

Educational Research Centre's new Research Series launched

The Educational Research Centre today (Monday December 11th) launched ***Shaping Schools: What TIMSS tells us about education systems***. The paper, by Eemer Eivers and Emma Chubb is the first in the Centre's new Research Series.

Shaping Schools compares the education system in Ireland to those in other countries, focussing not just on policy and curriculum, but also on broader structural characteristics, and how demography and cultural context influence the learning experiences of children in schools. It draws on data from TIMSS 2015 (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), in which almost 600,000 students worldwide took part.

Unusual features of the Irish education system include the relatively large number of very small primary schools and private denominational schools, and the extent to which multi-grade classes are a feature of primary schools. Also, as **Emma Chubb**, an author, noted “Ireland is atypical in that we have smaller class sizes at post-primary than at primary. In most countries, the opposite applies. Internationally, post-primary mathematics and science classes averaged approximately four more students per class than at Fourth grade.”

Lead author, **Dr Eemer Eivers**, commented “Another unusual feature of our education system is the imbalance in time allocated to maths and science in primary school. Across TIMSS countries as a whole, maths received twice as much instructional time as science at primary level. In Ireland, five times as much time was spent on maths as science. Also, the amount of time spent teaching science in Irish primary schools was lower than in any other participating country. Since TIMSS 2011, there has been a noticeable increase in the time allocated to mathematics at Fourth Class and a sharp drop in the amount of time allocated to science lessons.”

In a related vein, the report reveals that Irish post-primary students spent considerably less time than the international average in science lessons (90 vs 144 hours, respectively), and less time than average in mathematics lessons (109 vs 138 hours, respectively). The authors note that not only is the post-primary school year in Ireland slightly shorter than the TIMSS average, but, in a number of countries, “shadow education” systems (akin to grinds) were common. Thus, in countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and Korea, students may spend considerably more time than Irish students in various educational settings.

Ability grouping was far less common in Irish primary schools than was the case internationally. At post-primary, ability grouping was rare for science lessons in Ireland (7% of students vs 31%, internationally) but extremely common for maths lessons (88%, vs 44% internationally). As **Eemer Eivers** noted, “Perhaps contrary to popular belief, there is no clear link between individual level or country level performance and the extent to which ability grouping is used.”

Shaping Schools examines a variety of other aspects of education systems, including: the complex relationship between languages spoken in a country and performance on the TIMSS assessment; pre-school attendance; how curricula are structured and how frequently they are updated; and, the nature of teacher qualification and certification.

More information

The report is available for free download from www.erc.ie. More information about TIMSS is also available from www.erc.ie/TIMSS. The authors and report title are as follows:

Eemer Eivers & Emma Chubb. (2017). *Shaping schools. What TIMSS tells us about education systems.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

ERC Research Series

The report released today is the first in the Educational Research Centre’s Research Series. This type of publication is designed to provide regular and accessible reports on aspects of the research carried out by the Centre.

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