

Critical Review: Maria Grever, Ben Pelzer & Terry Haydn (2011): High school students' views on history, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43:2, 207-229

The research paper by Grever et al (2011) sought to investigate high school students' perspective on the history they consider worthwhile. They report the findings of a survey administered to 678 Dutch, English and French students who attend multicultural high schools in urban European cities. The study was undertaken to describe some relevant aspects of history education and if and how these issues are related to ethnicity and gender. The authors believe that European students receive little in the way of global perspectives in history classes and that the curriculum is increasingly dominated by national history. This is in spite of the fact that knowledge of global history is central if young people are to grow up with an understanding of the issues that shape the world they are growing in. The main findings from the survey data found that students are either interested in ancient or modern history, and "history of religion" scores high amongst all migrant youths as opposed to natives. Using factor analysis, they also uncovered five profiles of historical interest that were related to the students' demographic background. This critical review will seek to question the choice of questionnaires as a data collection tool, the reasoning behind conducting the study in three different countries, issues with the sampling strategy and finally the limitations with the use of factor analysis.

The choice of questionnaires as a data collection tool raises several issues that require scrutiny. Firstly, the study was conducted in three different countries and consequently the questionnaire would have been translated to three different languages. This is worrying for the reader as there is no guarantee that the context did not get lost in translation. The authors do indicate that a try-out of the questionnaire was undertaken in the Netherlands and England before distributing the revised version to all three countries. However they fail to try out the questionnaire in France and the reader has no way of knowing whether translating the questionnaire to French posed any problems. This is a serious consideration as a questionnaire "entails more than simply giving the same question to all respondents. The researcher has to be confident that each question will be

interpreted by each respondent in a similar manner” (Dowling & Brown, 2010; 72). The authors do attempt to tackle this concern by carrying out four focus groups interviews with 16 Dutch students in order to “check that respondents clearly understood the questions posed and that there were no distortions in responses caused by issues of language capability” (Grever et al, 2011; 210). Despite that there doubt is still cast on whether the English and French students understood the questionnaire as funding restrictions restricted the conduction of focus groups in all three countries.

Secondly, questionnaire and survey type studies are susceptible to being drawn into the trap of a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. Wineburg describes this as "the false definition of a situation, which in turn engenders behavior that brings the situation into conformity"(cited in Kane et al, 2002; 675). Basically, problems arise when researchers' expectations are built into the data collection tool, thus the likelihood that the participants will satisfy those expectations cannot be ignored. Furthermore according to Grever et al (2011) the questionnaire “explored students' *ideas*... what history they *believed* should be taught... their *views* on the purpose of history... and how they *viewed* their own sense of identity” (210: emphasis added). Since the purpose of the study was to uncover views and beliefs, the reader is left wondering as to the rationale behind relying on a questionnaire to answer those questions particularly as there are “severe limitations on what can be achieved using a questionnaire” (Dowling & Brown, 2010; 72). Primarily, the purpose of quantitative research is the creation of knowledge where methods “are designed that allow for the results and interpretations of quantitative research on representative samples to be inferred to the population under study within the bounds of a predetermined level of confidence” (Borland, 2001; 9). Data interpretation is undertaken to formulate conclusion stated with a predetermined degree of certainty. Yet the authors seem very reluctant to draw general conclusions by stating phrases such as “caution must be taken in generalizing results” (Grever et al, 2011; 212) and “with some caution” (ibid; 226) recommendations for educational policy are presented. In addition, the recommendations presented such as “teach the full breadth of the

human past, from ancient times to the present day” (ibid; 226) seem rather broad and general and have questionable use and practicality.

It is rather puzzling the authors’ choice to conduct the study in three different countries. They claim that the “differences between the three countries involved in the study were not our primary concern” (ibid; 217). If differences between the three countries are not of their concern then why devote time, effort and money to do so and compromise on the quality of research. For example “funding constraints” (ibid; 210) prevented the use of focus groups across all three countries, which the authors acknowledge as a limitation to the design of the research. It seems that Grever et al (2011) were trying to do too much at once. Perhaps conducting an exploratory study in one city would have meant that they wouldn’t have had to compromise on the quality of research because of issues such as financial restraints. Furthermore, when the prime purpose was to compare the views of students of different ethnicities and gender and not differences between cities, then the link between the reasoning to administer the research in three cities and the primary purpose behind conducting the study becomes more enigmatic.

The discussion of the sampling strategy for the questionnaire was uninformative and Grever et al (2011) simply summarize the characteristics of target population. Readers are informed about the composition of the respondents by including information such as the number of high schools, nationalities, gender and respondents per country. Generally, in quantitative research, samples are representative of the larger population (Borland, 2001) and the authors do not address representativeness. There is also no mention of the sampling strategy for the focus group. The study fails to elaborate on the process that led the researchers to choose this sample of 16 pupils in particular. There is no indication, for example, as to whether this sample was voluntary or whether the school selected them. Readers are only informed that the 16 students come “from different ethnic backgrounds” (ibid; 210) and no indication of any other characteristics about those participants is presented. The information presented about the sample is

insufficient and compromises a reader's ability to judge the validity and reliability of the questionnaire and the focus group interview data.

Using factor analysis, Grever et al (2011) investigate the meaning of history for students' personal lives. Five factors or "profiles of historical interest" (ibid; 221) were identified based on 16 questionnaire items. Despite the widespread use of factor analysis it still remains that the "utility of factor analysis for theory development is dependent on the manner in which it is implemented" (Fabrigar et al, 1999; 273). As a method, factor analysis requires the researcher to make critical decisions with respect to how the analysis is performed, each of which have important implications for the derived results. One issue is the number of variables that represent each factor. Research suggests that analysis deliver more accurate results when each factor is represented by multiple variables and "methodologists have recommended that at least three to five measures variables representing each common factor to be included in a study" (ibid; 273). Yet in two of the factors, *connection with history of migrants* and *pride and connection with history of my family*, only two variables are used. This potentially harms the reliability and validity of the authors findings.

In the study under question, Grever et al (2011) attempt to explore students' perspectives on the history they consider valuable. Using questionnaires and factor analysis they found that with regards to kinds of history, *history of religion*, scored high amongst migrant students. They also found that students are interested in either ancient or modern history. Finally, using factor analysis they identified five profiles of historical interest related to the students' background. Nonetheless, this review has highlighted some of shortcomings in the study. A major concern is with the choice of questionnaires as a data collection tool. The issues with that is the possibility that meaning is lost in translation. The researchers do take some measures to tackle this, however doubt is cast on whether what they do is enough. Moreover, in attempting to unearth views, ideas and beliefs it is questionable why a survey was conducted especially since the authors are very reluctant when drawing

conclusions. Furthermore, the purpose of the study was to compare the views of students of different ethnicities and gender and not differences between cities. Thus the rationale behind administering the research in three cities is unclear. Also, the researchers fail to provide sufficient information regarding their sampling procedures. Finally, the way the factor analysis was conducted makes it difficult to assess the reliability of their findings.

References:

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