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In this article, we analyze the opinions and stances of Swiss teachers with regard to cultural diversity. In the first part, we present the theoretical frameworks of our research. In the second part, we explore data from a questionnaire with students who are in the last step of their professional training to become teachers. We also present the findings from interviews with teachers in practice (i.e., those actively teaching in a public school in Geneva). In the third part, we discuss our findings and explore the current debate on how to better train teachers for cultural diversity in Switzerland.

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From accommodating to using diversity by teachers in Switzerland

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze the opinions and stances of Swiss teachers with regard to cultural diversity. In the first part, we present the theoretical frameworks of our research. In the second part, we explore data from a questionnaire with students who are in the last step of their professional training to become teachers. We also present the findings from interviews with teachers in practice (i.e., those actively teaching in a public school in Geneva). In the third part, we discuss our findings and explore the current debate on how to better train teachers for cultural diversity in Switzerland.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Today’s teachers, especially those working in multicultural urban areas, are increasingly faced with students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and they must prepare them to live in a multicultural society. However, studies have demonstrated so far the low-impact teacher training has in preparing future teachers to work with students from a culture different from their own (Davis & Turner, 1993; Garmon, 2004). Training rarely succeeds to profoundly change teaching practices and beliefs about diversity.

In Switzerland, studies during the last two decades show weaknesses and heterogeneity in the intercultural component of teacher training (Sieber & Bischoff, 2007). Alleman-Ghionda, Goumoëns and Perregaux (1999) explored how cultural and linguistic diversity is integrated into initial teacher education programs and the content of continuing education offered. In the thirteen institutes surveyed, the dimension of cultural and linguistic diversity is usually associated with the issue of immigration, mainly from the perspective of “problems arising.” The treatment of cultural diversity is almost always marginal and it is present only in few institutions through the initiatives of individuals. Cultural diversity is
rarely required in the curriculum offered to students. It is therefore not surprising that increasing cultural diversity in Swiss schools in recent years has been accompanied by an increase in the over-representation of foreign students in the school sections with a low level of instruction (Office fédéral de la statistique, 2001).

As Geneva Gay (2000) wrote:

“most teachers . . . expect all students to behave according to the school’s cultural standards of normality. When students of color fail to comply, the teachers find them unlovable, problematic, and difficult to honor or embrace without equivocation. Rather than build on what the students have in order to make their learning easier and better, the teachers want to correct and compensate for their “cultural deprivations.” This means making ethnically diverse students conform to middle-class, Eurocentric cultural norms. (p. 46).

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a relevant theoretical framework to analyze ways of teaching used to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by the use of cultural references that impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Valerie Ooka Pang (2005) added that CRT “is an approach to instruction that responds to the sociocultural context and seeks to integrate the cultural content of the learner in shaping an effective learning environment” (p. 336). Teachers who use this approach understand ways in which it makes their teaching more effective (King, 1994).

Educational researchers must encourage classroom teachers to use their students’ language and culture as resources rather than viewing them as barriers to learning. They suggested the need for teachers to revisit their own cultural orientations and preconceived notions of cultural diversity. The hope was that teachers would critically question their own understandings of diversity appropriately to better meet the unique needs of their students, allowing them to express their cultural identities.

Gloria Ladson-Billings’s (2001) identified several factors that make instructional practices culturally responsive to the needs of student learners. These include indicators of academic achievement, indicators of cultural competence, and indicators of sociopolitical consciousness. The first set of characteristics that Ladson-Billings (2001) identified includes indicators of academic achievement. These are present in classrooms where teachers believe that all students are capable of learning; where teachers explain what achievement is in the context of their classrooms; where teachers know content, the students, and how to teach
content to students; where teachers support the development of students’ critical conscience toward the curriculum; and where teachers encourage academic achievement as a multidimensional concept.

The second set comprises indicators of cultural competence. These indicators determine how teachers can improve their teaching practices in a context of culture diversity. They include teachers’ understanding of culture and the role of culture in education; teachers taking responsibility for learning about students’ culture and community; the teachers’ use of their students’ culture as a foundation for learning; and teachers’ support of the flexible use of students’ local and global culture.

The last set of indicators are those of sociopolitical consciousness, as associated with issues of social justice. These include teachers’ knowledge of the larger sociopolitical context of the school, community, nation, and world; teachers’ investment in the public good; teachers’ development of academic experiences that connect students’ perspectives to the larger social context; and teachers’ understanding that their students’ success will lead to an improved quality of life. These indicators provide a framework with which to consider aspects of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2001) calls her theoretical framework “culturally relevant pedagogy” (p. 144). She bases this framework on the propositions that successful teachers (1) focus on students’ academic achievement, (2) develop students’ cultural competence, and (3) foster students’ sense of sociopolitical consciousness.

Findings from research with teachers

This article is based on two studies. The first with a quantitative approach is based on a questionnaire with teachers in training. The second study is qualitative and used in-depth interviews with beginning teachers. Below is an overview of the findings of both studies.

The first study consisted of a survey based on a questionnaire entitled multicultural Barometer; it consists of 35 multiple-choice questions comprised of the following three parts:

(1) general attitudes toward ethnocultural diversity
(2) the degree of preparation in concepts and knowledge of multiculturalism
(3) the management of ethnocultural diversity in the classroom
Of the 123 individuals in teacher training who participated in this survey, 95% support the enhancement of multiculturalism (the responses strongly agree and somewhat agree).

Table 1 shows the aggregate responses of these future teachers about their readiness to work with diverse student populations. In general, teachers said they were adequately prepared to work with classes comprised of heterogeneous students at levels of learning and academic achievement. In contrast, when asked about preparedness for working with students from different cultural and ethnic groups, nearly half of teachers do not feel adequately prepared.

Table 1: Percentage of Teachers Responses by Survey Item

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Well prepared</th>
<th>Sufficiently prepared</th>
<th>Insufficiently prepared</th>
<th>Not prepared</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. . . in heterogeneous classes</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . with physical handicaps</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . with mental handicaps</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>82.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . with behavior problems</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . belonging to different cultural groups</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . whose gender differs from mine</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . with different learning styles</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . from single-parent families</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . from same-sex parents</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . from parents from two or more cultures</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked to choose an action from a list of different actions that teachers can engage in within these multicultural classrooms, teachers’ choices varied as presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Priority actions for managing cultural diversity in the classroom**

![Chart showing priority actions]

Welcoming diversity and understanding the lessons in the classroom are priority actions acclaimed by teachers. However, teachers do not focus their actions on being aware of discrimination and creating equal opportunities in the classroom. In terms of taking into account the linguistic plurality of students (Question: Students who do not speak French at home should have the opportunity to attend school in their maternal language), the majority of the sample (near 90% somewhat disagree and totally disagree). In sum, individuals in teaching training closed their minds on the issue of having linguistic diversity present in teaching. Sociopolitical consciousness remains low among Swiss teachers.

Finally, as shown in Figure 2, teachers report preferences for observing Christian holidays over respecting different religions or having a secular format that would eliminate Christian traditions and schedules in public schools. Teachers voted overwhelmingly in favor
of the celebration of Christmas and the demonstration of Christian values. By contrast, secularism and celebrating all religious holidays did not draw many votes.

**Figure 2: Treatment of religious holidays**

In the second study, 12 secondary school teachers participated in individual interviews. There were 10 women and 2 men. All participants had worked fewer than five years in the Geneva school system and different academic subjects (science, French, mathematics, etc.) were represented in the sample. The focus of the interview was on the participant’s vision of cultural diversity in Geneva and in the school system, and interviews were approximately one hour in length. Below we report the findings of teachers reflections on the following issues:

1) characteristics of the population of Geneva and the school system;
2) attitudes toward cultural diversity and other differences among schools and
students;
3) attitudes towards national belonging and expression of religion in schools;
4) reflections on professional education and training.

All of the teachers agreed that Geneva has a long history of cosmopolitism and cultural diversity and that it remains a basic fact of the city. Most teachers noted that this is a rich characteristic that is both highlighted and exploited. Some of those interviewed are concerned about the growing diversity of ethnic, cultural, and national identities of people, wondering what impact this diversity will have on the social cohesion of the city in the future. This concern is sometimes expressed as an assumption that not only there is a limit to the number of different cultures that can peacefully coexist, but also that the increasing distance between cultural values makes living together impossible.

Teachers’ perceptions about the city of Geneva are similar to those about its public school system in general, and the high school system in particular, with an important difference. The cultural diversity in the schools is growing; it does not seem to them to have the same historical and accepted aspect as is the case with the city. Teachers emphasize the importance of attending to the issue of the increasing diversity of students, both in the number of students and the number of cultures represented. This point leads to our next finding on teachers’ attitudes toward cultural diversity and other differences among pupils.

Our stakeholders can be divided into main two groups. One group believes that a good teacher works with all types of students’ differences, including that which refers to the culture. The attitude in this group is that culture should not be a priority for the school. This group has a posture of indifference to cultural differences, maintaining that the focus should be on general professional skills needed to teach rather than on having culturally appropriate teaching practices. Secularism in schools is also a essential value for this group.

A second group of teachers considers that the school must change to accommodate the cultural diversity brought by students; this group also is critical of the few existing measures that the school has taken toward integration of cultural differences. In one teacher’s words: “The school neutralizes cultural diversity, keeping schools working the same as always: that is to have processes and products that are monolingual and monocultural.” One of the most significant interviews with teachers revealed that the “off the record” discussions in the halls by teachers or in informal discussions between colleagues reveals the true attitudes on cultural diversity. In private talk between colleagues, cultural diversity is a proven professional
concern perceived by many teachers as a problem or even a threat. This raises the question of how to live and work in school with the dreaded cultural diversity.

To manage culture diversity in the classroom some teachers believe that avoiding it rather than confronting it is the best approach. The reason given for this belief is because the school does not provide the services needed to support students and the teachers cannot address and manage diversity alone. Thus, when a teacher has difficulty with a student from another culture, other colleagues would often suggest that the teacher look the other way and justify to oneself that the student has extenuating cultural circumstances. The resulting advice among teachers is not to be strict with a problem student who comes from a different cultural background. In other words, cultural diversity is used as an excuse to have lower expectations of “foreign” students.

The third major finding from this study is about teachers’ attitudes towards nationalism and religiosity in schools. According to teachers, national and religious affiliations are the most disruptive issues in the classroom. Nationalism, in the sense of rigid identification of students at national origin, can be disruptive in class. This is particularly the case in Geneva with students from the Balkan region (e.g., Serbian, Croatian, Albanian, Macedonian, and Bosnian). Students sometimes form alliances and are aggressive towards other students based on a particular national or ethnic origin of their parents. When this occurs, a teacher is often alone in this situation. She or he attempts to resolve conflict and to establish dialogue between students, but it is challenging for a teacher to convince students to disconnect their personal identity from their parents’ national or ethnic affiliation. Intervening in this conflict is not an easy or comfortable mission for the teacher because s/he is not trained to handle these situations and additional resources for this purpose inside or outside of school are not available.

Religion in the classroom is another disturbing factor to teachers. It unleashes the passions, particularly regarding Islam, which is perceived negatively by many students and teachers. Islam can also be a source of tension between Muslim students and teachers. One teacher has reported the great difficulties he had to use a video to teach anatomy and human reproduction. Some students of Muslim origin consider that the documentary used disseminates pornographic images. Muslim girls are shyer about speaking out and for them it was the first time they saw images of the human body.

A final finding in the interview is teachers’ reflections on the training of secondary
teachers in the management of cultural diversity. All of our participants agreed that it is deficient both in content and in process. Teachers think that academic or professional education makes no room for cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of students. For example, a French language teacher reports that her training at a university in Geneva was based on the assumption that all students have French as their mother language.

In conclusion, we can say that interviews with secondary school teachers have highlighted the important role of cultural diversity in high schools and their professional concerns for teaching and learning with this diversity. The interviews showed that the faculty is fairly evenly divided on the posture taken towards cultural diversity in public schools. There are those who support practices of “indifference to cultural differences” and those who are followers of a “critical stance against the monocultural school system.”

**Discussion and conclusions**

We observed a huge distance between the positions expressed by the Swiss teachers in our surveys and the characteristics and competencies of culturally responsive teaching presented above in our theoretical framework. Not only do Swiss teachers conceive diversity in limited terms of students’ belonging to different cultures and needing to comply with the dominant culture, but in addition, there is little room for taking into account the sociopolitical situation linked to international migrations and social inequalities.

Furthermore, the degree of preparation for managing differences in classrooms is weak. Despite good intentions, the curriculum of teacher education is slow to grant cultural differences a rightful place in the curriculum.

Back to our theoretical framework, we suggest that sociopolitical consciousness is the most needed dimension to better train teachers for cultural diversity in Switzerland. This most striking findings point out that if it is possible to convince teachers to value cultural diversity, it is much more difficult to persuade them to work taking into account others cultures in the classroom. In other words, valuing diversity does not mean working with diversity.

Finally, one of the most striking findings of this study is that teachers are almost unanimously against the inclusion of pupils’ native language in the classroom. This closure is particularly troubling in light of efforts already undertaken to promote multiculturalism and linguistic diversity in schools. It seems that teachers hold both openness and fears about
multiculturalism. On the surface they are open to the values of multiculturalism and inclusion of diversity and differences in schools and at the same time they feel isolated and see many challenges of radically changing traditional rules of schools, such as the language of instruction or the legacy of school culture. In other words, if intercultural education remains confined within the general rhetoric of valuing diversity, teachers appear to be relatively open. However, if the opening is linked to actions that challenge the pedagogical authority and professionalism of teachers, especially those related to language of instruction in the classroom, we observe that teachers close their minds. This study shows the difficulties of translating intercultural and multicultural education into teaching practices and the need to go beyond declarations of intention.

His exploratory study has revealed some interesting results that should be followed by further investigations. In Switzerland, the official educational policy stresses the integration of migrant and foreign pupils but it is coupled with a very restrictive immigration policy and the school system has not yet abandoned the metaphor of assimilation.

There are at least two limitations of this study. The first limitation is the method of self-report. What we learned in this study is limited to teachers’ report to survey and interview. Future research in this area needs to go beyond our study addressing attitudes to include investigating teachers’ behaviors in the classroom by conducting observational studies and interviews with parents and students. Another limitation of the study is related to the sampling. Most of the teachers in our study live in urban regions, but Switzerland is diverse country and we need more research in rural and mountain areas. What is interesting is that even in a cosmopolitan city like Geneva teachers are not open to using multiculturalism.

Even with the limitations this study’s findings have implications. We need to link the positions of teachers about cultural diversity to the broader society. We need to better understand the reasons of the closeness of Swiss society toward immigrants because our ability to effect change in teachers through teacher education is constrained by general societal beliefs.

References


