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Culture as a Construct with the Educational Discourse – French Perspectives

Abstract

This paper analyses how culture is constructed and mobilised within the French educational discourse, with a particular focus on compulsory schooling. It shows that cultural education in France operates along two related but analytically distinct dimensions: as a set of legitimate knowledge and values promoted by the State in the name of equality and republican citizenship, and as a plurality linked to linguistic, social and cultural diversity. Drawing on policy texts, curricula and teacher-training frameworks, the paper examines how these dimensions are articulated within a centralised and normatively universalist educational system structured by the principles of *laïcité* and a strong distinction between “high” and “popular” culture. It argues that this configuration generates specific tensions for the pursuit of equality, both in terms of access to legitimate culture and in the ways cultural diversity is problematised and addressed in schools and teacher education. The paper concludes that culture is simultaneously mobilised as a common core to be shared by all pupils and as a dimension of social and linguistic heterogeneity. This dual framing shapes current policies and practices regarding citizenship formation and responses to social and cultural inequalities.

Keywords: *Cultural education; Laïcité (secularism); Republican values; Cultural diversity*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag analysiert, wie Kultur im französischen Bildungsdiskurs konstruiert und verwendet wird, wobei ein besonderer Schwerpunkt auf der Schulpflicht liegt. Es wird gezeigt, dass kulturelle Bildung in Frankreich entlang zweier miteinander verbundener, aber analytisch unterschiedlicher Dimensionen gehandhabt wird: als Zusammenhang legitimer Kenntnisse und Werte, die vom Staat im Namen der Gleichheit und der republikanischen Staatsbürgerschaft gefördert werden, und als eine Pluralität, die mit sprachlicher, sozialer und kultureller Vielfalt verbunden ist. Anhand von politischen Richtlinien, Lehrplänen und Rahmenwerken für die Lehrerbildung untersucht der Beitrag, wie diese Dimensionen innerhalb

eines zentralisierten und normativ universalistischen Bildungssystems artikuliert werden, das durch die Prinzipien der *Laïcité* und eine starke Unterscheidung zwischen „Hochkultur“ und „Populärkultur“ strukturiert ist. Es wird argumentiert, dass diese Konfiguration spezifische Spannungen für das Streben nach Gleichheit erzeugt, sowohl hinsichtlich des Zugangs zu legitimer Kultur als auch hinsichtlich der Art und Weise, wie kulturelle Vielfalt in Schulen und in der Lehrerbildung problematisiert und behandelt wird. Der Beitrag kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Kultur gleichzeitig als gemeinsamer Kern, der von allen Schülern geteilt werden soll, und als Dimension sozialer und sprachlicher Heterogenität in Anspruch genommen wird und dass diese doppelte Rahmgebung die aktuellen Politiken und Praktiken in Bezug auf die Bildung von Staatsbürgerschaft und die Reaktionen auf soziale und kulturelle Ungleichheiten prägt.

Schlüsselwörter: *Kulturelle Bildung; Laizismus (Säkularismus); Republikanische Werte; Kulturelle Vielfalt*

Introduction

The French education system attributes a central role to culture, conceived both as a shared repertoire of references that should be accessible to all pupils and as a dimension of the social and linguistic diversity present in classrooms. Within compulsory schooling, this dual conception is articulated through national policies, curricula and teacher-training frameworks that promote a humanist and republican vision of education whilst acknowledging plural cultural affiliations. In a centralised system structured by the principles of *laïcité* and marked by a strong distinction between “high” culture and popular culture, these frameworks define what counts as legitimate culture and how it should be transmitted in schools. This paper analyses how these definitions shape educational discourse and practice and discusses the tensions that arise when the universalist ambition of a common culture encounters persistent social and cultural inequalities in access to that culture and in the recognition of diversity.

Cultural Education

In France, the discourse on cultural education falls within the frame of Artistic and Cultural Education (ACE). Rooted in the legacy of André Malraux, the Minister for Culture when the Ministry was created in 1959, ACE is led jointly by the Ministries of Culture and of National Education, through national policies and institutions. The Ministry of National Education specifies that “The missions of National Education are to bring a humanist culture to all students and to develop their sensitivity through artistic practices. This has to do with artistic and cultural education and the promotion of teaching Antique languages and cultures. Because they help us better understand the world, contribute to the thriving of students and are essential factors of true equal opportunity, arts and culture are at the heart of School”¹. The 2018 Charter for Artistic and Cultural Education – written by the High Council for Artistic and Cultural Education and signed by the main organisations of public bodies (such as the Organisation of French mayors’ inter-municipality Presidents, or the Assembly of Departments of France) – brings together actors and institutions around 10 principles, which are to:

- ensure access to cultural experiences for all,
- associate the visits of cultural spaces, the meeting of artists, the pursuit of artistic activities and the acquisition of knowledge,
- allow access to a diverse and emancipating culture in all its forms,
- ensure that culture and art should be emancipatory and develop critical thinking and aesthetic sensitivity,
- integrate artistic and cultural education into all aspects of their life, including time spent with friends and family,
- perceive artistic and cultural education as a means for young people to make sense of their experiences and better understand the world in general,
- enhance mutual engagement between different types of partners (educational and cultural communities, voluntary sector and civil society, State and local / regional authorities),
- base artistic and cultural education on a dynamic of projects associating these partners,
- train actors of artistic and cultural education, in order to promote mutual knowledge of each other, as well as the acquisition and sharing of common references,
- for research and evaluations to be conducted in such a way as to ascertain the impact of artistic and cultural actions, improve their quality and encourage innovative approaches.

Notable devices and policies include the “Pass Culture”, a financial aid for people between the ages of 15 and 21 to access cultural activities; History of Arts as a compulsory subject in middle school and one of the four subjects on which students are evaluated during their end

of middle school examination; and the creation of the National Artistic and Cultural Educational Resources Centres. In short, French Artistic and Cultural Education is conceived as a lever for equality, emancipation and personal enriching, whilst strengthening citizenship and the critical mind of students (Jonchery & Octobre, 2022).

Teaching culture in schools

In France, the thematic aspects of culture taught to students cover a wide variety of fields, reflecting a humanistic and artistic approach. In the French context, this humanistic orientation is rooted in a republican and Enlightenment tradition that conceives education as a means of forming autonomous, rational and critical citizens. Humanism here refers to a normative educational project that values access to shared knowledge, intellectual emancipation and the development of critical judgement. This tradition underpins the central place given to history, literature, arts and languages in school curricula, and frames culture as a common good to which all pupils should have access. Based on curricula from primary school and middle-school (MoNER, 2015; 2018), the main axes are:

- arts and cultural education: visual and plastic arts on the one hand, and artistic practices on the other,
- humanist culture: This encompasses history and geography – to contextualise historical and cultural events – as well as literature and heritage (French heritage, but also European and world heritage. This means teachers are authorised to work on texts from the Bible as a cultural document, not for reasons of proselytism),
- living languages: English is mandatory from primary school as well as a second language from middle school (usually German or Spanish, as well as Italian more recently), and a language not traditionally taught in the French school canon, such as Mandarin, as an optional 3rd language,
- regional cultures: According to the law of 21 May 2021, regional languages are taught (Breton, Occitan, Corsican, etc.) in educational settings that highlight folklore, crafts and traditions specific to each region,
- republican values such as equality and non-discrimination have been explicitly taught in the subject of intercultural education, which has been part of the curricula at all levels since 1978 (Ravez, 2019).

Regarding the normative aspects, the approach to teaching culture in French schools is essentially guided by the normative principle of *laïcité* (French secularism), rooted in the ideals of the French Revolution and solidified by the 1905 law on the separation of Church and State. The frame of *laïcité* shapes the relationship between individuals and the State, prioritising equality and shared citizenship over religious or cultural differences (Ferhat, 2025). This commitment to *laïcité* is also reflected in the education system, where it underpins the notion of a common national culture that transcends religious or ethnic divides. This leads to another normative principle guiding the teaching of cul-

ture: it must be a tool for students to become republican citizens of their country whilst also being open to other cultures, thanks to a learnt capacity to think critically, in a “neutral” way, understood here as the ability to adopt a reflexive distance from particular beliefs or cultural affiliations.

Culture as a context of the educational discourse

According to Letourneux & Passini (2021), the divide between a “high” culture and the “people’s” culture is particularly strong in France, a country that played a capital role in the 18th century. It established itself as a major cultural pole, imposing on European aristocratic and upper classes a language, a lifestyle, ideas and literary and artistic values. This historical position has contributed to the symbolic elevation of elite cultural forms, reinforcing the perception of high culture as a legitimate and superior reference within the French cultural space. Today, in a context of intensified international cultural exchanges, representations of culture in France tend to polarise around two opposing models. On the one hand, culture is increasingly associated with mass cultural production, characterised by consumption, entertainment and the massification of cultural goods. On the other hand, cultural actors emphasise France’s artistic vocation, presenting high culture as a distinctive national reference and as a marker of its continued role in global literary and artistic exchanges. This opposition has manifested into a stronger polarisation than elsewhere in people’s representations between a high culture (*haute culture*) and pop culture (*productions populaires*), to the point where the French cultural identity has been associated with the notion of high culture (Letourneux & Passini, 2021).

This divide impacts school curricula, as demonstrated by the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in 1970. Not only that, but the authors underlined how the distinction between a “high” culture and a “people’s” culture impacted teachers’ expectancies, with students who mastered the high culture being implicitly rewarded for this (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

In recent years, there has been a political willingness to make these expectancies explicit and enable all students to acquire the “high” culture, for a variety of reasons. Indeed, since 2005, ministerial texts have stipulated that during compulsory education (*scolarité obligatoire*, from ages three to sixteen) a common base or core of knowledge, competences and culture (*socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture*) must be incrementally acquired and mastered by all students². Furthermore, the curriculum focuses on several key aspects of culture, including cultural forms whose modes of transmission are less socially selective: these are notably an emphasis on French language skills and literary works, with a “balanced choice of works between patrimonial literature, children’s classics and recent works”³ and a focus on arts, literature and philosophy as academic subjects.

Beyond questions of access to legitimate culture and of the socially differentiated ways in which it is acquired, the French education system is also confronted with cultural diversity, understood here as the coexistence of different social, linguistic and normative reference systems among pupils. These two dimensions of culture coexist within the same republican educational framework and raise partly overlapping challenges for equality.

Dealing with cultural diversity

In France, the public education system is principally seen by the Ministry as a system to integrate all students as citizens of the French Republic. This means that faced with cultural diversity, the Ministry has firstly focused on equality, secondly on other French republican values such as inclusion, social inequalities, secularism (Meunier, 2021; 2008).

The French education system is centralised to the point that teachers all take the same national entrance examination. Those who pass it are then sent, by the Ministry, to the school they will work in. Consequently, the main way for the Ministry to spread a discourse on how cultural diversity should be addressed in school, and more specifically how teachers should address cultural diversity in their classrooms, is through the requirements of that examination. In other words, the Ministry imposes a specific way of addressing cultural diversity through the Republic’s values, by requiring that students prove in the examination that they have understood this. And in order for that to be the case, teacher-training colleges train students to become actors of the educational system, but also prepare them to pass the national examination, which is indispensable to become a permanent teacher. Therefore, colleges construct their curricula in alignment with the requirements to successfully pass this examination.

For instance, the teacher-training college in Nantes includes – in the curriculum for training primary school teachers – a teaching unit titled “Le professeur, acteur de la communauté éducative et du service public de l’éducation nationale” (i.e. The teacher, actor of the educational community and the National Education public service, our translation). 66 hours are devoted to this unit, and it is worth 7 ECTS. It is composed of 4 elements (“éléments constitutifs”, i.e. constitutive components), among them:

- the 24-hour module “L’École de la république dans les classes: École inclusive, polyvalence, transdisciplinarité, numérique, laïcité, hétérogénéité” (The Republican school in the classrooms: an inclusive school, versatility, transdisciplinarity, digitalisation, secularism, heterogeneity, our translation),
- the 16-hour module “Valeurs de la république, éthique professionnelle et sens et finalités de l’école, inégalités socio-scolaires” (Values of the Republic, professional ethics, meaning and purposes of school, and socio-educational inequalities, *ibid.*).

Perspectives

Taken together, these elements illustrate how culture is constructed within the French educational discourse, both as a shared set of knowledge and values to be transmitted to all pupils and as a dimension of diversity to be taken into account within a republican framework. This framing shapes educational policies, which combine an emphasis on equality through access to common cultural references with expectations of neutrality towards cultural differences. Cultural education is therefore conceived as a central component of the formation of republican citizens, while also being mobilized in relation to social and cultural inequalities.

MASTER 1 MEEF

1^{er} degré (2022/2023)

Unités d'enseignement	Heures étudiants	ECTS
UE 11 Le professeur, acteur de la communauté éducative et du service public de l'éducation nationale (*)	66	7
EC1 : L'École de la république dans les classes : École inclusive, polyvalence, transdisciplinarité, numérique, laïcité, hétérogénéité	24	
EC2 : Valeurs de la république, éthique professionnelle et sens et finalités de l'école, inégalités socio-scolaires	16	
EC3 : Contexte d'exercice (d'école, géographique, social), système éducatif, histoire de l'éducation, cadre réglementaire	16	
EC4 : Développement de l'enfant et apprentissages	10	

Notes

- 1 The Ministry of National Education stipulates that: "L'éducation nationale a pour missions d'apporter une culture humaniste à tous les élèves et de développer leur formation sensible au travers des pratiques artistiques. Cela passe par l'éducation artistique et culturelle et la valorisation des enseignements de langues et cultures de l'Antiquité. Parce qu'ils nous font mieux appréhender le monde, parce qu'ils participent de l'épanouissement des élèves et qu'ils sont les facteurs essentiels d'une véritable égalité des chances, les arts et la culture sont au cœur de l'École". Online: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/l-education-artistique-et-culturelle-7496>
- 2 According to the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research: <https://eduscol.education.fr/139/le-socle-commun-de-connaissances-de-competences-et-de-culture>
- 3 According to the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education And Research: "(...) un choix équilibré entre littérature patrimoniale (les œuvres de référence tombées dans le domaine public) ou classiques de la littérature jeunesse (œuvres plus récentes souvent étudiées et rééditées) et œuvres récentes".

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