The contribution of the school environment to youths’ resilience: A Dutch middle-adolescent perspective
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1 Introduction
1.1 Orientation

In schools many adolescents develop successfully against the odds. I will study the relation between the school context and this successful development despite hardship. Resilience will be explored in theory; from different perspectives; and deepened for a special age group, i.e. middle-adolescence.

Evidently the normative terms “successful development” and “odds” will be explored and grounded in a theoretical frame. The exploring of these terms simultaneously implies describing the construct of resilience as this construct is not unanimously defined. The construct consists of circumstances, assumptions, norms, expectations and psychological theories within a specific context. The strong focus in this study will be on the middle-adolescent in the context of his/her school. Resilience is interpreted on the basis of normative patterns of development in normative environmental contexts and the school gives us a frame of reference for making such judgements (Reynolds, 1994 in Wang & Gordon, 1994).

The main question that leads the focus in this study is:

What is the contribution of the school environment to the resilience of middle-adolescent students?

Before going into the background and rationale of this study I will specify the terms used in this research question:

- Contribution: In this study I will use the dynamic term ‘contribution’ instead of the term ‘effect’ because I will not measure the causal influence in a statistical way but I will explore the relationship between school environment and middle-adolescents’ resilience in terms of dynamic, reciprocal interactions.

- School environment: With the term ‘school environment’ I refer to all possible aspects of the immediate environment constituted by the school as a system in which the middle-adolescent is interactively participating. These aspects can include teachers as well as the school building as well as the lunch breaks and extramural activities. No framed description of this term will be postulated beforehand because the school environment will be studied from the viewpoint of the middle-adolescents. It is the middle-adolescents’ description of the term ‘school environment’ that is the focus of this study.
Resilience: Before constructing the term ‘resilience’ in a detailed manner in Chapter Two I will use the term to denote the ability to bounce back after stressful experiences.

Middle-adolescent: a 14-or 15-year old girl or boy. I will elaborate on the reason for the focus on this age group in paragraph 2.1.

1.2 Background and rationale

The educational system in the Dutch affluent society is struggling with the fact that more and more students for various reasons don’t succeed in developing their talents. Especially students from socio-economically poor families of both immigrant and ‘Dutch’ origin drop out of school or show behavioral problems in school.

Part of the increase in behavioral problems might be explained by the inclusive education policy that dominates the educational system in Dutch society today. Inclusive education, based on a governmental wish to increase the integration of children with special needs and disabilities in regular schools and the need to economize on the high costs of special education has led to various consequences for the regular education system in the Netherlands since the early 90’s. The inclusive education policy strives for dealing with behavioral problems in regular schools with help of extra financial support for children with certain familial circumstances. Directing students with behavioral problems to special education is restricted.

The financial support is based on the assumption that children who grow up under certain circumstances (e.g. immigrant parents or ‘Dutch’ parents with low socio-economic status (SES)) run higher risk to develop learning or behavioral problems in school than children from families with a middle or high SES. Intervention consists of early identification of risk factors and prevention of problems by means of extra financial support for schools. The schools are free in the choice of wherein to invest the money.

This strategy has not yet led to fulfilling results. School drop-out is increasing at the moment among Turkish, Moroccan as well as Dutch young adolescents in the Netherlands.

For this study I propose a different line of approach to examine ways in which education can help prevent school drop-out and behavioral problems among middle-adolescents. Instead of studying the causes for school drop-out and behavioral problems, I propose studying the conditions which might underpin succeeding in school and positive behavioral development despite the presence of riskful circumstances and low SES familial backgrounds. I will study the ability of middle-adolescents to bounce back from or be resistant to hardship in their lives; the ability to be resilient.

1 The terms immigrant and Dutch mainly refer to the parents’ status. Their children who are the students in our study are generally born in the Netherlands and therefore all ‘Dutch’ themselves.
1.3 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of my is to gain insight into the contribution that school environments make to the resilience of middle-adolescents. As Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick and Sawyer (2003) state, more efforts are needed to understand how social institutions can contribute to, or hinder youths' resilience. They suggest that research should be done on the role schools may play in developing resilient youth through enhancing protective factors such as social skills, problem solving skills and self-esteem.

I intend to contribute to knowledge on increasing the fit between the school environment and the needs of middle-adolescents to develop successfully. In this study, the focus will be on how the middle-adolescents who are resilient perceive the contribution of their school to their resilience.

With this purpose, my study will be a distinct contribution to existing studies because of the focus on the perception of middle-adolescents themselves on relevant environmental factors. This focus could contribute to an asset-based approach in addition, more specifically to the asset-access-mapping process (Bouwer, 2005) as it is developing in educational thinking today.

Because of the comparison between different societies (The Netherlands and South Africa) made possible by related research currently being undertaken in a SANPAD research project, the possibility arises to identify protective factors that are not context specific and therefore might hold more universal validity.

To fulfill these purposes I pose three sub questions2:

(i) What is the resilient middle-adolescent’s perception of the contribution of the school to his/her resilience?

(ii) What is the non-resilient middle-adolescent’s perception of the part played by the school in his/her experience of his/her difficulties?

(iii) How do these two perceptions compare with each other?

1.4 Assumptions of the study

The main assumption of the study is that children do not necessarily succumb to hardship or risk factors. To ground this assumption I’ve studied literature on resilience, a relatively new orientation in psychological, sociological, and educational research today. Within the theoretical frame that arises from the literature study I find reason to assume a possible positive influence from schools on resilience-building in middle-adolescents. In my search for insight into this influence, I assume that this influence is not objectively measurable. I suggest that the influence can only be described as perceived by the middle-adolescents themselves. At the basis of my interest in the content and nature of this influence lies the assumption that the middle-adolescents’ perception of the influence will be different from adults’ perception or from the
results of effective-school research. My last assumption relates to the differences between resilient and non-resilient adolescents. In this respect, I assume that the difference between the successful and less successful development in these groups is influenced by and/or reflected in their different perception, and/or utilization of useful assets in their school and by a fit or misfit between the middle-adolescent’s developmental needs and his/her access to the available assets.

In the next, second, chapter all the assumptions proposed in this chapter will be addressed and founded. The study will be framed in specific research and theoretical traditions of the risk-approach, the resilience approach, Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model and a developmental perspective on middle-adolescence. Additionally, the research context of circumstances, norms and expectations will be addressed. In the third chapter, a research design and strategies will be proposed to answer the research questions and the limitations of the proposed route will be discussed.

2 Literature study

2.1 Pre-amble

In this chapter, the study will be theoretically framed and founded. This foundation will result in operationalizing the construct of resilience.

Following a suggestion made by Howard, Dryden and Johnson (1999) in reaction to an analysis of previous resilience studies, I will guide this resilience study by three principles: firstly, I will adopt a theoretical and practical ecological framework in which I will describe the paradigm shift that has been taking place in psychological theory in coming to the resilience approach; secondly, I will be mindful of the social context e.g. the school environment, within which my research is carried out; and thirdly, I will take into account that middle-adolescents’ understanding of the key concepts of my study may well differ from those of my own.

2.2 Theoretical and practical ecological framework

Educational psychology focuses on situations where development from childhood to maturity takes place. The development is characterized by transitions, some of which Tusaie and Dryer (2004) refer to as transitions of great stress (e.g. starting school; detachment from parents during adolescence). Adolescence is the last developmental stage prior to adulthood and therefore a transitional stage from childhood to maturity. This transition does not take place in isolation. Many factors from different contexts influence the process and thereby the amount of stress the transition will have on the adolescent.

Although an ecological approach implies that an action or change on one level cannot be seen as the cause for an action on another level (Swart & Pettipher, 2005), the assumption that has

3 Main research question: What is the contribution of the school environment to the resilience of middle-adolescent students?
dominated social studies for a long time is the assumption of the causal relationship between the presence of a risk factor and problems occurring later in a person's life. Many prevention programs are grounded on predictions, based on the theoretically present risk factors in the family or other systems.

Through the years, the assumption of a simple cause and effect relation has been hard to hold. A growing number of researchers in the field of psychiatry, psychology and sociology have found that, in many cases, cause and effect are exchangeable. Questions have arisen like: does a shortage of social skills lead to antisocial behaviour, or do antisocial tendencies in a child prevent the child from integrating and using appropriate social skills (Henderson and Millstein, 2003, p.4); does running away from home lead to problems, or do the problems at home lead to the running away? The dual possibility then raises the essential question: on what level will the intervention be most appropriate and effective?

Pursuing this line of argument, other difficulties have been encountered in assuming a linear causal relationship between risk and problem. Ideological factors play a great part in defining and using the concept of risk. Many times students are labeled vulnerable or at risk because their appearance, language, values and family structures are not in accordance with those of the dominant culture (Goodlad & Keating, 1990 in Howard et al., 1999). A second objection to the assumption is that the main indicator for 'risk' is often obvious, externalized, difficult behavior whereas recent studies on victims of child abuse have indicated that it is very often the silent, withdrawn child, who causes few problems for the teacher, that runs at least as much risk as his/her noisier classmates (Fleming et al., 1997 in Howard et al., 1999). A third problem concerns the deficit model that, in schools, traditionally grounds the identification and management of students at risk. In the deficit model the students of the school, their families and possibly other systems in the ecological model are being viewed as having shortcomings in one way or another. In relation to interventions, the deficit model leads to programs that aim to change the student of the school and have it adjust to the existing school culture instead of adjusting the structure and programs of the institution to the needs of the student (Goodlad & Keating, 1990 in Howard et al., 1999).

In addition to ethical and practical objections considered above, long-term studies on populations at risk scientifically have proved the determining aspect of the risk approach untrue. These long term studies have found one third of the population at risk succumbing to studied risk factors, but two thirds not doing so. This has led various researchers to conclude that resilience factors have more predictive power than risk factors and should therefore provide the research base for planning preventive interventions (Garmezy, 1982; Werner & Smith, 1992 in Constantine, Benard & Diaz, 1999).

There are many ways to react to situations of great stress or high-risk situations. The reactions can be seen as the result of the person's negotiation with the high-risk environment. In this process of negotiation, strong positive factors within the person and his/her environment compete with the negative, high-risk factors. According to a conceptual model similarly proposed by different authors, there are four possible outcomes of reintegration after a disruption by risk factors: dysfunctional reintegration, reintegration with loss, reintegration to comfort zone and reintegration with resilience (Masten, 1994 and Henderson and Millstein, 2003). The outcomes
of reintegration are strongly influenced by the stressors, adversity or risks and by individual and environmental protective factors (Masten, 1994, Henderson and Millstein, 2003, Tusaie and Dryer, 2004). All models are consistent in identifying resilience as a dynamic process involving a personal negotiation through life and fluctuating across time, developmental stage, and context (Tusaie and Dryer, 2004). Although most research on resilience has focused on individual and family factors (Rigsby, 1994) resilience is not simply an individual level construct or solely influenced by family. Rigsby (1994) suggests that in questioning how a person becomes resilient and how one can contribute to the resilience of young people, we should study the details of all the social contexts within the environment in which young people are developing. The environment is critical to an individual’s resilience in two ways. First, the internal protective factors that assist an individual in being resilient in the face of a stressor or challenge are often the result of environmental conditions that foster the development of these characteristics. Second, immediate environmental conditions that are present, in addition to the stressor or challenge, contribute to shifting the balance of an individual’s response from one of maladaptation or dysfunction to homeostasis or resilience (Henderson & Milstein, 1996). The internal and external assets within an environment appear to transcend ethnic, social class, geographical and historical boundaries (Howard et al., 1999).

One theory on the influence of different environmental conditions on the individual and vice versa is Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner (1992; 1994 in Swart & Pettipher, 2005). The bio-element of the bio-ecological model refers to the developmental factor of the life stage of all members of a system, especially those interacting proximally in the microsystem(s). The ecological component(s) of the model refer to the influence of the developmental stage of the individual on his/her surrounding systems, and of the influence of the surrounding systems on each other and on the individual in his/her developmental stage (Swart and Pettipher, 2005). Bronfenbrenner posits the interaction of five environmental systems within one large system. These are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The microsystem is characterized by those individuals and events most proximal in one’s life, involved in face-to-face continuous contact, with each person reciprocally influencing the other(s). Examples of the microsystem are the family, the school and the peer group (Swart & Pettipher, 2005). The mesosystem refers to the relationships among and between the microsystems. The exosystem exercises external influence on the systems in which the person actively participates. External influences include systems such as the education system, health services or the parents’ place of work. The macrosystem refers to the attitudes, beliefs, values and ideologies inherent in the systems of a particular society and culture. Finally, there is the chronosystem, which refers to the developmental time frames that cross through the interactions among the systems and their influence on individual development. An example of the chronosystem is the development of a child’s life within the development of a family or a classroom setting as a system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 in Swart & Pettipher, in press).

Especially the microsystem is of interest for this study. Within the microsystem, the relationships between the individual middle-adolescent and elements of the school environment are in process. All the other systems are of influence, but the focus of this study is on the activities, roles and interpersonal relationships experienced between the individual middle-adolescent and
the school. I emphasize that I am aware of the different systems interacting with each other and constantly modifying each other. I argue that this multilevel influence might have various consequences for the scope of the influence that interventions in the school environment can have. For example, from a more negative point of view, the school's influence and thereby its contribution to resilience could be limited because of possible negative influences from the family system or other proximal or distal systems surrounding the child. On the other, more positive hand, the interventions on the level of school environment can positively modify the interpersonal relations of the middle-adolescent on other levels, such as the family level.

2.3 School context

Resilience has been studied particularly in relation to transitions of great stress. Developmental transitions during middle-adolescence include school entry and growing detachment from parents. These are “normal” stressful conditions. On top of these, stressful transitions also occur in unexpected or externally controlled events. The amount of stress that the adolescent life stage might cause upon the middle-adolescent emphasizes the importance of the context of the school in which the experiences of middle-adolescence and school entry take place and implies at least two points of particular interest: the transition from primary to high school and promoting resilience in the middle-adolescents who come there and have the developmental task of detaching from their parents. Resilience literature emphasizes that schools are critical environments for individuals to develop the capacity to bounce back from adversity, adapt to pressures and problems encountered, and develop the competencies – social, academic, and vocational – necessary to do well in life.

Various studies (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979; Werner and Smith, 1988; Howard et al., 1999;) have shown that one source of external protective factors can be the school. Children in discordant and disadvantaged homes are more likely to demonstrate resilient characteristics if they attend a school that has a good academic record and attentive, caring teachers. Schools can provide children with positive experiences that are associated with either success or pleasure. These experiences need not necessarily involve academic success but might be associated with sporting or musical achievement, getting positions of responsibility in the school, developing a good relationship with a teacher or social success among classmates. The studies also point to the important role that teachers can play in resilient children’s lives. They found that among the most frequently encountered non-family, positive role models in the lives of resilient children were favourite teachers who took a personal interest in them. Those were teachers who were not just academic instructors but were also confidants and positive models for personal identification.

The various findings described above lead me to the question of what my study might add to these findings. In sum, these studies have described the positive experiences the school can offer middle-adolescents and the positive role models the teachers can be for middle-adolescents. These aspects could be part of the contribution to middle-adolescents’ resilience. The question remains what the contribution of the school environment is to the resilience of the middle-adolescent according to the middle-adolescents themselves in the specific context of the current educational and societal context in the Netherlands today. In addition, the possible
international comparison with the contribution of the school environment to the resilience of middle-adolescents in South Africa could contribute to the contextual a-specificity of the findings.

2.4 Successful development despite risk

I will study the resilience of middle-adolescents in the school environment as reflected in their successful development despite the presence of risk factors in their lives. I see successful development as a normative construct wherein the synthesis of values, attitudes and beliefs in a society is decisive for the specific content of the construct. With all the diversity of cultures and people in each society, neither values, nor attitudes nor beliefs can be acceptable to all. In addition to this normativity of the construct, the middle-adolescents’ understanding of the key concepts of my study may well differ from my own. Each middle-adolescent will have different experiences of risk factors in his/her life and different coping styles that might be successful coping for that individual middle-adolescent at that time, but might not be perceived as successful coping by school staff or other observers of the behaviour.

In the development of an instrument to identify resilient middle-adolescents I will use a theoretical frame on successful development. The normativity of the construct implies for me the importance of explicating the normative frame that grounds the theoretical model of my instrument. In respecting different cultural perspectives on positive or successful development, I will specify the aspect of successful development for particular contexts and thereby acknowledge the relativity of the identification of resilient and non-resilient middle-adolescents with this instrument (see Chapter 3). According to Masten (1994), the common theme that unites the different approaches in educational research is a pattern of effective performance in the environment, evaluated from the perspective of salient developmental tasks in the context of late twentieth-century US society. Similar to Masten’s statement, the School Mental Health Project of the University of California in Los Angeles (1999) proposes a synthesis of outcomes to frame their research on resilience and barriers to learning. I will adopt this synthesis as a frame (Fig. 2.1) to give direction to the development of an instrument for identifying resilient and non-resilient adolescents.
According to Armstrong (1998), resilient behaviour may be viewed as comprising three types of behaviour that reflect successful responding to differing environmental demands: (i) Basic success in spite of being a member of a group with high-risk status; (ii) Continued or sustained success under observed stressful conditions; (iii) Successful performance in spite of an observed intense conflict or trauma.

In this study, the focus will be on the first and the second form of resilience (basic success in spite of being a member of a group with high-risk status, and continued or sustained success under observed stressful conditions) among young adolescents at the age range of 14-15.
From definitions quoted in the article (Armstrong, 1998) as well as other readings (Rigsby, 1994; Wang and Gordon, 1994; Masten, 1994; Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker, 2000; Olsson et al., 2003 and Tusaie and Dyer, 2004), I have arrived at the following synthesis and operationalization of resilience in accordance with the societal relevance of this study:

“The avoidance of antisocial behaviors or internalizing problems of middle-adolescents in school and their constructive coping with adversities despite of being a member of a group with high-risk status and being confronted with observed stressful conditions”.

2.5 Identifying the resilient and non-resilient middle-adolescent

Various authors (Masten, 1990 and Rigsby, 1994) caution for the fact that the labelling of children as resilient can be equally as dangerous and misrepresentative as labelling others at risk in deficit models. Resilience is not a discrete quality that children either possess or do not possess. Children may be more or less resilient at different points in their lives depending on the interaction and accumulation of individual and environmental factors. In identifying the resilient and non-resilient middle-adolescent we should be very aware of not treating non-resilient girls and boys as failures who are beyond help or hope because they don't presently have that “inner spark”. Resilience is not static. The domains of resilience are developmentally appropriate and change with different life stages.

Individuals who do experience disruption from stress but then use personal strengths to grow stronger and function above the norm are considered resilient (Tusaie and Dryer, 2004). For example, children who function above the norm scholastically and in peer relationships in spite of risk, are thought to exhibit resilience. In middle-adolescence and young adulthood, resilience may be measured by accomplishments higher than the norm in respect of a more independent relationship with parents, increasing self-directedness in high school and physical well-being in spite of the presence of risk factors.

There is a range of intrapersonal factors that help a person to be resilient in difficult situations (Olsson et al., 2003) (Appendix 1), but this list is, though very extensive, not exhaustive. Environmental factors that influence resilience include perceived social support or a sense of connectedness and life events. Social support is a transaction between the person and the environment. Therefore it is not only the number or function of social relationships that encompasses the definition of social support, but also the perception of the support. Individuals with a negative outlook toward the support being offered may reject it, thereby receiving and perceiving less support. Therefore, an individual is not a passive recipient of social support – the process of social support is reciprocal and dynamic (Tusaie and Dyer, 2004). )

It is within the definition of resilience as proposed in 2.3 and in respect of the cautionary matters considered above that I will define the resilient middle-adolescent as:

“having a disposition to identify and utilize personal capacities and competencies (strengths) and assets in a specific context when faced with perceived adverse situations. The interaction between the individual and the context, elicits sustained constructive outcomes that include continuous learning (growing and renewing) and flexibly negotiating the situation”.
As participants in the study, I will identify those middle-adolescents who:

- have personality traits that are associated with resilience, such as hardiness and pro-social attitudes;

- show resilient behaviour as described in the above definition;

- show this resilient behaviour on the interpersonal, familial, school and peer level.

I will study the relation between the resilient / non-resilient behaviour of these middle-adolescents and their school context as perceived by the adolescents themselves.

### 2.6 Implications of the resilience-approach for education

Studies have demonstrated that students with typical attributes (e.g. initiative, independence, insight, relationship, humour, creativity and morality - Wolins, 1993) often benefit more from the assets in their surroundings and therefore are more resilient than students without these typical personal attributes, the less resilient students. Insight is needed in the protective factors or assets within a school that less resilient students would not notice nor utilize as such, but that would be identified and utilized by their more resilient peers. The accessibility of such factors or assets to the less resilient students could then be more explicitly developed.

The stories of the resilient students on the assets within their school that have helped them feel and act like competent persons are the main focus of this study. The purpose of the study is to uncover and describe the participants’ perspectives on events – that is, the subjective view is what matters.

### 2.7 The study

In the theoretical frame I have shown that the relation experienced between resilience and school context could differ greatly among adolescents and professionals sharing the same school context. The resilient students’ perception of the assets in their school that have helped them feel and act like competent persons is the main focus of this study.

The aim of this study is twofold. In trying to find out how schools and education generally can contribute to the development and actualization of resilience in middle-adolescents, I can distinguish two goals:

(i) Being able to create a school environment where assets for resilience are evidently and accessibly present

(ii) Making schools capable of actively enhancing middle-adolescents’ benefit from such assets.
3 Methods

3.1 Methods in social science

Marshall & Rossman (1999) describe social research as a process of trying to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human experience (and sometimes taking action based on that understanding). Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used for this purpose of understanding. As Bryman (2004) states, quantitative methodology is often seen as an approach to the conduct of social research, which applies nature science, and in particular, a positivist approach to social phenomena and research in this paradigm is underpinned by distinctive theory of what should pass as warrantable knowledge gathered through objectivity, replicability and causality.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) emphasize the fundamental difference between qualitative methodology and quantitative methodology. They describe qualitative methodology as a commitment to seeing the social world from the point of view of the actor. Therefore, close involvement and contextual understanding by the researcher is needed. According to Bryman (2004), advantages of the qualitative approach above the quantitative approach include the more fluid and flexible way of research which makes it possible to discover novel or unanticipated findings in the behaviour and context of meaning systems. Qualitative research is more fluid because it holds the possibility of altering the research plan in response to these unexpected, novel findings and thereby exploring the field without previous expectations of warrantable knowledge (Bryman, 2004). One of Bryman’s (2004) arguments for qualitative methodology is that its associated techniques are more sensitive to the complexities of social phenomena than quantitative methods. When it becomes necessary for the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest to unfold as the participant and not as the researcher views it, qualitative research is indicated (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

This study’s emphasis on the importance of the middle-adolescents’ own perceptions on the contribution of their school environment to their state of resilience thus indicates mainly a qualitative approach. I will examine the school’s contribution to middle-adolescents’ resilience by studying the middle-adolescents’ perspectives on the contribution of the school primarily by means of in-depth interviewing.

In order to qualitatively study the relationship between resilience in middle-adolescents and the school environment, I propose a quantitative approach for the preliminary step of identifying the resilient and non-resilient adolescents for participation in the study. In this way, I can follow Tusaie et al. (2004, p.6) who state that the clearest descriptions and measurements of resilience today consist of a quantitative scale correlated with outcome measures specific to the population and domain of resilience being studied, combined with a qualitative process to address the individualized dynamics of resilience. In this proposed manner, the qualitative approach serves an additional purpose to the purpose of insight into the relation between resilience in middle-adolescents and school environment. The additional purpose will be the validity check of the proposed quantitative instrument, in that way making a contribution to the development of a diagnostic instrument for use in schools in the Netherlands.
3.2 Quantitative study

3.2.1 Orientation

The question that will be addressed in the preliminary quantitative study is:

*How can resilience be measured reliably in order to identify resilient and non-resilient students?*

In examining this question, I especially refer to Tusaie et al (2004) who found that the measurement of resilience has lacked empirical instruments because of the diversity of definitions as well as the trend to use qualitative studies for this complex phenomenon. The early work measured the absence of expected symptoms in various populations in order to assess resilience.

Another view is suggested by Olsson et al. (2003), who state that a more developed theoretical frame of resilience should contain protective factors within the individual, within the family, within peer groups and within the school environment and neighbourhood. According to this view, by mapping the protective processes on every level, the resilience of an individual can be assessed. In the development of resilience research, the focus has indeed shifted from measuring the absence of expected symptoms to identifying specific personal attributes of resilience. Therefore, self-report instruments to quantify resilient factors within the individual have been developed (e.g. the Resiliency Subscales Inventory <RESI>; Adult resiliency scale <Jew, 1991> Resilient Beliefs <Jew & Green, 1995>, Adolescent Resiliency Belief System <Mzarek & Mzarek, 1997>) but none of these scales have been widely used and they also lack generalizability due to their development in specific populations (Tusaie et al, 2004). Appendix 2 (Paper version) shows a translation of the Resilience and Youth Development Module (RYDM) which combines the personal attribute approach to resilience with the approach of measuring the presence of protective factors.

But the presence of protective factors does not in itself prove that a person will use these factors or benefit from using them and act resiliently in the face of adversity. Not the absence of expected symptoms, nor the presence of protective factors, nor the existence of personal attributes in itself indicate the essence of resilience. In respect of the perception that the school environment contributes to resilience, Tussaie (2004) mentions that social support is a transaction between the person and the environment. He states that it is not only the number or function of individuals’ social relationships but also their perception of the support that must be recognized in the definition of social support. Individuals with a negative outlook about the support being offered may disregard or reject it, thereby then receiving as well as perceiving less support. Therefore I conclude that, in an instrument to identify resilient behavior, the respondent’s perception of support in different contexts must be included.

3.2.2 Questionnaires and Surveys

In quantitative research, questionnaires to some sample of a population can be used to learn about the distribution of characteristics, e.g. personality traits or behavioural characteristics. In
deciding to survey the group of people chosen for study, the researcher makes one critical assumption – that the characteristics can be described and measured accurately through self-report. In using questionnaires, the researcher relies totally on the truth and accuracy of participants’ responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1998).

As shown in my definition of the resilient middle-adolescent, I assume that resilience can be identified in the behaviour of middle-adolescents. Personal characteristics and the person’s disposition can lead to resilient behaviour.

Following my definition of the resilient middle-adolescent, I will identify a resilient ‘disposition’ in terms of personal characteristics associated with resilience according to my literature study (Appendix 1). In addition to that, I will measure resilient behavior in terms of the ability to identify and use personal capacities, competencies and assets in a specific context to elicit constructive outcomes. In measuring the personal characteristics, I will use a standardized personality questionnaire which contains scales that correlate with resilient personality factors as described in resilience literature: the Nederlandse Persoonlijkheids Vragenlijst-Jongeren (NPV-J). In 3.2.4 I will further elaborate on the specific scales in this questionnaire. For the measurement of the resilient behaviour, I will construct items for my self-perception questionnaire that describe stressful conditions and possible ways of reacting to these conditions: the Veerkracht Vragenlijst (VVL) – Appendix 3 (Paper version). In 3.2.5 I will describe the theoretical background on which I will base the scales and items in the VVL.

The use of an established questionnaire along with a self-developed questionnaire will enable articulation with research done by the national research community, so some additional issues may be addressed from the results, and understanding may also be enriched. Data gathered through the NPV-J and VVL will be combined and analyzed and the results will be used to study the internal structure of the VVL questionnaire. This analysis of the internal structure of the questionnaire will possibly lead to the removal of certain items from certain scales, which will enhance the validity of the VVL and thus the identification of the resilient and non-resilient adolescents.

In reaction to Marshall & Rossman’s (1998) position about dependence on the honesty and accuracy of participants’ responses in self-perception measures, I will add a third questionnaire, the Veerkracht Vragenlijst-Professionals (VVL-Prof, Appendix 4) with a selection from the items of the VVL, focusing only on the students’ behaviour in the school. The items will be grammatically adjusted to the third person. The questionnaire is intended for the mentors and/or other professionals close to the adolescent to fill out on the grounds of their observations of the middle-adolescent student. Professionals will be approached to fill out the VVL-Prof in respect of those students who are selected as possibly resilient on the basis of a high score on resilient personal characteristics in the NPV-J and a high score on resilient behaviour as described in the VVL, and those who are selected as possibly non-resilient on the basis of a low score on resilient personal characteristics in the NPV-J and a low score on resilient behaviour as

3 “having a disposition to identify and utilize personal capacities and competencies (strengths) and assets in a specific context when faced with perceived adverse situations. The interaction between the individual
described in the VVL. The main purpose of the VVL-Prof is triangulation of the data. The VVL-Prof will not be decisive or indicative for identifying the resilient and non-resilient middle-adolescents.

### 3.2.3 Construction of the VVL

For the construction of the VVL I use my literature study on what is known about the construct ‘resilience’. I have decided to construct items on every level in Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model, described in 2.2 of this proposal. Each item represents a stressful condition on a specific level in combination with optional resilient ↔ non-resilient reactions to this condition along a Likert scale of 5 positions. Students can rate themselves on the scale as to what extent the proposed behavior is in accordance with their own behavior when faced with the described stressful circumstance.

In the options of resilient and non-resilient reaction to the stressful condition, I use theory and practical experience of practitioners on coping strategies of young adolescents. Seiffge-Krenke (2000) describes three ways of coping which are based on a factor analysis on the “Coping Across Situations Questionnaire” (CASQ, Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). She tested the scales on coping behavior of 15-year-old adolescents, also the age of the participants in my research group. The scales are: (i) Active Coping (for example: I discuss the problem with my parents), (ii) Internal coping (for example: I think about the problem and try to find different solutions), and (iii) Withdrawal (for example, ‘I withdraw, because I cannot change anything anyway’). I will add ‘aggressive coping’ as an additional ‘dysfunctional’ coping structure because of the focus in my study on the avoidance of internal (e.g. withdrawal) and external (e.g. aggression) problem behavior among the middle-adolescents in my research group as described in 2.5. In describing resilient behavior, I will base my conclusions about the participants’ positive or negative coping on two of the four possible outcomes of reintegration after a disruption by risk factors as proposed in the conceptual model in 2.5 namely reintegration with resilience and reintegration with loss.

I do not formulate extreme examples of stressful conditions because the described stress has to be recognizable to all the respondents of the questionnaire and the respondent group might be very heterogeneous, with different backgrounds and different experiences in their youth or present families. In the next three sub paragraphs the three questionnaires (NPV-J; VVL; and VVL-Prof) will successively be described. The VVL and the VVL-Prof will be illustrated with two items per scale.

### 3.2.4 NPV-J

The scales in the NPV-J are correlated positively or negatively with interpersonal characteristics related to resilience (Appendix 1) i.e. inadequacy, perseverance, social inadequacy, recalcitrance and dominance.

and the context, elicits sustained constructive outcomes that include continuous learning (growing and renewing) and flexibly negotiating the situation"
3.2.5 VVL

The VVL as conceptualized is contained in Appendix 3 (Paper version). The scales in the VVL are related to reintegration with resilience or loss; to ways of coping; to the context in which the risk factor appears and the context in which the asset is identified and utilized or not identified and utilized. I will describe the scales by means of the specific item numbers on each scale and I will propose two examples of the items per scale, translated in English.

Ways of reintegration

The scale of ‘Reintegration with resilience’ contains the items 1; 3; 5; 6; 7; 8; 10; 12; 14; 16; 19; 20; 22; 23; 25; 26; 29; 30; 32; 33. Two examples of the items are:

5. If somebody speaks to me and I don’t understand what the person is saying, then I will ask what the person means.

16. If a teacher is angry with me, then I will try to concentrate more on my schoolwork.

The scale of ‘Reintegration with loss’ contains the: items 2; 4; 9; 11; 13; 15; 17; 18; 21; 24; 27; 28; 31. Two examples of the items are:

4. If I don’t succeed in a schooltask immediately, then I will quit.

13. If I have to make a difficult decision, then I tend to wait so long that the opportunity to make the decision is gone.

Ways of coping

The scale of ‘Active coping’ contains items: 1; 3; 5; 6; 7; 8; 10; 12; 14; 16; 19; 22; 23; 26; 29; 30; 32; 33. Two examples of the items are:

19. If I feel bad, then I go and do something I like (e.g. hobby or sports).

22. If I don’t succeed in a school task immediately, then I will try a different manner to work on the task.

The scale of ‘Internal coping’ contains the items 20; 25, which are:

20. If I have to make a difficult decision, I will analyze all my options and then choose the best one.

25. In my past, I have dealt with difficult things in a good way.

The scale of ‘Withdrawal’ contains the items 2; 4; 11; 13; 15; 17; 21; 24; 27. Two examples of the items are:

17. If there are problems at home, then I stop going to school.

24. If I feel bad about problems at school, then I won’t go to school the next day.
The scale of ‘Agressive coping’ contains the items 9; 18; 28; 31. Two examples of the items are:

28. If a teacher is very angry with me I will become angry myself and the situation becomes worse.

31. If I feel bad about problems at school, then I’m very unfriendly to the teachers.

**Context of risk factors**

The scale ‘Interpersonal risk factor’ contains the items 1; 11; 13; 19; 20. Two examples of the items are:

11. If I feel sad, then the sad feeling stays with me the whole day.

19. If I feel bad, then I go and do something I like (e.g. hobby or sports).

The scale of ‘Risk factor at home’ contains the items 2; 6; 8; 14; 17; 18; 23; 26. Two examples of the items are:

2. If I’ve had a fight at home, then I don’t do anything the entire day.

23. When there are problems at home, I help to make the best of it.

The scale of ‘Risk factor at School’ contains the items 4; 7; 10; 15; 16; 22; 24; 28; 30; 31. Two examples of the items are:

7. If I have at a bad day at school, then I will do something I like after school.

30. If I’ve had many low grades for a particular subject, then I will find someone who can help me with my homework for that subject.

The scale of ‘Risk factor in leisure time’ contains the items 3; 5; 9; 12; 21; 27; 29; 32. Two examples of the items are:

21. If my friends want to do something that I would rather not do, I will go along with their plan.

29. If I have had a fight with my friend, I will try various ways to make up again.

**Context of assets**

The scales that describe the context of the assets contain far less items than the other scales. One reason for the small number of items is that the VVL consists for approximately 50 % of items that indicate reintegration with loss in which no assets are identified and utilized. In addition, the questionnaire serves the purpose of identifying resilient behavior where the action of the individual is the focus. The interviews serve the purpose of identifying the assets identified and/or utilized or not identified and/or utilized by the resilient and non-resilient middle-adolescent. Therefore some items have been formulated as constructive behavior without a specific asset.
The scale 'Internal asset' contains the items 3; 5; 7; 8; 16; 19; 20; 22; 23; 25; 26; 29; 32; 33. Two examples of the items are:

8. If I want something very badly and my parents don’t want to pay for it, then I’ll go work extra hard until I have saved enough money to buy it myself.

32. If my friends want to do something of which I know it will cause a lot of trouble, then I won’t join them.

The scale ‘Asset at home’ contains one item, item 1, which is:

1. If I have to make a difficult decision I will talk with someone at home who can give me advice.

The scale ‘Asset at school contains one item, item 10, which is:

10. If I feel bad about problems at school, then I always find someone in the school who is prepared to help me.

The scale ‘Asset in leisure time’ contains two items, items 12 and 14, which are:

12. If some friends in my group of friends want to do something that I’d rather not do, I’ll search for someone in the group who agrees with me and doesn’t want to join as well.

14. If I had a fight at home, I’ll talk about it with a friend.

3.2.6 VVL-Prof

The VVL-Prof (Appendix 4) will contain a selection from the items of the VVL, focusing only on the students’ observable behaviour in the school. The items will be grammatically adjusted to the third person. Two examples of the items are:

2. If this student doesn’t succeed in a school task immediately, then this student will quit.

4. If this student feels bad about problems at school, then this student will always find someone in school to talk to.

3.2.7 Participants and site

In my site selection I will choose five schools of which four schools are ‘Education Opportunity schools (Onderwijs Kansen-scholen)’ which are attended by a large number of children with a high risk status. Three of those Education Opportunity schools are ‘black’ schools, in which the majority of the students have immigrant parents. One of the four Education Opportunity schools is a school for agricultural education. Agricultural education tends to attract ‘Dutch’ students and this particular agricultural school is attended by a large number of ‘Dutch’ children with a high risk status. One of the five schools is not an Education Opportunity school. It is a school for
theoretical education and is attended by both ‘Dutch’ and ‘immigrant’ students without a high risk status. My sample is a convenience sample in the sense that it is an established network containing a combination of schools that will permit some relevant comparison of findings. The schools operate in a network in the same area outside the city centre of Utrecht.

I will use the five schools for the preliminary research task of developing measures to reliably identify resilient and non-resilient middle-adolescent participants for the qualitative main study. The sample will comprise approximately 500 students. For the qualitative study I will select three schools: one ‘black’ Education Opportunity School, the ‘white’ Education Opportunity School and the school for theoretical education. I will select 4 resilient and 4 non-resilient students per school. This selection of 8 students per school will create a sample of 24 students. After the qualitative data collection I will decide on the basis of the content of the data to analyze the data of 6 or 8 students per school.

3.3 Qualitative study

3.3.1 Introduction

Qualitative researchers constantly still need to argue that their research will meet the more traditional criteria of validity and reliability. Criteria of goodness for qualitative research differ greatly, however, from the criteria developed for experimental and positivist research. Qualitative research does not claim to be replicable (Marshall & Rossman, 1998). In this Paragraph I will describe the ways in which I will meet the criteria of goodness for qualitative research by describing my research design.

3.3.2 Data Collection Methods

For answering my research question on the contribution of the school to the resilience of middle-adolescents, I have formulated three sub questions: (i) What is the resilient middle-adolescent’s perception of the contribution of the school to his resilience?, (ii) What is the non-resilient middle-adolescent’s perception of the part played by the school in his experience of his difficulties? (iii) How do these two perceptions compare with each other? As my main method of data collection, I will use audiotaped in-depth interviewing to answer these questions, my other methods being fieldnotes and a reflective journal. I will conduct the interviews in a semi-structured manner with the use of a schedule, i.e. a topic list. I have decided on a topic list for two reasons: (i) the respondent group is small, with a maximum of four resilient and four non-resilient students per school. In order to answer my research question, I don’t want to risk the possibility that the respondent might refrain from mentioning the school environment even once; (ii) the respondent group consists of middle-adolescents in the age-range of 14-15 years old. Middle-adolescence is a developmental stage in which children start to form their identities and can become recalcitrant or, by contrast, very shy and silent. That is why I will need some topics or questions to give direction to the interviews only when the respondent doesn’t speak at all or doesn’t speak enough.

I will explore various topics in the interviews, e.g. coping with hardship, contexts of support and the role of the school in the respondent’s life, but otherwise I will respect how the participant
frames and structures his responses. I will have the same opening question and the same topic list in each interview.

In respect of trustworthiness, I am aware of the fact that as a qualitative researcher I myself am my main instrument and that I need to be very conscious of how I influence the process of the interview by keeping a transparent, reflective journal on the circumstances of the interviews without controlling them, of my own condition, of my prejudices and assumptions, and of my feelings, thoughts and habits during the interview.

For lots of reasons, e.g. the richness and completeness of the data, the building of a trusting relationship, and intruding as little as possible on the daily school routine, it is necessary to have no restrictions on the amount of time for the interviews. Therefore, I will try to schedule the interviews in the leisure time of the respondents by emphasizing to them the importance and worth of their story. One positive aspect of scheduling the interviews in the leisure time of the respondents is that the respondents might identify me less as related to the school and more as a neutral person, which might positively influence the authenticity of the responses and thereby the trustworthiness of the data.

Conducting the interviews in the leisure time of the respondents has implications for the place of the interviews. I will reserve a room at the Hogeschool Utrecht (a teachers training college) for conducting the interviews. This implies that the respondents will have to come to the Hogeschool Utrecht. This choice of site for conducting the interviews holds various advantages above choosing the school as the interview site: (i) Being out of the school context and the context of their peers might make the respondents more authentic in their responses; (ii) Being out of the context of the school while talking about the school creates a more distal view, which might strengthen the reflective capacity of the respondents; (iii) By inviting the respondents to come to an external institution could emphasize the seriousness and the worth of their participation in the interviews; (iv) At the site of the Hogeschool Utrecht I can direct the circumstances of the interview, e.g. serving coffee and cake before the interview, which would provide an opportunity for social talk and relating without the pressure of a tight school schedule.

One of the limitations in choosing this interview site is the fact that I, as a researcher, will control the circumstances of the interview in a way that there is no chance of relating to the respondents in their daily routine and natural habits.

3.3.3 Paradigm

The paradigm in which I’m going to collect and analyze my data is interpretivism. In my theoretical frame I have emphasized that the perception of the respondents in my research is the object of study, which implies my vision on reality as subjective and constructed. In addition, I am trying to understand this reality rather than knowing the reality as in a positivist paradigm or wanting to change the reality as in a critical theory paradigm.

This choice of the interpretivist paradigm holds implications for gathering and analyzing the data. With regard to gathering the data I will aim to have any term and statement of the child’s deconstructed, e.g. by asking “Can you tell me more about this?”, by summarizing what the
respondents say in their own words, by repeating the terms the adolescents use and then asking them to elaborate on the meaning of the term. In respect of data analysis, the implications of the interpretivist paradigm include that I will start the analysis of the data without a theoretical frame and that I will strive to preserve the respondents' voice by using their words as much as possible and following their line of thinking and the context of their remarks in my interpretations of the data.

3.3.4 Managing and Analyzing the Data

I will record the interviews on tape after asking permission for this from the respondents. I will place the recorder out of sight to avoid intrusion in the natural flow of the interview. I will make sure the microphone of the recorder is strong enough to be able to record the interview from a longer distance.

Following Marshall & Rossman (1998), I am building strategies into the proposal for limiting bias in my interpretation of the collected data. Firstly, I will ask different research partners to ask very critical questions and play ‘devils advocate’ about my decisions and interpretations. Dr. A. van Peet of the University of Amsterdam has already played a very valuable role in this regard. Secondly, although my research question is what the school contributes to the resilience of middle-adolescents, I will be open to what the schools may fail to contribute or where they might not actively contribute. I will do this by collecting data from non-resilient middle-adolescents in addition to data from the resilient middle-adolescents and by choosing for unstructured interviews as a data collection method. Instead of asking the students what the school contributes to their resilience, I will ask them how they cope with hardship and problematic circumstances or incidents in their lives. The unstructured interviews will allow the respondents to say anything that comes to mind about the school, good or bad. A third way of limiting my bias is by keeping a journal of reflective notes so I will be sensitive to any form of bias. Also, during the phase of data collection I will write down two sets of notes, one with more objective observation and another with more tentative observations. A fourth way of limiting the bias of my interpretation is that I will strive for the triangulation of the findings of my study from the interview data, the fieldnotes and my reflective journal as well as by means of an analytical return to the literature after having arrived at apparent findings. In that way I can interpret findings against the foil of other findings and I can examine possible alternative explanations. The fifth way of limiting bias in my interpretation is that my promoter, co-promoter and a quantitative research specialist (Dr. A. Van Peet) will audit my collected data and the results of my analytic strategies.

Analytic Procedures

In analyzing the interview data, I will choose between two qualitative analyzing computer programs, Kwalitan and Atlas-ti, on the basis of the experience of research colleagues and in alignment with the following analytic design:

I will completely analyze one interview at a time, especially because I will not use a theoretical frame for the analysis, which strengthens the need to understand the individual's response completely in order to draw any comparison between responses. At first, I will do a textual analysis of the interview, in which I will code the topics the respondent mentions and the terms
he/she uses. Secondly, I will take into account the context in which the terms and topics are mentioned. With ‘context’ I refer to both the textual and the emotional context of the terms and topics being mentioned by focusing on the tone in which the respondent speaks about the topic (warmth, rejection etc.) and the proximal chain of references preceding and following the remark.

I will have 3 case studies. The respondents of every school will constitute a case study. I will have full respect for the respondent’s individual story, but in addition I will use their personal stories to synthesize an understanding of how the particular school contributes to the resilience of its students. I will not compare the data of the respondents in an early stage of the analysis. It might be the last phase of my data analysis.

3.4 Limitations of the study

As Patton (1990, in Marshall & Rossman, 1999) states, there is no perfect research design. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), a discussion of the study’s limitations demonstrates that the researcher understands this reality. This understanding implies that I will make no overweening claims about generalizability or conclusiveness relative to what I have learned. By framing the study in specific research and theoretical traditions, the study gains validity and reliability or trustworthiness. Simultaneously, the theoretical frame and traditions adhered to place limits on the research. By choosing a definition of resilience within a specific context, my conclusions will be applicable solely within that definition and context. My overall design will indicate just how broadly applicable this study may be.

In this study both quantitative and qualitative methods will be used. The quantitative study is essential preliminary research, proposed to reliably identify resilient adolescents. The qualitative method will be used to gain insight in the relationship between school context and resilience, the main research question. The small sized sample of my qualitative study and the recognition of the uniqueness of personal truth will prevent the findings from being generalizable in the statistical sense but the findings might suggest the relevance of researching the same question in the same research design in other contexts.

Furthermore, at the beginning of my study I can identify and anticipate the following limitations of the preliminary study: (i) The lack of an established identification instrument for resilient individuals; (ii) The proposed quantitative instrument contains very personal questions. Due to practical circumstances this instrument will be used in the classroom with all 20-30 students present. These circumstances are far from ideal for the reliability and validity of the instrument. One of the limitations of the qualitative study is indicated by Marshall & Rossman (1999) who state that the research method of interviewing has limitations and weaknesses. Interviews involve personal interaction; cooperation is essential. The middle-adolescent respondents may be unwilling or may be uncomfortable sharing their stories with me, or they may be unaware of recurring patterns in their lives. Because of a lack of expertise I might not ask questions that evoke long narratives from participants. To address this limitation I’ve taken an intensive course on qualitative interviewing. The main limitation of the complete study is that The Netherlands is a small country with a well developed educational science tradition. Many high schools have
opened their doors for research projects in the past and have become ‘research-saturated’. They long for order, peace and structure in their schools and fear the possible disruption by a research project in their schools. This limitation emphasizes the importance of cooperation with the school by initiating personal contact with a crucial staff member in the school and the importance of making the staff active participants in the study and being open to their ideas and views and wishes about the way to study their school site.

In the development of my research design I have considered the limitations raised above and have attempted to find ways in which to deal with them.

3.4.1 Ethics

Ethics are important in every line of work. It is of primary importance that in research of any kind the ethics should be addressed in the general term of respect for the object or subject that is being studied. In social research, ethics also start with respect for the social context and for the processes and people in that social context. This respect could be described in the first place by my awareness of my own possible prejudice about the context, process and/or people and by being very critical of the prejudices. Secondly, being admitted to a particular context implies a given trust by the people in the context that should never be mistreated. The schools will open their doors for me as a researcher and offer me insight in their daily events and routine which might have positive as well as negative aspects. My trusting relationship with the school staff will be very important and none of what I see in the school will be reported in relation to the school to anyone else besides my promoter, co-promoter and other researchers involved in the study. In relation to the respondents, any gathered data should be treated with the utmost care and security that only I, as a researcher or the research group that is aware of confidentiality will see the data in relation to the respondent.

Ethics are especially important in my study because I will work with under-age students who did not ask to be studied. Their school staff have decided to engage in this research project because they feel it is important to understand more about their students and about how they could contribute more to the resilience of their students. Informed consent from their parents and protecting participants’ anonymity will be very important in this respect and I will make sure that the students understand my neutral position as a researcher and that they are not obliged to participate and can direct the study by communicating to me their hesitations and sensitivities about the study and the questions I might ask.
List of references


UCLA (1999). School Mental Health Project. *Addressing Barriers to learning, 4 (4).*

Appendices

Appendix 1 xxx
Protective Factors on individual level (Olsson et al., 2003; Center for Mental Health in Schools (2002).

Constitutional resilience:
Positive temperament
Robust Neurobiology
Psycho physiological health
Easy Temperament
Outgoing Personality
Gender

Sociability:
Responsiveness to others
Pro-social attitudes
Attachment to others
Outgoing personality/positive behaviour

Intelligence:
Academic achievement
Planning and decision making
Higher cognitive functioning
Success at school

Communication Skills
Developed language
Advanced reading

Personal Attributes
- Tolerance for negative affect
Self efficacy
Self esteem
Foundational sense of self
Internal locus of control
Sense of humour
Hopefulness
Strategies to deal with stress
Enduring set of values
Balanced perspective on experience
Malleable and flexible
Fortitude, conviction, tenacity and resolve
Strong abilities for involvement and problem solving
Sense of purpose and future

Promoting full development
Pursues opportunities for personal development and empowerment
Intrinsically motivated to pursue full development, well being and a value-based life