

The Recognition of Cultural Diversity in the French Educational Context: A Literature Review

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Introduction

As part of the motto of the French Republic, the principle of equality among human beings is a fundamental principle of the French society. Therefore, in France, cultural diversity has long been ignored in public policies, especially in education policy. In this traditional approach, taking into account cultural differences at school might have been interpreted as a violation of equality in rights, and perceived as a sign of inequity among pupils and students.

Starting from the nineties, the European unification and the world globalisation have altered the landscape. On the one hand, building a meaningful European citizenship involves that every nation or cultural group within the European Union recognises, understands and accepts cultural diversity. On the other hand, coping with the economic and social globalisation, and taking advantage of it, needs awareness of and preparation for pluriculturality. An example of that is the growing tendency of firms to hire managers multiculturally open-minded and ready to face cultural diversity within their staffs, markets, partners and clients (Davoine 1998; Dupard 1997; Pierre 2002; Poirey 1994).

These new trends influenced attitudes and provoked debate about the recognition of cultural diversity in France, especially in education. The aim of this paper is to present the key ideas and arguments which were developed in this debate. The paper is based on a review of the French-speaking academic literature. Three main issues emerging from the debate will be presented.

The first and most prevalent issue deals with the links between cultural diversity and citizenship. On the one hand, insofar as citizenship was traditionally based on ethnic identity, growing cultural diversity puts citizenship into question. On the other hand, the recognition of differences is a matter of democracy.

A second discussion centres on the approaches of cultural diversity recognition in the society and in education. Much

attention has been paid by authors to analysing and comparing such concepts as "interculturalism" and "multiculturalism".

Finally, the third debate focuses on the pedagogical methods to raise pupils' and students' intercultural awareness. Several authors proposed methods such as language teaching, teaching history or civics.

Though cultural diversity in education has often been discussed, few authors have specifically addressed the French situation in the international academic literature. Therefore, this paper should be of interest to researchers, practitioners and policy makers concerned with developing a European way to handling cultural diversity in education, and especially to those concerned with taking the French approach into account.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 discusses the relationships between cultural diversity and citizenship in the French educational context. Section 2 presents some concepts and systems which were mentioned in the debate for the recognition of cultural diversity in the society and in education. Section 3 reports some pedagogical ways for cultural diversity education which were suggested in this debate.

Cultural diversity and citizenship in the French educational context

Cultural diversity has long been ignored in the French society, including the educational system. Four major reasons, unity, identity, safety and equality can explain this situation. However, some recent changes can be reported.

Unity, identity, safety and equality

First, France has a long tradition of political centralisation. Since its origins in the middle ages, from monarchy to empire then

finally republic, the French state has every time been centrally administered. Federalism has never been applied in France. Apart from some overseas islands ("French overseas territories and territorial communities" – 'collectivités territoriales' –, i.e. French Polynesia, Mayotte, New Caledonia, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, Wallis and Futuna), the same national laws, regulations and institutions, centrally designed, are identically implemented whatever the part of the national territory considered. Therefore, the French state has long considered that recognising cultural differences would encourage the emergence and structuring of minority-based local powers, and would open the way to claims for political autonomy. As a result, denying cultural diversity has long been a method to preserve national unity.

This attitude itself had a consequence in terms of cultural identity. Negation of cultural differences within the French population led the French state to favour and promote a unique French cultural model. A good example to illustrate this point is the French Academy ('Académie Française'), officially established in 1635 in order to regulate and normalise the use of French language. Nowadays, the rules edicted by the French Academy still define the correct use of French language within the administration, at school, or in the media. More generally, the French national cultural model is defined through a large set of reference values and of strongly recommended good practices. The model encompasses various aspects of the way of life: arts, music, literature, cuisine, religion, dress, sexual preferences, conjugal status, choice of educational institutions, political opinions and so forth. In each field, best practices are clearly identified, for example going to the theatre rather than watching TV, listening to classical music rather than to popular or world music, and so on. Of course, the content of the reference values and best practices may change over time but adaptation to new times is rather slow.

Favouring a unique national cultural model implies that each citizen or inhabitant is required to join the national model, and to adopt its values and practices. In the French approach, joining the national model does not mean bringing one's culture and adding it to others. On the contrary, it means replacing one's initial values and practices with the dominant culture, at least in the public sphere, i.e. outside one's home. To a large extent, conforming to this attitude meets the French conception of civic behaviour. Diverging behaviours are tolerated, but they are not considered legitimate, and are not valued. They may become legitimate only if a large part of the national community adopts them. Such changes can occur to meet new circumstances. For example, as a result of several government road safety campaigns, not drinking wine at meals is socially accepted nowadays while it was not twenty-five years ago and would have then been considered as a trait of an imperfect socialisation.

The third reason explaining the negation of cultural diversity is safety. As can be seen from foreign examples such as the Spanish Basque land or Northern Ireland, affirmation of culturally and historically based regional identity can turn to claims for political autonomy, and may be viewed as leading to violence and terrorism. In France itself, several separatist movements have developed terrorist activities since the seventies in Corsica and in Brittany. In that respect too, preventing the emergence of sub-national communities has been a strategy to preserve public safety. More recently, the development of international terrorism linked with Middle Eastern conflicts (Palestine then Iraq) offered new arguments to justify "anti-communautarism", as it is termed. It is generally thought that Islamic communities might host activists, which advocates against the recognition of sub-national communities. More generally, the increasing ethnic diversity within the French population for fifty years aroused suspicion

towards ethnic communities.

Of course, banning communities has consequences. It contributes to explaining why French people rely so much on the government for aid. More generally, defiance towards diversity has profoundly shaped the French society and political system, which look so different as compared with others within or outside the European Union (for example, in comparison with the American approach to diversity and communities, as described by Putnam (2000).

It thus appears that there is a contradiction between the French republican conception of citizenship and the recognition of cultural diversity. It can be noticed that France has still, in 2005, not yet ratified the European Council Charter for Regional or Minority Languages adopted in 1998. In the French conception, citizenship does not only mean active involvement in the functioning of democracy. Citizenship also means relegating personal differences to the private sphere and merging as an individual in the dominant model. As a consequence, individuals are theoretically identical in the public sphere and can then be recognised as having strictly equal rights (Vermès 2002, 13). Therefore, individuals should not be treated differently. In other words, differences – and especially cultural differences – are denied and cannot be used to justify any difference in treatment. Thus, the principle of equality in rights appears to be the fourth grounding reason of the French traditionally assimilationist attitude towards cultural diversity.

Assimilationism within the educational system echoes the attitude in the society in general. In primary and secondary schools, curricula are centrally designed by the Ministry of Education. The institutional and functioning framework is centrally designed too. Teachers are public sector employees, which implies that their expected behaviour is codified and standardised. Pedagogical practices are normalised, and Academic inspectors control the way rules are implemented. A key principle is that pupils themselves should not be treated differently. Finally, a major objective assigned to the educational system is to educate for citizenship in the French sense of the word. Due to their own education and training, most primary and secondary French teachers also have faith in this model. In such a context, there is little place for taking account of differences among pupils, whatever these differences may be, cultural or otherwise. The recent controversy about wearing Muslim headscarves at school illustrates this context.

Recent changes

However, this traditional way of handling cultural diversity has been put into question since the nineties. It has been argued that a modern conception of citizenship should take into account not only equality but also equity (Vermès 2002, 26).

The first idea is that though formally enjoying the same rights, individuals do not actually have the same chances and opportunities as regards school achievement, access to employment or position in the social hierarchy. Recognising differences and taking account of them would therefore contribute to overcoming actual inequalities. Applied to the educational system, this more nuanced position suggests that pupils whose cultural background does not allow them to get the best out of the education they receive, might be awarded better learning conditions. In that respect, a "Priority education" programme ('Education prioritaire') designed to meet special needs was launched in 1991. The programme consists of additional funding to support educational institutions in geographical areas socially and culturally disadvantaged. In 2004, the programme was covering 13% of the whole population of primary and secondary pupils.

Another aspect of the equity argument is that individuals from cultural or ethnic minorities are not equally recognised

in the society. Though enjoying formal equality in rights, they are often less considered than other citizens. Therefore, institutional and public acceptance of their differences is a matter of legitimacy and dignity to them, in order to recover self-esteem (Ogay et al. 2002, 46) and feel as valuable citizens as others (Charlot 2002, 139-140, Vermès 2002, 16-17). In education at least this demand was partly met, as shown by the fact that several regional languages (Alsatian, Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Creole, Melanesian, Occitan and Tahitian) and immigrants' languages (among which Arabic, Chinese, Turkish and Vietnamese) are taught nowadays in French primary and secondary schools.

In addition, the lack of consideration for minority cultures can have critical effects on the educational activity itself. Using the social psychological approach, Ogay et al. (2002, 47) argued that part of school failure among immigrants' children and part of their violence might result from a sense of loyalty to their community. The point is that children have to choose between the dominant model and their parents' model. While some children will choose to assimilate, some others will reject the dominant model and reinforce their belonging to their community, hoping to change people's minds. Violence inside (and outside) schools, as well as school failure, may be signs of this rejection of the dominant model. Therefore, valuing cultural diversity might abolish the necessity for pupils to choose one model, and consequently might help reducing school failure and violence.

Furthermore, the efficiency of the teaching and learning process is subject to recognising cultural diversity. As pointed out by Charlot (2002, 141) and Ogay et al. (2002, 48-49), learning implies decoding information on the basis of one's own culture, knowledge and experience. Therefore, effective teaching implies that teachers have some knowledge of learners' cultural patterns and representations, in order to adapt their methods and presentations to them accordingly. On the contrary, Ogay et al. (ibid., 44) emphasised how distraught, frustrated and finally ineffective teachers may be when unprepared to classroom cultural diversity.

Some concepts and systems for the recognition of cultural diversity in the society and in education

In contrast with the French assimilationist traditional approach, some authors pointed out that there may be various ways of taking into account the pupils' cultural diversity. On the basis of international experience, Muñoz-Sedano and Martin (2000) classified several approaches to deal with cultural diversity. Four non-assimilationist conceptions can be distinguished: segregationism, multiculturalism, interculturalism and integrationism.

Segregationism means apartheid. Cultural minorities may exist but must develop separately. There are no relationships between cultures. Cultural minorities are excluded from the educational system of the dominant group. They may have their own schools, teachers, languages and pedagogical methods adapted to their specific social and cultural context. In this model, minority cultures are not recognised as equal to the culture of the dominant group. The former South African apartheid model illustrates this approach.

Next, multiculturalism means that all cultures represented in the country are recognised as equally legitimate. Multiculturalism aims to promote simultaneous development of different cultures on the basis of mutual respect. The different cultures coexist and each may follow its own way. Cultural minorities have access to the majority educational system, but they may choose as well to develop their own specific educational institutions. In the majority educational

system, cultural differences are not necessarily taken into account. Cultures may choose to interact and develop relationships, but they do not necessarily have to (Wicht 2004). Community coexistence is based on a minimal set of common 'functional' values such as murder prohibition or the respect of commitments (Camilleri 1997). This approach is also called "pluriculturalism". Authors generally consider that, to some extent, multi- or pluriculturalism might be illustrated by cases in the United Kingdom.

The third approach is interculturalism, which means that beyond the coexistence of several cultures equally valued, there are further interactions between cultures (Camilleri 1997). The different cultures are represented in the majority educational system, within or outside curricula (for example through extracurricular activities). Especially, in the majority educational system, all mother tongues are taught or at least may be used at school. Cultural differences are also taught. Pedagogical methods must adapt to the pupils' cultural needs. Interculturalism aims to provide pupils with skills which are necessary to understand other cultures, necessary to live together and necessary to interact. Wicht (2004) considers that Switzerland illustrates this approach.

Finally, the fourth way to handle cultural diversity would be integrationism. Integrationism means that all cultures merge in a unique common culture. This unique common culture is not the one of the dominant group. It is a new cultural melting pot, consisting of contributions from all cultures represented in the country. The common culture changes and adapts itself as new cultural communities settle in the country. It comprises common languages and an extended set of shared values. The educational system is common to all. All cultures and languages are represented at school. Thus, each culture may be equally recognised and respected as part of the common culture. To some extent, an example of this approach might be provided by the New Education System implemented in Singapore since 1979, which takes into account both mother tongue languages and cultures (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) as well as English (Gauthier 1998).

Basically, these models can be contrasted by means of three criteria, i.e.:

- The legitimacy awarded by the dominant culture to minority cultures;
- The minority groups' autonomy of decision as regards the setting of own specific educational institutions;
- The representation of minority cultures in the dominant educational system.

Table 1 below presents this typology.

| | Are minority cultures considered to be as legitimate as the dominant culture? | Are minority groups allowed to set and develop their own specific educational institutions? | Are minority cultures, minority languages and cultural differences taught within the dominant educational system? Are the cultural needs of pupils taken into account through adapted pedagogical methods? |
|------------------|---|---|--|
| Assimilationism | No | No | No |
| Segregationism | No | Yes | No |
| Multiculturalism | Yes | Yes | Optional |
| Interculturalism | Yes | Yes | Compulsory |
| Integrationism | Yes | No | Compulsory |

Table 1: Social models for handling cultural diversity

Some pedagogical ways for cultural diversity education

The third wing of this debate deals with the ways of education for cultural diversity. Several ideas have been proposed.

Intercultural education

The first and most thoughtful approach is known as intercultural education ('éducation à l'interculturel'). As Camilleri (1997) explained, intercultural education is based on three main pillars.

To begin with, teaching and learning other cultures implies respect for these cultures. Respect itself results from the recognition of the legitimacy of these cultures. Linking cultures with their original environment opens the way to understanding their rationality, to recognising their legitimacy, and is therefore helpful for eliminating value judgments. Likewise, teachers' and students' awareness of the psychological mechanisms which generate racism might contribute to their open-mindedness.

Next, it is necessary to recall and remember that cultures are living and change permanently. Interculturalism and intercultural education imply relationships and interaction between cultures, which means that cultures may adapt and change. Therefore, there is no way forward for intercultural education if cultures are construed as static, designed once and for all and as not subject to change.

Finally, effective intercultural education should neither mask nor deny actual antagonism which may exist between cultures. Interculturalism does not mean peace and love among nations. There may be contradictions between grounding values of cultural groups, for example as regards polygamy, female genital mutilation, or the concepts of human rights or democracy. Though it cannot solve such antagonisms, intercultural education must acknowledge them to be credible.

Linking national history, European history and world history in teaching history

The second idea deals with teaching history. Obviously, lack of awareness or rejection of other cultures may lead to intolerance and nationalism. Therefore, Malbert and Perotti (1998) state that, in teaching history, national history should be put in a European perspective, in order to make people aware of belonging to a common civilisation. In addition, teaching European history itself should be connected with world history so that pupils and students in European countries avoid developing ethnocentric views and attitudes.

Language teaching

Thirdly, in the French-speaking academic literature, language teaching is the most frequently discussed way of providing education for cultural diversity. On the one hand, authors express the idea that language teaching provides pupils and students with intercultural skills which are necessary for mutual understanding and interaction (Chalabi and De Salins 2002, Clisson and Zuliani 2001, Schumacher 1998). On the other hand, other authors emphasize the role of teaching minority languages as a sign of recognition and respect of other cultures (Cunningham and Reddan 1998).

The role of teaching civics and rhetoric

To end, Khlifi (1998) emphasized the importance of various disciplines in enforcing education for cultural diversity. He especially pointed out the role of civics: through such themes as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both unity and diversity of mankind can be examined. He also insisted on the importance of teaching rhetoric whatever its form; essay

writing, debating and so forth. Insofar as it is based on handling arguments, rhetoric favours a multifaceted global approach to problems, which is an important skill in education for cultural diversity.

Conclusion

Due to political reasons, cultural diversity has long been ignored in the French educational system. However, changes have occurred since the nineties. Along with the European unification and the world globalisation, the need for more equity and efficiency in education has urged reforms. As a consequence, a large debate has been initiated on new concepts and new ways to cope with cultural diversity in education.

Though efforts are made to acknowledge this diversity – especially language diversity – at school, the French educational system seems to be late as compared with other national systems such as those of the United Kingdom or the Netherlands. Reducing the gap probably requires connecting with the international experience and debates in this field, to get the most of them.

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