kind of concept flourishing is. ‘Happiness lessons’ in school as a way of aiming for a life of well-being, for example, such as Wellington College in England or the Dutch method of gelukskoffer (happiness suitcase), assume that the ways to achieve (subjective) happiness can be learned, and that happiness can contribute to better school achievement. In other words, happiness is conceptualised both as a goal and as an instrumental good. In chapter 2 it is argued that flourishing is always to be seen as an intrinsic good. In so far as happiness is seen as the same kind of concept as flourishing, or even as an equivalent of flourishing, ‘learning’ happiness creates tensions.

But that is not the main point I want to make here. There is a sense in which I believe, contrary to White’s remark, that it is the crucial point of theory on education for flourishing to

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8 White 2011, p. 2.
9 Reiss and White 2013.
10 Reiss and White 2013.
'state the obvious’. I believe that it is an important aim of theory on education for flourishing to state the ‘obvious’ point that there is broad agreement in the society that I live in that education is – also – a means to contribute to every child’s (chance of) a good, flourishing life. It is my belief that there is in fact broad, intuitive agreement that one of education’s main purposes is to help children to be better able to cope in the world and live a life of well-being, but in a world preoccupied with efficiency, improvement and protocols this is sometimes forgotten, or interpreted in a too confined way. We tend to not see the wood for the trees, and to remind ourselves of this it is important that theory on flourishing points out the ‘obvious’.

However, on a different interpretation of ‘stating the obvious’ one can also argue that substantive accounts of flourishing, such as for example White’s, in fact do not go beyond the ‘obvious’, in the sense that these tend to stick to culturally dominant (psychological) ideas about child-rearing and human development.12 It is probable, that is, that these conceptions of flourishing make certain implicit cultural assumptions. The sociological research by Annette Lareau cited in chapter 5 exemplifies exactly what I mean by this. Lareau found two dominant cultural repertoires of parenting which she connected to different social classes.13 Poor and working-class families tend to adhere to a different ‘parenting strategy’ than families from the middle- and upper-class. These differed, but it was clear that both had their own advantages as well as disadvantages. However, Lareau also observed that professionals (teachers, child carers, etc.) tended to endorse the strategies of the middle- and upper-class. Lareau stresses that it would, in any case, be a mistake to ‘accept, carte blanche, the views of officials in dominant institutions’.14 As discussed in the introduction, I come across a lot of empirical research that aims to contribute to the ‘optimal development’ of children. It typically does so by proposing interventions that are very much in line with what Lareau identified as the dominant cultural repertoire of the middle- and upper-class. Generally, these interventions are based upon (developmental) psychological theories. These are often things that middle- and upper-class parents already tend to do well, and poor and working-class parents do not do well, hence: they need the interventions to learn the same methods the middle- and upper-class already use. Examples are: reading to children, parental involvement in school (as described in the introduction), etc. This is not to say that the findings of this empirical research are necessarily wrong, or that such interventions or advice to parents are never needed, but it is to say that it is important to be aware of a possible bias.15

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12 Ramaekers and Suijs 2012.
13 See Lareau 2011.
15 See also Ramaekers and Suijs 2012, p. 108.
A substantive account of education for flourishing increases the chance that this account shows a certain (cultural or class) bias. I believe it is important to find ways to address these ‘obvious’, and therefore perhaps biased, notions. With this dissertation I have tried to make a start with this.

6.3 A Different Language of (education for) Flourishing

The points that are brought forward in this dissertation are also discursive points. The ‘luck-side’ of flourishing, as I have called it in the introduction, is not completely absent from the paradigm of theory on education for flourishing, but it is the language in which the effort-side is emphasised that is distinctive of current theory on education for flourishing. In this section I discuss two different aspects of this discourse. The first is how a choice of words emphasises a particular normative paradigm of flourishing as an aim of education. As described in chapter 4, a discourse in which ‘risk’ is used to describe things and events that ought to be avoided at all times, is at the same time a discourse that reduces the value of trust, for instance the need for, and importance of, trust in the parent-child relationship. Such a discourse tends to focus on the things ‘we’ (whether these are parents, educators, or human beings in general) can and should do about ‘it’ (whatever problem is at hand), as opposed to a focus on how ‘we’ should react upon the things we cannot control. Also, as seen in chapter 5, it is easy to connect competitiveness, hyperparenting and stress with parents having expectations, both of themselves and of their children. ‘Hope’ on the other hand, is intuitively connected to humility and to an awareness of the uncertainty of achieving that which one hopes for. Arguing for a parental attitude of hope is also arguing for the use of a particular vocabulary.

Judith Suissa and Stefan Ramackers argue that ‘questions about what parents do for their children and how they act need (…) to be reclaimed from psychology and put at the heart of moral thinking about parenting’. They argue that we need a different ‘language’ – one that is not dominated by a (Western) psychological discourse – in which we can discuss matters of child development, parenting, and also the end(s) to which children (ought to) be raised. I think that such a different language should also make it possible to go beyond ‘obvious’ (in the sense of culturally dominant) conceptions of human flourishing. Ramackers and Suissa give several examples of authors who use a different language to discuss parenting, such as Winnicott, Ruddick,

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16 Ibid., p. 107.
Noddings and Stadlen, whose (feminist) work focuses on mothers and maternal caring, I am particularly impressed by the language of British child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. The theme of his 1964 book *The child, the family and the outside world* can be summarised in his own words as ‘it is when a mother trusts her own judgment that she is at her best’, and ‘in the long run, what we need is mothers, as well as fathers, who have found out how to believe in themselves’. Both the content of what Winnicott argues for (his emphasis on trust) and the way in which he puts that forward as his most important claim (the language he chooses) are in line with what is argued for in chapter 4 and in this discussion, which makes it a good example of what I mean by using a different language. Another example is how Winnicott opens his book by giving a description of the ‘ordinary mother’:

I am certainly not putting forward the view that it is essential for the young mother to read books about child care. This would imply that she is more self-conscious about her state than she is. She needs protection and information, and she needs the best that medical science can offer in the way of bodily care. She needs a doctor and a nurse whom she knows, and in whom she has confidence. She also needs the devotion of a husband, and satisfying sexual experiences. But she does not necessarily need to be told in advance what being a mother feels like. One of my main ideas is this, that the best mothering comes out of natural self-reliance and there is a distinction to be made between the things that may come naturally and the things that have to be learnt, and I try to distinguish between these so that what comes naturally may not be spoiled.

The vocabulary Winnicott uses here, by for example writing about what a mother needs as opposed to what a mother ought to do, and the emphasis he puts on not telling the mother what she has to do, has a ‘soothing’ rather than a ‘worrying’ effect on the reader (particularly when the reader is a parent). This is similar to how I described that the difference between ‘hope’ and ‘having expectations’ has both substantive and discursive consequences/implications. Winnicott does not refrain from arguing what is best (ideal) for mothers, and he aims high, but somehow he is able to leave space for parents to have their own ideas, without becoming a relativist in the sense that

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17 Winnicott 1964, Ruddick 1989; Noddings 1984; Stadlen 2004, all cited in Ramaekers and Suisse 2012. Aspects of these accounts are also vulnerable to criticism, for example the idea of ‘natural’ knowledge of parenting, which both Noddings and Stadlen defend (albeit in different ways). Ramaekers and Suisse argue that what is ‘natural’ cannot be separated from what is cultural and from what is moral.

18 Ibid., p. 25.

19 Winnicott 1964, p. 9.
‘anything goes’ in parenting. Also, he leaves space for parents to be dependent on others, and to be uncertain, which, as I have argued elsewhere, seems to be absent from current parenting and educational discourses.\(^{20}\)

Winnicott also makes clear that there might be authorities concerning parenting (i.e. scientific knowledge or experts) but that this need not imply that parents necessarily ought to ‘do’ something with their advice. This brings me to the second aspect I want to discuss, namely how a particular use of language by authorities (either theorists, psychologists, educationalists) brings about a particular vocabulary with regard to flourishing as an aim of education. And, as discussed in chapter 5, claims about parents, such as for example the claim that parents should aim for a flourishing life for their children, might be internalised by parents. These claims can subsequently be perceived as things they (have to) expect of themselves. It is for an important part up to how these claims are described, that is, in which way it is made clear (by which authority and in what sense it is taken for granted) what ‘task’ is assigned to parents. Ramaekers and Suisse, for example quote Stadlen, who argues that:

One difficulty is that as soon as a psychiatrist or researcher has invented a word, he then goes on to show how important it is for mothers and babies to do whatever his word describes. (...) It is they who define what the ‘task’ is. This kind of writing turns mothering into a minefield, with “experts” to guide mothers through the danger areas, instead of mothers guiding the researchers and – most important – using their own language. Surely no mother ever invented pseudo-scientific terms like ‘bonding’ or ‘attachment parenting’, or ‘entrainment’. Mothers talk about love.\(^{21}\)

I found a comparable remark in Winnicott’s book where he comments on breast feeding and states his preference for ‘natural’ feeding (not feeding on a time schedule, but whenever the baby indicates that it’s hungry, which was a hot debate at the time of writing (1964)). He is clear in his preference for natural feeding and its advantages for the establishment of the mother-child relationship, but he insists that ‘even the idea of natural feeding would be harmful if it were to become a thing to be consciously aimed at, because it was said to be good by the authorities’.\(^{22}\)

In terms of (aiming for) flourishing, I have heard mothers and fathers say things like that their reason for bringing their child to day care, is that it ‘will give them a head start in their social development’ (which is crucial for their future flourishing, to finish the thought), or that they let

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\(^{20}\) See Wolbert 2018.


\(^{22}\) Winnicott 1964, p. 49.
their children choose her own food, because this is important for developing their autonomy (which is again crucial for their future flourishing). These parents’ choice of words is likely to have been copied from something they have read somewhere, written by an expert. Again, this is not to say that sending children to day care or letting them choose their own food is wrong, but I give these examples to show how a particular language, related to flourishing, has influenced the vocabulary of parents themselves.

I have made a start in this dissertation to ‘set the tone’ for a different language to speak and write about human flourishing as an aim of education. I wrote about fragility, about luck, about the inevitability of taking (existential) risks when bringing children up to become flourishing adults, and about the difference between having expectations and a more modest attitude of hope. I aimed at two things; first, to emphasise the inherent fragility of flourishing, but second, as a consequence of this different outlook and accompanying different language, to pave the way for interpretations of flourishing that go beyond the ‘obvious’ ideas about optimal development that are dominant in my lived worlds of educational research and parenting. But I have only made a start, and I don’t know whether it will change anything in the ‘real world’ or in the world of philosophy of education. More work needs to be done in this respect. In addition, other kinds of research may be worthwhile. In the next and final section I will give some recommendations for further research.

### 6.4 Recommendations for Further Research

With regard to further theoretical research, one recommendation that follows from the conclusions I have drawn is to encourage the elaboration of nonideal theory on education for flourishing. One of the ways in which current educational theory can be improved is by populating the theory with real-life examples in the way I have attempted to do in chapter 5. Yet another way is by developing a ‘multilevel’ theory on education for flourishing. Howard Curzer describes Aristotelian flourishing as including a multitude of possible ‘levels’ of (non-)flourishing; ‘ranging at the bottom from the misery of those without good fortune and compensating virtue, through mere lack of flourishing for those with bad fortune but compensating virtue or good fortune without virtuous activity, to the top level of blessedness for those with bonus goods of fortune and virtuous activity’.

This a) provides a more detailed perspective than the simple claim that children need ‘good luck’ in order to lead flourishing lives; and b) could be a starting point for an educational theory that is able to

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distinguish between children with more or less good fortune, and more or less chances to compensate bad luck with education.

A more radical approach to nonideal theory might ask for a thorough and precise evaluation of what the established (pre)conditions for a flourishing life, as proposed by the theories discussed in this dissertation, really imply for actual children in actual schools in different places in the world. Such research would have to be based on a variety of sociological and psychological research (either already available or conducted for this purpose) about the circumstances of children living in particular environments and how these affect their (school) lives. It would be interesting to link the empirical data to the specific (pre)conditions that have been proposed in current theories on education for flourishing. In this way, it is also possible to empirically test to which extent the idealising assumptions that I have argued to be ‘bad idealisations’ are in fact false assumptions or not.

A second potential way of empirically ‘testing’ theoretical work that I would be interested in relates to the findings of chapter 5. It is an interesting question whether actual parents have hopes and/or expectations about their children and their children’s future flourishing life, and to which extent they are made explicit and integrated in their parenting. How are such hopes and expectations articulated? Do actual parents articulate that they do things in order to contribute to their child’s flourishing (or happy) lives? Lareau’s work suggests that parents generally do not have such explicit ideas.24

Finally, related to these questions, it would also be interesting to explore in what sense parents expect things from themselves, from their children’s schools, or from other professionals with regard to aiming for the future flourishing of their children. This would help to map out in what sense claims about parents are internalized by parents, as Ramaekers and Suissa argued, and whether this is beneficial for both children and parents, or rather problematic, and whether there is indeed a traceable bias related to parents’ social class.

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24 Lareau 2011.