

Friedrich Schweitzer

## **Research on Confirmation Work and its meaning for Practice**

With this conference we are looking at the results from 10 years of international research on confirmation work. This is a unique and most wonderful opportunity. Never before has there been a comparable international research project in the field of confirmation work bringing together colleagues from 10 countries and even more churches. Most of all it is wonderful being able to present research results which are of interest not only for academic purposes but also for the practice of confirmation work itself.

My presentation will of course not be able to cover all results or to describe the whole project in detail. All this may be found in our joint publications. What I want to offer you is an introduction to the reasons for this research, its design and selected results. After this overview, I will focus explicitly on the question of what this kind of research can mean for the practice of confirmation work. In conclusion I will offer some thoughts on the way ahead.

### **1. Why international empirical research on confirmation work?**

In my understanding it is important to not just dive into the research results and just skip this question: Why international empirical research on confirmation work? Why should this kind of research be meaningful? For those doing the research the answer is obvious: the results are highly interesting. Yet if we do not want to limit ourselves to some positivist approach we need to be aware of the wider background.

Four reasons for doing research on confirmation work appear to be of special importance:

- First, from a theological point of view, empirical research is important because all human work—including education—is fallible and therefore is in need of improvement. Especially from a Lutheran perspective,

education is part of God's worldly reign, even if a program like confirmation work is offered by the church. We are therefore encouraged and even obliged to use all possibilities for improving this program, including educational research.

- Second—and for many in the first place—, confirmation work is a program offered for young people. This is a decisive aspect, theologically as well as educationally. In order to fulfill its purposes confirmation work must be carried out in such a way that young people are effectively supported in their understanding of both, the Christian faith in general and their own faith in particular. Moreover, they must be given the opportunity to get to know congregations and the church as lived expressions of this faith. This purpose was actually the reason for transforming the traditional model of confirmation preparation and instruction into what is now called confirmation work. Confirmation *instruction* was based on the model of the traditional school—confirmation *work*, in contrast, uses youth work as its guiding model, with many creative opportunities which young people find attractive. From this perspective, empirical research is needed because those in charge of developing programs for young people should know as much as possible about the questions, interests and doubts of the adolescents addressed.
- The third reason for empirical research on confirmation work has to do with the importance attributed to this field of work by the church, by theology and in society. Traditionally, most empirical research in religious education in Europe has been directed at the school subject of Religious Education which, following the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers, is indeed of prime importance. Yet in today's situation the so-called non-formal sector has become more and more important. Contrary to the family or the media which are often considered informal education, non-formal education can be intentionally shaped by the church and can also be influenced by theology. Moreover, there is a growing awareness that the Protestant heritage in education is closely related to the non-formal sector. In some countries like the United States where there is no Religious Education in state-maintained schools, programs like the Sunday School or

confirmation work are decisive. In other words and independently of the differences between the countries, confirmation work deserves much more attention, within the church as well as beyond in society at large. In the European countries participating in the study, between 400.000 and 500.000 adolescents participate in this program per year—a figure which can remind us of the actual scope of this program which is quite remarkable.

- Fourth and last, although not least important are the ecumenical reasons for international research. At a time when many people seem to have lost interest in the traditional ecumenical dialogues on questions of theological dogmatics, joint research on confirmation work turned out to offer an effective platform for what can be called practical ecumene—the exchange of perspectives, experiences and ideas at a practical level of church work. For myself, this practical ecumenical experience has been a real gift and a true benefit which I had not expected from doing research. I am convinced that working together in an international research project can be quite influential in supporting mutual understanding and in making us aware in new ways of the tasks and aims which we, in the Protestant churches and beyond, have in common.

So there are good reasons for doing research on confirmation work and for doing it internationally. Yet what exactly was or is the research project I am referring to?

## **2. Researching confirmation work in Europe 2006 – 2017: Beginnings, design, selected results**

### **2.1 Many Beginnings**

Most naturally, international projects have many beginnings. To really do justice to the beginnings of the present project one would have to look into each of the nine participating countries or churches. In every country there are different starting points and different traditions for researching confirmation work.

For the actual cooperation within the project, however, a conference at Tübingen in 2007 played a decisive role because it brought together, for the first time, a number of researchers from different countries. Soon more meetings followed and a network was formed as the basis for doing joint research—the *International Network for Research and Development of Confirmation and Christian Youth Work*.

This network became the basis for our research, with first seven and then nine European countries participating. Most of the churches were Lutheran or Reformed; also, the Methodist Church in Germany joined the second study. Moreover, there is the parallel project in the United States which is an independent project but has also been in touch with us from the beginning.

## **2.2 The studies in overview**

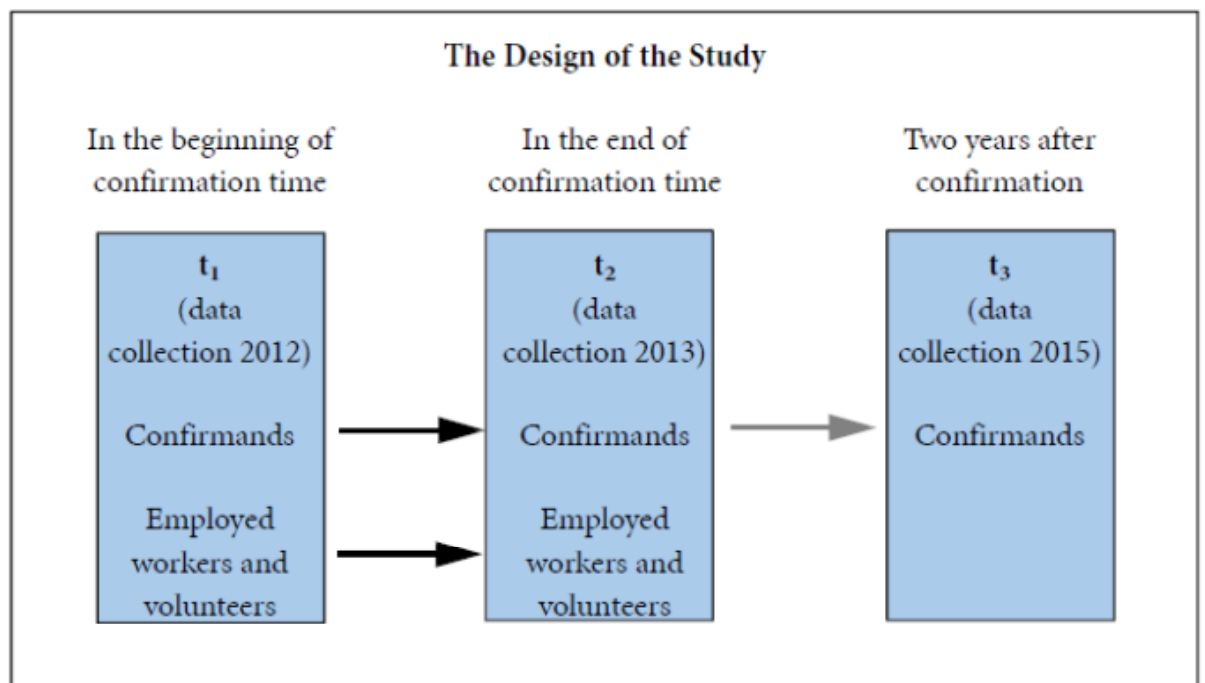
The project comprises two studies, the first one with data collection in 2007/2008, the second one with data from 2012/2013 and 2015. The second study repeated the major parts of the first study in order to allow for comparisons over time. Both studies were longitudinal. The same adolescents completed questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of their confirmation time. Moreover, with the second study, another questionnaire was sent out two years after confirmation in order to gain first insights into possible long-term effects of confirmation work.

The first aim of the whole study was to achieve a multi-perspective empirical description of confirmation work, including as many aspects of the practice of this program as possible. The study therefore included the views of the adolescents taking part in this program as well as that of the workers, both ministers or other full-time employees in charge of the program as well as volunteers. In some of the countries, questionnaires were also completed by parents of the confirmands. Although the study included some qualitative parts, the main emphasis was quantitative. Research questions referred to expectations and experiences concerning confirmation work but also to religious upbringing and religious attitudes. The second study added a special

emphasis on young people becoming volunteers after confirmation and on adolescents' long-term relationship to the church.

The study was carried out in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. The aim was to have samples which would be as representative for the respective part of the population as possible. This was considered important in terms of gaining valid results as well as a sound basis for international comparison. With more than 28.000 confirmands taking part, for example, in the 2012/2013-study this aim was clearly achieved. Concerning the part of the study two years after confirmation, it was not possible to work with representative samples because there is no institutional basis for reaching young people after the end of confirmation time. The data from this part of the study are of interest in terms of their truly longitudinal character, making it possible to trace developments on an individual level over several years. Only the data from those adolescents were used for evaluation who had completed all three questionnaires and whose questionnaires could be matched.

The design of the second study looks like this:



The following table gives an overview on the samples:

Table 1: Sample sizes for the countries involved ( $t_1$ )

Country	Total	DE EKD	AT	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	PL	HU	DE EmK
units/ groups	1635	576	28	477	61	111	48	59	42	134	99
confir- mands	28070	10191	495	7217	2024	2436	2337	1381	362	866	761
workers	4172	1667	126	905	80	679	105	357	-	115	138

In order to give you a glimpse of what the young people behind these figures are thinking I want to quote a number of the statements they noted in the questionnaires:

*"Christian Faith doesn't seem too bad to me, but the older I am, the stronger my doubts become." (f)*

*"I come from a not very religious family, so my confirmation time was important for coming in contact with faith for the first time and for getting interested in it. I only hope, that I am not the only one, whose confirmation time was influential." (f)*

*"Today, the origin of the earth for example can be explained by the theory of evolution and a lot of dubious phenomena by logical and scientific facts." (f)*

### 2.3 Main results

The results from the international studies have been published in three volumes (Schweitzer et al. 2010, 2015, 2017), in addition to other publications in the national

languages. In the following I will refer to both, results which are especially encouraging but also to results which show that there is a need for improvements.

- *Approval rates:* Across the participating countries, confirmation work receives very high approval from all people involved in the program, from the adolescents as well as the ministers and other workers or the volunteers. The average for the participating countries is 76% of the confirmands who said that they were satisfied with their “whole confirmation time”—a result that should be counted as a real success, even if those less satisfied with the program should not be overlooked.

- *Religious attitudes:* The religious attitudes show a mixed picture which may be interpreted against the background of the high participation rates and, consequently, of the fact that it is not only adolescents especially interested in faith or religion who take part in confirmation work. At the beginning of confirmation time, only very general statements like “I believe in God”, “God loves all humans and cares about each one of us” or “There is life after death” find approval from a clear majority of the confirmands. More clearly Christian views like “Jesus has risen from the dead” receive much less approval.

Many of the religious attitudes addressed by the study are strengthened during confirmation time, thus following the expectations of the church. Yet two years after confirmation, most of these positive effects had disappeared, although the 16 year olds also showed some increased religious interests, most of all concerning life after death.

One of the most challenging items was “God created the world”. Already at the beginning of confirmation time, average approval in the countries was as low as 38% among the confirmands, with much lower approval rates in some of the countries (Sweden: 22%). These rates did not change much during confirmation time which implies that possible doubts in creation faith were not addresses successfully. Two years after confirmation, the approval rate had decreased even more (international average: 34% - but one has to keep in mind that the results from two years after confirmation are not representative; most likely, representative results would show

even less approval). This result concerning faith in God the creator is an example for how the study could help improve confirmation work. It makes the ministers and workers aware of problems in the understanding of the Christian contents taught to the young people.

- *Relevance of the contents:* Several questions in the questionnaires were related to the confirmands' interest in certain topics. One key question directly addressed the issue of perceived relevance: "What I learnt in confirmation training has little to do with my everyday life". 45% agreed to this statement (European average). This indicates that confirmation work has only been partly successful in showing young people how the Christian tradition is related to their own faith and life. This observation is further supported by the results concerning the church and the adolescents' relationship to the church.

- *Relationship to the church:* First of all, the adolescents have a very positive view of the church. At the end of their confirmation time an average of 73% of them agree to the item "The church does a lot of good things for the people". At the same time, however, it is only 40% who say that it is "important" to them "to belong to the church". In other words, even after one or two years of confirmation time, most of the adolescents perceive the church as a beneficial institution which, just like a trustworthy bank or hospital, operates quite independently especially from its younger members. The question following from this must therefore be how young people can be given a better sense of how a church depends on the participation and influence especially of its adolescent members—an impression they will only be able to gain if they are given the chance to really have a say in church.

Concerning the relationship to the church, another item must be taken into consideration—an item which we adopted from a general survey on youth in Germany. "The church does not have answers to the questions that are important for me". In this case, it was 32% who agreed at the end of confirmation time. It must be added that this number actually increased from the beginning to the end of confirmation time which shows that there is not only the issue of relevance but also the challenge of finding convincing answers to what matters to the young people.



Let me add two more statements from the adolescents themselves:

*"The Church was always too conservative and its history is also not that kind of good. Even more, the stories are stupid rubbish." (m)*

*"With the help of my confirmation time I got involved in the life of my congregation, and now I am glad to be active in the congregation and in youth work. I got to know a lot of people and made some of my most important friends. I really learnt to appreciate my faith and myself." (f)*

- *Worship services:* One of the intentions of confirmation work is related to introduce young people to the meaning of worship services as a central part of Christian life. In many congregations the confirmands are obliged to attend a certain number of services which testifies to the importance of this aim. At the same time it is a given in most European countries that young people attend worship services only rarely, be it before or after confirmation. It is no surprise then that many adolescents view worship services rather skeptically: At the beginning of confirmation time, 50% agree to the statement "Church services are usually boring". What should not be expected, however, is that the respective percentage is up to 54% at the end of confirmation time. This result indicates another important challenge for the future. How can the confirmands be given a chance for more attractive encounters with worship services? In this respect, the results from the studies indicate a clear direction. Young people want to experience forms of worship which they consider adequate for adolescents, and they would like to contribute their own ideas to the services in general.

- *Volunteerism:* One of the results which surprised and also encouraged me the most refers to the role of volunteers in confirmation work. In my own country, we calculated that about 62.000 volunteers are active in confirmation work every year, and many of them are only a few years older than the confirmands. This means that we have about one volunteer for three to four confirmands in Germany. In Finland, the ratio is even more impressive. An important implication of this result refers to the question of what comes after confirmation.

Traditionally, many ministers complain that the adolescents will stay away from church after their confirmation. Seeing so many of them continue as volunteers after confirmation means that the invitation to become such a volunteer after confirmation is of key importance.

The study also looked into the question what factors are responsible for the decision to become a volunteer. The answers are both, discouraging and encouraging for confirmation work. What is discouraging is the fact that many factors relate back to experiences in childhood, most of all to the religious upbringing in the family and to having parents who were or are active as volunteers as well. Becoming a volunteer appears to be somewhat hereditary, as it were. Yet confirmation work itself also plays a clear role in strengthening the motivation for volunteerism among the confirmands, which is encouraging for this program offered to adolescents. Good experiences with confirmation work are of influence but there also are specific influences, for example, of having had a chance to try out voluntary work during confirmation time.

There are, of course, many more results that would deserve to be reported here. For the sake of time, however, I have to refer you to our books for more detailed descriptions. In order to include at least one consideration from international comparison I want to add some comments on the *participation rates* for confirmation work in the different countries. When calculated on the basis of the total population at the respective age, i.e., not as percentage of the actual members of the churches, participation rates vary greatly from country to country, from close to 90% in Finland to less than 5% in Austria. These differences mirror the religious or denominational situation in the countries. What is more remarkable are the changes over time. While there is a lot of stability in some of the countries, there has been a strong decline over the years in others. This applies most clearly to Sweden where participation declined from more than 80% in 1970 to just over 30% in 2012. In Norway, similar developments appear to be happening, even if at a much higher level. It is an open question which factors may be responsible for this decline—a question which could motivate further research on confirmation work in the future.

The different developments of the participation rates show both, the stability and the fragility of confirmation work. Even an age-old institution is not exempt from possible break-downs. This is why it is important to be aware of the need for continually improving confirmation work.

### **3. How the practice of confirmation work can benefit from research**

Again there are many more ways in which the practice of confirmation work can benefit from research than I will be able to describe here. I limit myself to four considerations.

My first point is about *visibility*. Without wanting to praise our own work it is probably justified to claim that our research—together with our publications, conferences, individual lectures and presentations in many places—has strongly contributed to making people aware of the importance of confirmation work. This is true for the churches which have come to realize that this field of work deserves continuous attention in church leadership. It is also true, at least to some degree, for a wider public in the academy and in society in general. We made a number of efforts to demonstrate that confirmation work should also be viewed and appreciated as education for civil society, for example, in terms of supporting social values and commitment to the common weal or, to make it more concrete, in terms of motivating young people to become volunteers.

My second consideration refers more to the *practitioners* themselves. Many of them have let us know that they felt greatly *encouraged* by the experience of being involved with serious research. That confirmation work is considered worthy of a prolonged international research process seems to imply that confirmation work is important and that it deserves attention and additional resources, be it in terms of time or of financial resources. Such encouragement also implies a new commitment to confirmation work, again among the practitioners as well as in church leadership.

My third point possibly is the most difficult aspect of the kind of research we are talking about. Research always implies some kind of *evaluation*, at least to some degree. Our study

intentionally avoided the danger of creating an international rating system for confirmation work like, for example, with the well-known PISA studies. Yet we could not avoid—and we did also not want to avoid—providing a *critical mirror*. In my understanding such a mirror provided by research results is much needed, in any kind of work. It necessarily shows both, strengths and weaknesses. In fact, experienced practitioners have always known that they have to be aware of both, their own successes as well as their short-comings. Yet research can carry such self-reflection a decisive step further by offering a systematic analysis based on empirical methods and also on the cooperation of an international team of experts.

The critical function of research would, however, not be helpful if there would not also be its constructive function of *identifying perspectives for future improvements* which is my fourth and last point in this section. As has hopefully become clear throughout my presentation there are many such perspectives addressed in the results, be it concerning worship services or concerning the presentation of the Christian faith. Moreover, the issue of long-term effects of confirmation work deserves much more attention in the future, among others, by becoming more systematic in our approaches to working with young volunteers.

#### **4. The way ahead**

This conference holds many chances for getting new impulses and for developing perspectives for the future. It is therefore part of one of the main tasks ahead of us—bringing together theory or research and practice. As mentioned before, many efforts have already been undertaken in this respect, with conferences and presentations. Yet even more efforts are needed—joint efforts of researchers, church leaders and of those in charge of the initial and continuing training of ministers and other workers. In my eyes, the research results which have become available now are a true gold mine which should be exploited.

The last task, however, I want to address here is the question of starting *another international study on confirmation work*—a new study which would be the *third international study on*

*confirmation work*. If it is true that the first two studies were able to create encouragement and new commitment, it seems most natural that we should not wait until it will be too late to keep this new motivation alive.

Looking back to the second study today we see that it was important to repeat certain parts of the first study. But with its new focus on the time after confirmation the second study provided new insights and thus was a big step forward. A third study would certainly have to do more than just repeating the earlier research. It should—and could—again enable us to make another step ahead. First ideas in this direction have already become available, for example, with the confirmation camps taking place in Wittenberg in the context of the reformation jubilee this year. For these camps, a new evaluation tool will be used that the confirmands can answer on their smartphones. A third study could make use of such new tools. A workshop tomorrow morning will discuss this idea further – and it is just one idea for how the research on confirmation work could continue in the next years. Other ideas refer to the ongoing challenges of church-membership or to the fragility of Christian beliefs.

There have been voices telling us that confirmation work has now received enough attention and that new research projects should look at other fields of work. In my understanding, this is a mistaken conclusion. Yes—it is correct that other fields of non-formal religious education also deserve to be researched. But No and No again to the idea that there will be no more need for research in the field of confirmation work for a very long time. One does not rekindle a fire by waiting until it is cold. Too late is too late. This is why I am convinced that it is indeed time to think about a third international study and I would indeed be glad to go home at the end of this conference with the feeling that Erfurt—that Martin Luther’s monastery—was the birth place of this idea.