Ben Smit

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Mario
This is In Context, the podcast in which we delve deeper into research into education. I am Mario de Jonge, education researcher at ICLON at Leiden University.

I am sitting here today with dr. Ben Smit. Ben, you have been affiliated with ICLON University Leiden since 1995 as a consultant and researcher in the field of teachers and teacher training. In recent years, you have focused your research on student participation, especially in the context of action research and practical research in education. And in September 2024 you defended your dissertation entitled *Teachers and students as partners in researching educational practice*. And last Friday there was a farewell seminar, entitled Student participation in research and education: a democratic perspective. Yes, farewell seminar that sounds very final, of course. You are retiring.

Ben
Yes that is right yes.

Mario
But it was a very nice farewell, I must say.

Ben
I also thought it was very successful. I was very happy that - I don't want to say that I am going to laze about now - but that at the end of mu career I could once again put the subject of student participation in the spotlight. And I have the impression that the people who were there also found it all very fun and inspiring.

Mario
Well, we certainly thought so, I experienced that too. That is why I am very happy that we can now exchange ideas and talk about this subject. I thought I might start, because not everyone might know what student participation entails. Maybe you can explain very briefly for those who don't...

Ben
Yes, You can understand different things by it, but what I especially understood in the studies we did, was the active involvement of students in decision-making processes in education, so that they get a voice in decision-making about the content of education, the lessons, its design, working methods that are available, But also about school policy, the matters that concern them. It is not only about the choice of students in which subjects they want to learn, for example, but also about the decision-making processes. How that is tackled and what helps and hinders them in learning.

Mario
So really the way education is organized and given?

Ben
Yes, that could certainly be part of that. I mean, choosing subject matter or what you or the order in which you want to learn something is one of the aspects of that. But when you talk about decision-making about processes that concern you, it goes a bit further than just that.

Mario
Yes. A student panel was present at the farewell. And one of the things that also came up at a certain point in the discussions with the students, for example, was the idea of also being involved in hiring teachers, that you are part of the selection committee for example, would that also...

Ben
Yes, that could certainly be done. It's not something you should start with, I think. It is quite a step for students, but certainly also for teachers and school management, to give students more say in what is decided in education. It should also feel safe for students, right? So if it feels difficult for a teacher and a school management to give students that voice, it can also be difficult for students to make that voice heard. So it is important to go in synch and gradually get used to the fact that more and more control is emerging. Although students - but then you might want to talk about it later - also have the right to talk about those kinds of things.

Mario
Yes, we're definitely going to talk about that in a moment, because I think that's a very interesting point. But before we talk about that, because the other components in your thesis include action research. Perhaps it is also good to briefly explain what is action research and how does it compare, for example, to, well, regular research in which only a researcher...

Are
You do indicate one of the important elements. Action research is not necessarily one method. It's more of an approach to research. But what is in any case a fixed element in it is that you do

not only do research from the outside, but that you do it from the practice that you are researching and preferably also through or with the involvement of those who work in that practice. So in this case in education, it is often the teachers. In my case, I would say, it goes a little further, it is also the students who play a role in this. Research in education is always about students, so students are involved in the research on what needs to be done about it. It combines at least two elements, action and research, so it's about improving something, trying something out in practice to solve a problem you've identified. But also research into it. It is also about systematic research. In that sense, certainly scientific. It's not just doing something. It is really coming up with a research question, also finding out what kind of data you need to answer such a question and then moving on to the next step of improvement together.

Mario
Yes, so there is really a data collection and the students are not only participants in the research, but also, for example, think about what data might be collected and...

Ben
Yes, you can distinguish different ways of student participation, student involvement in research. They can sometimes be a data source, but they can also be co-researchers. In my research, I also tried to have them participate as co-researchers at least in a number of phases of research, but certainly in different phases. So it can already start and preferably I would say, it can already start with thinking about what is the problem we have here? Unravel that and then think: what is a research question that fits in with that?

Mario
Yes, because then it's about the problem statement and maybe a teacher has a different idea of what the problem could be, than the students.

Ben
Yes, that discussion, discrepancy, you see that very often. Not only in the problem definition, but also in the suggestions that are given. So it is very important indeed that the students also add their own perspective. So that you may eventually find out that the problem is in a completely different area than what you may have first thought, so before you start a whole investigation into a problem that may not be there at all, or that you have to solve something else before you can move on, it is important to definitely involve the perspective of students.

Mario
Yes, that actually prevents a certain amount of tunnel vision if I can put it that way...

Ben
Yes, you could possibly call it that. Yes, it is actually about exploring together what interests, what perspectives there are on a certain practice or an element of that practice and then

thinking about how that might hinder you in learning and how you could improve that. And you can then try out a possible approach and investigate it further.

Mario
The teacher is also involved in the research, but is there also a scientific researcher involved, or is that not really necessary?

Ben
Well, that depends a bit on the skills of those involved. It could very well be that you could include an experienced researcher from the university or a university of applied sciences who has more experience with this in a team to give a number of workshops on how to do research. But in principle, this is not really necessary if the teacher and the students themselves have enough skills.

Mario
And I also think if the teacher is also trained to do this kind of research, right? Because then I'll go back to your dissertation. That was one of the components, at least one of the goals that you set in the dissertation, and that you may still be working towards, is preparing and motivating student teachers to promote student participation in the classroom. And that can be, for example, in the context of action research, but also broader than that. But one of the questions and one of the things you might be able to answer is: what skills does a teacher need? And then we are talking about, for example, teachers at ICLON who are in training and who may have to promote and invite student participation and perhaps also do research on this.

Ben
Well, it is certainly not the case that teachers, and certainly not teachers in training automatically have all those skills. They have often done research from the perspective of their studies, but often in a completely different field than the social domain or the educational domain. And that's a different type of research in general. These are very often experiments and you are not going to do that in classrooms with students in general. So in research with people, with children and in educational situations, it is about a different type of research. In any case, that is something that comes first, you have to get the realization of that in your head and the methods that are suitable for it. But it does indeed go a little further if you start working with students as co-researchers, then you have to realize that those who participate in it must also have learned the skills and must also recognize each other as valuable partners in such a process. So it's also about your view of what others can bring to the table and also coming up with ways to empower everyone to bring their own perspective and skill. This can mean that with students you end up with different ways of collecting data than if you were to do it with adults, for example. For example, you might think that you have students take pictures or

drawings about a certain problem and have them explain it, instead of presenting them with a questionnaire, for example.

Mario
Yes and that's also about creating the conditions within which that is possible, right? Because giving space is an important aspect of it and I think I saw that reflected in different models. I also thought, isn't it often the case that maybe the adults who may have the feeling of being in the lead take up too much space and actually have to take up less space themselves to make that possible?

Ben
Yes, yes definitely. It's not that you necessarily have to give away the authority or the power completely. Teachers are often a bit concerned about this. Still, the idea of I have to determine what happens here. In any case, that is still the normal practice in schools. But it is important to experience that if you involve students more in the development of such research and in general more in giving them a voice in certain matters, it does not mean that you relinquish all control. This control must also be adapted to what the pupils are doing, to the age phase of the pupils, the stage of development, the skills, the knowledge they already have. And as they can do more, you can also involve them more and leave more to them. But that is a process that teachers and lecturers in training also have to learn. And I think it can be done mainly by doing research with them in your own class. By keeping it a bit small, the research not too big, but in your own class, your own practice. And then to experience that students say very sensible things about it and are not always against the odds or do not want to cooperate. They really want to think along and participate and that also motivates them enormously to give suggestions on how things can be improved.

Mario
So experiencing that is a very important step in the learning process of novice teachers. And is that currently also anchored in a certain way in teacher training?

Ben
Yes, well, anchored - it is starting to take hold more and more, I would say. The research I did for the dissertation at the time mainly took place in a part of our own programme, the World Teachers Programme, the bilingual part of the programme. And there it is now more or less common to do action research by students of ours and certainly the trainers now realize that you always have to think about how you can give students a role in this. In the rest of the teacher training, I think it is a little less the case. But that is a nice challenge to work further on now.

Mario
Yes.

Ben
And well, hopefully the seminar has given a little push to that. And of course I also hope that this will not only remain at ICLON, at Leiden programmes, but that it will also happen outside of it. Abroad, it may have been developed a little further. In general, in Australia you see a lot of work in this area and it is also being worked on in schools. And in England it is also quite far.

Mario
But do I understand that ICLON is actually the only institute that is really doing specific research on this?

Ben
In the Netherlands as far as I know. It is written about. There are institutes such as the Youth Institute or the Alexander Foundation in Amsterdam, which deals with all kinds of youth issues that also involve student participation, or sometimes slightly broader youth participation. But in teacher training... I have not yet been able to discover that it really plays a clear role in the curriculum of teacher training.

Mario
That's kind of crazy, isn't it? Because you hinted at it a bit in the beginning, didn't you? In your dissertation, you argue that students should be able to express their opinion and that it should be taken seriously by adults and that it even has a legal basis in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. During the symposium, this was also discussed by Ton Liefaard, professor of children's rights, and it surprised me somewhat that it is apparently an obligation that schools should fulfill. But that this actually happens little or sparingly in practice? Am I saying that right?

Ben
Yes, yes, that’s right. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is about a lot of things, including the fact that provisions must be made so that children can really go to school and that they can live somewhere safe and that they are cared for and so on. But it also says something about, in Article 12 predominantly, that the perspective, the points of view of pupils must be taken seriously and must play a role in decision-making on all kinds of matters. And perhaps those who have ratified the Treaty have not realised the consequences of it. But it certainly goes so far that you should also implement this in education at a more far-reaching level than is currently happening.

Mario
Why do you think hat this is not happening yet?

Ben
I'm not entirely sure, but I think the focus has been on the more obvious consequences of the Treaty. Namely, that you ensure that there are education systems in which everyone could find a place, regardless of whether that offers the same opportunities for everyone. And that it is precisely the point of more control that requires a culture change that is much more difficult to achieve than making an arrangement or putting a system into operation, a culture change about how you look at students, what the relationship between the teacher and student should be like in such a case. I think it is a bit further removed from the practice that was already there, and I think that also makes it more difficult.

Mario
Yes, I can imagine that practice sometimes lags a bit behind the legislation, but we are talking about a treaty from the 80s, If I'm not mistaken.

Ben
Yes, well in 1990 it was ratified. Human rights are of course much earlier and this is a derivative of it, the children's rights convention in 1990. Anyway, that was also 35 years ago now. Yes, you can say that takes a very long time.

Mario
Yes. What I would also like to point out is that both the dissertation and the seminar describe student participation not only as an end, but also as a means, and then as a means to teach students something about democratic decision-making in general. And with that, there is also a clear relationship with the subject of citizenship education in secondary school. I recently read an article on the NOS, entitled *Citizenship education falls short in many schools, the inspectorate sees*. I don't know if you happened to see the article. But it was stated, among other things, that research shows that one in seven students in secondary education does not know that everyone is equal before the law, how a democracy works or why we vote anonymously. So my first question is: do you recognize this image that was outlined here in this article?

Ben
Yes, not directly from my own research perhaps, but I do recognize that and I am always surprised that you could put citizenship in a kind of school subject. Citizenship is not a school subject for me. Of course, knowledge about democratic systems is needed. How do voting rights work and so on? These are things that you should definitely teach students. But citizenship is mainly about an attitude, I think, and a way of living together, and I think you can hardly express that in a citizenship course. But that must be reflected in the way in which people at school treat each other, for example. And then you come back to when students have no voice in all kinds of things that are decided about them, how do you make it clear to them that they have

to do that after school and how that works? I can't imagine that you have been in education for 15 years and your voice is never really heard and then suddenly you have to do that as an independent citizen. It is incomprehensible to me.

Mario
Yes, so that should be set up differently I think. And I have to be honest, that is also one of the things that struck me with the student panel, last Friday during the seminar, that at one point the question came up of what you learn by deciding and thinking, to what extent do you already apply that in other situations and that the students had a lot of trouble coming up with examples of this. So it seems that the transfer to new situations turns out to be difficult in practice. Even if you pay extra attention to it.

Ben
Yes yes, well, of course we often see when you teach subjects very separately from each other, that it is very difficult to actually use general skills or knowledge that you gain there in another subject. That can be with languages and history and that can be anything. But if you consider citizenship as a separate part and, for example, only use such a student panel at a certain time when there is a meeting with the management of a school, for example, it is very difficult for students to think that you can also use it in other ways. The idea is that by doing research together with your teacher, for example, you get used to consulting with people from other generations, don't you? The teachers with the students, the students with the teachers, with the management about matters that you find important and about which you have an opinion. And that you may automatically use such an attitude and skill in other situations. I think it would be more important that the teachers of other disciplines realize that they also have an important role in this and that they are not only busy with imparting physics knowledge or teaching a language, but that the way in which you do that and how you involve students in it is an important part of the school's task to not only teach knowledge and to qualify the students for society, but that it is about the socialization function and personal development and that every subject plays a role in this.

Mario
Every subject. So it should actually come back throughout the curriculum.

Ben
Yes, I can imagine that there is a course or a number of courses in which you tell students something about how voting rights work and how parliament works, or how the city council operates. Well that kind of thing. You can cast that in a kind of course-like form. But how you shape that and how it really works in practice, you don't just learn that in a subject, it has to be felt throughout the school.

Mario
At the end of the seminar, you actually left us with a question, didn't you? And that question was, how to proceed with student participation. I thought yes, you are going to enjoy your retirement and I also had the feeling of: you are actually aiming this question at us at this moment. Maybe someone is listening, and then I thought, well you are not retired yet, and maybe you will still be working on this from time to time during your retirement. That will undoubtedly happen, but maybe you can help us a bit, so I also want to ask those questions the other way around: what now? What challenges do you see for student participation at the moment? And, what could perhaps be next steps to integrate this more into education in secondary schools and primary schools as well?

Ben
Yes, we haven't mentioned that so clearly yet, but it's certainly not just about secondary schools. It concerns students of all ages and in all types of education. So primary education, special education, secondary education and also at universities and colleges. We are no longer talking about children, perhaps, but about the voice of those who are learning there. Ultimately, you want to move to a culture in which everyone takes it for granted that people who play a role in such a practice are involved in what is conceived and decided. But that is a long-term matter. But in the short term, I would say from the teacher training programme, doing research with pupils in practice is really recommended. But you can also do that on a very small scale by first figuring something out with a very small group, maybe not researching, but figuring something out and talking to them about how they experience it. That is often a first step towards ‘oh yes, students have a completely different view and they can help me to make my teaching better’. Then you can later scale it up to a whole class or maybe something that plays a school-wide role, and so you can gradually show your fellow teachers that it also brings benefits, not only for the students themselves, but for the teachers and the whole school.

Mario
This is at the level of an individual teacher. I also saw, you also distinguished different levels, didn't you? Micro, macro, meso. We have now covered micro. Macro, maybe teacher training?

Ben
Yes. If you look at it from a macro perspective, it is no longer about one programme but, for example, about all programmes in the Netherlands. Perhaps in this case the Association of Teacher Training Colleges in the Netherlands, the VELON, could play a role in this, but perhaps also the requirements that are set by the ministry for teacher training colleges about what a teacher should ultimately be able to do when he or she graduates from a course, and not just the content or professional knowledge and the didactic knowledge, But that giving space to the

voice of the students should be part of the curriculum of every program and that it is also checked whether that happens and in what form it happens and whether it goes far enough.

Mario
Did we cover meso now too?

Ben
Well, the school management is really in between, you would say. Or the partnerships between schools could perhaps also be considered meso. There you may be a little earlier in the consultation and dialogue between the teacher training institutes and the training schools. I would like to argue, for example, that in all the preparations that there are every year and the consultations with the supervisors at school to make this an explicit topic and perhaps also organize workshops and courses for schools and teachers to show how this could work and why it is important and how you can teach students in different ways, not only in research, but also, for example, in student panels or in other ways give a voice in education.

Mario
Yes, it's very clear. I hope that people have listened carefully and are willing to take up the gauntlet and take on these challenges further. Then we have come to the end of this podcast. I would like to thank you very much for this conversation. Yes, enjoy your retirement, I would say. We are going to miss you enormously at ICLON, of course, but I hope you will come by regularly for a chat and a cup of coffee.

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