Preface

“I am always disappointed when a book lacks a preface: it is like arriving at someone’s house for dinner, and being conducted straight into the dining room” (Dummett, 1981, p. ix)

This dissertation grew out of a number of studies in early childhood classrooms in the Netherlands that I have carried out over the past five years in order to show I am worthy of the title PhD. The research presented in this dissertation was made possible by a certain amount of interest in the topic, some luck with people who were crazy enough to devote (their) money and time, and numerous others who guided me along the road (see Acknowledgements for details).

The empirical work described in this dissertation is based on approximately 125 hours of video recordings of classroom talk in whole-group and small-group settings, 90 hours of recorded conversations and interviews with teachers (apart from the many informal conversations), 400 hours of short recorded conversations with 600 children (aged 4-6 years), the responses of almost 200 teachers from all over the country to our questionnaire, and endless dialogues with many knowledgeable others as well as myself.

It is just now that I realize the importance of the topic that I have been thinking about over the past years in the context of this dissertation. In today’s polarized society with strong differences, disagreements, and tensions between groups and individuals, dialogic classroom talk might be the key to good education and a livable world as it supports children’s dialogical capacities (cf. Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; van der Veen, Dobber, & van Oers, in press). These dialogical capacities enable children to cross the boundaries of their own understanding, understand the other, and revise their own understandings in light of new evidence. Children need these capacities to deal with otherness, with differences, with tensions, and to overcome the problems that today’s society faces.
Therefore, in this dissertation, I argue that these capacities should already begin to be promoted in early childhood education.

Researching classroom dialogue made me aware of its great importance. Not for education alone, but for life in general. Although heated debates are still great fun, they tend to only have one winner. In a productive dialogue, on the other hand, every participant wins and progresses in thinking and understanding. Therefore, it is my hope that this dissertation will be a tool for thought and ongoing (academic) dialogue.

Finally, Winston Churchill once said in 1942 (although in an entirely different context of giving a talk after a small victory of the British army over the Germans): “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” Completing this dissertation gives me the same feeling. It is definitely not the end. Much more work needs to be done (see the list of papers in progress). But hey, this dissertation still marks the end of the beginning of my academic career.

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References

