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Task demands and test expectations. Theory and empirical research on students' preparation for a teacher-made test

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PREFACE

According to Doyle (1997), the most important products of educational science are stories. Education, he argues, is too much embedded in specific contexts to define universal laws about learning and instruction. Instead, educational scientists should formulate concepts and theories that provide an approximate description of "strings of events" that may occur in certain types of educational setting (p. 95). In the ideal situation, the theories along with their concepts can be considered as stories that for those involved in the educational settings are used to understand their situation and to increase the effectiveness of their behavior. Empirical research should examine whether theories and concepts indeed connect with the realities as experienced by those involved in education.

The present dissertation is based on a research plan that, according to contract, I carried out during a period of several years at the Graduate School of Teaching and Learning of the University of Amsterdam (ILO). Right from the start, I considered the research plan as rich material for a story. I have spent the following years developing this story, which gradually I began to summarize to people with the question: Can students predict the test questions? Discussing my research topic informally (e.g., conversations with various people inside and outside educational science), formally (e.g., giving conference presentations) or in educational settings (e.g., giving a course on classroom assessment) helped me to be more precise in formulating concepts and relations between concepts. Moreover, people inside and outside my discipline supplied me with useful information to revise or extend parts of the story.

Next to these talks, I based the story on both existing empirical research and a new empirical investigation. This empirical investigation includes both the study that is at the focus of this dissertation as well as several small pilot studies, which are not reported here. Admittedly, at times it felt as if the scientific methods for collecting and analyzing data only interfered with developing a story. For instance, a large part of the dissertation project was spent on finding appropriate methods for statistical analysis. When looking back upon these efforts, however, I consider them as helpful for refining research questions and concepts, and allowing me to obtain findings that are more accurate. Moreover, I consider the statistical analyses as important products of the dissertation. Hopefully, they will be useful for other researchers when examining analogous research questions.

The original research plan built closely on previous studies carried out by colleagues at the ILO (Schellings, 1995; Van Hout-Wolters, 1986, 1990a, 1990b). Whereas this research was based on data collected in classrooms, its settings can be considered semi-realistic in that the studies made use of experimental designs or study materials that were not part of the regular curriculum. The step that I was to take was to examine whether findings could be replicated in fully realistic classroom settings. Moreover, I was to extend the research by examining students' expectations regarding both the content and the type of test questions. These changes urged me to connect various research domains. The results of this effort are summarized in the theoretical and empirical reviews of the literature included throughout the chapters. From the viewpoint of developing a story, these accounts are important products of the dissertation.

As is clear from the foregoing, I did not carry out the dissertation project on my own. In particular, I want to thank my supervisors Bernadette Van Hout-Wolters, Gert Rijlaarsdam and Huub Van den Bergh, who are co-authors of the articles that form the body of this dissertation. I thank Bernadette for giving me trust in developing my own story from the original research plan that she had written. She gave me this freedom despite her great involvement with the topic of task demands. I thank Gert for pushing me to think more deeply about the theoretical relations and for his willingness to fulfill the role of second supervisor after supervising my Master's thesis on writing processes. In both projects, he arranged the collaboration with Huub. I thank Huub especially for his part in the statistical analyses of the articles, which had important conceptual implications. Without his help, I doubt whether this dissertation would have been finished.

I also want to thank other people who have contributed to my dissertation. I thank the teachers and students who were willing to participate in the main study as well as those who participated in the pilot studies. I thank Marielle de Reuver and Lisa Peeters for helping me with analyzing the teachers' tests. I thank Petra Brouwer and Camilla Meijer who helped me out when data were to be collected at different schools at the same time. Petra Brouwer also gave detailed comments on the Dutch dissertation summary. I thank Gonny Schellings whose dissertation formed the starting point of my research project. I was happy that we could carry out a study together based on her dissertation data at the point when she was leaving the institute to work at another university. I thank Michel Couzijn, Geert ten Dam, Marianne Elshout-Mohr and others at the ILO whom I assisted with their research before I started my dissertation project. By making me confident with doing research, I am sure they helped me at least as much as I helped them. I thank Dirk Hoek, Carel van Wijk and Joop Hox for their methodological advice. I thank the researchers and other colleagues of the ILO, whom I worked with very pleasantly all those years. In particular, I thank Martine Braaksma for her support. Starting a dissertation project at the same time, we were able to share many experiences and to comment on each others products. I thank my current roommates Nadira Saab and Elwin Savelsbergh and my former roommates Dirk Hoek, Ruurd Taconis and Janneke Bakker for providing an agreeable working climate. I thank the teachers of several courses that I followed during the dissertation project. Most of these courses were organized by the Interuniversity Center for Educational Research (ICO). I thank the editors and the anonymous researchers who reviewed the manuscripts that we submitted to international journals. They gave very useful suggestions to improve our manuscripts and really set "task demands" towards we could direct our efforts. More generally, I thank all the researchers who provided me with ideas that I could build on. I thank my colleagues who are or were part of VPO and JURE, the national and European PhD organizations in educational research, respectively. Without their company the research conferences would not have been that nice. Finally, I thank Petra Brouwer, my parents, my family and my friends for their support throughout the years. I dedicate this dissertation to Frans Volkers, who always showed great interest in my efforts and looked forward to the day of my promotion. Very sadly, he passed away two months before the ceremony. On this day, my thoughts will be with him, An-nemarie and with all others who miss him.