THE EFFECT OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS’ DOMINANCE IN CLASSROOMS ON COGNITIVE AND NONCOGNITIVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

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Abstract
This paper focusses on the relation between pupils’ religious minority or majority position in school on the one hand, and a number of cognitive and noncognitive educational outcomes on the other. On the basis of theoretical notions about value and functional communities (Coleman), school belonging and school membership (Goode), and the effects of school composition, it was expected that pupils in a position of religious dominance function and perform better at school. Data from 550 Dutch primary schools and 10,000 grade 2 pupils were analysed using descriptive and multilevel analysis techniques. The results failed to confirm expectations concerning a position of religious dominance.

Keywords: classroom composition, parental religious affiliation, school denomination, educational outcomes, value communities, school belonging, large-scale research, multilevel analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 20th century the principle of freedom of education has applied in the Netherlands. This means inter alia that parents have a right to establish a school and that schools may teach in accordance with a specific religious belief or philosophy. In addition all schools are entitled to equal subsidies. It implies that public schools run by local government receive the same funding as private schools, most of which are based on religious belief and run by private law institutions (Ritzen, Van Dommelen & De Vijlder, 1997). The system has led to an educational system comprising three main denominations: public, Roman Catholic and Christian Protestant, each representing some 30% of primary schools. In addition there are 16 smaller denominations such as Islamic, Hindu and Montessori, together constituting 7% of all schools (Van Haaften & Snik, 1999).

Over the years the number of studies of the relation between parents’ religious affiliation and their children’s educational outcomes has been limited, not only in the Netherlands but elsewhere as well (Dijkstra & Peschar, 1996; Sherkat & Darnell, 1999). The findings of such research
show that by and large the effects of religious belief are minimal, and if pupils’ socioeconomic background is taken into account as well, they disappear altogether. Considerably more research has been done on the relation between school denomination and children’s educational outcomes (Dijkstra, 1997). Such research focussed largely on cognitive outcomes at the end of primary education; noncognitive outcomes have hardly been researched at all. The results of this kind of research have not been consistent: sometimes they indicate effects, sometimes not. To the extent that effects are noted, the trend is for private schools, and more particularly Roman Catholic ones, to do better than public and other private schools.

Of late the relation between religion and education has attracted renewed attention (Dijkstra, 1997). This is largely attributable to a process of secularisation and declining church membership that started in the 1960s, which has drastically affected the role of religion in society (Felling, Peters & Schreuder, 1991; Hermans & Van Vugt, 1997). Noteworthy in this regard is that, despite the radically altered situation in society at large, the Dutch education system is still organised on the basis of religious classification (Bax, 1988; Dekker & Ester, 1996). Although only 37% of Dutch people regard themselves as members of a religious denomination, some 65% of schools remain private, religious institutions (Becker & De Wit, 2000; Dronkers, 1996). This paradoxical situation makes it interesting to determine what relations there are between religion, denomination and educational outcomes.

2. MAJORITY POSITION

This article investigates three aspects pertaining to religion. First I examine the relation between the religious affiliation of parents of children in primary education and the denomination of the schools attended by these children on the one hand, and certain educational outcomes on the other. In contrast to a lot of earlier research, the value of this study is that it is relatively large-scale (about 550 schools and 10,000 pupils), is based on very recent (1999) data, involves young children, analyses both cognitive and noncognitive effect measures, and uses adequate analytical techniques (multilevel analyses). A key factor in the study is the pupil’s position in the school as regards religion: is he or she in a majority or a minority position? Although this theme has been researched previously, those studies were conducted from the angle of ethnicity and social background rather than from a religious perspective.