A Story never told: A personal confession
Difference without distinction

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If a child develops differently than most other children, pedagogues, psychologists, teachers and doctors have normal distributions at their disposal, with respect to a variety of properties. The "abnormal" child is measured on these properties, and the deviating pattern is compared with known clusters of deviations, which are known under labels such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc. But is this measurement method really comparable to measuring the physical dimensions of something or someone?

For example, if the length of a piece of paper is measured with a ruler, this is literally measuring a quality of something. On the other hand, a score on a pre-constructed test - an IQ test for example - is actually generating an estimate based on empirical data of the extent to which someone will develop (ab)normally in the future. Therefore it’s a prediction. But this prediction is calibrated for children (and adults) who develop more or less "normally" in a world that develops more or less stably or "predictably".

Both conditions are not met in the case of the "abnormal" (neurodiverse) child. First, a deviant child sometimes does not fit into the normal distribution at all. Secondly, because of its complexity, the world is increasingly developing in many areas, not linearly and therefore unpredictably. Normal distributions are therefore misleading rather than providing insight.

In addition to the violation of the first condition, it is important to recognize that some children perform at yet a very young age in an excellent way (for example, reading and playing a Beethoven piano sonata with both hands at the age of three). According to our theories (pre-operational stage), this should not be possible. Precisely because they are rare, rare properties cannot be estimated on the basis of previous observations. With regard to the second condition, a new technology such as social media can completely upset a standard developmental trajectory, which means that children with characteristics other than those known until that time are at risk of slipping through the cracks. What becomes a hype cannot be predicted, and therefore does not fit into any normal distribution known as a priori.

Great risks
Applying physical techniques (measuring is knowing) to the psychological or social characteristics of people entails great risks. Unfortunately, the professional is not always aware of this. As a child with an autistiform profile, I myself wouldn’t have to do the highest grade of primary school, because I wasn’t supposed to reach the abstraction level required for this, according to the professionals from about 50 years ago. This column proves that they were wrong.

My parents and I were stubborn enough never to resign ourselves to this kind of "opinion", even though they came from medical specialists. Unfortunately, there are still many children who, due to this type of stigma, end up in a self-fulfilling prophecy (or self-serving bias). Also think of Matthew-effect in education: success creates success, disadvantage grows into deficit (the rich get richer and the poor get poorer). Precisely because all of this has been bothering me all my life, I was involved in a complaint against the IQ concept at the beginning of the 21st century (then initiated by Ewald Vervaet of the Dutch Histos Foundation). Preventive measures (including IQ "fortune telling") prepare the way for personal dramas, just as antibiotics (wrongly provided) ultimately make the outbreak of an epidemic inevitable. At that time, The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences put the charge aside. I think I'll knock on their door again. Science is, after all, progressive insight.