



MINUTES OF THE THIRD REMC MEETING, FLORENCE, 6-7 APRIL 2009

Research on school choice and effectiveness

Silvia used pooled PISA data to present a very interesting and rigorous analysis of the factors influencing choice of private dependent as opposed to public schools. Because the PISA survey does not collect information on the religion of the school, 'private dependent' schools (that is, schools which are privately managed but publicly funded) are taken as a proxy for faith schools. The analyses indicate that the proportion of young people in private dependent schools varies across national systems and that choice varies by individual background in only a minority of countries. In the second part of the presentation, Silvia assessed differences between private dependent and public schools in student reading scores, using propensity score matching to control for selection into private dependent schools.

Action:

- Silvia and Jaap intend to develop upon this analysis to either look at the effects of attending private dependent schools on attitudinal outcomes or to examine differences in reading scores between private independent and public schools.

Report on fieldwork

Each of the national teams presented an update on the fieldwork conducted and an appraisal of how the research instruments had worked. Within each country, research was conducted in selected case-study schools and involved interviews with primary school principals, teachers, parents and children. Supplementary methods used included classroom observation (Scotland, Malta and Flanders) and children's essays (Ireland). Across the countries, the research included a good mix of schools with different profiles, and tapped the experiences of parents and children from majority,

minority and no faith groups. A discussion of the fieldwork proved a useful way of opening up dialogue about the perspectives and themes emerging from the research.

Actions

- Each team should circulate their presentation on fieldwork progress by Thursday, 30th April.
- Two of the teams, Ireland and Scotland, had difficulties to date in accessing Muslim parents and children through the case-study schools. They are to attempt to contact members of this group through other methods.
- It has proved difficult to involve a Catholic school in Germany but efforts will continue to obtain access.

Structure of the final report

There was a good deal of discussion about the possible structure of the final report, mainly centring on how the primary qualitative research could be best addressed. In light of issues relating to the specificity of national systems, language differences and time constraints, the following was agreed:

- Each team should develop a ‘national’ working paper analysing their primary research according to a common framework (with some flexibility to reflect national/local circumstances within this framework).
- Each working paper should be around 8-10,000 words and will form a chapter in the final report.
- These working papers will be used as the basis for a comparative chapter addressing cross-cutting themes.
- The quantitative analyses of PISA data will be presented as separate working papers within the final report.

Conceptual/analytical framework for the study

The meeting revisited the draft conceptual framework of the study. Through the medium of Skype, Kathleen raised two issues which she felt had not yet been adequately integrated into the framework: firstly, the power of religious institutions; and secondly, the commonality across religious organisations in their treatment of issues relating to gender and sexuality. She also raised the broader issue of ‘what is religion?’. A number of issues were raised in response:

- It would be helpful for Kathleen to write a short summary of her arguments and circulate them to the group.
- These macro issues form an important part of the context of our study. However, the degree to which religion is ‘organised’ varies across countries and religious groups (including those with secular beliefs). Many tensions occur at the horizontal level rather than solely reflecting vertical power relations.
- It is important not to lose sight of power(lessness) issues in relation to children themselves.
- In relation to the definition of religion, it was felt that we should take what teachers, parents and children themselves consider as ‘religion’ or ‘belief’.

Kathleen’s intervention was seen as an important springboard for the discussion. In particular, our study is seen as very broad-ranging as it addresses micro (child-family), meso (school) and macro (State/school system) levels. Given the constraints of time, the need to prioritise the child-family-school nexus in our analytical framework was emphasised, while still placing it in the broader macro context. The central elements of this analytical framework are outlined in the Appendix.

Actions:

- Kathleen to write a short summary of her arguments and circulate them to the group.
- ESRI, UCD and Sheila Riddell to work on developing the analytical framework outlined in the Appendix for circulation in early May. This framework would then be used as the basis for establishing overarching themes to be addressed in the data analysis.

Approach to analysis

Broadly, two potential approaches to analysis of the data were discussed: looking at themes among parents, children and teachers separately; or using the school as a case-study to explore the different perspectives of teachers, children and parents within the school. It was agreed that the approach used could be decided by each team but that the analysis would be conducted under the overarching headings developed from the conceptual framework.

Action:

- Each team should develop a coding frame for their own use; this should be based on the main elements of the conceptual framework but can also reflect national/local specificities.
- Preliminary analysis by each team of the school-parent-child data relating to parts one and two (context; personal identity) of the analytical framework by the June meeting. This can be used as a basis to revisit the framework at the meeting.
- Time-frame: first draft of common country chapters by early October, with drafts to be circulated in mid-September for discussion at the group meeting.
- More detailed discussion of the comparative chapter to take place at the October meeting.

Practical issues

- Due to Mary's health, the group agreed to look at the possibility of relocating the June meeting from Leuven to Malta.
- Because of the symposium proposal sent to the ECER conference, it was agreed to look at the possibility of having the October meeting as an add-on to the conference in order to minimise time and money costs.

Appendix: Elements of the conceptual/analytical framework

The following four elements will provide the structure for the analysis. This is seen as a dynamic framework with change occurring within and between the elements on an on-going basis.

1. Context

- What is the profile of the society in terms of religious and secular beliefs?
- What options and choices are provided by the educational system in relation to these beliefs?
- How do parents and children make choices within this context?

Here information from the country report and stakeholder interviews can also be used to describe the macro-level context within which school and family processes play out.

2. Social construction of personal identity

- How salient is religion as an aspect of identity on the part of children and their parents? How do parents and children describe (self-label) their belief systems?
- How do parents seek to impart (formally, e.g. through religious practice, and informally) their beliefs to their children? How does the child negotiate their own identity within this? (Where religious education explicitly takes place outside the school context, this should be considered here.)

3. Social construction of school identity

- Is religious or values education an explicit part of the curriculum? What is considered as 'religious education'? In practice, what is its nature and content?
- In what other (formal and informal) ways does the school communicate beliefs and values to its students?
- How does the school, and the teachers within it, 'manage' diversity and inclusion?

4. Home-school interaction and potential tensions

Personal and school identities (within the particular context) interact to shape this element of the framework. Again, this is seen as a dynamic process; home-school tensions may eventually result in formal responses at the school level or in parental 'accommodation' or withdrawal within the school context.

- How do parents and teachers view each others' roles in shaping the beliefs and values of children?
- Are there any contradictions/tensions between school and home in relation to beliefs and values? (from the point of view of school, parents and children)