

## Quality of life of Aruban Schoolchildren: Pathways to well-being and problem behavior within the context of school

A. Slotboom, P. Kibbelaar and J. Hendriks

**Summary** In this study we combine a qualitative exploration of several interconnecting themes, perceived by primary schools in Aruba that influence the development of children, with a quantitative exploration of these themes as perceived by the children themselves. By using different methods and different perspectives we will gain a more nuanced and richer picture of the needs of the children in the context of school. Based on the qualitative results, it appears that schools mainly refer to parenting and neighborhood problems, influencing well-being and problem behavior of the child. While trying to perform their pedagogical task sufficiently, they also struggle with financial limitations and language problems of the children and limited parental participation in school. The quantitative results show that individual and relational factors are the strongest predictors of well-being. Problem behavior is predicted by individual, peer, school, and neighborhood factors. While children indicate that neighborhood factors are somewhat less important for their own well-being, problem behavior is influenced by multiple social contexts. In addition to the meaning that schools give to the different social contexts around the child, children show that it is good to take these contexts into account in different ways. Reinforcing individual and relational factors appears to be important for increasing well-being, while involving behavior of friends and neighborhood experiences also appears to be important for reducing problem behavior.

**Keywords** quality of life, well-being, problem behavior, primary school children, Aruba

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## 1 Introduction

Young people in Aruba and other islands in the Caribbean run a relatively high risk of being confronted with negative experiences such as school dropout, abuse, neglect, poverty, and crime (Joosen & Baily, 2017; Lacey et al., 2019). This study examines the factors that contribute to these life experiences and examines factors that contribute to a healthy development of Aruban children in the final classes of primary education.

Schools play an important role in creating a safe and positive climate for children (Larson et al., 2020; Lester & Cross, 2015) and this is also the case for Aruban youth. It is the school or the classroom that creates a safe and positive climate for a lot of the children, which is seen in some of the participating schools of this study, which are *barrio* or neighborhood schools where grandmothers, aunts or other family members also attended<sup>1</sup>. That is why, among many other reasons, the Aruban government has put quality of education within their coalition agreement<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the Aruban Government has put for the first time the social crisis within the community on the center of their political agenda, which resulted in the Social Crisis Plan (SCP), which aims among others to promote partnerships between departments and a focus on the prevention of child abuse and domestic violence<sup>3</sup>.

The objective of this study is to get a better understanding of the factors that are important for the development of children in the context of school. It is therefore important to understand how schools perceive the broader social context of their pupil's life. However, to understand and possibly intervene in the lives of children, it is not only important to include the perspective of the school, but also to include the voices of children themselves reporting about their life experiences, how they see themselves, their school, their parents, friends, and neighborhood. By using different perspectives, we will gain a more nuanced and richer picture of the needs of the children in the context of school.

### *The Aruban context*

Although Aruba has its own unique socio-cultural context, such as post-colonial heritage, the Status Aparte of the island and the influence of tourism and migration of English-speaking Caribbean and Spanish-speaking immigrants from Venezuela and Colombia, young people or in this case young adolescents, face similar problems and challenges as in other countries (Joosen & Baily, 2017; Lacey et al., 2019). To illustrate the main risks for children in Aruba, some statistics are given below.

The family structure has been undergoing notable changes in the last few decades. The average size of both the nuclear and extended family is becoming smaller, but Aruba has also one of the highest divorce rates in the world (CBS and Population Registry Office, 2018). About a quarter of female-headed families live below the poverty line (CBS, 2013). With respect to inequity of the

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educational system, it is noticeable that the repetition rate in primary schools in Aruba is high, especially in the first three years (in 2013-2014 on average 12.3% of boys and 7.3% of girls) (CBS Aruba– 2014 Statistical Yearbook)<sup>4</sup>. No discernable evidence was found that this could be linked to the migrant students, particularly from non-Dutch speaking nations. Health problems are concentrated around food, physical condition, sexual behavior, and child maltreatment. Many children are overweight: 27% of boys and 28% of girls in fifth grade were overweight, 16% of boys and 15% of girls were obese (CBS, 2013). Teenage pregnancy occurred in 42 per 1,000 young girls (CBS, 2013). According to the organization Wit Gele Kruis, 10% of mothers were under the age of 18 (Boer et al., 2015). Child maltreatment was measured in a sample of 68 schoolchildren aged 12-17 years. All children experienced at least one form of child maltreatment. The most prevalent types of child maltreatment were emotional abuse (94.2%), severe physical abuse (66.7%), sexual abuse (18.8%), and neglect (42%) (Eugene & Graafsma, 2020).

Aruban crime statistics show that unlike globally decreasing crime trends, official crime increased between 2008 and 2012 (Statistical yearbook of Aruba 2012). Although statistics on juvenile crime are not reported, public authorities have indications that juvenile crime is increasing. Between 2005 and 2007, the International Self Report Delinquency Study (ISRD) was conducted in 30 different countries, including Aruba. Compared with Curacao, St. Maarten and Bonaire, the Aruban youth scored highest in group fights in the past year, as well as pickpocketing and shoplifting (Van Solinge et al., 2010). One in twenty juveniles (twice as more boys than girls) reported being a member of a deviant youth group, which is the highest percentage compared to Latin American countries such as the Netherlands Antilles, Venezuela, and Suriname (Gatti et al., 2011). Aruban youth do not differ significantly from Dutch youth in terms of delinquency but report much more (psycho) social problems and problem behavior than their Dutch peers (Van der Wal, 2011).

#### *Positive Youth Development, problem behavior and well-being*

Although this study focuses on various risk factors that increase the chance of a problematic or risky development, attention is also paid to factors that (despite a risky background) contribute to healthy development. Over the last decades, several large-scale longitudinal studies on the development of children have been conducted on a wide area of important developmental domains in Western countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands (Eichelsheim et al., 2010; Farrington, 1995; Hawkins et al., 2001; Keijsers et al., 2012; Loeber et al., 1998; Resnick et al., 1997; Weerman et al., 2007; Thornberry & Krohn, 2006). One of the overarching conclusions is that there is not one factor responsible for negative outcomes such as delinquency, drug abuse, and gang participation. Individual factors such as intelligence, social

cognitions, temperament, and biological factors are intertwined with family factors (parent-child relationships, child maltreatment) and school factors (school connectedness, motivation, school performance), peer factors (delinquent peers, unstructured socializing, group processes, and gang membership) and neighborhood and community factors (social disorganization, low social cohesion) (Lösel & Farrington, 2012; Thornberry & Krohn, 2006).

While there are various risks factors for unhealthy development, less attention has been paid to children who do not end up delinquent, unemployed, addicted and/or having health problems despite a high-risk background. Recently, awareness is growing that protective factors can prevent young people from adverse outcomes. These protective factors can also help building resiliency among these youngsters (e.g., Keijzer et al., 2021). Resiliency suggests a shift in perspective from researchers to focus on elements of positive development that also occur despite a high-risk status (Jain et al., 2012). Resilience also refers to phenomena such as maintaining competence under specific stressors (e.g., coping with parental divorce) or recovering from severe trauma (e.g., child abuse and neglect) (Lösel & Farrington, 2012). It is thus important to focus not only on risk domains but also on protective factors. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) model, developed by Catalano and colleagues (2004), focuses on psychological and social strengths of developing young persons experienced and shaped in different contexts such as the family, school, peers, and neighborhoods. This approach strongly emphasizes the strengthening of protective factors in young people, thereby also emphasizing that strengthening relations with family, peers, teachers, etc. leads to enhancement over the course of young people's lives (Lerner, 2017). Enhancement may refer to life satisfaction, well-being but also to the reduction of anti-social and delinquent behavior. Although well-being and antisocial behavior are different concepts, enhancement of psychological and social strengths works in two directions, it reduces anti-social behavior (Catalano et al., 2004) and increases well-being (Lerner, 2017). It also appears that both concepts are predicted from the same broad domains. A study examining the subjective well-being of 9-14-year-old children in 14 different countries showed that a safe and stimulating home environment, satisfaction with friends, a good school climate (feeling safe, teacher quality) and neighborhood safety, resources (e.g., outdoor play and recreational areas) and social connectedness in the neighborhood were all predictors of well-being (Newland et al., 2019). Policy developments to reduce problem behavior and increase well-being should therefore focus on parental, peer, school, and neighborhood contexts of the developing child.

### *The school context*

To promote healthy development and to address risks and vulnerabilities, schools can offer important and accessible information for policy and interven-

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tions. There are three ways in which schools are relevant: as an individual risk or protective factor, as a collective context that can lead to positive or negative outcomes for their students, and as a location where interventions take place. School is an important factor in mitigating the effects of risk factors related to problematic development, meaning that schools can offer important protective factors for children and young people in adverse conditions (Kim et al., 2015; Sklad et al., 2012; Wissink et al., 2014).

### *Aim of the study*

In this study we combine a qualitative exploration of several interconnecting themes, perceived by primary schools in Aruba that influence the development of children, with a quantitative exploration of these themes as perceived by the children themselves. By using different methods and different perspectives we will gain a more nuanced and richer picture of the needs of the children in the context of school.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the perspective of school staff on factors related to well-being and problem behavior of primary school children in Aruba?
2. Which factors are related to well-being and problem behavior of schoolchildren in grades 5 and 6 in Aruba?

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## 2 Method

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### 2.1 Participants

Eleven schools from five different districts participated in this study, representing the various school organizations (Catholic, Protestant and Public) spread across different neighborhoods on the island (ten primary schools participated with grades 5 and 6 as well as one special education school (first year of secondary school))<sup>5</sup>. Interviews were conducted with the teachers (grades 5 and 6), the management of the schools, schoolboards, and other stakeholders. To get a better insight in the behavior and social environment of the youngsters, interviews were held with 3 to 4 persons at each school. In all schools the (adjunct) director and the social worker were interviewed, and where possible, also a teacher and/or teaching assistant. We also interviewed directors, staff members and policy makers and social workers of different school boards. Most of the respondents were experienced educational specialists in their field. In total 44 individuals were interviewed (see Table 1 for information about the respondents).

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**Table 1**

Background characteristics respondents

School type	District	Position respondent
SKOA*	Santa Cruz	Principal & Team
DPS**	Santa Cruz	Principal & Team
SKOA	Oranjestad	Principal & Team
DPS	Oranjestad	Principal & Team
SPCOA***	Oranjestad	Principal & Team
SKOA	Dakota	Principal & Team
DPS	Noord	Principal & Team
DPS	Noord	Principal & Team
SKOA	San Nicolaas	Principal & Team
SKOA	San Nicolaas	Principal & Team
DPS	San Nicolaas	Principal & Team

\* SKOA = Stichting Katholiek Onderwijs Aruba, \*\* DPS = Dienst Publieke Scholen

\*\*\* SPCOA = Stichting Protestants Christelijke Onderwijs Aruba

Next to the interviews with school staff, the children were asked to fill out a short questionnaire. More than 90% of all children in the participating classes filled out the questionnaire. Children were surveyed in the classroom by trained students from the Instituto Pedagógico Arubano (IPA). The sample was made up of a total 848 children (Mean age:  $M = 11.66$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) from 11 schools (428 boys (51.5%) and 403 girls (48.5%)). Data collection for the study took place in May 2019. Almost two third of the children live with both their biological parents and more than 90% of the children live with their mother in the same house while only two third live with their father in the same house. Although we did not ask specifically about single parenthood, these percentages suggest that mothers more often are the main caretaker than fathers. Almost a quarter of the children have a grandmother living in the house and almost 13% has a grandfather living in their house. Most children were born in Aruba (82.7%). The other main countries of birth were the Netherlands, 5.5%, Venezuela, 2.6% and Colombia, 2.8%.

## 2.2 Measures

### *Interviews*

During orientation in the field in 2018 the lead researchers discussed with the participating schools and asked them about the specific issues and challenges they faced. Based on these interviews, Bronfenbrenner's model (1979)<sup>6</sup> and the

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**Table 2**

Description of Variables in Analyses

Variable	example item	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
<b>Dependent Variables</b>			
Well-being	<i>I am happy with myself</i>	5 items	.42
Well-being school	<i>I like being at school</i>	2 items	.44
Problem behavior	<i>I can get angry suddenly</i>	5 items	.47
<b>Independent variables</b>			
Lack of self-control	<i>I often do things without thinking first</i>	3 items	.36
Healthy lifestyle	<i>I do healthy things such as eating healthy and doing sports</i>	2 items	.40
Healthy coping	<i>If I have problems, I ask for help</i>	5 items	.39
Positive self-image	<i>I think I am smart</i>	1 item	
Parental Warmth	<i>If I am sad, my mother takes care of me</i>	5 items	.77
Parental monitoring	<i>I am at home alone after school</i>	3 items	.30
Harsh parenting	<i>At home they punish me when I have done nothing wrong</i>	2 items	.47
Attachment to friends	<i>I feel good with my friends</i>	3 items	.37
Problem behavior of friends	<i>My friends steal</i>	5 items	.73
Good school grades	<i>My school grades are good</i>	1 item	
Teachers paying attention	<i>Teachers pay attention to me</i>	1 item	
Victimization on the street	<i>I am being threatened on the streets</i>	3 items	.45
Unsafe neighborhood	<i>I feel safe when I'm walking on the streets</i>	2 items	.10
Physical decay neighborhood	<i>In my neighborhood there is waste on the streets</i>	2 items	.31

literature on risk factors for problem behavior and wellbeing, four broad topics (school context, neighborhood or *barrio*, family, and the individual child) were selected. The topics were further specified in a topic list, and detailed questions were asked about poverty, socioeconomic status (SES), neighborhood, financial conditions of schools, cultural diversity of school population, language, parental involvement, parental SES, parenting styles, abuse, child problem behavior and health. These topics were deemed relevant in relation to the school experiences of the children and the questions formulated in the screening instrument which were answered by the children themselves<sup>7</sup>.

### Questionnaire

For this study, a new screening instrument was developed in which the items were based on existing instruments such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Van Widenfelt et al., 2003; Vugteveen et al., 2019), the Utrechtse Coping Lijst UCL (Bijstra et al., 1994), the school questionnaire (Weerman et al., 2007) and the Youth Lifestyle Survey Aruba (YLS) (Van der Wal, 2011) and discussions with professionals in Aruba about aspects that are important in the lives of Aruban children. The KLAS (Kwaliteit van Leven Arubaanse Scholieren [Quality of Life Aruban pupils] (Slotboom et al., 2019)<sup>8</sup> consists of 62 items with a 4-point Likert scale (Almost never – Sometimes – Often – Very Often). We decided to use a 4-point scale instead of a 5-point scale because the problem with 5 points is that children could use the intermediate category due to having no opinion, or they do not want to express their true opinion. This forced choice decision (with no mid-point) may also reduce skewness and the number of respondents refusing to answer (Nadler et al., 2015). Also, having an intermediate category might increase social desirability (e.g., Asún et al., 2016). The key dependent variables of the study were both the self-reported well-being of children (in general and in the school context) and self-reported problem behavior (see Table 2). The dependent variables and related risk and protective factors were derived from the literature on well-being in children (e.g., Lee & Yoo, 2015; Newland, 2015) and problem behavior and delinquency of children and adolescents (Eichelsheim et al., 2010; Loeber et al., 1998; Resnick et al., 1997; Weerman et al., 2007).

### 2.3 Procedure

The interviews were conducted by one of the senior researchers, two student assistants who were recruited via the University of Aruba (UA) from the Social Work and Development Department of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) and four employees of the Aruban Department of Education. The student assistants were trained to conduct the interviews during a workshop that was organized at the UA for them to be fully prepared to conduct all the interviews in Papiamentu, Dutch, or English. Interviews were scheduled by Instituto Pedagógico Arubano's (IPA) supporting staff by email via an informative letter. The interviews were conducted during the months May-July 2019. All the interviews were recorded by smart phones by the interviewers and mailed to a team of transcribers. Transcribing the interviews was executed by two IPA colleagues.

The questionnaire for the children was administered by students from IPA and UA in May 2019. The students were trained by IPA staff to administer the questionnaires. Sample questions, such as "I am going for a swim in the sea" [Almost never – Sometimes – Often – Very Often] were practiced in class with the children before the questionnaire was completed. The completion took ap-



proximately 20 minutes. Students worked in groups of two per classroom in different schools where the questionnaire was administered in all grades 5 and 6 classes. The questionnaire was formulated both in Dutch and Papiamento in such a way that the questions were printed in both languages. Parents of the participating children delivered an active informed consent for participation of their children in the study.

## 2.4 Analysis

### *Interviews*

The 44 interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, which were then analyzed by a team of IPA staff members. Lofland and Lofland (1995) was used as a framework of the qualitative methodological approach. Excel sheets were created using the different topics and subtopics from the topic list. The interviews were then coded in the excel sheets under the different (sub)topics by different researchers. The researchers discussed and cross compared their coding several times to guarantee similar coding as much as possible. A summary of the results is presented in this paper<sup>9</sup>.

### *Questionnaire*

Many items were not normally distributed, and scales had low Cronbach's alphas (see Table 2). This might have been caused by the four-point scale that was used, or by the number of items per scale, but also by the tendency of the children not to use all the four different answer opportunities. However, it was decided to use the scale variables in the analyses because the scales represent factors, similar to factors predicting delinquency in the literature (Loeber et al., 1998; Resnick et al., 1997; Weerman et al., 2007). Also dichotomizing the scales would cause a loss of power and an increase in type I errors. To report prevalence rates of the different variables we dichotomized the variables (almost never and sometimes were coded as 0 and often and very often were coded as 1). For all other analyses we used the full-scale variables. They were coded as follows: Almost never (1) – Sometimes (2)– Often (3)– Very Often (4). In Table 2 variables, item examples and number of items are described. Descriptive analyses were used to give information on the dependent and independent variables. Correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to search for predictors of well-being and problem behavior.

## 3 Results

Although the analyses of the interviews resulted in more elaborated information on all the detailed subtopics, for the purpose of this paper we summarized the

results under the same general topics as we asked the children in the quantitative part of the study. These topics are referring to the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) but also refer to the main domains relevant for the development of well-being and problem behavior.

### 3.1 Interviews with school staff

#### *School context*

Almost all respondents said that the financial support for the school was insufficient, for example, there are not sufficient teachers and teaching assistants. They also reported a lack of internal communication and too few remedial teachers to support the at-risk children. The diversity of cultural background that the pupils represented was seldom perceived as a problem, but the respondents noticed different cultural habits regarding upbringing. For example, almost all the respondents stressed the fact that within the Haitian culture, parents discipline their children very harshly. The non-Aruban children were generally from Venezuelan, Colombian, Jamaican, Chinese, Philippine, Haitian or Dominican Republic descent. The respondents noticed that this cultural diversity was something to be proud of. Although most of the respondents embraced cultural diversity or multiculturalism, they also emphasized the differences in upbringing (regarding disciplining practices, respect and authority, hierarchy, importance of schooling), cultural-economic background and language competency. All the respondents were very clear about how they perceived the role of language in their school. Papiamentu is the most spoken and preferred language within the schools and on the school playground. However, the main instruction language is still Dutch.

#### *Barrio or Neighborhood*

Depending on the specific barrio or neighborhood, respondents informed the interviewers about the livability of the barrio, security and safety, social cohesion, gangs, violence and or drugs traffic or dealing. Some barrios were categorized by the respondents as unsafe for the pupils, with notable gang behavior. However, the pupils are often too young to be active in a gang. Respondents from all the schools mentioned that their barrios improved because of the renovation of the infrastructure and through activities that have been organized by several societal organizations. Barrio watch and police watch have helped improve some neighborhoods. Several respondents told that in the poorer neighborhoods markets are organized by NGOs where food boxes, clothing or other necessities are given away.

#### *Family*

Neglect, conflict between parents, divorced parents, other problems within the family/household or no money, no food at home; these are some of the pro-

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blems that are faced by the teachers and teaching assistants, management, and social workers at schools. Lack of attention, love, security, and safety are believed to be the causes for the problem behavior of children. This is because parents often juggle two or more jobs and/or do not have the focus on their children. Abuse, in the form of severe neglect and harassment by parents or family members is common, according to the respondents. Some of the respondents also expressed their suspicion of some children experiencing sexual abuse. Most households were of low middle class or working class. Some school managers mentioned that the socio-economical background is a problem and that often the parents had a low educational level and had a problematic family background themselves. Often the poverty could be noticed by the lack of personal hygiene, children coming to school without having had breakfast, consumption of unhealthy foods, wearing the same clothes for school, or by the way child-care appears to be organized at home. The overall complaint was and is that parent participation is low. Some respondents also expressed the view that gang formation in the barrios and financial stress of the parents combined with the lack of care and attention to the children, might be responsible for the aggressive behavior of some of the children in the classroom. Regarding the household composition, the respondents remarked that single parenthood, in particular single motherhood, was common and often the cause for poverty. However, some of the respondents mentioned that children of single mothers that worked hard are proud kids because they have seen their moms persevere contrary to children of more affluent households that take certain things for granted. Due to the high percentage of migrant pupils within some of the selected schools, the respondents expressed their worries about the exclusion of the migrant pupils at the schoolyard or activities. Migrant mothers were often excluded or bullied according to some of the respondents within the school group chats where important or essential information regarding parent participation is shared and or communicated.

#### *Individual child*

Most of the respondents stated that bullying, along with loud and yelling behavior during the lessons were problems that were often seen. Fighting in the schoolyard was also mentioned by some respondents. Schools often have a protocol regarding bullying, fighting, loud behavior, threats and (sexually) unaccepted behavior. Parents are notified when children are not following the rules and regulations of the school. Other behavioral indicators mentioned were, having a lack of concentration and focus, being shy, and showing silent or withdrawn behavior within the classroom with the teacher as well as with their peers. Truancy is not seen very often. When problems do arise at home, very often children first inform the teacher, teaching assistant, or the school social worker. Regarding health, most of the respondents stated that a school doctor regularly visits their school. Children often visit the dentist and/or doctor.

Some of the schools intent to be healthy schools and therefore only sell healthy food items in their canteen. A few schools are clients of a foundation that feed children who do not get breakfast daily at home. They cater to their needs and every morning orange juice, fruit and bread is delivered at schools that request their help to feed the children from poor families. Sexual education is seen as an essential part of health and well-being through the program Biba Amor (a sex education program) that was introduced in the 5th or 6th grades. Respondents acknowledged the existence of lover boys or sugar daddies in the lives of some of their female pupils, so sexual education is considered a necessity. The results from the interviews revealed that parents appear to not educate their children on issues of sexual health and responsible sexual behavior. The respondents further indicated that issues around sex and sexuality are still considered as a taboo in a lot of families.

### 3.2 Questionnaire

#### *Prevalence of well-being, well-being at school and problem behavior*

When asked about their well-being, most children reported feeling happy, not worrying, and being content with themselves (very) often. Well-being at school is reported by somewhat less children than well-being in general but still most children report they like school and feel safe at school. Problem behavior (being angry suddenly, not listening to schoolteacher, fighting, and bullying other children) is reported by a minority of the children (see Table 3 for the prevalence rates).

#### *Prevalence of factors associated with well-being and problem or risk behavior*

The prevalence of the independent factors significantly associated with well-being and/or problem behavior are also reported in Table 3. Looking at the individual characteristics of the children, it is shown that almost half of the children reported a lack of self-control in certain situations, around two third reported a healthy lifestyle and most children have a positive self-image. A healthy coping style is reported by almost half of the children. Most children reported having parents that show warmth and affection and having parents that monitor their behavior (e.g., parents know where their child is after school, the child is not alone at home after school). Harsh parenting (e.g., “at home they punish me when I have done nothing wrong”) was reported by a minority of the children. Good school grades were reported by more than two third of the children while more than half reported that the teacher does pay attention to them (very) often. Most children are attached to their friends and only a minority of the children said they have friends that show problem behavior. With respect to their neighborhoods, two third of the children reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood (very) often, a quarter reported physical decay in their neighborhood and a minority of the children said that they have been victimized on the streets.

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**Table 3**

Descriptives of dependent and independent variables

	n	M	SD	%
<b>Dependent variables</b>				
Well-being	820	14.21	2.44	86.7
Well-being school	828	5.89	1.62	82.2
Problem behavior	819	7.73	2.10	13.8
<b>Independent variables</b>				
<b>Individual factors</b>				
Lack of self-control	826	6.65	1.82	47.6
Healthy lifestyle	841	6.50	1.35	60.9
Positive self-image	839	3.06	0.86	73.7
Healthy coping	838	12.24	2.77	49.0
<b>Parental factors</b>				
Parental warmth	817	15.67	3.61	77.0
Parental monitoring	828	9.59	1.87	85.7
Harsh parenting	834	2.83	1.21	14.5
<b>School factors</b>				
Good school grades	840	3.06	0.88	71.8
Teachers pay attention	838	2.77	0.93	59.1
<b>Peer factors</b>				
Attachment to friends	823	9.11	1.87	78.3
Problem behavior friends	828	5.79	1.63	9.5
Teachers paying attention	838	2.77	0.93	59.1
<b>Neighborhood factors</b>				
Victimization on the streets	822	3.31	0.86	6.0
Unsafe neighborhood	833	4.22	1.42	66.3
Physical decay neighborhood	838	3.16	1.32	22.3

*Regression analyses of well-being and problem behavior*

Different analyses were conducted for both well-being and problem behavior. First correlations analyses were conducted for the different independent and dependent variables (see Table 4). As can be seen in Table 4, all variables were correlated with

**Table 4**

Correlations between Independent Variables and Problem behavior, Well-being and Well-being at school

	Well-being in general	Well-being at school	Problem behavior
<b>Individual factors</b>			
Lack of self-control	-.14***	-.30***	.36***
Healthy lifestyle	.32***	.31***	-.16***
Positive self-image	.31***	.32***	-.20***
Healthy coping	.37***	.34***	-.36***
<b>Parental factors</b>			
Parental warmth	.43***	.36***	-.22***
Parental monitoring	.27***	.24***	-.20***
Harsh parenting	-.16***	-.12***	.22***
<b>School factors</b>			
Good school grades	.24***	.30***	-.29***
Teachers pay attention	.28***	.40***	-.16***
<b>Peer factors</b>			
Attachment to friends	.23***	.23***	-.18***
Problem behavior friends	-.17***	-.20***	.37***
<b>Neighborhood factors</b>			
Victimization on street	-.23***	-.13***	.27***
Unsafe neighborhood	-.18***	-.16***	.09*
Physical decay neighborhood	-.10**	-.11**	.19***

Note \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

well-being (at school) and problem behavior, although in opposite directions. Second, a multiple regression analysis was conducted for well-being in general (see Table 5 for further details). Six factors significantly predicted well-being in general, namely healthy coping, healthy lifestyle, positive self-image, parental warmth, teachers paying attention and victimization on the streets ( $F(14, 672) = 24.03, p < .000, R^2 = .32$ ). Victimization on the streets is the only significant predictor that is negatively correlated with well-being, which means that victimization on the streets reduces the change of well-being. All other factors increase the chances of well-being.

**Table 5**  
Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables predicting Well-being

	$\beta$	SE
Constant	7.63***	.90
<b>Individual factors</b>		
Lack of self-control	-.043	.045
Healthy Coping	.127***	.032
Healthy lifestyle	.231**	.067
Positive self-image	.482***	.116
<b>Parental factors</b>		
Parental warmth	.127***	.027
Parental monitoring	.060	.047
Harsh parenting	.006	.068
<b>School factors</b>		
Good school grades	-.168	.117
Teachers pay attention	.322***	.092
<b>Peer factors</b>		
Attachment to friends	.081	.045
Problem behavior friends	-.019	.053
<b>Neighborhood factors</b>		
Victimization on streets	-.428***	.095
Unsafe neighborhood	-.055	.058
Physical decay neighborhood	.055	.063

Note \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Next, a multiple regression analysis was used to predict well-being at school (see Table 6 for further details). Seven factors significantly predicted well-being at school, namely lack of self-control, healthy coping, healthy lifestyle, positive self-image, parental warmth, teachers paying attention and attachment to friends ( $F(14, 678) = 23.92, p < .000, R^2 = .32$ ). Lack of self-control is the only significant predictor that is negatively correlated with well-being at school, all other factors increase the chances of well-being at school.

Finally, A multiple regression analysis was used to predict problem behavior (see Table 7 for further details). Seven factors significantly predicted problem behavior, namely lack of self-control, healthy coping, parental warmth, good school grades, teachers paying attention, problem behavior of friends and victimization on the streets ( $F(10, 695) = 25.02, p < .000, R^2 = .35$ ). Four of the seven significant

**Table 6**

Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables predicting Well-being at school

	$\beta$	SE
Constant	1.77**	.58
<b>Individual factors</b>		
Lack of self-control	-.081**	.029
Healthy Coping	.069**	.021
Healthy lifestyle	.166***	.043
Positive self-image	.216**	.076
<b>Parental factors</b>		
Parental warmth	.038*	.018
Parental monitoring	.001	.030
Harsh parenting	.001	.035
<b>School factors</b>		
Good school grades	.063	.076
Teachers pay attention	.441***	.059
<b>Peer factors</b>		
Attachment to friends	.076**	.029
Problem behavior friends	-.044	.035
<b>Neighborhood factors</b>		
Victimization on streets	-.118	.064
Unsafe neighborhood	-.006	.038
Physical decay neighborhood	-.009	.041

Note \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

predictors are negatively correlated with problem behavior. These factors reduce the chances of problem behavior of the children and are seen as protective factors.

## 4 Discussion

The objective of this study was to get a better understanding of the factors that are important for the development of children in the context of school. By focusing on both the perspective of school and the perspective of children themselves we wanted not only to gain a better understanding of the needs of the children but also a better understanding of the contribution of school to these needs. We will discuss the findings from the two different parts in a more integrative way.



**Table 7**

Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables predicting Problem behavior

	$\beta$	SE
Constant	7.692***	.73
<b>Individual factors</b>		
Lack of self-control	.243***	.037
Healthy Coping	-.157***	.026
Healthy lifestyle	-.011	.054
Positive self-image	-.135	.096
<b>Parental factors</b>		
Parental warmth	.046*	.022
Parental monitoring	-.054	.039
Harsh parenting	-.102	.056
<b>School factors</b>		
Good school grades	-.377***	.095
Teachers pay attention	-.152*	.076
<b>Peer factors</b>		
Attachment to friends	-.028	.036
Problem behavior friends	.232***	.045
<b>Neighborhood factors</b>		
Victimization on streets	.299***	.078
Unsafe neighborhood	-.041	.048
Physical decay neighborhood	-.056	.052

Note \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ 

First, we will describe the perspective from both schools and children on the four broad domains we examined, namely the individual child, parents, school, and neighborhood domain.

When well-being and problem behavior are described from the perspective of the schools, it can be concluded that schools regularly notice the externalizing behavior problems of the children but at the same time report that children show trust in their schoolteachers, which is an important condition for learning intellectually, but also socially, emotionally, and morally (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Based on the quantitative study most children reported seeing themselves as happy children, who do not worry very often, and most children did not report problem behavior such as fighting and bullying. However, still a considerable percentage showed signs of low well-being and problem behavior at a relatively young age (pre-adolescent years).

Schools often observe the parents as being overburdened and stressed due to too much work and struggling with poverty, in particular migrant parents or mothers. Due to the high percentage of migrant pupils within some of the selected schools, the respondents expressed their worries about the exclusion of the migrant pupils at the schoolyard or activities. Migrant mothers were also often excluded or bullied according to some of the respondents within the school group chats where important or essential information regarding parent participation is shared and or communicated. Parents (particularly migrant parents) often lack parenting skills, resulting in neglect and/or hardly any involvement in the school and schoolwork of their children. These family related problems can be a serious threat for the healthy development of the children and are known as risk factors for problem behavior and delinquency (Eichelsheim et al., 2010; Farrington, 1995; Hawkins et al., 2001; Loeber et al., 1998; Resnick et al., 1997) and at the same time can reduce quality of life and well-being of children (Lee & Yoo, 2015; Newland, 2015). However, children are also proud of their hard-working single mothers and the existing larger family network (including grandparents) that takes care of the children can be seen as an important factor in creating positive relationships with the children. It is known from the literature that warm, positive relationships and positive attachment are very important for a healthy development (Bretherton, 1992; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Although schools often observe parents as being overburdened and stressed, we also noticed that most children reported having parents that are affectionate, involved and hardly show harsh behavior. Children's perceptions of their parents slightly contradict the perceptions of the school staff about parents, and it also contradict the high prevalence rates of emotional and physical abuse that were reported by adolescents in a study conducted at a secondary school in Aruba (Eugene & Graafsma, 2020). These results suggest that childhood maltreatment is a serious threat to the well-being of Aruban children. Although we did not find indications in this direction from the self-report data in our study (we did not explicitly ask about traumatic events such as physical abuse), it is important to include more detailed information about parenting behavior and possible child maltreatment in follow-up research.

Three school-related topics are mentioned by the schools that are important and a possible threat for a positive development of the pupils, namely: lack of financial support, the struggle with differences between pupils' native language and the language of instruction, and a lack of involvement of parents. First, lack of financial support results in too few teachers, teaching assistants, remedial teachers, and social emotional support. Second, the perceptions of the schools about the language struggles of their pupils fits within the ongoing debate about the role of Papiamentu and Dutch in the context of school. Pereira (2018) and other Aruban Papiamentu experts (Croes & William, 2017; Todd Dandaré, 2014) have analyzed the (negative) impact of the legacy of Dutch being forced as the

language of instruction in schools on a vast majority of children. The expert's plea for the introduction of Papiamentu as the main language of instruction at least in primary education in the first years based on the results of the UN findings on the impact of the importance and acknowledgement of mother language as the basis for learning a second language.

Schools not only emphasized possible risks, but also a strength, namely the heterogeneous, multicultural diverse population in their schools. Although it can be a challenge when using Dutch as the language of instruction and having to deal with different upbringing norms and values and or cultural habits of the parents, it is mostly not seen as a problem but more as an enrichment for all children.

Within the school context, children were only asked about the behavior of the teacher and their school grades. Although most children like being at school and feel safe at school, they also mention that teachers do not pay enough attention to them.

Finally, the communities or neighborhoods have an impact on the schools, but the influence depends also on the specific barrio or neighborhood. When there is poverty, and/or drug traffic, it has an impact on the reputation of the school, and on the behavior of the children. One of the strong points mentioned by the schools was the increased social cohesion strategies and projects within different neighborhoods, that the last 20 years have been implemented by the Aruban Government. Finally, it can be stated that a lot of barrios have been renovated, and made safer using barrio watches, which has a positive effect on schools, parents, and their children. This renovation work, notified by school staff is in line with the perspective of the children. Most of them do not report physical decay in their neighborhoods. However, several children report their neighborhood is unsafe.

Next to descriptions of the four broad domains, we also examined the relationship between the different domains and well-being and problem behavior as measured by the questionnaire. The literature suggests that well-being and problem behavior are predicted from the same broad domains (e.g., Catalano et al., 2004; Farrington, 1995; Newland et al., 2019). However, this study showed that the domains might be the same, but the specific factors differ. Almost all factors that predicted well-being in general, were related to a positive functioning of the individual child, combined with a positive relation with parents and teachers (for well-being at school the most important factors were slightly different, referring to a positive functioning of the individual child, combined with positive relations with teachers and their peers). These findings are in line with the literature on well-being (e.g., McCullough et al., 2000; Newland et al., 2019). Problem behavior of Aruban school children, however, is increased by risk factors such as a lack of self-control, problem behavior of their friends and victim-

ization on the streets. Healthy coping and good school grades function more as protective factors against problem behavior. Although these factors differ from those predicting well-being, the results are in line with the international literature on the risk factors of antisocial behavior (e.g., Farrington, 1995; Loeber et al., 1998)

Combining the perspectives of schools and children resulted in a more in-depth picture of well-being and problematic behavior. While children indicate that neighborhood factors are somewhat less important for their own well-being, problem behavior is influenced by multiple social contexts, in particular school, peer, and neighborhood factors. In addition to the meaning that schools give to the different social contexts around the child, children show that it is good to take these contexts into account in different ways. Reinforcing positive individual and relational factors appears to be important for increasing well-being, while reducing low self-control, and awareness about problem behavior of friends and the risk of victimization in the neighborhood appear to be important for reducing problem behavior. At the same time reinforcing other individual factors such as healthy coping and good school grades may further reduce problem behavior. Therefore, not only putting effort in reducing risk factors but also strengthening protective factors seems to be an important strategy for a healthy development of children (see Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner, 2017). Also, relying on just one source (questionnaire) would lead to more superficial outcomes, e.g., children are mostly happy and seldom show problematic behavior, while schools (interviews) mention that they regularly observe externalizing problems. This contradiction leads to questions such as: why there are different perspectives and how these perspectives do supplement each other? In the case of externalizing problems, it might be that children show socially desirable behavior in the questionnaire, or that children do not view their behaviors as problematic in the same way teachers do. It is however also possible that children show mostly adjusted behavior but because teachers are overburdened in their work, they are too focused on negative behavior.

The fact that this study generally produced the same factors as in the literature relating to well-being and problem behavior means that Aruba can learn from best practices in other countries. Also, other countries can learn from this Aruban study that using combined perspectives of school and children, measured differently, can contribute to a better understanding of the needs of children. Also, Aruba is a community that, besides the more general characteristics of an island in the Caribbean, has its own unique characteristics, such as large influx of immigrants due to the immense impact of its tourism, multiculturalism and multi-lingualism. Other countries could learn from these experiences, in particular how to deal with different languages and different cultures in the classroom. It is also important to realize that NGO's and other volunteer organi-

zations play an important role in improving social circumstances. The question is how well these initiatives collaborate and how they can play a role in other countries where poverty is also a key issue.

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research**

A limitation of the qualitative method used in this study is that the results reflect the priorities and concerns of the interviewed school staff and might therefore reflect individual views and opinions, that may not always be representative of the general ideas of the schools. However, interviewees were from a wide variety of schools within the different districts of the island and therefore faced very different contexts, working situations and challenges, yet what was striking was the similarity of their views regarding difficulties and strengths of the social context of the pupils. This study was conducted in 11 schools, but it would be useful to conduct further qualitative work with a wider range of schools to explore the views further.

The quantitative study has several limitations that should be taken into consideration. First, the study population included children aged 10-13 from 11 schools but may not represent the total school population of Aruba. Although we tried to select the schools as good as possible to have a representative selection, it depended on the collaboration of the schools and schoolboards, which schools finally participated. Second, the newly developed short questionnaire was tested for the first time, with scales having relatively low alphas and some constructs represented by one single item. Although it is possible to measure a construct with one single item (see also Gogol et al., 2014) reliability could only be tested by applying the questionnaire in another sample. A replication of the results in new samples is therefore an important next step. Another important step might be a revision of the created scales. In future research we also intend to add some items, although for screening purposes the questionnaire should be as short as possible. However, although the alphas of the scales are low, correlations and predictions of the different scales are in line with earlier research on this topic. In addition, this study relied on self-report questionnaires completed by children themselves, and their answers may be influenced by social desirability. However, studies on self-reported well-being show that correlation with social desirability is relatively low, suggesting that children report their actual feelings of well-being (Caputo, 2017; Riley, 2004).

### **Recommendations for practice**

Finally, based on the results of this study we formulated some recommendations to improve a healthy development of children in Aruba, namely: first, monitor all children in the last grades of primary school and in the first years of secondary school. Next to information from this monitor also regularly interview

schools and use a (short) questionnaire for parents. In view of the expected negative effects of COVID, it is even more important to closely monitor the development of children. Adequate child policies can only be made when children are monitored, preferably in a longitudinal way. Second, improve the possibilities for teachers to pay attention to individual children, especially those who are at risk for developing antisocial behavior and/or developing mood problems. Third, continue focusing on the (problematic) relationship between native language and language of instruction. Fourth, stimulate parent participation at school. Finally, increase neighborhood safety to reduce the risk of developing problem behavior and later delinquency.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The popular program titled Conscious Discipline focuses on this important aspect and has been implemented at most primary schools in Aruba (<https://www.elcslc.org/coalition-initiatives/conscious-discipline-initiative/>).
- 2 SDG4 of the UN17 SDGs has been a core element of the national education vision or plan (PEN).
- 3 It is essential to realize that this research pilot was executed pre-COVID 19. The consequences of the pandemic will have undoubtedly aggravated or worsened the results. The Prime Minister of Aruba has even declared the social crisis a mental health crisis and the Aruban mental health agency has emphasized the seriousness of this crisis among the Aruban youth.

- 4 These CBS data are based on the Census 2010. In 2020 CBS Aruba executed latest Census. CBS is finishing now (April 2022) the ISCO data. Due to the pandemic the execution and presentation of the most recent statistical data have been delayed.
- 5 SPO is a public school for special secondary education that was also included for this research pilot. This pilot was assigned by the minister of Education, specifically the Department of Public Schools (DPS). DPS requested that we included an SPO school to interview their staff and surveyed their first class to understand better the complex challenges this specific group of children face. Also, the pupils of this SPO school could be comparable to pupils of primary education schools. Although they are slightly older, their cognitive intellectual level is considered more that of children of the last class of primary education.
- 6 Bronfenbrenner's theory is rooted in the belief that a child develops interactively, in response to various levels of environmental relationships and influences. This model situates the child at the center, and it considers the child as an active participant in his/her learning and development.
- 7 The topic list is available from the authors.
- 8 The instrument is also available from the authors.
- 9 For more detailed results of the qualitative study see Kibbelaar, Slotboom, & Hendriks (2020).

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## Samenvatting

### **Kwaliteit van leven van Arubaanse Schoolkinderen: welbevinden en probleemgedrag in de context van school**

In deze studie combineren we een kwalitatieve verkenning van een aantal samenhangende thema's die de ontwikkeling van kinderen beïnvloeden, gezien door de ogen van school medewerkers, met een kwantitatieve verkenning van deze thema's zoals waargenomen door de kinderen zelf. Door verschillende methoden en verschillende perspectieven te gebruiken, krijgen we een genuanceerder en rijker beeld van de behoeften van de kinderen in de context van school. Op basis van het kwalitatieve deelonderzoek blijkt dat scholen vooral verwijzen naar opvoedings- en buurtproblemen, die het welbevinden en probleemgedrag van het kind beïnvloeden. Daarnaast kampen scholen zelf met financiële beperkingen en taalproblemen en beperkte ouderparticipatie op school. Uit het kwantitatieve deelonderzoek blijkt dat individuele en relationele factoren de sterkste voorspellers zijn voor welzijn. Probleemgedrag wordt voorspeld door individuele, school, peer- en buurtfactoren. Waar leerlingen de buurt iets minder bepalend vinden voor hun eigen welbevinden, wordt probleemgedrag beïnvloed door meerdere sociale contexten. Naast de betekenis die scholen geven aan de verschillende sociale contexten rond het kind, laten kinderen zien dat het goed is om op verschillende manieren rekening te houden met deze contexten. Individuele en relationele factoren versterken lijkt van belang voor het vergroten van welbevinden terwijl naast individuele factoren, aandacht voor het gedrag van vrienden en ervaringen in de buurt eveneens van belang lijkt voor het verminderen van probleemgedrag.

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**Kernwoorden** kwaliteit van leven, welbevinden, probleemgedrag, leerlingen in primair onderwijs, Aruba