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## Migration, Multiculturalism, and Schooling in France: Rethinking Republican Integration

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines how republican integration is interpreted and enacted within culturally diverse lower-secondary schools in France in the context of contemporary migration, addressing the limited empirical research on how republican integration principles are translated from national policy discourse into everyday school practices. This study examines how the principles of equality, secularism (*laïcité*), and citizenship in national policy are implemented in everyday teaching practices in culturally diverse lower-secondary schools, using a qualitative multiple case study approach. Using a multiple case study approach, data were collected from three lower-secondary schools through semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders (n=18), focus group discussions with migrant-background students (n=24), and analysis of school policy documents and civic education curricula. The findings show that schools interpret and apply republican values differently, ranging from open discussions about secularism and citizenship to practices that emphasize linguistic and cultural conformity. In schools where educators frame secularism and equality as dialogic and reflective pedagogical tools, students report stronger perceptions of belonging, recognition, and civic engagement within the school community. When integration is mainly defined as following language and secular norms, students may feel tension between school expectations and their identity. The study also shows a gap between national integration policy and classroom practice, highlighting the role of teachers and school culture. It argues that democratic cohesion in diverse societies requires education that balances shared civic values with respect for cultural diversity.

Keyword: Republican Integration; Migration And Education; Multicultural Schooling; *Laïcité*; Civic Education;

### INTRODUCTION

Migration has significantly reshaped the demographic composition of schools across Europe, raising complex challenges for education systems that were historically designed around culturally homogeneous populations. In France, these challenges are particularly salient because the education system is grounded in a republican universalist model that emphasizes equality, secular neutrality (*laïcité*), and the construction of a shared civic identity irrespective of ethnic or cultural background. The French education system has historically been grounded in the doctrine of republican universalism, which emphasizes equality (*égalité*), secular neutrality (*laïcité*), and

the construction of a common civic identity beyond ethnic or religious differences (Dubet, 2014; Schnapper, 2017). This model seeks to construct a shared civic identity that transcends ethnic, religious, and cultural distinctions. However, demographic transformations associated with international migration have increased the presence of students with migrant backgrounds in French public schools. According to recent OECD estimates, approximately one in five students in urban school systems has at least one parent born abroad, introducing new linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic dynamics into classrooms.

Recent data from Education at a Glance 2025 indicate that migration background and



home language continue to shape educational outcomes in France. Large-scale assessments continue to reveal persistent educational inequalities associated with migration. Data from the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies indicate that adults from migrant families in France demonstrate lower average literacy proficiency than those with native-born parents, suggesting that disparities in educational integration during schooling may produce long-term consequences for academic attainment and social mobility. (OECD, 2025). These disparities suggest that early educational integration remains uneven and may generate long-term consequences for academic and social mobility.

Further evidence from the OECD Economic Survey of France 2024 highlights continuing patterns of social and academic segregation within French schools. Students from migrant backgrounds are disproportionately concentrated in disadvantaged schools and urban priority zones, contributing to unequal learning environments and limited cross-group interaction (OECD, 2024). Such patterns raise concerns regarding the capacity of the republican model to effectively promote social cohesion and equal opportunity in increasingly diverse contexts.

At the same time, the nature of migration itself has evolved. Contemporary migration flows include refugees, asylum seekers, and transnational families whose educational trajectories may be shaped by displacement, interrupted schooling, and multilingual realities. Educational professionals must therefore navigate complex pedagogical challenges, including language acquisition, intercultural communication, and psychosocial support. Research conducted between 2021 and 2023 indicates that while some educators continue to interpret schools primarily as instruments of national integration grounded in universalist principles, many increasingly advocate for more inclusive approaches that acknowledge the plural identities of students and the social realities they bring into the classroom (Lantheaume, 2023).

Debates surrounding *laïcité* remain particularly salient in educational settings. Public controversies over religious symbols and expressions in schools reflect broader tensions between institutional neutrality and individual identity. Recent analyses emphasize that while secular policies aim to safeguard equality and civic unity, they may also generate perceptions of exclusion among certain minority groups, especially when implementation lacks contextual sensitivity (Associated Press, 2024). The school thus functions as a symbolic arena in which national identity, secularism, and multicultural realities intersect.

Existing scholarship on migration and schooling in France over the past five years can broadly be grouped into three strands. First, quantitative policy-oriented studies document structural inequalities such as achievement gaps and school segregation. Second, sociological research examines how educators interpret diversity and implement integration policies within institutional constraints. Third, comparative studies situate the French republican model within broader European debates on multicultural governance. While these bodies of work offer valuable insights, they remain fragmented and rarely connect structural analysis with classroom-level pedagogical processes. First, quantitative and policy-oriented studies focus on structural inequalities, examining academic performance gaps, school segregation, and social mobility outcomes (OECD, 2024; OECD, 2025). Second, sociological investigations analyze professional practices and institutional responses to diversity, often emphasizing teachers' perceptions and the challenges of implementing inclusive education in priority education zones (Lantheaume, 2023). Third, comparative research situates France within broader European debates on integration and diversity governance, frequently contrasting the French republican model with multicultural approaches in other contexts (Welply, 2022).

Despite these important contributions, several limitations remain. Although quantitative studies document persistent inequalities in



educational outcomes, they provide limited insight into how republican principles such as equality and laïcité are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in everyday pedagogical interactions within culturally diverse classrooms. Conversely, qualitative analyses of teacher perceptions rarely integrate normative educational theory capable of explaining how laïcité and equality are enacted at the classroom level. The relationship between policy discourse and lived educational experience therefore remains insufficiently theorized.

A second research gap concerns the fragmentation of perspectives. Moreover, policy analyses, studies of teacher practices, and research on students' lived experiences are frequently conducted in isolation from one another (Welply, 2022; Lantheaume, 2023). This fragmentation limits our understanding of how integration unfolds dynamically within schools as institutions shaped simultaneously by national policy frameworks and everyday social interaction. This separation limits our understanding of how integration unfolds dynamically within schools as social institutions shaped by both structural constraints and human agency.

A third limitation involves the changing character of migration. Emerging forms of transnational belonging, facilitated by digital connectivity and sustained cross-border social networks, challenge traditional binary frameworks that oppose assimilation to multicultural recognition (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2009). Current research has yet to fully conceptualize how republican integration might adapt to these evolving realities while preserving its foundational democratic commitments.

By examining interactions between policy discourse, institutional practices, and student experiences, the study contributes to international debates on migration and schooling by offering an empirically grounded analysis of how republican integration is negotiated in contemporary multicultural classrooms. It explores how educators and students negotiate the principles of equality, secularism, and citizenship within culturally diverse classrooms. By integrating

normative educational theory with empirical attention to institutional practice and student experience, this study aims to illuminate how French schools can reconcile universal civic ideals with multicultural realities.

Through this approach, the article contributes to international debates on migration and schooling by offering a context-sensitive analysis of the French case. It argues that republican integration should be understood not as a fixed model of assimilation, but as an evolving educational project shaped by dialogue, negotiation, and institutional adaptation in the face of contemporary migration dynamics.

## METHODS

This study employs an interpretive qualitative research design grounded in a multiple case study methodology to examine how republican integration is understood, negotiated, and enacted within culturally diverse classrooms in French lower-secondary schools. The interpretive approach allows the researcher to explore how educational actors construct meanings around republican principles such as laïcité, equality (égalité), and citizenship within their institutional and social contexts. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to understand how educational actors interpret and negotiate abstract civic principles within everyday pedagogical practices. Such processes involve subjective meanings, contextual interactions, and institutional norms that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. As Creswell and Poth (2018) argue, interpretive qualitative research enables a deep analysis of social phenomena as constructed through individual experiences and institutional contexts, rather than through numerical representation alone.

The study adopts a multiple case study strategy involving four lower-secondary schools located in two major metropolitan regions in France. Schools were purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) a high proportion of students



with migrant backgrounds (above 40%), (2) participation in the national *éducation prioritaire* programme, and (3) the presence of institutional initiatives addressing linguistic diversity and civic education. The selected schools represent different institutional strategies for managing diversity, including variations in language support programmes for newly arrived migrant students, professional development initiatives on intercultural education, and differing levels of resource allocation within the *éducation prioritaire* framework. Existing literature emphasizes the importance of contextually rich case studies to understand how integration policies are enacted locally (Ginicolo et al., 2026). This design enhances the ability to compare and contrast institutional responses to multiculturalism within the republican framework.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants, including 14 teachers, 4 school leaders, and 2 guidance counselors across the four schools. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of different professional roles and levels of experience in working with culturally diverse student populations. (Song et al., 2024). In addition, six focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 30 students aged 12–15 from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Each focus group consisted of five students and was facilitated in French, with occasional clarification provided for students with emerging language proficiency. The document analysis included 18 institutional documents, such as school policy statements, civic education curricula, internal guidelines on *laïcité*, and communications distributed to teachers and parents between 2021 and 2024.

Data analysis followed a six-phase thematic analysis procedure, including familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and final interpretation. The constant comparative method was applied throughout the coding process to identify similarities and differences across cases. Interview transcripts and documents were coded iteratively

to identify emergent themes, such as inclusive pedagogical practices, teachers' negotiation of secular norms, and students' perceptions of integration. This approach aligns with qualitative best practices in interpretive education research, emphasizing iterative reflection and theme refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To enhance credibility, the study employed data triangulation by comparing evidence obtained from interviews, student focus groups, and institutional documents. In addition, preliminary findings were discussed with selected participants to ensure interpretive accuracy and reduce researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from adults and guardians of minor participants, and pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality. Institutional review board approval was secured prior to fieldwork. By integrating theoretical constructs with rich empirical data on school practices in multicultural contexts, this methodology provides a nuanced understanding of how republican integration is enacted as both an ideology and lived reality in contemporary French education.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Theme 1: Interpretations of Republican Values in Diverse Classrooms

Across the four case-study schools, most interviewed educators explicitly referenced republican principles *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*, and *laïcité* as central to their professional understanding of civic education. These principles were frequently invoked when teachers discussed classroom management, citizenship education lessons, and responses to cultural or religious expression among students. However, the meaning ascribed to these principles varied substantially by context and by teacher background. Teachers working in schools with long-standing multicultural student populations tended to interpret *laïcité* not primarily as a regulatory constraint but as a pedagogical framework for discussing pluralism and civic respect. For



example, several teachers described incorporating discussions about religious diversity, cultural traditions, and constitutional principles into citizenship education lessons. For example, one teacher observed:

“Laïcité is not just about removing religion; it is about creating a respectful space where all students can learn without fear of judgment. It allows me to talk about values, not just rules.” (Teacher A, School 2)

This teacher’s statement illustrates a pedagogical interpretation of laïcité that emphasizes dialogue and mutual respect rather than mere institutional neutrality. This interpretation corresponds with recent scholarship suggesting that secularism can function as an inclusive civic practice when educators frame it as a basis for ethical dialogue rather than as a rigid administrative rule (Song et al., 2024). Indeed, contemporary analyses emphasize that secular policies can function as tools of inclusion when enacted reflectively and not merely administratively (Duclos & Hameline, 2023). Several educators who adopted this interpretive stance reported using classroom discussions, debates, and reflective activities to connect secular principles with students’ everyday experiences. These practices illustrate a more dialogic interpretation of republican values.

Contrastingly, teachers in schools with less institutional support for diversity tended to reduce laïcité to compliance with dress codes and curricular neutrality. In these contexts, republican values were articulated in ways that unintentionally reinforced cultural hierarchies:

“We focus on ensuring students follow the secular policy and speak French, because that’s what integration requires.” (Teacher D, School 4)

Although this study focuses on qualitative evidence from classroom contexts, the observed patterns echo broader concerns identified in international assessments indicating that rigid integration policies may contribute to feelings of exclusion among students with migrant backgrounds (OECD, 2025). When secularism is

interpreted primarily as boundary enforcement rather than a dialogic practice, integration risks becoming synonymous with assimilation—contrary to the inclusive ideals educators claim to uphold.

In summary, educators’ interpretations of republican values are not uniform. Instead, they reflect the institutional cultures and professional development experiences of each school, revealing that republican integration is as much a site of negotiation as it is a prescribed policy.

## **Theme 2: Pedagogical Practices that Navigate Diversity and Cohesion**

Empirical data show that teachers who reported positive student engagement were those who actively incorporated students’ cultural repertoires into classroom practice. One notable example involved a history teacher who reframed lessons around citizenship to include comparative case studies on national identity from students’ countries of origin:

“We discuss different national narratives so students see that being French does not erase their story. They build bridges between experiences, not walls.” (Teacher B, School 1)

This approach reflects what Wang and Bifulco (2022) describe as “inclusive civic pedagogy,” a model of citizenship education in which civic values are taught through dialogue, comparative perspectives, and recognition of students’ diverse cultural experience. Such pedagogical strategies contrast with more traditional approaches that focus exclusively on canonical narratives of French history and citizenship.

Conversely, classrooms where teachers emphasized rote memorization of civic norms without dialogue exhibited lower levels of student participation and identification with school values. Several students indicated that citizenship lessons often felt disconnected from their everyday experiences, particularly when discussions focused exclusively on abstract national values without acknowledging the cultural and migration-related realities present in the classroom.



“They tell us what values are important, but we never talk about what they mean for someone like me.” (Student F, School 3)

This student response mirrors findings from Welply (2022), who documented that culturally diverse students often disengage when schools treat citizenship education as a static body of facts rather than an interactive negotiation of meanings. In this sense, inclusion is not merely about access but about recognition and relevance—students need to see their identities as legitimately contributing to the learning process.

A third dimension of variation concerned institutional language support practices. Schools that implemented structured language assistance—such as preparatory language classes for newly arrived students, bilingual support staff, and adapted instructional materials—reported greater student confidence in classroom participation. Schools that provided structured, sustained language scaffolding—through bilingual aides, peer mentoring, or adapted curricular materials—reported higher student confidence and participation. This finding is corroborated by the OECD (2024), which shows that targeted language support is crucial for equitable educational outcomes among students with migrant backgrounds. However, several schools struggled with resource constraints, resulting in inconsistent language support that disproportionately affected new arrivals.

### **Theme 3: Students’ Perceptions of Belonging and Identity Negotiation**

One of the most significant findings concerns students’ narratives of belonging, understood as the extent to which learners perceive themselves as valued members of the school community. Students who felt seen and heard reported a stronger sense of school community and civic commitment. For instance, one student shared:

“When we talk about our family histories in class, it feels like we are part of the story of France, not outside it.” (Student J, School 1)

This aligns with recent research emphasizing that students’ sense of belonging is a

key predictor of academic engagement and well-being (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2023). When classroom practices validate students’ identities while connecting to shared civic themes, learners report greater engagement with schooling as a meaningful space for participation and growth.

In contrast, students in schools where cultural discussion was minimized described a sense of tension between their home identities and school expectations:

“Sometimes I feel I have to hide parts of who I am to fit in here.” (Student L, School 4)

Such experiences echo critiques of universalist models that fail to adequately account for the lived realities of students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Brubaker, 2021). While republican ideals aim for equality by deemphasizing difference, this can inadvertently minimize the importance of identity recognition in students’ educational journeys.

### **Theme 4: Policy Implementation versus Practice**

Across all data sources, a recurring pattern was the discrepancy between the normative language of national integration policies and the practical realities teachers face in classrooms. Although school administrators repeatedly referenced national integration goals and civic education requirements, fewer concrete mechanisms existed to support teachers in translating these goals into everyday pedagogy. One principal acknowledged:

“We emphasize republican values in assemblies and guidelines, but training for teachers on how to enact these values in class is limited.” (Principal C, School 2)

This observation reflects broader systemic challenges identified in recent educational policy reviews, which note that policy clarity does not guarantee effective implementation without sustained professional development, institutional support, and reflective practice (Rivière & Maucorps, 2025).

In practice, schools with deeper commitments to integration invested in ongoing teacher collaboration and reflective forums where



educators shared strategies for navigating diversity. In these schools, teachers regularly participated in collaborative meetings, professional development workshops, and informal peer exchanges where they discussed strategies for addressing linguistic diversity and intercultural tensions in the classroom.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the implementation of republican integration within culturally diverse lower-secondary schools in France is shaped less by formal policy prescriptions than by the ways educators interpret and translate republican principles such as equality, secularism, and citizenship into everyday pedagogical practices. The findings indicate significant variation in how republican values are enacted across schools. In some contexts, educators interpret secularism and equality as frameworks for dialogue about diversity and shared civic norms, while in others these principles are implemented primarily through regulatory compliance with language and neutrality requirements. Rather, they are continuously negotiated by educators and students within specific institutional and social contexts.

The findings suggest that when educators frame republican principles as dialogic pedagogical resources—encouraging discussion about citizenship, identity, and shared norms—students from migrant backgrounds are more likely to report stronger feelings of belonging and engagement within the school environment. Schools in which teachers adopted reflective pedagogical approaches and incorporated students' cultural experiences into civic education discussions tended to report higher levels of student participation and more positive narratives of belonging among learners. Conversely, in schools where integration was framed primarily as compliance with formal norms—particularly linguistic conformity and strict interpretations of secular neutrality—several students described

feelings of tension between institutional expectations and their personal identities.

An important finding of this study concerns the role of teacher agency and institutional culture in shaping how integration policies are enacted. Teachers frequently described adapting civic education lessons, classroom discussions, and language support practices to respond to the diverse social and cultural realities of their students. Policy discourse alone does not determine practice; rather, professional interpretation, collaboration, and sustained support structures significantly influence how values are translated into everyday classroom interactions. This underscores the necessity of continuous professional development and institutional dialogue to ensure that republican ideals remain responsive to evolving demographic realities.

Ultimately, the research argues that republican integration should be understood as an evolving educational project. In a context of increasing cultural plurality and transnational mobility, the sustainability of the French educational model depends not on denying difference, but on cultivating shared civic commitments through inclusive and reflective pedagogical engagement. By reconciling universal principles with lived diversity, schools can more effectively fulfill their democratic mission in contemporary society.

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