



France’s Intercultural Education for Immigrants in a Republican Context

LÜ Jiqun^{[a].*}

^[a]Associate professor, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Intercultural education is adopted by many countries in addressing the issue of immigration. In the 1970s to 1980s, intercultural education policy was practiced in France’s elementary and secondary schools, targeting primarily immigrant children and later an extended group of all students. With the republican model set as the foundation, the French government put a ban on any unfair treatment to every individual citizen irrespective of language, culture, religion and differences in other aspects. The implementation of intercultural education policy, however, ran against this forbiddance, which emerged as an evolutionary move in history. The policy, though, failed to go beyond what the republican model was defined as the French government was dubious about the practice of intercultural education, which ended up in early demise with singular, unvaried measures. Ethnic problems going prominent, France has the imperative to reflect on its political institution and learn as much as possible from its past experience in cultural and educational policy.

Key words: Republican model; Intercultural education; Immigrant children

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Intercultural education is the key to tackling immigrant problems for many countries, and France is no exception. In the 1970s, the French government, aware of the differences and particularities of immigrants from various cultures, promulgated a series of educational policies that were oriented toward intercultural education and targeted elementary and secondary school students. The practice of intercultural education in France presented its own features and problems amid the national immigration and its Republican model of integration, which will be discussed from below.

1. TWO MAJOR STAGES OF FRANCE’S IMMIGRANT EDUCATION

France has witnessed four waves of immigration in recent centuries. Before the 1970s, most of the immigrants moved in from within the European community, while the 1970s ushered in a new period when immigrants beyond Europe flooded in (Song, 2006). The immigrant educational policies in France thus can be categorized into two kinds

1.1 Assimilation through Education and Integrity of Language

Before the year of 1970, the policy of assimilation through education targeting immigrant descendants was implemented in the elementary and secondary schools of France. Technically, the policy was an educational practice serving for immigrant integration, rather than a governmental initiative set for school age children of immigrants. As said in the first term of *the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (France), “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.” In other words, it prohibited any unfair treatment to individuals regardless of language, culture and religious belief. That’s the reason why the government

did not give any specific instructions to foreign students in its official documents. Moreover, immigrants must be politically loyal to the country as well as assimilated in French language, culture and value before eventually entitled French citizenship. Schools, therefore, served to impart the Republican values to all students, both French children and immigrant descendants, and turned them into French citizens, which worked exactly the way assimilation did.

In the 1970s, amid the pervasion of global civil rights movement and national communism, the French government proposed that each child enjoy equal opportunity at school. Immigrant children, however, had undesirable results in academic performance due to the lack of language proficiency and lower cognitive levels, which were considered obstacles to realizing “equal opportunity”. On January 13th, 1970, the French Ministry of Education pointed out in its No. IX-70-37 circular, “The schooling of foreign children can only be done in good conditions when they quickly acquire the usage of French, which enables them to integrate into the school environment and continue their studies.” In this context, language programs targeting immigrant children were developed to satisfy, mainly including *integration classes* (CLIN, les classes d’intégration), *integrated remedial courses* (CRI, les cours de rattrapage intégrés) and *adaptation classes* (CLAD, les classes d’adaptation). The establishment of these language programs, again, announced the public schools as a guard of national unification. Of greatest importance is the prohibition of any forms of discrimination in secular schools. It implied the government’s recognition of the difference and uniqueness of ethnic groups and it stepped further to offer help. It was a revolutionary deed that paved the way for later “positive discrimination” (la discrimination positive) and an attempt to amend the Republican model of integration in France.

1.2 Intercultural Education and Other Integration-oriented Education

After the establishment of language programs, the French government issued a circular in February, 1973 that, for the first time, included the original languages of immigrants in the teaching plan of school terms. Since then, the teaching of the original languages and cultures of immigrant students had been implemented in schools. On April, 9th, 1975, the French Ministry of Education, in its No. 75-148 circular, announced *the Teaching of Languages and Cultures of Origin* (ELCO, enseignement des langues et cultures d’origine) as part of the immigration policy, with a view that knowledge about the languages and cultures of origin accelerates instead of do harm to the orientation of school life. The circular reads, “Experience has shown that the maintenance of foreign children in the knowledge of their language and culture can constitute a positive element of the adaptation

of these children in French schools. [...] if the creation of this system can be seen as a desire to preserve the cultural identity of children of foreign origin by giving them freer access to French language and values, the intercultural option is nonetheless subordinated to a policy of incentive for immigrants.”

ELCO was one of the intercultural policies, and its establishment marked a milestone in the evolution of the immigration educational policies in France. The French government came to use the word “intercultural” for the first time in its official documents during this period, and allowed the teaching of the original languages of immigrant students, which in fact acknowledged the cultural heterogeneity among different groups of students. In addition, schools needed to divide the students based on race, and ascertain their original countries in reference to the cultures and languages of students’ parents, before their courses settled down. It was the first try to break the tradition in France where distinction of cultures, races and ethnicity groups among students are prohibited.

To broaden the influence of ELCO, in the same year, France’s former Minister of Education Joseph Fontanet decided that schools were allowed to autonomously organize “original activities” (les activités originales) in whatever forms and themes in one tenth of its teaching hours. In 1976, the French Ministry of Education founded The Mission of the Cultural Action (la mission d’action culturelle) to echo the decision, where cultural plans were studied and policies of cultural cooperation were formulated. Under its influence, the government launched *The Projects of Educative and Cultural Actions* (P.ACT. E, projets d’actions éducatives et culturelles) in the year of 1979, later replaced by *The Projects of Educative Actions* (PAE, les projets d’action éducative) in 1981, to enhance teaching activities in culture. In this context, some activities held in elementary and secondary schools were intercultural-centered, such as learning about France’s population structure and immigration history and exchanging communication with neighboring countries.

The Council of Europe encouraged its members to “develop intercultural teaching activities in schools and help students realize the benefits of mutual understanding and openness with different cultural identities”(Porcher, 1995) Meanwhile, the French government experienced setbacks when it encouraged immigrants to return to home countries due to an increasingly stable immigrant population. Considering the national and regional environment, the French Ministry of Education, on September 7th, 1978, announced in its No. 341 official gazette that ELCO was expanded to cover all students, which meant the language and culture programs previously targeting immigrant children were open to all students. Surely, French students would benefit from it by learning other languages and cultures. Yet the upmost meaning of this announcement is that the original cultures of immigrant students were valued, which helped

build up their self-esteem with their cultural identities and equipped their peers with more knowledge about their original cultures. The consequence was immigrant students were more accepted and better engaged in school life and gained improved performance in academy.

The No. 341 official gazette was the first official educational document that included the word “intercultural”. The broadened ELCO was “the first intercultural-centered teaching.”(Kerzil, 2002) “Whatever the resistance is, interculturality is institutionally recognized as a positive structuring element for the children and education can now be envisaged from a perspective of intercultural society.”(Clanet, 1993) The phenomenon of immigrant discrimination was lessened afterwards.

In 1984, the Minister of Education Jean-Pierre Chevènement proclaimed the termination of the 11-year-old intercultural education. Apart from intercultural education, development education, civic education, peace education and democratic education have also been adopted in France to address the issues of multicultural conflicts and immigrant integration. Among them, development education and civic education are placed first. Development education, started in 1981, requires that teachers should “strive to make students aware of the commonalities they have with the children of the Third World and the close ties of solidarity that unite them.” (from the government gazette by French Ministry of Education on April 23rd, 1981) In a 1983 circular, the government pointed out that “it is a matter of showing the pupils that the Western civilization in which they live is not unique, to make them realize that other forms of civilization and development may exist with those of our industrial society.”(Riondet, 1996) Civic education, initiated in 1985, according to a circular on November 14th, is to enable students “the understanding of the rules of democratic life and their foundations, the knowledge of the institutions and their historical roots, the reflection on the conditions and means of respect for man and his rights in the world today.” From above, it can be seen that these educational circulars match the intercultural education in term of purpose.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION POLICY IN FRANCE’S ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

As one of the long-established immigration countries, France has a different picture from countries like America or Canada that are constituted by various immigrant groups, or other emerging immigrant destinations like Italy that began to allow the inflows of immigrants late in the second half of the 20th century. The intercultural

education policy was the product of immigrant education policies after they came through all the years. Hence, together with its Republican model of integration, the intercultural education in France presents its own specialties.

2.1 Economic Prosperity Is the Engine

ELCO is the most representative and systematic among France’s intercultural educational policies. After a three-decade postwar booming, France was struck by the oil crisis and the sequential economic crisis in the 1970s. As a result, unemployment was unprecedentedly serious at the time. To tackle this, the French government started implementing a tightened immigration policy and at the same time encouraged immigrants to return to home countries. The government also signed diplomatic agreements with seven countries – Italy, Portugal, Tunisia, Morocco, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Algeria – that teachers were sent from the embassies and consulates to these seven nations to serve for the language and culture programs in French schools which targeted students with an immigrant background. With the programs, the French government prepared the immigrants for their later returning. Apparently, a prosperous economy gave the most impetus to the establishment of ELCO.

Another aim ELCO was set to achieve was help immigrant children strengthen self-esteem with their cultural identity by enriching knowledge about the cultures and languages of origin so that they could orient themselves in school life and obtain better results in academy. In the very beginning, however, the policy was criticized despite its clear purpose and being pragmatic. It was condemned that ELCO was against the “no discrimination” of the Republican. Doubts were also shed on its practicability. Some scholars even left denouncement like, “It is agreed that the teaching of ELCO was not satisfactory, and some people even say that if we keep doing so, it will a catastrophe.”(Kerzil, 2002)

2.2 Government Shows an Ambiguous Attitude

The intercultural education lasted for merely 11 years from the year of 1973 when “intercultural” was firstly used in official documents by France’s Ministry of Education and ELCO was initiated to the year of 1984 when former Minister of Education Jean-Pierre Chevènement put an end to it.

Despite the fact that “intercultural” was removed from the official documents, certain intercultural-centered activities in schools have endured to remain. Firstly, French government’s abandon of the intercultural education gave way to the instructions to intercultural activities from regional organizations such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Secondly, ELCO, as the most representative practice of the intercultural education, is still put in effect. On April, 28th, 2016, former Minister of Education Najat

Vallaud-Belkacem highlighted the issue of the renewal of the diplomatic agreement with the seven immigrant origin countries when confronted with questions about government work. Lastly, intercultural education was replaced by other correlative ones, mainly development education (from 1981) and civic education (from 1985). Development education overlaps the intercultural education somewhere, for it can “contributes to the valorization of different communities and cultures from the developing countries in French society, particularly in schools.” (from the No. 32 Communique by French Ministry on September 19th, 1985). Civic education apparently conflicts the intercultural education, which emphasizes diversity, but the two work for a same goal – prepare immigrant students for full engagement in French community and a better life.

Intercultural education in France was abandoned for the government's sensitivity to “intercultural”, but in fact, both development education and civic education overlap it to some extent. Therefore, the concern and hesitation the French government has in addressing the intercultural education issue is perceptible.

2.3 Intercultural Education and Multi-cultural Education Intersects

The French government, knowing the positive effect ELCO imposes on students with an immigrant background, began to provide language and culture programs within the framework of respective diplomatic agreements. The programs initially were oriented towards immigrant students only. Technically, it fell into the category of multicultural education.

Multicultural education, as generally regarded, is a replacement for intercultural education in the Anglo-Saxon system. In fact, the two differentiate as well as overlap each other in some way. In terms of purpose, the former aims to “help students from different races, ethnicities and social classes to acquire equal access to education and get engaged in the mainstream culture and finally enhance the development of all cultures involved, while the latter is inter-subject, which concentrates on appreciating the differences of cultures, embracing interaction with other cultures in peace.” (Feng, 2014) As for the way they exist, “multicultural education means the coexistence of different cultures with or without communications, while intercultural education involves interaction and communication.” (Huang, 2013)

ELCO, targeting immigrant students, was aimed to acquaint the group with knowledge about language and culture of their origin. In essence, it allowed the existence of languages and cultures of immigrant origin parallel to mainstream French language and culture that immigrant students pick up in process so that students can “gain academic success and psychological and sentimental balance.” (Flye Sainte-Marie, 1993) But the problem lied in that the two do not have real communication with each

other. On the contrary, the later extended ELCO provides French students with access to the languages and cultures of other ethnic groups and the opportunity to learn and understand foreign cultures before getting to embrace them in harmony. Although French culture have not integrated with other cultures to a great level, the intercultural quality is prominent.

3. PREDICAMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN FRANCE'S ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

In spite of the removal of the intercultural education from French official document in the 1980s, it does not mean the breakdown of the coexistence of various cultures, especially the coexistence of mainstream culture and other ethnic cultures which immigrants originate. On the contrary, the current situation confronting the French government calls for the addressing of the issue of multi-cultural relations. The practice of intercultural education may hold lessons for further development.

3.1 Target and Effect

The intercultural education in France was not very pertinent to the national situation and its effect was not satisfactory. As the major practice of the intercultural education, ELCO was oriented towards all pupils with an immigrant background, but in fact, those that were included only shared a small percentage of the total. On one hand, “parents do not think it necessary as the policymakers do and solicit about their children's learning of the French language.” (Kerzil, 2002) On the other, at the very beginning of the implementation, new arrivals took up only a small proportion. Most immigrant children were born in France, so the cultures their parents were nurtured in do not have much connection with them, which put the implementation of ELCO into a dilemma. In fact, it is questioned whether learning the languages of ethnic origins will increase the self-esteem of immigrant children. As far as the writer knows, most of the Chinese French, especially those with a biracial background, were born in France. For them, the Chinese language is a language for their parents. The reason why they learn Chinese varies. Some learn the language to satisfy their parents, and others learn Chinese to add to their employment advantage since now China is gaining power in the international community. Therefore, the learning of the language of origin does not rise to the level of cultural identity.

Moreover, ELCO was implemented under the bilateral diplomatic agreements between France and seven other countries that assigned the teaching of their languages to

staff sent to France. The teaching staff would possibly be confronted with the same problem of how to get immersed in the French community. In most cases, they lack professional teaching training, so appropriate teaching methods may escape the French students (Kerzil, 2002). Another thing is that the practice of intercultural education in school tends to be reduced to the diffusion of folklore because of the divorce between theory and practice and the limited ability of the teaching staff. Usually, the teaching would stay focused on wearing, cuisine and festival – the most detailed but superficial cultural phenomena – instead of deep explanations and understandings behind these cultural activities. What's worse, the supervision of teaching becomes a complicated issue since the teaching staff come from seven other countries. Without long-term assessment, the intercultural education in France is actually questioned.

Finally, France's early intercultural policy, which targeted elementary and secondary school students with an immigrant background, was a practice of "positive discrimination". Positive discrimination is aimed to offer help to those in need, but meanwhile, people who receive help are labelled as "different from the mainstream". Thus, immigrant children, in a way segregated from other student groups, are becoming a potential marginalized party in the French community. The later extended policy, covering all students, is actually an improved version.

3.2 Conflicts Between Intercultural Education and the Republican Model

France's intercultural education comes essentially contradictory to its republican model in which individual merges into the society. The model is based on secularism and civil rights. Secularism allows no religious symbols in public schools. According to civil rights, individual citizen instead of community is the direct constituent of the French society. Respectively, French laws prohibit any expressions or presentations of the ontology of culture, especially the ontology of religion, in public places, because any open expressions of ethnic groups may be interpreted as threats to democracy.

In terms of religion, many French people think that Islam is the major obstacle to the assimilation of French and Muslims, from which prejudice towards Islam is unveiled. Results from public opinion polls show that 58% of French people think it impossible the coexistence of Islam and France's Republican democracy, and only 2% stand opposed. (Ma, 2003) Hostile can also be sensed from the storming oppositions against the 2015 proposal by former Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem. The Moroccan-born Minister suggested *Islamic Culture* in the list of compulsory programs for French students and reducing *Christian Culture* to an optional program, which aroused a nationwide controversy. Some member of the Ministry of Education denounced the proposal with an online article titled *The Betrayal of Najat Vallaud-*

Belkacem (La trahison de Najat Vallaud-Belkacem), in which dangers of the Islamization in France were listed (Anonymity, 2017). In the French society, schools are taken as the shrine of the cultivation of Republican citizens and the diffusion of *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*, but the problem is how to nurture in secular schools citizens believing in Islam as well as equipped with Republican values. More than half of the ELCO countries are Islamic states. Thus, it is not easy to tackle the problem through intercultural education.

Intercultural education in France involves different communities and ethnic groups, but there exists much ambiguity in the immigrant policies, which is subject to the Republican democracy. Similar examples include Priority Education Zone (Zone d'Education Prioritaire), a constant focus in the discussions of France's immigrant education policy. Immigrant children should be the biggest beneficiaries. The policy, however, distinguishes its target from the rest with a more neutral criterion – economic conditions – rather than immigrant identities, and grants certain benefits to the disadvantaged group. Under the French Republican model, immigrants from distinctive ethnic groups are not only deprived of certain rights which they should enjoy with their identity, but also confined to indirect ways to obtain their rights. Conclusively, the Republican model, with a history of more than 200 years, can no longer meet the demand of the current immigration in France, and the implementation of intercultural policy and its unsatisfactory effect, to a great extent, mirrors the dilemma France is exposed to when it is confronted with the issue of immigration.

3.3 Conflicts between Intercultural Education and Ethnic Discrimination

The major purpose of the intercultural education in France is to realize the final harmony among various cultures by enhancing the mutual understanding and eliminate prejudice and discrimination between different cultures. The French government plunges into the cause and endeavors to develop intercultural education and others like civic education, development education and peace education, though with results undesirable. In recent years, sequential terrorist attacks related to Islam in France are prone to arouse hostility to Islamic immigrant descendants in the public, which intensifies the prejudice against Islam and the Islamization in France. On the other hand, many Islamic immigrant descendants are no longer involved in any forms of religious activities and share the same political values with most French people. They are equal to their French peers in law, but economically, socially and culturally discriminated. In history, their fathers were under the colonization of France, and today they suffer discrimination in the French community; thus, demanding for equal rights and social status are voiced, yet in most cases, in violent and extreme ways with resentment. (Ma, 2003)

In the French Republican model, “equality” is supreme with its secularization and civil rights, but it emphasizes “formal equality rather than substantive equality, equality of procedure rather than equality of results.”(Liu, 2013) However, factors contributing to the inequality are diversified, including the structural inequality in the social economy and the immigrant policy under the frame Republican democracy. So, the French government needs to redefine the value of equality. “The rights of immigrants (French citizens) should be further recognized socially and culturally. Today, hundreds of thousands of the second-generation of immigrants from Maghreb area and other parts of Africa have struggled to fight for citizenship. As a French citizen, they may become the incentive to achieving the equality and secularization of French society.” (Ma, 2003)

CONCLUSION

Intercultural education, a governmental attempt in immigrant children education, was evolutionary in the context of a republican institution, but failed to overcome what the institution falls short of. The French government hence was indecisive in the implementation of this policy that ended up unvaried in specific measures and undesirable in effectiveness. At present, however, the French community is exposed to a complex environment – the coexistence of various cultures, the Muslim problem, and the circulation of personnel and culture brought by globalization. In this context, France needs to draw lessons from its previous implementation of intercultural education and more importantly, amend the Republican model of integration in order to stay French as well as culturally heterogeneous. For France, it is still a long way to go.

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