

## Tolerance in Discourses and Practices in French Public Schools

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The French education system is centralised and 90% of the school population is enrolled in state-funded public schools. Even private schools receive public funding and the content of their teaching is monitored by the state. French public schools are managed by the Ministry of National Education and **curriculum contents are decided at national level**. It is a powerful instrument to convey national representations of French identity.

The French education system is a place where **diversity is widespread although not equally distributed**. School is compulsory until 16 years of age and children of foreigners, should they be legal or illegal residents in France, go to school starting in first grade (6 year old). Although there are no statistics to measure the diversity of the school population, it is fair to estimate that **9% of the pupils are children of immigrants**. This does not encompass, however, the totality of pupils with an immigrant background. Moreover, the unequal repartition of wealth and space makes it more likely to find a **high level of diversity in school population, in disadvantaged urban areas** (at the outskirts of major cities).

The principle of *laïcité* (the French understanding of secularism that confines religion to the private realm) was first and foremost enforced in public schools with the 1882 Ferry laws (the formal separation of Church and State occurred in 1905). Concretely, **it excludes religious teaching from public schools**. The teaching of moral values, previously taught as part of religious classes, was replaced by civic education. During civic

*As a place where a discourse on national identity meets a diverse population, French public schools are major sites to address the challenge of diversity.*

*Moreover they implement the principle of laïcité and are important venues to teach tolerance and impact practices of acceptance.*

**education** classes, at primary and secondary level, pupils learn about laïcité, equality and their rights as citizen. Civic education is taught by teachers of history and geography (30% of the curriculum is dedicated to civic education). On 15 March 2004, a law was passed to reassess the enforcement of laïcité and prevent all pupils from wearing religious signs inside public schools.

In this report, we analyse the schools' response to the diversity of the school population. **How is diversity approached in the content of the teaching and in the interactions with pupils?** Is there a specific discourse on tolerance or acceptance of diversity? And if there is such a discourse, how does it operate in practice? Do teachers have the feeling that they are fostering tolerance or acceptance in the content of their teaching and their interactions with pupils? And what is the perception of pupils?

To answer these questions, two case studies were selected, for which literature reviews, press reviews and interviews with key actors were conducted (n=14). Participation in school activities have also been used to explore the perception of pupils.

**CASE STUDY 1** focuses on religious diversity and the enforcement of laïcité in French schools. It explores practices of toleration, non-toleration and acceptance.

**CASE STUDY 2** focuses on migration-related diversity and the inclusion of immigration history in national curriculum. It deals with acceptance of others as equal.

*To explore how tolerance is approached in schools' practices and discourses, two case studies were selected: one on religious diversity and one on migration-related diversity*

## Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

### CASE STUDY 1: Religious Signs and Expressions in Schools

The first case study looks at the issue of religious expressions in schools with a focus on the implementation of the 2004 law banning religious symbols in public schools.

The enforcement of the 2004 law is considered a success by its proponents among governments officials and teachers' unions because it put a halt to a difficult situation encountered by schools principals who had to decide if a student was to enter a school or not. With the law, this difficult phase of negotiation disappeared; pupils stopped wearing religious signs in schools (even if they wear them outside schools). Beside, few pupils opted out of schools (96), according to the Ministry's figures, which, to them, demonstrates a good understanding of the law.

*"After the passing of the law, it is clear that we enjoyed a blissful peace. Before, you had to deal with pupils, families and religious associations. You had to negotiate. After the law; no more of that." (Interview with a school principal, April 2011)*

However, upon further investigation, the implementation of the law and the debate that it stirred have led to some ambiguities around the notion of laïcité. Although teachers appear convinced by the philosophical objective of *laïcité* as a principle that guarantees neutrality in the classroom and the equal treatment of each individual; in practice, they express concerns that French public schools may foster a sense of two-tier *laïcité* with disproportional room allocated to Catholic expressions (namely the calendar of holidays) and little means to accommodate Muslim practices (absence on *Aïd* or *Hallal* food).

*"The principle of laïcité is not applied fully. Pupils compare all the time Catholicism and Islam. (...) For them, it is an acknowledgment that does not exist." (Interview with a teacher, May 2011)*

*Although laïcité as a principle seeks the acceptance of individuals as equals, regardless of their origin or religious belonging, laïcité in practice, may appear as a two-tier concept that excludes practices from the norm (toleration) or even ban them (non-toleration)*

Furthermore, the restrictive interpretation of *laïcité*, that promotes the 2004 law, may be sending negative signs to French people of Muslim background. Therefore, in certain circumstances, the implementation of *laïcité*, as it is institutionalized in the 2004 law, can be regarded as an instrument of non-toleration.

*"We are, right now, in a moment where neutrality rules. We live quite well. But for some, we can see frustration - for girls and for boys." (Interview with a school principal, April 2011)*

*A reassessment of laïcité is necessary to avoid frustration and keep the Republican promise of equality for all*

### The specific case of the Departments of Alsace and Moselle

Since the two departments were not French but part of the German Empire when two major *laïcité* laws were passed (1882 and 1905), the Concordat law of 1801 signed by Napoleon 1 is still enforced. It implies a **different separation of religious matters from the public sphere**: religious signs are not banned and religious classes are taught in public schools for the three religions that were represented in 1801 i.e. Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. Classes are not mandatory and pupils can chose not to attend.

*Within the different arrangements of the Departments of Alsace and Moselle (North-East of France), religious practices that are considered as foreign (Islam) are not accepted as equal with other religious practices.*

With an increasing presence of Muslim people in the two departments (est. 100 000), there has been a **mobilization for Islam to be integrated to the Concordat law**. This would mean that Islam could be taught in religious classes in public schools. Moselle Deputee François Grosdidier proposed a law for the inclusion of Islam in the Concordat law (2006 law proposal number 3216). It argues that the failure to update the 1905 law – particularly as regards state support to religious buildings that were erected before 1905 – has created a situation of inequality for Muslim people and that this situation is even more blatant in the Departments of Alsace and Moselle. The law proposal, however, has not been followed up so far.

## **CASE STUDY 2: Acceptance of diversity in school curriculum**

The second case study analyses curriculum contents with a focus on the introduction of immigration issues in the history curriculum.

The difficulty to add immigration history in the curriculum comes from the **lack of legitimacy of the topic** in the historical field and the **construction of immigration as a *problem*** in the public debate. Past experiences of teaching of the history of Islam shows that some teachers tend to reluctantly tackle issues that may sound controversial due to the political context.

How is this part of the curriculum going to be taught? What are the difficulties, what are the challenges?

The observation of a lesson on immigration in post-war France and a discussion with pupils (9th graders) show that immigration history reveals **valuable pedagogical resources for teaching** and is well received by pupils.

→ Immigration history **should not be taught in connection with current events** but rather included in the regular succession of historical event.

→ Immigration history **equally concerns minority and majority populations. It should not target specific population**, or be taught exclusively in schools that cater to a diverse population

→ Immigration history does not come down to the history of the African or Asian continent. It is **the inclusion of immigration facts in the regular course of historical events**.

→ Explicitly putting the teaching of African history in relation with the presence of pupils with African background pertains to ethnic ascription and is not about acceptance of others as equals.



*The inclusion of immigration history in French history curriculum is about acceptance of others as equal.*

*However, if taught exclusively to a diverse population and in direct connection with contemporary issues (as opposed to be included to the regular course of historical events), it can become an instrument of ethnic ascription and social exclusion.*

## Key Messages for Policy Makers

The French understanding of equal treatment regardless of origin, race and religion makes it difficult to implement a policy of acceptance that implies the recognition of minority groups. However, there are ways to foster acceptance by including others as equal and it is all the more important to thrive to implement this kind of actions because **our study reveals an important breach in between the principle and the actual practices.**

1. Despite the philosophical objective of *laïcité* to guarantee the neutrality of French public schools, in practice, disproportional room is allocated to Catholicism. There is a sense that a two-tier *laïcité* applies that is a threat to the Republican promise of equal treatment, regardless of pupils' origin or religion.

→ **At national level**, there should be a reassessment of *laïcité* in view of its core principles that are equality and neutrality towards religious beliefs.

→ **At local level**, there should be an acknowledgement that some room is allocated to Catholic practices and a decision to either equalize downward (make less accommodation to Catholic practices) or equalize upward (make as much accommodation to Catholic and Muslim practices).

2. The inclusion of **immigration history** in French curriculum is crucial tool to make diversity an integral part of French national identity. However, it should not be taught only to pupils of immigrant background and should be approached as a **regular topic of history**.

→ **At national level**, there should be an awareness of the necessity to recognized immigration history as a legitimate topic of historical inquiry.

→ **At local level**, teachers should be trained to incorporate pedagogical resources that are specific to immigration history.

## Methodology

The analysis draws on a review of literature, a press review, a collection of secondary sources and material collected during the fieldwork.

The **fieldwork** consists in:

- A selection of **interviews** (n=14).

For Case study 1, 8 interviews were conducted from January to May 2011 with two principals, 3 union representatives, 1 NGO representative, 1 community organiser and one interview was conducted with 3 administrative officials in charge of education policy at the level of a district (Paris region). Interviews with teachers for the second case study were also used in the analysis when they referred themselves to the notion of laïcité

For Case study 2, 6 interviews were conducted from January to May 2011 with one principal, one education officer in charge of overseeing the teaching of history at the level of a district, one person in charge of promoting the teaching of immigration history at the French museum of immigration in Paris, and 3 history teachers.

- One **group discussion** was organised so that three teachers give their point of view on teaching to diverse population and their opinion on curriculum content. They were chosen so as to have a balance in terms of gender, origin, experience in the field and type of population they are teaching to.

- One session of **participatory observation** was organised on 7 April 2011 in a secondary school of the Paris region.

- Half a day of **observation** of history lessons was organised on 10 May 2011 in a high school of the Paris region.

## Project Identity

<b>Acronym:</b>	ACCEPT PLURALISM
<b>Title:</b>	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
<b>Short Description:</b>	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
<b>Website:</b>	<a href="http://www.accept-pluralism.eu">www.accept-pluralism.eu</a>
<b>Duration:</b>	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
<b>Funding Scheme:</b>	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
<b>EU contribution:</b>	2,600,230 Euro, Grant agreement no. 243837
<b>Consortium:</b>	19 partners (15 countries)
<b>Coordinator:</b>	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
<b>Person Responsible:</b>	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
<b>EC officer:</b>	Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer