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Turning the kaleidoscope

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rijksuniversiteit
 groningen

Turning the kaleidoscope

Multiple enactments of professional autonomy
in Early Childhood Education

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de
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Preface

This is a dissertation. It is a *thing*. It is *produced*. Yes, I was busy working on it for quite a few years. I learned and experienced that doing research on a scientific level needs uncompromising rigour and attention and, thus, it is time consuming. However, without downplaying this, I also experienced that my work amounts to little compared to that of a myriad of other actors which were already in place, assembled in networks, working with me to *enact* the three studies that are presented in this dissertation: articles, databases, search machines, recording devices, policy documents, post-its, traditions, criteria, computer screens, analysing software, conferences, folders, phones, spreadsheets, markers, desk-fans, and endless more. Thus, I was part of the extended sociomaterial assemblage through which this dissertation was enacted. Here, I use the language of Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005, Law, 2004, Mol 2002), with which not all readers will be familiar. At the outset of this PhD project, I was not either. Throughout this dissertation it will become clearer what these first few sentences actually mean, and why learning to speak this particular language became a meaningful part of my PhD story. But let me start at the beginning.

My PhD story began years before it formally started, in the second half of the first decade of this century, when I set off to lecture at an initial teacher training programme at Stenden University in the northern Netherlands. As a lecturer, I encouraged students to develop their own well-argued positions on the dilemmas they encountered in their teaching internships. In one of my classes, for example, we discussed the merits and drawbacks of testing in early childhood education (ECE). The students explored this issue and identified their own positions in the debate on a topic that was current in educational practice. However, the students and I encountered an uncomfortable tension. An increasing number of the students reported back that while their mentor-teacher in their teaching internship for early grades agreed with their specific point of view, they made it clear that such a position was impossible to put into practice, due to regulations and restrictions that the teachers felt they must obey. One example: 'I think testing toddlers using the Cito test¹ is not appropriate, but the inspectorate demands this test'. This was besides the facts. At the time of this statement it was not compulsory for primary schools to conduct specific tests (Primary Education Act, 2017, Section 8.7). However, it seemed to be a truth experienced by many teachers in the Dutch field of education. Some students even accused the teacher training programme of the university of encouraging them to learn 'impossible stuff'. This then led to new and interesting debates about external rules and professional responsibilities. As a result of these experiences, I started to wonder how I could best support these upcoming teachers and help them to deal with the tensions between external regulations and their own professional point of view, which they were unavoidably going to experience in their professional lives.

Around that time, experts from different disciplines in the field started to demand attention to the increasing pressures of accountability policies and the specifically harmful effects of these pressures on young children (e.g., Gallant, 2009; Janssen-Vos, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Wildt-Dienske & De Wildt, 2013). In

¹ The Cito Institute is the main provider of educational tests and examinations in the Netherlands.

the Dutch educational field, several initiatives emerged that aimed to join forces of a wide range of ECE experts to discuss these trends, bring attention to the negative consequences and find ways to deal with the tensions they faced in the daily practice of working with young children. Examples of these initiatives include the conference: 'Gone haywire. Are toddlers and pre-schoolers still allowed to develop at their own pace?' (Goorhuis-Brouwer & Levering, 2006) and the setting up of several national associations and workgroups, such as the Young Child Union (Vereniging Jonge Kind, VJK) in 2009.

In 2012, driven by the same critical concerns, Stenden University (now NHLStenden University) took such an initiative by launching a professorship Early Childhood Studies, aimed at conducting research concerning the development of young children, and educating specifically trained ECE professionals (Goorhuis-Brouwer, 2012; Oenema-Mostert, 2012). Because of my own concern with the subject, arising from my experiences as a lecturer, I expressed interest in the activities of this group, and, due to this interest, I was invited to become part of the team as a PhD researcher. I decided to accept this invitation and take the opportunity to investigate the tensions between the external regulations and the responsibilities of ECE teachers.

An exciting journey started. Thanks to my supervisors, I was able to not only explore my specific questions about dealing with the tensions in ECE, but also to explore the multidimensional field of science. My supervisors suggested interesting places to go, warned me about pitfalls, and encouraged me to take unusual turns. However, I was the one who made the decisions and I am responsible for all choices made in this work; hence, the use of the first-person singular. Once on the go, studying ECE practice became as fascinating as turning the kaleidoscope. In what follows, I describe and account for this.