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Through the eyes of the beholder

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Through the eyes of the beholder

Unfolding social participation “from within” the classroom

Renske Ria de Leeuw

Elucidation on the cover: The cover symbolizes the intended change through the tessellation technique of M. C. Escher. For the research project, two mice with backpacks were used as logo. These mice and backpacks represented students with social-emotional problems or behavioural difficulties, thereby, symbolizing the student-bound budget system before the introduction of the act for "Befitting Education".

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Through the eyes of the beholder

Unfolding social participation “from within” the classroom

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Preface

Impetus for this preface

In this dissertation, multiple perspectives will be presented. I want to use this preface to reflect on my perspective as a researcher to you, the reader, how and where I stand concerning the dissertation topic because this type of perspective and reflexivity is not addressed in the presented chapters of this dissertation. With *reflexivity* a researcher examines their motivation for pursuing a chosen research^I. There are multiple reasons why, but one of the main reasons is that it is not common within my research field^I. Adding a paragraph or even a chapter in which the researcher reflects on their positionality or reflexivity is (more) common within intersectional feminist approaches and ethnographic qualitative research^{II}. However, every type of research is influenced by the researcher^{III}. The researcher is also one of the beholders observing and interpreting a phenomena. Therefore the implicit and explicit beliefs, as a person/researcher, will influence aspects such as research design, methods and analyses^{III,IV}.

Personal experiences and perspective

I had my struggles during primary school. I was victimised and socially excluded since grade 2 by my peers. I was an easy target because I was a timid, extremely shy² Dutch, white girl, at a multi-cultural (regular) primary school in the Netherlands, who loved to learn. Also, I was very clumsy. I would trip over my own feet and was very bad at the gym lesson activities. The latter was one of the reasons that I was picked as the last one for gym activities, enlarging my feelings of not fitting in. Reflecting on my own experiences, I remember that I felt unheard during primary school and how my primary schoolteachers and (loving) parents addressed the situation. I think thereby that my motivation to include the perspectives and voices of students in my research goes beyond my initial research proposal to have one study that involved interviews with students^V or the right of students to be heard^{VI, VII}. As a researcher doing inclusive research, I was motivated to provide students with the opportunity to share their perspective. Because I have personally experienced how important it is to have had or been withheld of the possibility to share my (child) perspective.

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- 1 For concrete examples of reflexivity and educational research, I advise you to read the Chapter "Researching the researcher", by Allan and Slee (2008), *Doing inclusive education Research* (Vol. 1), Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers and the Chapter "Reflexivity in educational research", by Musgrave (2019), New York, NY: Routledge.
 - 2 People who know me now can probably not imagine this.

Scientific perspective

In addition to my motivation and my perspective, I took the perspective of a scientist while conducting the studies part of this dissertation. To realise this, I needed to position myself and my experiences outside the data analyses and interpretation^{VIII}. Concrete to the research and analysis of the data, this was realised by sharing the research results and insights with critical others, such as my supervisors and the attendees of the qualitative research group “*Selectief Kwalitatief*”.

In schools, I tried to be clear what my intentions are as a scientist. I am a scientist, with a background as a Speech and Language therapist and a specialised in learning development and difficulties via the Master Learning and Educational Development. Although I have collaborated with teachers in diverse settings before my dissertation, I am aware that I do not know all the ins and outs of what it is and takes to be a teacher. When I contacted teachers to be part of my studies, I always explained to them that I wanted to help teachers and students in the realisation of social participation in regular schools. Because I am no almighty scientist in an ivory tower, who upholds a higher position, it was not my intention to tell teachers how to do their work. What I wanted to do was to help them in the move towards inclusive education.

I identify myself as a *pracademic* (practical academic). It is my personal goal to bridge the empirical research insights gained from my studies with practice. This all, in order to improve the situation of students, with or without social-emotional problems or behavioural difficulties, who are struggling within the education system. However, also the teachers who work with these students and feel that they feel as a teacher to support them. I experienced this when I came back to my old primary school for a short internship, and I ran into one of my previous teachers. She began to cry when she recognised me and started to apologise for my primary school years. She explained that she did not know how to change the situation, besides correcting my peers and trying to improve my resilience (as if it was my fault that I was victimised). This is not an N=1 example. Many times, I have been approached by teachers to share the results of my dissertation with them, in order for them to feel more supported to meet the needs of students with social, emotional or behavioural challenges. These were teachers participating in my studies or at social engagements, such as a friends party. This notion is also reflected in the recent report conducted by the general education union of the Netherlands. Based on a large survey, it was concluded that (primary school) teachers support the idea of inclusive education and acknowledge the importance of including students with special educational needs into regular schools, but that they are insufficiently supported and prepared to meet the academic and social needs of every student^{IX}.

For the teachers who want to be supported in the move towards a more inclusive education system and to provide students to share their perspective, I will not stop after this dissertation. I look forward to a career as a *pracademic*. In this career, I aim to conduct many participatory research in which the perspectives from different beholders are taken into account. Specifically, those of students who struggle in the education system. Whereas I have nothing to declare except my perspective of the situation³.

3 This is a less sassy version of the original quote of Oscar Wilde (see opening Preface)

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