

Preface

Writing this dissertation has been quite an unexpected journey, for me as well as for those close to me. It almost feels as the result of a chain of random events and unexpected choices, with the first one dating back to the summer of 2007. While I have no recollection of how the weather was, I do vividly remember that enjoying graduation and having a good time with friends coincided with a fair amount of stress about what the next few months would bring. As was the case for many of my peers, I was forced to reflect on the question: Would I start working or would I go to college? While many of my friends back in the days prematurely dropped out of high school, those who did finish were mainly concerned with work and earning money. I remember going back and forth in my mind, but eventually decided to give college a try. This was a major decision for me (and my parents), knowing that school has never really been ‘my thing’, as exemplified by the five schools I attended in my seven years of high school and my track record of truancy – which sounded way cooler when I was younger. After weighing my options, a professional Bachelor’s degree in Medical Imaging and Radiotherapy or one in Social-Educational Care Work (Orthopedagogics), my desire to make a difference in youngsters’ lives was stronger than my odd fascination with radiology. With the support and a legitimate dose of skepticism from my environment, I enrolled in my three-years program in Orthopedagogics. During that time, becoming a quality of life researcher never popped up since I wanted to work in the field. Three fairly successful years and one internship abroad in an ambulatory service for families with children labelled as having emotional and/or behavioral problems in South-America later, I discovered that my lack of interest in everything school-related had developed into a growing scholarly curiosity. This led me to move 150 km away from home and enroll at Ghent University for my

Master's degree in Educational Sciences. Without realizing it at the time, this program sparked my interest in pursuing a career in research.

While I encountered the concept of quality of life for the first time during my bachelor's degree, I became more knowledgeable about the topic during my Master's. Aside from the traditional theoretical lectures on the topic, I had the opportunity to receive a training in quality of life assessment among individuals with intellectual disabilities. It wasn't, however, until my final year that I experienced the explicit connection between quality of life and youth care. When contemplating on the direction to go with my master's thesis, my promotor at the time, Franky D'Oosterlinck, pointed me in the direction of quality of life. One email in 2012 to, what a coincidence, my current co-promotor resulted in my second training in quality of life assessment at Tilburg University, and writing a master's thesis on quality of life assessment in youth care.

By immersing myself in the topic, I develop a profound belief that quality of life could serve as a positive framework to better understand the experiences and lives of youngsters in care.

After moving back home and having worked in residential youth care for a short period, I had the opportunity to start working as a researcher for the Centre of Expertise on Quality of Life (E-QUAL) at HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Being at E-QUAL at the right time allowed me to carry out my first qualitative research project on quality of life among adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders in residential youth care. This centre, which recently developed into the EQUALITY//ResearchCollective, also gave me the opportunity to explore ways to further work on the topic and provided me with the extra boost I needed to write up my first proposal for a practice-oriented research project (the RETHINK-project), with a focus on working on quality of life assessment among youngsters in everyday practice. A new chain of events and choices eventually resulted in merging my work at HOGENT with a PhD at Ghent University, and a one-year Special PhD Fellowship enabled me to finish this dissertation.

Just thinking about all the encounters with youngsters in this work made driving over 2000 km and spending countless hours writing alone on this dissertation more than worthwhile. However, all the work that has been done in close collaboration with youngsters and practitioners is not an end-stage, but is rather one small stepping stone to enhancing the quality of life of youngsters in youth care. It has driven me to further advocate for youngsters' active, meaningful and just involvement in research and daily practice. The time is now to further intertwine research and practice in taking essential steps in further implementing the framework in daily practice and to further capitalize the knowledge and insights that youngsters have provided us over the past years.