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# Teacher Education and Multiculturalism in Europe: National Policy and Practitioner practice in France

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## The French educational system and the representation of minorities

In 2002-2003, the school population in metropolitan France and in the overseas counties was 14,940,900 pupils and students – the French population being just above 60 million – among whom: 6,529,000 are in primary schools (pre-elementary and elementary), 5,596,000 in secondary schools and 2,209,000 in higher education. French is the language of education. Dialects or regional languages are taught as modern languages.

The official statistics of the French Ministry of National Education do not distinguish the pupils according to their ethnic origin. They are only based on the criterion of nationality, distinguishing foreign pupils from the French pupils (see below). The following tables show the distribution of foreign pupils by nationality. The data concerning secondary education are updated (school year 2002-2003); however, the figures for primary schools are only available since 1999-2000.

### Foreign pupils in public and private primary schools (1999-2000) (selected nationalities)

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Moroccan	23.0%
Algerian	14.5%
Turkish	13.0%
African (Maghreb not included)	13.0%
Portuguese	10.0%
Tunisian	7.0%
Other UE	4.0%
Southeast Asian (Cambodian , Laotian, Vietnamese)	2.0%
Italian and Spanish	2.0%

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N=372 000 (5.9% of primary school pupil population)

### Foreign pupils in public and private secondary schools (2002-2003) (selected nationalities)

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Moroccan	24.0%
African (Maghreb not included)	14.5%
Algerian	11.0%
Portuguese	10.5%
Turk	9.0%
Tunisian	7.0%
Other UE	5.0%
Southeast Asian (Cambodian , Laotian, Vietnamese)	2.0%
Italian and Spanish	2.0%

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N =238 200 (4.4% of secondary school pupil population)

The proportion of foreign pupils and their distribution by nationalities reflect the history of migration streams. The proportion of foreign pupils has been decreasing since 1985 in

primary schools (10.6 per cent of the pupils at that time) and since 1992 (7.5 per cent) in secondary education, as a result of the slow down in immigration and the increase of naturalisation.

The number of Italian and Spanish pupils has fallen since the early 1980s; accounting for little more than 2 per cent of foreign pupils today. This is because the primary migration from Spain and Italy took place several decades ago.

The immigration of Algerian and Portuguese workers in the 1960s and the 1970s constitutes the second wave of immigration. Although the proportion of these pupils has decreased in schools since the mid 1980s, it is still significant (between 10 and 15 per cent for each nationality).

Moroccan and Tunisian pupils come from the third most recent wave of immigration. Moroccans constitute the largest foreign population in the French school system (almost the quarter of the foreign pupils) today. Tunisian pupils represent approximately 7 per cent of the foreign pupils. Turks and Africans also belong to this third wave of immigration and represent an important part of the foreign pupils (around 10-15 per cent for each of the nationalities) today. The number of pupils coming from Southeast Asia had strongly increased until the mid 1980s and has since decreased; now representing a very small proportion of foreign pupils (2 per cent).

On the whole, the largest countries represented are Morocco, African countries, Algeria, Portugal and Turkey.

The distribution of foreign pupils on the French territory is strongly heterogeneous. The proportion of foreign pupils is high in the Ile-de-France (19 per cent for Paris, 18 per cent for Créteil) and in the eastern and southeastern academies (12 per cent for Lyon, 11 per cent for Strasbourg, 9 per cent for Nice). On the other hand, in the western academies of France, this proportion is generally below 5 per cent. When all is said and done, immigrant pupils are not included in education public statistics. Therefore the ethnic reality of schools cannot be properly analysed.

There is no data in France on the ethnic origins of the teaching population today. It has been asserted that the proportion of newly qualified teachers from minority ethnic groups has increased over the last few years. But this assertion cannot be verified with the complete absence of national data. A rapid analysis of the list of primary education trainee teachers in initial training in an IUFM of the Paris region gives the result of approximately 10 per cent of patronymics from the Maghreb area (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco), Turkey and Black Africa in 2003. This figure is quite high, but it must be noticed that it only represents one initial teacher training college in an educational district where the immigrant population is larger than other areas in France.

### **Secularism and multiculturalism: a first approach to a French specificity.**

The school has, for historical reasons and in the French republican tradition, always been conceived as an institution encapsulating the authority of the State and which played a central role in the construction of the national unity and helped spread a shared culture.

For the last two decades, the *rapport* between the school and the various cultures has been questioned and at the moment is the heart of debate and discussion; in particular the thorny debate on the place of immigrants in French society and the issue on national

identity in the context of European construction and globalisation. Education policies have, for the last thirty years, revolved around the assertion of the cultural differences and the will for national unity.

In the 1970s education experts started assessing the special needs of immigrant pupils. The political response in the 1980s corresponded to a complete lack of differentiation between pupils, whatever their ethnic origin, and tended to overshadow the ethnic dimension of the problems that many schools had to cope with (this is particularly obvious when analysing the official collection of statistics).

The place of cultural diversity and the fight against ethnic discrimination in schools should also be examined through the analysis of school curricula, which was particularly debated from the 1980s onwards. The most recent period was finally marked by important discussions about the deep meaning of school secularism and its connections to different religions.

Up to the end of the 1960s, questions of immigration and cultural variety were not the main concern of education policies. The problem of integrating the immigrant population was essentially contained at this time in the economic and social spheres and linked to the placing of immigrants in employment and housing.

In the 1970s, the State eventually realised the need to sort the situation created by the important presence of immigrant children in French schools, after the Government had developed a systematic policy of family entry and settlement. Specific education practices were, for the first time, mapped out to target immigrant children in French schools.

From the 1980s onwards, a new conception of the problem of the integration of immigrants arose. The integration of immigrant children is no longer tackled as a specific issue and is interwoven with social exclusion policies. A new consensus has emerged with a social approach to ethnicity, and this is bound to the refusal to make distinctions among the pupils on grounds of their origin or their ethnicity.

Compensatory mechanisms are developed on a regionalised and local basis to target socially discriminated populations. The policy of the *Zones d'Education Prioritaire* (ZEP) or education action zones, for example, aims at giving supplementary funds to schools in zones with social and economic difficulties.

Various writers have underlined the ambivalent political treatment of ethnic questions. Officially, education policies do not identify specific problems met by ethnic minority pupils. Yet the proportion of foreign pupils in a specific area would be one of the criteria used to identify an EAZ. References to ethnicity are thus relatively eclipsed in official speeches, but its presence in schools is striking.

Sociological studies showing the importance of the ethnic dimension in schools increased in 1980s and especially in the 1990s. Some research attempted to describe the processes leading to the concentration of pupils of foreign origins in underperforming classes or in certain schools. The ethnic segregation between and within schools is the result of several elements that reinforce each other, as some schools do their utmost to avoid registering middle class family pupils for instance.

Other research underlines the existence among school staff of negative representations towards pupils and their families, on the basis of socioeconomic inferiority and ethnic differences.

### **Professional practices and teacher training**

We have so far made a limited and mixed assessment of teachers' practices regarding the promotion of multiculturalism and the concept of a European identity.

The question of the place of cultural diversity at school emphasises the diverging positions of teachers that were also visible – but less clearly – as far as citizenship education is concerned. The hierarchy of priorities is not the same among all teachers. For some teachers, the dominant aim is integration into French society/culture, even if a place is also granted to minority cultures inside school. These teachers also recognise the need to accept the diversity of cultures in school. Pupils may be encouraged to talk about their cultural origin in class, for example. But the overriding priority is integration into French culture. Moreover, when these interviewees talk about valuing minority cultures in school, their predominant aim is to give these minority ethnic children a positive image of themselves and to show them that the school environment does not have a negative view of these cultures and is a place of freedom for all.

Others interviewees have a significantly different vision. They see education for cultural diversity as a key purpose of education. The ethnocentrism of pupils is pointed out here:

Children have a very self-centred image and are very sectarian: French people are the best!

According to children, everybody speaks French, everybody is French... They are not aware of that. Hence it is good for them to see other things, other languages, other cultures, other ways of life. I find it important.

The cultures are ignored by the curriculum. The history of other countries is absent.

Therefore these teachers use every opportunity to make children more aware of cultural diversity and of the richness of different cultures than French. The logic here is different from that described above: the actions are not centred on valuing minority ethnic children, but on the open-mindedness of all children, especially those belonging to the majority culture.

All interviewees recognise the responsibility of society for the difficulties currently experienced by minority ethnic groups. In particular, they point out the negative consequences of the 'ghettoisation' of some areas and schools. Several teachers also talk of the intolerance of the majority culture. This intolerance is also concretised within schools themselves: minority ethnic pupils suffer at school from rejection by other pupils and even teachers.

Most teachers argue that minority ethnic children undergo specific difficulties linked to mastering the French language: as their parents do not always speak correct French, these children are disadvantaged. Moreover, minority ethnic families often belong to lower socio-economic classes, so the cultural environment of minority ethnic children is rather deprived.

However, several teachers go further in their perception of ethnic minority pupils difficulties. Some of them also blame the behaviour of minority ethnic families themselves. They denounce the communitarianism existing in the school environment. Communities of a foreign origin are described in a negative manner – as closed communities, whose have a limited or non-existent desire to integrate into French society. This is especially mentioned in the case of Islamic populations. Several interviewees condemn the increasing emphasis on religion within such populations. They deplore the pressure put by parents or elder brothers on children, especially girls, to conserve religious traditions. It will be important to confirm, analyse and better understand this tendency, as it suggests the existence of quite negative representations of minority ethnic groups among teachers, which is particularly focused on Muslim populations.

Another research finding is of a similar importance. Some teachers interviewed interpreted particular behaviour as being the consequence of belonging to a particular ethnic group. For example, two teachers denounced the attitudes of Gipsy families, who they said were far too much permissive with their children and did not value schooling at all.

The expression of this opinion is interesting because it appears to be an effect of social representation, rather than a mere observation of a fact. Another teacher told us precisely the opposite: Gipsy children are not a problem and they are well integrated. This teacher was working in a school where the cultural mix was greater and where a high proportion of children came from the majority culture and upper socio-economic classes. It may be that the integration of pupils of Gipsy origin is easier in such context: but what is interesting is that in both cases teachers point to a specific problem concerning Gipsy children by describing as an intrinsic characteristic of the Gipsy community.

In a similar manner, two primary school head-teachers refer to the specific problems they perceive with pupils of African origin. African families, they said, were too permissive; their children loafed around the streets very late, and so on. Several other teachers generalised such ideas, claiming there was parental abdication in areas of social difficulty. Those who are really targeted behind such statements are very often minority ethnic parents, who are said not to educate their children and not to give them necessary stable landmarks. Hence the role of school is to compensate for the 'lack of education' of minority ethnic children and to 'civilise' them.

In the total discourse of several teachers some minority ethnic groups were described in negative ways, whether this was about their religious attitudes or their educational deficiencies. What is apparent is a process of 'ethnicisation' in some teachers' representations: particular phenomena and facts are interpreted as the consequences of culture and ethnicity. These teachers also recognize the difficult social conditions encountered by minority ethnic groups, rejected by the majority culture, placed in experimental ghettos and facing social difficulties. It therefore seems difficult to describe their attitudes as simply a form of racism. They are working in difficult areas and have undergone many problems in their school, including pupil under-achievement and violence, and they may be overwhelmed with feelings of powerlessness and fatigue. Some develop a fatalistic view and a defensive logic in order to rationalise their difficulties. Some are then prone to develop negative representations of minority ethnic groups and to describe them in a fatalistic and fixed way.

We have already described some of the teachers' solutions and practices to better integrate minority ethnic pupils. Several teachers also mentioned another positive experience: integrating minority ethnic parents better into the school, developing close contacts with them appears a good way of creating mutual trust and of recognising minority ethnic pupils' achievements. Different ways were suggested to do this: helping minority ethnic families to participate in the school council and school meetings; consistently helping them at all times, particular in the social field (accepting more of the role of a social worker); always striving to establish communications with them when a problem occurs, such as violence.

The involvement of minority ethnic families into the school life appears to have positive effects. In particular, it may be a good way of avoiding 'ethnicisation' processes, and counter the development of mutual incomprehension and distancing between school staff and minority ethnic families. These practices might be examined further, and may be the object of one of our future case studies.

Several teachers mention a similar positive practice in their pedagogical behaviour. If necessary, they say that they treat minority ethnic children in a specific ways, perhaps adapting their usual pedagogy or marking, for example when there are language difficulties. The teacher may spend more time helping the children, or giving them less difficult exercises at the beginning. But at the same time these teachers argue that such specific treatment must remain invisible, so as not to create feelings of inferiority among them. They act always to value the children and to give them a positive self-image. The specific treatment of minority ethnic children seems to be no different from that given to any other children experiencing difficulties in school. The only variation is that there is greater focus on language difficulties.

The European issue seems to divide our panel of interviewees, as it is currently splitting the French opinion as a whole. Our interviewees reflect the great diversity of attitudes and opinions that are found in the French population on this issue, ranging from outright criticism to true enthusiasm, from indifference to idealism. The teachers we questioned wavered between scepticism and voluntarism.

About half the teachers we questioned consider that Europe not to be a priority for them in their day-to-day school environment, either because:

- they disagree with the current evolution of European integration (*'too distant from the citizens', 'too much based on competition', 'too unequalitarian'*); or
- they see Europe as an abstract, theoretical and distant issue, (*'it is a fantasy', 'it is some thing like a chore, a boring and routine task that we the teachers are all supposed to do in order to have a good conscience of ourselves'*); or

the vast majority consider the European issue is disconnected from their day-to-day reality and concerns (*'There are far more urgent and pressing issues to tackle'* was the most frequently answer we were given).

Unsurprisingly, the last answer was expressed most often by teachers working in 'ghetto schools' or schools with a very difficult social environments and a large proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups in their classroom (*'The pupils do not even feel French, then what's the use of all these discourses on Europe and the concept of a European identity?'*).

But there does not seem to be a systematic link between the characteristics of the school and the attitudes of the teachers towards Europe: there were also very positive responses on Europe from some teachers working in very difficult contexts.

The other half of the teachers we questioned had a positive vision of Europe, arising either from a pragmatic attitude towards the current progress to European integration, or from a deep conviction in the virtues of the European political and cultural project:

*Europe is our past and our present, and the future of our children,*

*Europe is the best example of cultural diversity,*

*Europe is an avoidable part of the necessary education to citizenship,*

*Europe has practical consequences on our everyday life,*

*My pupils are true Europeans now, they are European citizens.*

These teachers consequently tended to develop pedagogies that include many possible references to Europe. Examples given ranged from ‘the introduction of the euro’ to ‘the consequences of enlargement’ or ‘the effects of European decisions on our everyday life’.

As examples of innovative teaching practices, the most dedicated teachers have involved themselves in the European COMMENIUS programme, which organises educational networks in Europe: one particular teacher was involved in launching a COMMENIUS program that linked his former (privileged) primary school with Swedish and English schools, and is committed to start a new programme that could link his current and underprivileged school with other schools from southern Europe.

Overall, these teachers considered that the best way to develop European identity among their pupils is to promote the teaching of foreign languages at school, as well as cultural exchanges and travel within the European area. On this practice the teachers noticed with regret the timidity of the French government and the scarcity of credits, which has led to insufficient foreign language activity in primary education, and to the almost exclusive teaching of English as a second language for French young people.

Whether they were reluctant or enthusiastic, pessimistic or optimistic about Europe, all the teachers we interviewed agreed on and acknowledged their lack of training and cultural background on the issue: most of them deplored this. Some expressed willingness to get more information and training on the issue, particularly in the areas of foreign languages, cultural diversity, teaching practices and European programmes.



