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Xavier Dumay^a

^a GIRSEF, Université Catholique de Louvain and Fonds national de la recherche scientifique, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

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How do teachers coordinate their work? A framing approach

Xavier Dumay*

GIRSEF, Université Catholique de Louvain and Fonds national de la recherche scientifique, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

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Since the 1970s, schools have been characterized as loosely coupled systems, meaning that the teachers' work is weakly coordinated at the local level. Nonetheless, few studies have focused on the local variations of coordination modes, their sources and their nature. In this article, the process of local coordination of the teachers' work is analyzed, using a sociocognitive approach. A longitudinal study of the framing process conducted during two years in one school is presented, in order to capture the parallel evolution of the teachers' cognitive structures and the school's social structures. The results show that: (1) the framing process is at the heart of political games, meaning that the local definition of teaching and its conditions represent an important issue for the teachers; and that (2) the cognitive structures that emerge from the framing process appear to some extent to be decoupled from the teachers' actual practices, contributing only partially to the local process of the teachers' work coordination.

Keywords: coordination; teachers' work; framing; communication; power

1. Introduction

For several decades, the issue of work coordination in schools has been essentially explored through a reflection on organizational structures (e.g. Bidwell 1965; Meyer and Rowan 1983). The intention, from this perspective, was to provide theoretically based explanations of the loosely coupled nature of educational organizations. Until recently, little theoretical and empirical research had focused on a micro-level approach to this issue, despite insistent calls to make this a significant avenue of research (Barley and Kunda 2001; Bidwell 2001). Importantly, however, changes in the modes of regulation of educational systems initiated around the 1980s (through the promotion of accountability systems and school-based management) have significantly modified the importance of local organizations in the implementation of policy objectives/standards and in the orientation of teaching practices, making it important to understand how schools enact their new "role," and the extent to which it influences the teachers' practices in their classroom.

The major objective of this paper is to contribute to this line of questioning, and to analyze the local coordination of teachers' work using framing theory (Benford and Snow 2000; De Wulf 2006). This theory has a long tradition in sociology (Goffman 1974). At the juncture of sociocognitive and sociopolitical approaches, it

*Email: xavier.dumay@uclouvain.be

suggests that the coordination process results from communicative processes developed locally, which can lead to common frameworks of interpretation and action, which are themselves sources of coordination.

Drawing on a longitudinal study in one school over two years, this paper argues that: (1) cognitive structures that are linked to the framing processes remain, to some extent, decoupled from teachers' actual practices, contributing only partially to the local process of teachers' work coordination; and (2) the framing process is at the heart of political games and teachers' resistance to external definition of their work, even when external attempts to define their work are locally anchored.

The paper is structured as follows. First, local approaches to schools are described, with a particular focus on the framing theory. Next, the longitudinal study is presented; it is designed to analyze the processes through which teachers' cognitive structures and the school's social structures are becoming transformed, and how these changes in social and cognitive structures affect teachers' work coordination. Finally, the results are discussed, highlighting this study's contributions to the analysis of local coordination of teachers' work.

2. Local approaches: mapping the terrain

Although it has been less developed than the structural approach, the analysis of organizational dynamics within local educational organizations has taken a variety of paths. Retrospectively, we can identify three streams of study. The first is rather normative and seeks to identify practices facilitating schools' organizational development. It is largely rooted in School Improvement Research (SIR). Much work has been done using this analytical approach to describe conditions that make school-based management possible and effective (Leithwood and Menzies 1998). Comparative analyses of schools are used to discern operating characteristics that contribute to making schools places where various actors genuinely participate in the educational community. From this perspective, the study of school leadership is central. The "ideal" principal is identified as a facilitator of teachers' professional development and a teaching resource for the school (Dupriez 2002).

The second approach focuses on political activities within schools. This type of analysis is centered on two ideas. One is that, within the same organizational context, teachers pursue multiple interests (material, organizational, socioprofessional, cultural-ideological), not necessarily convergent with their colleagues' interests. The second is that, to satisfy their interests, teachers engage in strategies that position their own interest in agreement or conflict with that of others. The analysis focuses on power relations between teachers, and is conducted both through conflict analysis and analysis of teachers' alliances. Micropolitical analysis of educational organizations has been applied to various situations such as teacher mentoring (Blase and Blase 2002), teacher socialization (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002; Schempp, Sparkes, and Templin 1993), principal leadership (Blase 1993), and school evaluation (Kelchtermans 2007; Timperley and Robinson 1998). In this paper, our analysis of power relationships between teachers will be largely centered on "cultural-ideological interests," defined by Kelchtermans (2007, 482–3) as, "the set of (more or less explicit) values and goals one aims for as an individual and the norms that guide life and work in the school as organization."

The third broad approach is the sociocognitive approach (Coburn 2001; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). Its goal is to analyze the psychosocial processes

through which common understandings and shared beliefs are produced. Analysis of the education policy reception process from the sense-making perspective is particularly illustrative of this school of research. It (for instance, see Coburn 2001) combines a consideration of public policy as cognitive matrices with an analysis of cognitive processes through which teachers enact them. The fundamental objective is to better understand the relationships between educational policies and classroom practices, with the assumption that teachers, individually or collectively, interpret, adapt, or transform policies during their implementation (Coburn 2001; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). It suggests that cognitive frames developed by teachers play an important role in implementing policy measures, since these filter the information from the environment.

3. Framing approach to coordination

In studying the social processes through which collective cognitive structures (the frameworks) emerge, spread, and organize/coordinate the action, framing theory can mainly be situated in the third analytical approach. Yet it pays attention to strategic aspects of the social construction of frameworks and, in this sense, tackles some research questions attached to the second vein of analysis more than does sense-making theory. Indeed, its ambition is a more thorough consideration of the power relations underlying the communication and negotiation processes around actors' respective frames. Compared to sense-making theory, framing theory gives more prominence to the longitudinal constitution and definition of local orders, with cognitive structures and their evolution during the interactions at the core of the analysis. This theory allows for the elucidation of mechanisms through which cognition is constructed collectively and transposed from one stage to the other. It aims to draw a parallel between the evolution of social structures and that of cognitive structures, and to analyze the communication processes facilitating the emergence of shared representations and their resonance within various conversations between teachers.

The framing theory has not gained much success in the education field. Only Davies (1999) used it at the macro and political levels to understand how two multifaith coalitions in Ontario lobby the provincial government to fund separate religious schools. He showed that the coalitions are gaining political ground by avoiding traditional arguments for religious schooling that stressed the moral impact of faith and religious duty, and by couching their claims in the idioms of multiculturalism and choice. At the micro and class levels, McFarland (2001) analyzed the student resistance and argued that the micro social process of student resistance at school is less characterized by individual traits of race and class than by the formal and informal organizational characteristics of social settings. He suggested that student resistance behavior is largely dependent on organizational features of social networks.

To our knowledge, the only study analyzing educational organizations using framing theory – at the meso level – is that of Coburn (2006). Coburn described the trajectory of six issues identified in an inductive analysis of conversations between teachers of a given school during one school year. Her purpose was to understand the reception process of the reading reform in California primary schools. Her analyses led to some interesting results. First, the process of framing is fundamentally social. Cognitive frameworks are not only negotiated and

transformed through interactions between teachers, but they also cement these relationships by creating or enhancing the formation of groups around the sharing of certain norms. In addition, this study characterized the frames according to their level of resonance. It appears that frames that spread and act as sources of coordination have at least three common characteristics. They are linked to individual teachers' worldviews and experiences, they are based on values and ideas already widely shared or visible in the school or its environment, and they are sufficiently robust to explain the reality experienced by teachers. Third, this study points out the nesting of framing processes in power relationships (between teachers, but also between teachers and the principal). Some actors seem to have more weight in defining situations (diagnosis framing) and finding solutions (prognostic framing). This power to define situations and give them meaning is related to positions in the school (leadership and curriculum coordinator) but also to the discursive skills demonstrated by some of the teachers. Moreover, the adoption of some frameworks is a way for teachers to position themselves in a given group. In other words, negotiations about interpretations of and solutions to problems are also negotiations on the nature of relationships between teachers. Finally, it shows that common interpretations can have significant effects on teaching practices and act as a real source of coordination. Indeed, it seems that the legitimacy gained by certain interpretive frameworks encourages the adoption of some teaching practices and excludes others, but also that those frames may serve as background necessary to interpret events experienced by individual teachers.

This paper contributes to the emerging literature on local analyses of teachers' work in three ways. First, it extends framing approaches to teachers' work coordination by bringing into the analysis a detailed description of patterns of interaction and communication at work during the framing processes. This is particularly important to better understand the micro social processes through which teachers define their work and resist external attempts to define it. Second, it extends this literature by analyzing the processes through which organizational structures are socially constructed, and become some resources and constraints for the teachers' work coordination. Third, it extends framing approaches to teachers' work coordination by exploring in detail strategic aspects of frameworks' social construction. It is suggested that the definition and interpretation of problems collectively identified as important by teachers represent significant sources of power, because their mastery (through framing processes) is related to teachers' legitimacy and ability to define their own working conditions.

4. A longitudinal study of the framing process in one Belgian primary school

4.1. The Belgian context

The educational system of French-speaking Belgium is particularly promising ground for exploring these research questions, both for historical reasons and due to recent changes in educational policies. Historically, the Belgian school system was established as a highly decentralized system. The Belgian Constitution, for instance, begins, not by defining what education should be, but by recognizing the legitimacy, even the prime importance, of private initiatives in education (Dupriez and Maroy 2003). Even in 1914, when education up to a certain grade level became mandatory, the state refrained from interfering with Catholic schools, which would necessarily have involved investigating what schools actually did. Since the end of

the 1990s, however, under the political authority of the French-speaking community, regulatory and legislative activity has tended to standardize instruction, and has made the situation of subsidized schools (Catholic and municipal schools) similar to that of schools under direct state supervision. New rules have been established, principally in two areas: definitions of common requirements for programs of instruction, and teaching personnel status. Nonetheless, the emergence of the state as a key coordinator has not been achieved by denying the importance of local forms of teachers' work coordination. During the late 1990s, the state emerged as an evaluative state (Neave 1988), meaning that it defined standards and monitored the extent to which they are attained through external evaluation organized at the end of primary school, but that it allowed some autonomy to schools in selecting strategies to achieve these standards. New forms of school-based management have been promoted, centered on three characteristics (Dupriez 2002): the development of cooperative structures, more leadership from the principal, and collective decision-making with respect to the school's pedagogical orientation. In such school-based management, the main source of control and coordination is cultural, meaning that it is through teachers' normative commitment that their work is controlled and coordinated (Correnti and Rowan 2007). Legally, each teacher must participate in 60 hours of cooperation per year, mostly divided between plenary meetings that all primary teachers attend and "cycle" meetings in which only teachers from a given cycle participate. Indeed, in foundational education, the teaching is organized into three cycles ("cycle 1" corresponding to grades 1 and 2, "cycle 2" to grades 3 and 4, and "cycle 3" to grades 5 and 6), and teachers are asked to work together more and to develop curricula and program requirements for these study cycles.

Various instruments to assess student learning have been devised in the French-speaking community since the 1990s. Since 1994, all students in the 2nd and 5th years of primary education (7 and 11 years of age) have taken part every school year in an external evaluation (not leading to certification), dealing, in turn, with the reading/production of written work, mathematics, and sciences/early learning activities (tri-annual rotation). Each school receives its results and its position compared to the average performance of schools in the French-speaking community. Yet, results do not circulate publicly and cannot be used to rank individual educational institutions. Some exams also lead to certification. These have existed since 2007 and are intended for students in the 6th year of primary school. Thus, these exams are relatively new, though they rely in part on previous exams (later eliminated) set up at the network (Catholic vs. state schools) or inspection-district level. An annual exam is set and successful candidates receive the *Certificat d'Etude de Base* (Basic Education Certificate).

4.2. The school and its selection

The school was selected based on information from earlier comparative research involving four primary schools. This comparative research aimed at better understanding the processes through which greater coherence and coordination in teachers' practices and perceptions are developed. The four schools were initially chosen to offer a range of levels of within-team consensus on pedagogical practices and their vision of local coordination (as measured by a questionnaire). The school of the present study is characterized by a low level of within-team consensus,¹ which is important in studying the framing process, since it makes it possible to observe

how teachers deal with their differences in perceptions and frames, and the extent to which the framing process is embedded in power relations.

The school is an urban Catholic school. Its population seems to have changed significantly over the past 10 years. The school tends to have more students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and also more immigrants than before. According to the principal, this change is related to a neighborhood change (the area becoming poorer), as well as to the image that the school projects in the neighborhood. It seems that for some underprivileged parents in the neighborhood, the school is perceived as a source of (potential) upward social mobility. Two schools are located in the close neighborhood. The first serves a much more privileged population, and the other, essentially a disadvantaged population.

The teaching staff consists of 20 primary teachers. The school has two classes per grade from the 1st to the 4th grade, and five classes in the third teaching cycle. Unlike cycles 1 and 2, vertical classes are organized in cycle 3 and the teachers from this cycle are more committed to a competency-based² approach than are their colleagues. They also collaborate more to develop a common structure of lessons and didactic material. In cycles 1 and 2, teachers organize fewer meetings, and their discussions are less centered on pedagogical considerations, even though the situation significantly changed in cycle 2 over the two years of observation. During plenary meetings, pedagogical discussions are still quite general and tolerant of a diversity of approaches and methods. Most teachers even regret the lack of instructional leadership and underline their need for clear and common objectives. Nonetheless, the principal, who has been in the school for four years, thinks his role is to raise and discuss problems, without proposing solutions and guidelines. He stresses the need to analyze the current situation, and to see how teachers can improve student learning, and considers that his function is to support initiatives and provide the necessary resources to facilitate changes in teachers' practices. Most teachers seem to agree that their students' performance is deteriorating and that, consequently, they need to change some of their individual and collective practices. They also suggest that their perception of their students' relative weakness is largely due to their results in the certificate and non-certificate external evaluation.

4.3. Data collection

A single-case approach was used, in order to capture the subtle ongoing processes of framing, reality construction, and local coordination. The research material was collected in two stages (see Table 1). During the first year of the study (the 2006–2007 school year), an initial in-depth interview with the school principal was conducted. Then, several meetings were observed and filmed: two meetings with all the primary teachers (plenary meetings), two meetings with the five teachers from “cycle 3,” and one meeting with the four teachers from “cycle 2.” The selection of observation periods was made in collaboration with the teachers. Finally (at the end of the school year), there was a second in-depth interview with the school principal and four interviews with teachers from both cycles. All interviews were systematically tape-recorded and transcribed. A brief description of the teachers' characteristics is given in Table 1.

In the second year studied (the 2007–2008 school year), observations of the teachers' meetings were increased. One new plenary meeting, five new meetings of cycle 3, four of cycle 2, and two of teachers from both cycles were observed. The

Table 1. Teachers' characteristics.

"Cycle 2" teachers	"Cycle 3" teachers
C2 – Teacher 5: Female, 42 years old; high seniority	C3 – Teacher 1: Female, 53 years old; high seniority
C2 – Teacher 6: Male, 35 years old; middle seniority	C3 – Teacher 2: Male, 33 years old; middle seniority
C2 – Teacher 7: Female, 28 years old; low seniority	C3 – Teacher 3: Female, 31 years old; middle seniority
C2 – Teacher 8: Male, 32 years old; middle seniority	C3 – Teacher 4: Female, 34 years old; middle seniority

choice of period to observe was again raised in discussion with the teachers. Observations were also extended beyond the formal meetings, by staying as long as possible in the school after the formal observations. Over the course of the school years 2006–2007 and 2007–2008, approximately 40 hours were spent observing formal and informal meetings. Formal meetings were systematically filmed, to analyze the communication processes underlying the teachers' framing. Finally, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school principal and three teachers to review and validate our initial interpretation. To the same end, the teachers' reactions to the research report are also included in the research material.

4.4. Data analysis

An interactional approach to issue framing (De Wulf et al. 2009) was used, in order to understand how actors interactively construct the meaning of issues in (potentially) conflict situations. An important difference between the cognitive and the interactional approaches to framing is:

that the cognitive approach considers frames to be representations stored in memory (and framing is the process of applying cognitive frames to situations), while the interactional approach considers framing to be the dynamic enactment and shaping of meaning in ongoing interactions. (De Wulf et al. 2009, 162)

In order to describe the issue framing process as dynamic and interactional, the observational data were coded in three successive steps. First, similar to Coburn (2006), the themes and issues addressed regularly in conversations were inductively coded. Second, the communication processes observed during the meetings were deductively coded. The analytical categories developed by De Wulf (2006) to capture the communication processes through which multiple actors (with initially different interests and frames) differ in the co-construction of issues and how they negotiate these differences were used. This strategy is different than the one adopted by McFarland (2001), who focused its coding on the kind of social networks and their evolution over time, with the objective to show that social structures (and their evolution) play a significant role in resistance phenomena. We argue that categories proposed by De Wulf are particularly relevant for our research questions and the kind of framing analyses presented in the present paper, because they intend to describe the dynamic processes of teachers' interactions and deepen the understanding of frames as negotiated in interaction. They have some similarities with the analytical categories developed by Benford and Snow (2000) in their use of the

framing theory to study social movements, in that they make it possible to link the communication processes with the nature of change in negotiators' frames (frame alignment, reframing, frame resonance, etc.). But their main advantage is to provide a clearer picture of the interaction processes through which the frames are debated and negotiated.

These categories will now be discussed. The first category described by De Wulf (2006) is incorporation. When incorporating a challenging issue through reformulating it in an attenuated fashion, participants shape their intervention to fit their own issue framing, while at the same time keeping it recognizable (as the same element) for the other. The second pattern is disconnection. Disconnecting in some form dismisses the challenging element but at the same time maintains the stance of taking what the other said seriously. The third pattern of interaction and communication, polarization, combines reaffirming one's own issue framing with avoiding repeating yourself and involves mostly an upgraded formulation of one's own issue elements. The fourth pattern identified is accommodation. Accommodation involves making your own issue framing acceptable to the other, while maintaining coherence in your own framing. Exploration, the fifth category, consists of open questioning and self-dialogs, combining both sides with valuing both sides. Finally, reframing faces the double challenge of simultaneously taking one's own and the challenging issue framing seriously and finding a workable relation between them. Examples of this coding step are given in the quotes of the results section.

Third, the issue framing processes (and the way they were coded) were segmented as a function of the moment and the kind of meeting observed, in order to track the issue framing trajectory and the way it evolves over time. Figure 1 displays the trajectory of the central problem analyzed. The analysis of the framing trajectory will now be detailed. Four phases are successively presented: the definition of the problem, its propagation in different social networks, the frames' confrontation, and the consequences of the frame alignment.

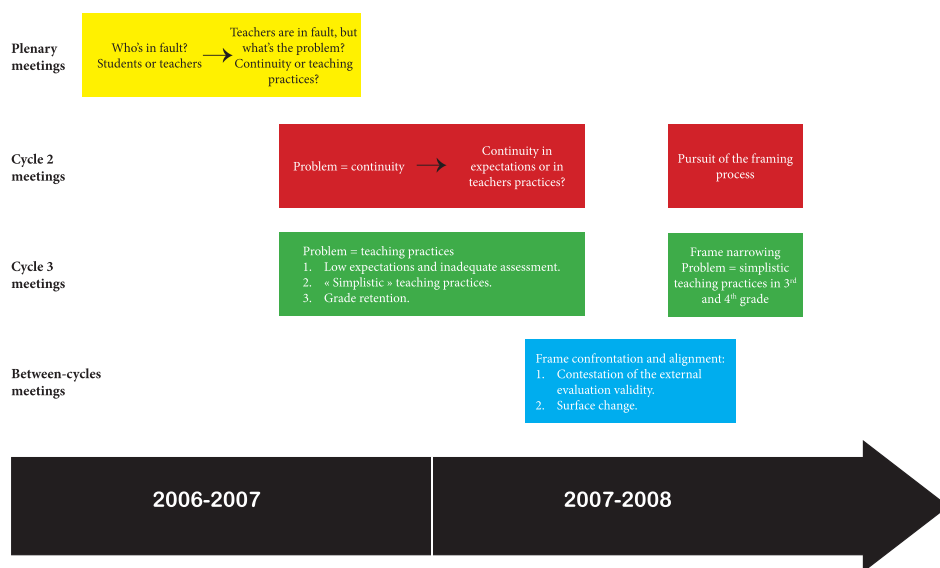


Figure 1. Timeline.

4.5. Results: framing the problem of students' weak performance

4.5.1. Defining and legitimizing the problem

Clearly, one issue dominates teachers' conversations, regardless of the moment and the situation observed. It was the only one to be discussed over the two years of observation in all types of social arrangements (during plenary meetings, but also in "cycle" meetings and in "between-cycles" meetings). This issue is that of students' weak performance. This concern appeared clearly in the foreground of the first plenary meeting (with all the primary teachers) observed during the 2006–2007 school year. All the primary teachers, as well as the school principal, acknowledged this problem as crucial for the school. According to the principal, this issue has slowly emerged in recent years and has continuously gained importance through the school's successive (negative) results in different forms of external evaluation.³ However, it is only recently (approximately at the beginning of our observations) that the issue has been tackled collectively by the teachers, in different forms of interaction. The first time the process of collective "problematization" was observed around this topic was during the first plenary meeting of the 2006–2007 school year.

During this long meeting, teachers went through different stages of framing. The first stage lasted half an hour and consisted of raising the issue of student performance during a brainstorming session about difficulties encountered by teachers with their students. This problem was widely shared by all the actors, who particularly underlined the negative evolution of student performance.⁴

C3 – Teacher 1: In the fifth and the sixth grade, we decided to focus on certain subjects, but I have more and more children who do not have the basics, not at all!

Principal: It seems that the situation is worse than you said if you think that the children are even unable to improve!

C2 – Teacher 5: I do not feel that it's getting better and better and I fear that, if we do not react now, it will become even more complicated.

Next, some diagnostic framing processes were observed. In other words, teachers tried to identify the causes of this situation. They were seeking an answer to the question: who is to blame? Two interpretations emerged quickly. The first (which I denote in the quotes as STUDENTS) is centered on the specific characteristics of the students in the school. For some teachers, the major cause of student learning difficulties is related to their characteristics. They argue that the school's specific student population (a large number of immigrants, with weak mastery of the French language, and children whose parents have low levels of cultural capital) is a barrier to learning. This interpretation, however, was quickly challenged by several teachers who highlighted their own individual and collective responsibility. (This second interpretation is denoted in the quotes as TEACHERS.)

C2 – Teacher 8: I think we're in a period when children are not motivated. We always think it's our fault, but the children are also responsible for their learning. And our students are not motivated enough. (STUDENTS)

C3 – Teacher 3 (DISCONNECTION): It is the role of the teachers to stimulate children. I think we are responsible for students' low motivation. (TEACHERS)

C2 – Teacher 8 (DISCONNECTION): You feel responsible, but it's probably not your fault! It is mostly that of the family. (STUDENTS)

C3 – Teacher 3 (DISCONNECTION): Excuse me but I think we are the only ones receiving a salary to find ways to make the PlayStation less interesting than what we do at school. (TEACHERS)

The second interpretation was clearly supported by the principal. By his intervention in the framing process, he encouraged the teachers to look at solutions that can be identified as helping students improve. The role played by the principal is interesting here. By stabilizing the diagnostic frame, he encouraged a reflection on teaching practices, and ensured that teachers are not locked into a blaming process centered on exogenous explanatory factors:

Principal: It is still we who create our working conditions; it's still interesting to list what we could change here, now, to face our difficulties, so that we can talk about them and change them. We can regret the students we have, but anyway we must take their characteristics into account to help them. (TEACHERS)

The teachers next launched a phase of “prognostic” framing lasting approximately 15 minutes in order to reflect on some potential collective “solutions” to the problem identified. Again, two complementary forms of solutions were discussed. The first (that I denote in the quotes as CONTINUITY) is to call into question the continuity of learning within the school. This line of discussion is centered on the idea that it is important to guarantee basic skills are sufficiently mastered during the first years of primary school. The second line of discussion questions teachers' practices more directly, claiming that they are inadequate to develop students' complex skills (this prognostic frame is denoted in the quotes as PRACTICE). The argument is that teachers in this school would aim at developing simple and “sequenced” learning, rather than developing complex skills and metacognitive strategies for solving problems. These two lines of explanation partially intermingled, since they underline the minimum skills to master at different points in the primary curriculum, but they also raise questions about which teaching practices promote a thorough development of complex skills:

C2 – Teacher 5: I find it interesting to try to give more meaning to learning and to break the “discipline view.” I would find it interesting and important to develop more complex skills (PRACTICE) ... What is most important? Is it that children, at the end of the fourth grade, have mastered six conjugation modes, or have rather seen them six times and that, in fifth grade, they must review them because they only remember some? Or wouldn't it be more interesting to say that, at the end of the fourth, they have mastered the present, imperfect and future, only three modes but they know their use, they know what they are, they know how to use them in writing, so that when they arrive later in cycle 3, I must not revisit all of them because I know what our children really know. (CONTINUITY)

C3 – Teacher 1: I think we do not teach them “how to learn.” (PRACTICE)

C2 – Teacher 8: I think that it is not in the fourth or in the fifth grade one should have basic problems, it is from up to the third (grade) maximum, and I think we want to go too quickly. (CONTINUITY)

In short, during the same plenary meeting, teachers discussed the main sources of the problem and put forward some solutions. Communication processes were essentially dominated by processes of exploration, and sometimes disconnection, whether in the diagnostic framing stage or in the subsequent phase of prognostic framing. This means that differences in interpretation were not discussed in detail by teachers around the table. They never really agreed on common interpretations or solutions related to the problem of low student performance. Interestingly, the principal represented a privileged “voice,” encouraging progress in the discussions. However, he or she does not play the role of catalyst in the reflections, especially when the discussion focuses on the choice of practical solutions that teachers may adopt (prognostic framing). Thus, the process of framing is largely decentralized, in cycle meetings or in between-cycles meetings.

4.5.2. *How is the issue handled within the social structure?*

It will now be shown how this problem and its interpretations were portrayed in different organizational situations, particularly during the meetings of cycles 2 and 3. Despite the lack of systematic organization of the framing process by the principal, reflections on students’ poor performance continued across the school’s different social networks. One may also note that in both cycles’ meetings, the discussion seemed to follow a very similar pattern of framing to that observed during the plenary meeting. Teachers re-situated the problem and discussed alternatives repeatedly during the plenary session. Interestingly, however, teachers from each cycle developed very different frameworks to make sense of the same problem. Teachers from cycle 2 seemed to favor an interpretation in terms of learning continuity and explored ways to establish more within- and between-cycle continuity in student learning, while teachers from cycle 3 refined their criticism of teachers’ practices.

In cycle 2, the first discussion that followed the brainstorming of the plenary meeting aimed to reconsider solutions proposed during the prognostic framing stage:

C2 – Teacher 6: There are a lot of children who are not good enough to be in the cycle. There is such a wide gap between the minimum skills children have achieved at the end of the first cycle and the skills to achieve at the end of the fourth year! If a child has not already acquired a basic level of literacy, numeracy and mastery of the language, I think it becomes complicated for him to begin the cycle. And in the first cycle, they have the same pressure. We have a problem with our practices, particularly when children are struggling. (PRACTICE)

C2 – Teacher 5 (DISCONNECTION): What I do not understand is that the evaluations we do at the end of the fourth grade are based on the prescribed curriculum. So perhaps it means that the program is so vague that some will interpret that competence must be assessed in the fourth grade, when in fact, you’ll decide it must be in fifth grade. And that’s why I think it is important that we determine a point at which we shall arrive and from which they begin. (CONTINUITY)

C2 – Teacher 6 (DISCONNECTION): I really think that in our cycle we do too many systematic and simple learning activities. (PRACTICE)

Throughout the discussion, it rapidly emerged that the preferred interpretation was that of learning continuity. Teachers of this cycle seemed reluctant to question their practices directly. Only one teacher (Teacher 6) argued in this direction, several times raising the issue that teachers' practices in the school are too systematic and unable to ensure the development of pupils' complex skills. Despite these interventions, the discussion focused on how to ensure continuity between the two years of the cycle. Different ideas were debated, particularly that of making vertical classes that would mix students from both grades within the same classroom (as teachers from cycle 3 do). They also discussed which kind of continuity would be desirable, which gave rise to a new process of prognostic framing. Continuity was either seen as a harmonization of teachers' expectations (denoted in the quotes as C – EXPECTATIONS), or as a harmonization of practices (denoted in the quotes as C – PRACTICE). At this point, the discussion of teaching practices partly returned to the table, through consideration of the harmonization of teachers' practices. The teacher (Teacher 6) who defended a definition of continuity as a harmonization of practices suggested that the four teachers' adopting a common model of educational practices would be a good opportunity for them to confront the difficulties with their own teaching practices.

Such a suggestion was, however, not pursued by the other three teachers who preferred to define continuity purely in terms of harmonizing their expectations. The only concrete idea that emerged from the discussion was that of developing joint student evaluations, while discussions on the adoption of common methods (including the adoption of common textbooks) ended with recognition of teachers' autonomy:

C2 – Teacher 6: So far, I think we have no common frameworks for thinking about our methods. I think it's time to make a decision. I think working in the cycle is an advantage only if we develop practices together. (C – PRACTICE)

Teacher 7 (DISCONNECTION): But I am not interested in collective reflection about teaching material and methods. Reflecting on the goals we must achieve, that's the most important. (C – EXPECTATIONS)

C2 – Teacher 6 (DISCONNECTION): And how to achieve them. (C – PRACTICE)

C2 – Teacher 7 (DISCONNECTION): Be careful, you cannot force someone to do things your way if he has another approach. You can have different ways of achieving the same goal. Now what will be good when we do joint evaluations is to see, well, you have worked over this aspect and cannot force someone to work in a particular way. (C – EXPECTATIONS)

C2 – Teacher 6 (DISCONNECTION): I do not say we need to change our practices completely. But it is still interesting to think about some aspects, and to develop common pedagogical material, like contextual problems that make sense for students as the start of our pedagogical sequences. We could, for example, decide that we will develop such a kind of "contextual problem" only in geometry first. Now, in the end, everyone is free to use them or not. But to me the core of our meetings should be that. (C – PRACTICE)

C2 – Teacher 7 (DISCONNECTION): I agree and disagree. I agree that it is important that we talk about our practices, what has worked and not worked, but I also think that the cycle is not only that. My expectations about our collective work are more about organization, but freedom in practice. (C – EXPECTATIONS)

In terms of the communication processes, the frequency of disconnection increased, revealing a greater confrontation of conflicting cognitive frameworks. The more the discussion was centered on teaching practices, the more teachers committed to the discussion to defend their point of view. Yet the confrontation of teachers' respective frames only partially ended with the explicit adoption of a common framework. The "majority view" simply prevailed, that is: the problem of students' low performance is a problem of continuity expectations, and not a problem associated with individual teaching practices or the within-cycle coherence of the teaching practices' model.

During the same period, the evolution of this problem in cycle 3 was also noted. Two "cycle meetings" were observed during the first school year, and five the following year. Systematic (diagnostic and prognostic) framing was done by teachers of this cycle over several months in order to develop solutions to the problem of students' weak performance. This problem was, indeed, back on the table at each of our observations, and interpretations became clearer over time. Two dimensions emerged from the interpretive framework shared by teachers of the fifth and the sixth grades. First, they questioned the attainment of students at the beginning of cycle 3, and not at the end of it. This interpretation was based on their analysis of the external evaluation results carried out at the beginning of the fifth grade, showing that students obtain, on average, lower results than those they obtained at the end of the fourth grade. The results of the external evaluation were, thus, instrumental for these teachers in order to legitimize their interpretive framework. For them, in fact, students' negative results in the external evaluation showed that the expectations of teachers from cycle 2 were too low (since there is a significant gap between their results in the two tests), but also that the students arriving in fifth grade have not reached the objectives defined by the curriculum:

C3 – Teacher 4: Take examples. Last year, "X" had seventy-two in mathematics, and now he has sixty-one. "Y", eighty, and now, seventy! Etc. They have all 10% less now than at the end of last year, except for "Z."

C3 – Teacher 1: Well we should impose a minimum level for them to reach! When they come into the fifth grade!

The second important point that emerged from the (prognostic) framing process within cycle 3 concerned solutions to the problem. Interestingly, teachers from cycle 3 left behind them the question of continuity (between cycles or between grades), more directly confronting some problems related to the teaching practices of teachers of earlier grades. Three approaches in particular were discussed. The first is the greater use of grade retention, when students have not reached the minimum level of skills specified by the curriculum at the end of the fourth grade. Confronted with pressure from the external evaluation at the end of the sixth grade, teachers from cycle 3 argued it is useless to compromise on the level of requirements, and suggested stopping the low performers in their trajectory more frequently:

C3 – Teacher 2: I think that when a child fails in French or math, he should not reach the next grade!

C3 – Teacher 1: I would even add that even if they succeeded, but just barely, teachers should also consider whether it is not better to make them repeat a grade.

C3 – Teacher 4: It should not happen; I think children should not reach the next grade if they do not have more than 60%!

C3 – Teacher 2: Anyway we will have to stop them.

The second approach, which was the most widely discussed, was directly related to teaching practices of cycle 2 teachers. Teachers from cycle 3 greatly questioned the too systematic and linear nature of their teaching practices. They criticized the fact that the knowledge developed by the students is too fragmented, and cannot be easily transferred to more complex tasks and environments. They also complained about the failure to develop metacognitive abilities. Their criticisms were particularly harsh, and contrasted sharply with the less critical examination of their own teaching practices:

C3 – Teacher 1: I think they should reduce the scope of what they teach to develop students' deeper understanding. Let's take an example. They taught them how to calculate the perimeter of different forms. But I am sure the students never manipulated these forms, or only a few, so that they do not understand the formula and they cannot apply them to different situations. They cannot use them in more complex and different situations! They also forget them faster.

C3 – Teacher 2: I do agree. They really don't know how to transfer their skill to new situations.

C3 – Teacher 3: And you think they'll change the way they do this [speaking about the teachers from cycle 2]? They will just listen to our critiques and continue their way of doing things.

C3 – Teacher 4: They all do everything too fast and any which way.

The third approach discussed by the teachers concerned the student evaluation at the end of the fourth grade. They criticized the items' degree of difficulty as well as the type of evaluation items. For cycle 3 teachers, the evaluations constructed by teachers of cycle 2 perfectly reflected their low expectations. They also complained about the fact that they let students and parents think that they have acquired sufficient skills, and that it will be possible for them to succeed in the final external evaluation at the end of the sixth grade.

4.5.3. The frames' confrontation

The framing process conducted over several months separately in both cycles led to the organization of two "between-cycles" meetings, at the request of the teachers from cycle 3. This aspect captures the consequences of the framing process on the nature and structure of teachers' relations very well, since it is indeed the framing process developed by teachers from cycle 3 that produced a new social structure.

The organization of “between-cycles” meetings was justified and legitimized by student results on the external evaluation early in the fifth grade.

Teachers from cycle 3 introduced the meeting by framing the problem using the results of the external evaluation (at the beginning of the fifth grade). In doing so, they strategically glossed over interpretations that could be related to a questioning of their own teaching practices:

C3 – Teacher 3: We looked at the results students got in the evaluation you organized at the end of the fourth grade, and we realized that there is such a wide gap between those results and those from external evaluation. The gap is about 15%. We see that especially in the geometry section. I mean typically in a section where much understanding (more than simple application) is necessary. I really feel they have strong difficulties in understanding.

C3 – Teacher 4: There is a problem; we have seen a huge difference over a few years. That’s for sure. I no longer feel I am teaching sixth-grade students. I feel that I’m in fourth, not always in relation to the maturity of the students but in relation to their knowledge.

Interestingly, cycle 2 teachers first tried to discredit the validity of the external examination organized at the beginning of the fifth grade. They claimed it is designed to assess the skills to be mastered at the end of cycle 3, and that it is, therefore, normal that students at the beginning of fifth grade are struggling. This contestation was, however, doubly challenged by the teachers from cycle 3: firstly because it did not explain the gap observed, and secondly because, according to them, the test was actually tailored to the level of fifth grade, even if it measures skills to be mastered at the end of sixth grade:

C2 – Teacher 6 (DISCONNECTION): External evaluations at the beginning of fifth grade are based on the objectives to reach at the end of the sixth grade. Then for children already in difficulty, it’s normal that they are struggling!

C3 – Teacher 4: You’re right to say that the skills tested are those to be mastered at the end of the sixth grade, but the inspector has confirmed that the items are adapted to the level expected in the beginning of the cycle!

What is striking in the analysis of the “between-cycles” meetings is that all teachers appeared not to have an equal “voice” in defining the situation and finding solutions to it. Teachers from cycle 3 seemed to be in a position of dominance in relation to those of cycle 2. The differences between teachers’ respective frames were handled quickly by systematically rejecting those of cycle 2 teachers. The debate on the value of the external evaluation is a good illustration of this. It stopped short, though it offered the possibility of an interesting discussion on the role of external assessment in guiding instructional practices. Interestingly, two types of framing process (issue and relationship framing) are interacting here. To sustain their issue framing, teachers from cycle 3 reframed their relationships to their colleagues by blaming them and making them responsible for the situation.

The results of external evaluation considered as a “principle of reality,” teachers next engaged in two new processes of framing – a diagnostic one initially and then a prognostic process. At the diagnostic level, teachers from cycle 3 clearly argued that teachers are (at least partly) responsible for the situation, while some teachers

from cycle 2 evoked the argument of the student body again, trying to situate their responsibility amongst a wider array of explanatory factors:

C2 – Teacher 6: I have the impression that some skills that should be mastered at the end of cycle 6–8 are not. Some children are accepted into the school, but we cannot do anything with them! So either they are kept or not. I do not mind, but it is a choice to make. Just look at how many children in cycle 6–8 consult the speech therapist? It's amazing! (STUDENTS)

C3 – Teacher 3 (POLARIZATION): Yes but beware, the problem of speech therapy can be induced by the type of instruction. Many children are monitored in speech therapy at school, not because they have specific problems in language production or understanding, but because they have overall difficulties at school. So it's more a problem related to school difficulties than to the child. There are many children who have long consulted the speech therapist in our school, but why? Perhaps the quality of instruction we give them is still in question. Maybe we are too quickly satisfied! But clearly it's not enough for them to succeed later, in secondary school! (TEACHERS)

C3 – Teacher 4 (POLARIZATION): It is true that one can always say it is not our responsibility. But we must make things change! We must find solutions! (TEACHERS)

At the prognostic level, teachers only discussed proposals made by teachers from cycle 3. Therefore, they considered “remedies” to improve the teaching practices of cycle 2 teachers. Questions of continuity never came to the table, showing a frame alignment. While cycle 2 teachers had generally avoided discussion of their teaching practices during their meetings, during the between-cycles meetings they agreed that their practices were actually too linear, systematic, and rooted in excessively simple and repetitive learning environments. They also accepted that their practices facilitate neither the development of students' mental processes, nor that of “transferable” knowledge and skills:

C3 – Teacher 2: I think that most children are unable to construct links between different skills and different knowledge. There are plenty of things we do not do enough in this school!

C3 – Teacher 3: The difficulty is perhaps not especially in mathematics but overall in understanding. If you look at lower achievers' results, they have no problems in “numbers” – where less understanding is needed – but a lot of problems in geometry. I really feel that these are difficulties in understanding.

C2 – Teacher 6 (ACCOMMODATION): I mean the difficulty is not systematic exercises or exercises that they do regularly; the difference is when you do more subtle ones.

C3 – Teacher 3: I think they are not bad at all; that it is systematic. The problem is when we come to complexity.

C3 – Teacher 4: But developing these complex skills in two years is impossible! It must be done in six years!

C2 – Teacher 7 (REFRAMING): Yes they have no “mental approach” to the problems. Let’s take an example. You give them a little challenge to solve and they are not going to say: I’ll have a look, I can start doing that, or I can use this or that.

C3 – Teacher 4: It’s very systematic.

C2 – Teacher 7 (REFRAMING): It’s very linear, very controlled. They do not even know in their head where and how to start [solving their mathematical problem].

C3 – Teacher 1: As for me, I think we do not go deeply enough into each subject.

The communication processes observed during the between-cycles meetings were symptomatic of the presence of conflicting interpretative frameworks. Processes of polarization, mainly in the voices of cycle 3 teachers, reflected their desire to raise the differences in the interpretive frameworks of the two cycles. Disconnection processes were identifiable when the cycle 2 teachers partly contested the interpretation proposed by cycle 3 teachers. This was particularly the case when discussing the value of external evaluation results. Yet, as soon as cycle 3 teachers became more pressing, they appeared to use more accommodation and reframing.

4.5.4. Consequences of the frame alignment

What then were the consequences of the frame alignment that took place during the between-cycles meetings? In cycle 2, the framing process resumed as if nothing had happened. They continued to examine how it is possible to implement vertical classes effectively and harmonize their respective expectations within the cycle. They rarely evoked the criticisms of their practices made by cycle 3 teachers, suggesting that the alignment of their interpretative framework was only a surface change.

On their side, teachers from cycle 3 appeared to be aware that the agreement reached during the meeting was only a surface one. They appeared frustrated by the iterative nature of the framing process and went on to narrow their prognostic frame a bit further. They restricted their criticisms to teachers’ individual practices, abandoning, for instance, their discussions on grade retention. They also explicitly denounced the frame selected by cycle 2 teachers, arguing that framing the problem in terms of continuity was an illusion, and a way for them not to change their practices.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to better understand the local processes of framing and their effects on coordinating teachers’ work. To this end, a longitudinal and ethnographic study was conducted in a school characterized by a diversity of teachers’ cognitive structures. Analysis revealed some significant changes in the treatment of the problem of weak student performance. After collegial (re-)identification and naming of the problem in a plenary meeting, successive phases of diagnostic and prognostic framing carried out jointly by teachers were observed. Then, the framing process was shown to take a different path, depending on the cycles. The paths intersected during between-cycles meetings, giving rise to a collective frame dominated by the proposed interpretation of cycle 3 teachers. Yet the frame alignment of cycle 2 teachers appeared rather a surface one, since it had little effect on the

framing trajectory observed during various subsequent cycle 2 meetings. In turn, cycle 3 teachers questioned the validity of the change in cycle 2 teachers' representations, which had the effect of further strengthening the framing of cycle 3 teachers on the deficit of cycle 2 individual teaching practices.

These results will now be discussed in relation to framing theory, and its contribution to understanding the local coordination of teachers' work. The first important result of this study is the few problems (and associated frames) that seem to have a significant resonance in this school. Indeed, only one problem, students' poor performance, attracted the attention of teachers during the entire observation time, and spread to the various situations observed. In a similar study, Coburn (2006) identified a much larger number of resonant problems and frames.

The literature has identified several factors explaining the frames' resonance level. According to Benford and Snow (2000), a framework is resonant when consistent, empirically credible, and recognized as legitimate by relevant actors in the organization. This problem seems actually to fit these criteria. It is the only one to be discussed in a systematic manner during plenary meetings, and to be recognized as significant by the school principal. It obviously gives meaning to many situations faced by teachers, experiences such as the level of student performance in the external evaluation or the observation of a general decline in student level over the years. Finally, focused on an internal attribution of the problem (diagnostic framing) and on the questioning of individual teaching practices (prognostic framing), it tends to acquire a certain internal consistency, meeting after meeting.

Yet, this study provides new arguments for thinking of the question of framing resonance, centered on organizational explanations. This type of explanation has been little discussed in the literature to date. In the context of our study, however, the low level of framing resonance seems to be linked to the overall weak process of collective organizing, and its highly decentralized nature. In other words, the level of resonance can be explained by organizations' characteristics, including the structure of social networks within them. Indeed, processes of framing and sense-making were rare during plenary meetings (except the plenary meeting during which the problem of students' weak performance was reintroduced); and when they were, neither the principal nor any teacher who would assume such a leadership role organized the confrontation of the respective frames and synthesized the emerging interpretations and solutions. Therefore, the processes of framing operated in a decentralized manner, through teachers' networks characterized by more intense discussion and confrontation in direct relation to their practices. Indeed, it is more difficult in such a pattern of relations (between teachers, but also between teachers and the principal) to imagine that problems and frameworks developed locally, in specific groups, spread to the entire team of teachers. In line with this argument, the debate on external evaluation was confined to a discussion in the between-cycles meetings, while the reflection on continuity and distribution of students in classes was limited to the cycle 2 meetings.

Three aspects related to analysis of the problem's trajectory are now developed. The first is that the analysis allows for better understanding of the interrelationships between changing social structures and the transformation of teachers' cognitive structures. It became apparent that the transformation of cognitive structures depends on the social structures in which they were being debated and, in contrast, that the transformation of cognitive structures produced changes in the structure of relations between teachers. In support of the first argument, we observed that the

framing process took a different path as a function of the social structures. In cycle 2, the reflection suggested a reexamination of continuity in learning objectives, while it questioned the individual teaching practices in cycle 3 more directly. In support of the second argument, the interpretative framework adopted by cycle 3 teachers has prompted the development of a new social network, which brought together teachers from the two cycles, while the growing distance in the respective frames of the two cycles (despite the temporary frame alignment) cemented the differences existing between these two networks and contributed to improving the relational climate in cycle 2.

The second point of analysis concerns the intertwining of cognitive structural transformations in the power relations that developed between teachers or groups of teachers. This element is probably the most interesting in our case study. Indeed, in most framing studies, researchers examine interaction situations in which actors around the table occupy positions clearly differentiated in terms of power over the situation. The study by De Wulf (2006) focused, for instance, on analysis of interactions between engineers, actors, NGOs, and local farmers around the issue of water conservation in Ecuador. Yet here, teachers, in terms of position and status within the school, have *a priori* equal weight in defining and making sense of their teaching practices. It is, therefore, necessary to understand how some teachers or groups of teachers acquire a “voice” that counts more than that of others in making sense of the problems and uncertainties experienced and identified by teachers. Our definition of power is rooted in a “Crozérienne” definition in which power is basically a reciprocal and unbalanced relationship between actors, more than a reflection of hierarchical positions (Crozier and Friedberg 1977). According to Crozier and Friedberg, power certainly depends on individual properties, such as mastering a specific skill or good knowledge of organizational rules, but it also depends on the margins of freedom that actors try to increase within their organization. These margins of freedom correspond to “zones of uncertainty” constructed and negotiated by different actors. However, the specificity of our analysis (compared to a conventional “Crozérienne” analysis) is here to understand and limit the definition of “uncertainty zones” in cognitive terms. The hypothesis is that the definition and interpretation of problems collectively identified as important by teachers represent significant sources of power, because their mastery (through framing processes) is related to teachers’ legitimacy and ability to define their own working conditions. Indeed, we can argue that, in the school’s current situation, the definition of teaching conditions and practices (and factors that explain their problematic effects on student performance) is an important issue. It can be assumed that the interest that guides the process of framing this problem is obtaining or retaining the power to define professional practices and conditions that promote their effectiveness. This school’s teachers are clearly at a turning point in their reflection on their practices. The climate of uncertainty about the effect of their teaching practices and the desire to improve matters by developing collective reflections on factors explaining this situation are conducive to the emergence of power relations between teachers. In this situation, teachers from cycle 3 dominate teachers from cycle 2 in identifying explanatory factors for students’ weak performance and in suggesting solutions. Several observations support this interpretation. During the between-cycles meetings, which they initiated, cycle 3 teachers opened the debate and proposed avenues of interpretation. Cycle 2 teachers reacted either by challenging the “evidence” that underlies them (the results of external evaluation) or by complying with the

proposed framework. Moreover, the functioning of the cycle adopted by cycle 2 teachers is a form of mimicry of the functioning of cycle 3. It will be recalled that cycle 2 teachers, in preparation for the 2008–2009 school year, decided to adopt vertical classes and greater collaboration between teachers. This imitation can be interpreted first as a form of “subjugation” of cycle 2 teachers to their colleagues, and partly as a way to protect themselves from criticisms of their teaching practices. Thus, the present study confirms that cultural–ideological interests (Kelchtermans 2007) influence how the teachers interpret messages from the school environment (e.g. external evaluation). However, it does not show that the filtering of policy messages through the teachers’ interests induces the buffering of the external accountability pressures. It rather points out that (some) teachers use these regulation tools (external tests) to legitimate their own views of the teaching/learning process, and indirectly, possibly facilitate the institutionalization of accountability and external evaluation in the school.

The third point of discussion concerns the nature of teachers’ frame change. In the literature on framing (Benford and Snow 2000; Coburn 2006; De Wulf 2006), three types of evolution are distinguished. The first type of evolution is fundamentally a surface change. In such cases, actors adopt the words and rhetoric without changing their own representations of the situation. That seems to be the case of the cycle 2 teachers’ framework modifications that occurred during the between-cycles meetings. The second type of change corresponds to peripheral changes in actors’ representations. The third type of evolution corresponds to a deeper transformation of the framework structure. Although access to teachers’ individual representations and practices was limited in this study, the changes observed are first or second type changes. Quite clearly in fact, teachers of cycle 2 rally to the interpretation of the situation proposed by cycle 3 teachers and use their words to characterize it, without placing their own frameworks in real competition with those suggested by cycle 3 teachers.

This last consideration leads us naturally back to the question of framing effects on the coordination of teachers’ work. Coburn (2006) has suggested that the framing processes may have three types of implications. Frameworks adopted may influence relations between teachers, teachers’ practices, and teachers’ individual sense-making in their classroom. In our case, the implications are essentially relational. It was explained earlier that the adoption of a framework focused on the questioning of teachers’ practices had numerous relational effects. It stimulated the formation of a new social network, made it possible for cycle 3 teachers to adopt a domination position vis-à-vis their colleagues from cycle 2, and finally increased the relational distance between the two cycles.

But what about the implications for teachers’ practices and individual sense-making? Our observations are limited in regard to teaching practices and the reference made by teachers to collective frameworks during classroom activities. Thus, we can only suggest the following hypothesis: in this school, the adoption of a common framework is more indicative of a reconfiguration of power relations than of a search for a collective solution to the problem of students’ weak performance. In cycle 2, teachers frame the issue in terms of a continuity problem to avoid direct questioning of their practices, while the framework developed by cycle 3 teachers (centered on the deficiency of cycle 2 teachers’ practices) also protects them from such questioning. However, attention should be drawn to the fact that our analysis

lacks the opportunity to analyze longer-term effects of the pressure exerted by cycle 3 teachers on their colleagues.

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Notes

1. Within-group agreement indicators (rwg) on several school culture scales were computed for the four schools of the first study (Dumay 2009). They indicated that in the school described in the present study, the level of within-team agreement on several dimensions (collaboration, performance, innovation, and discipline) was lower than in the other schools.
2. The competency-based approach has been promoted by the political authority in French-speaking Belgium since the end of the 1990s. It focuses on students' learning as an active process and competency construction by students. It is most often opposed to a teacher-centered approach to teaching.
3. This means that the definition of performance became largely centred on the main content evaluated externally: language, mathematics, and science.
4. Teachers 1–4 are teachers from cycle 3, while teachers 5–8 are from cycle 2. A more detailed description of each teacher can be found in Table 1.

Notes on contributor

Xavier Dumay is a professor in education at GIRSEF, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium. His research interests lie in educational policies and educational administration.

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