# Talking about cultural diversity at school: dialogical tensions and obstacles to secondarisation

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## Abstract

In Switzerland, as elsewhere, issues dealing with cultural diversity raise major challenges in education. At present, little is known about how students make sense of these highly sensitive societal issues and relate them to their everyday experience. Drawing on a sociocultural and dialogical approach to learning, this study aimed at understanding how the students made sense of themes related to cultural diversity. More generally, it sought to examine whether secondarisation (i.e. a transformation of everyday experience into a more generic and scientific form) took place. In this study, ten focus groups were carried out: five in primary school (11- to 12-year-old students) and five in lower secondary school (13- to 14-year-old students) in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The specificity of the research design consisted of setting up a situation that had both similarities and differences with lessons on cultural diversity that had previously been taught in the classroom. We assumed that this would create dialogical tensions and thereby shed light on the obstacles that may arise when themes related to cultural diversity are taught in school. Analysis of the discursive dynamics of the focus-group discussions showed that education for cultural diversity cannot be considered independently of the student's other spheres of experiences. Personal, social and moral dimensions are part of the students' effort to make sense of the themes under discussion. Talking about cultural diversity, even though with pleasure and involvement, cannot be equated with learning and transforming these themes into scientific concepts. Moreover, dialogical tensions can create unexpected effects and even bring about the very phenomena that education for cultural diversity is supposed to fight.

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## Introduction

As social actors, students learn both inside and outside school. The subjects they learn at school have social meanings within their family and their social environment, and take on personal meanings (Lawrence and Valsiner 2003; Zittoun 2017). This is especially so when they touch on *real-world issues* (e.g. migration or racism) that are close to the students' everyday experience and elicit various divergent discourses outside school, thus setting up dialogical tensions between what is taught within the school and what is experienced or heard outside school (Grosssen and Muller Mirza, 2019; Ligorio 2010; Muller Mirza et al. 2014). Based on this premise, this article presents a study which was carried out in primary and lower secondary schools in Switzerland and focused on education for cultural diversity with the aim of understanding some obstacles that might be found in such teaching.

In Switzerland, as in many other countries, issues related to cultural diversity raise major challenges in education. Various interventions have been set up in schools, such as integration programmes for migrants, language courses and teacher training in intercultural education. Themes related to cultural diversity have also been introduced as school subjects and are taught within disciplines such as social sciences (history, geography, civic education) or in specific programmes organised to promote equality, encourage tolerance or fight racism. Although the integration of these themes into school education is rarely questioned, there is considerable debate about the way in which themes related to cultural diversity should be introduced and talked about at school. One risk of broaching sensitive societal issues such as historically contested events (Goldberg and Schwarz 2016), socioscientific issues (Mäkitalo et al. 2009) or politically relevant projects (Rajala et al. 2013) is not only to taint them with ideology, but also to trap the students in their personal opinions and everyday understanding, and to make it hard for them to overcome the emotions these issues may arouse.

Consequently, knowing more about the way in which students make sense of these themes when they are discussed in the school context, how they relate them to their personal experience and whether this leads them to consider their everyday experience in a different and more conceptualised light—what we refer to as *secondarisation*—is an important issue when teaching cultural diversity at school. Drawing on a sociocultural approach to teaching and learning, the present study was intended precisely to find out how students make sense of themes related to cultural diversity by inviting them to talk about such themes in a focus group that took place *outside the classroom* after a set of lessons taught by the teacher *inside the classroom.* Our assumption was that the dialogical tensions created by holding the focus-group discussion in a different context would shed light on the obstacles that may be encountered when themes related to cultural diversity are taught in school.

After briefly describing education for cultural diversity in general, and the Swiss context in particular, we present some key concepts of the sociocultural approach to teaching and learning, focusing on secondarisation. We then describe the procedure adopted in the present study and the qualitative method we used to analyse the focus-group discussions. We conclude by identifying some of the obstacles and challenges raised by turning cultural diversity into teaching/learning subjects.

## Education for cultural diversity and its challenges

In present debates about education, there is currently a consensus that students should be made aware of the challenges of multicultural societies in order to avoid racism and other forms of discrimination. However, education for cultural diversity raises endless debates about which themes should be covered (knowledge about intercultural variations and/or power relationships, awareness of intercultural communication, emotion management, etc.) and about the format it should be taught in (self-contained programmes or cross-disciplinary topics).

The history of various educational programmes illustrates the sensitivity of these debates. In Switzerland, since the 1970s, many workers from neighbouring European countries were called as working force so that the schools had to integrate a high number of allophone students. Defining these students in terms of "deficiency" (lack of knowledge in the language of the host country, lack of skills due to their generally lower socioeconomic background, etc.), schools have undertaken actions to fill these gaps. However, these have been highly criticised, because the support provided to students failed to build on their knowledge and experience, thus confining them to a radical alterity (Allemann-Ghionda 2002; Matusov et al. 2007; Muller Mirza 2012). Most educationalists today acknowledge the importance of introducing themes related to cultural diversity in compulsory school programmes, in order to reach all students. The aim should be to lead students to become aware of their relation to alterity, rather than to "teaching knowledge about the "other", or "teaching the other", as Gorski put it (Gorski 2009; see also Abdallah-Preitcelle 2003; Lanfranchi et al. 2000).

At present, there is no such discipline as "education for cultural diversity" in schools in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Related themes however are included in teacher training and appear in the official school programme under the heading "Transversal Subject Matters". Consequently, these themes should be addressed across a range of subjects (e.g. history, geography, languages or citizenship education). The fact that these themes have not been institutionalised by the school reflects their hybrid nature (between social sciences, ideologies and personal opinions), and underlines the difficulty of delimiting a specific knowledge field (Audigier 2012). Moreover, for the time being, schools lack experience in the pedagogical methods required to teach these topics, and teachers are left with the responsibility of developing their own methods. Consequently, research on actual teaching practices is needed in order to gain a better understanding of the obstacles faced by both teachers and their students.

## A sociocultural approach to teaching and learning

Two main theoretical elements developed in a sociocultural approach in psychology were of particular interest in the exploration of our object of study (Ludvigsen et al. 2011; Valsiner and Rosa 2007; Wertsch 1991), and justified the choice of the research design of the study presented in this paper, as well as the analysis of the data.

The first concerns the relationship between everyday and scientific concepts (Vygotsky 1934/1988). One of Vygotsky's main theses was that scientific concepts develop out of everyday concepts and that school plays a fundamental role in the transformation of everyday concepts into scientific ones. Hence, for Vygotsky, there is no clear separation between the two, first because they feed each other in a reciprocal relationship, and second because the application of these two categories of concepts depends on the situation and the activity in

which the person is involved. Reasoning in terms of scientific concepts may be relevant at school, but not necessarily in all situations. Accordingly, as with all traditional school subjects, one goal of education for cultural diversity should be to turn everyday concepts into scientific ones. In recent years, French researchers (Bautier and Goigoux 2004; Bautier and Rayou 2009; Bonnéry 2007; Jaubert et al. 2004) have proposed the notion of *secondarisation* to account for this transformation. Secondarisation can be defined as the process whereby students reconfigure their immediate experience of a given phenomenon, and turn it into a more generic form. This reconfiguration goes together with the development of a speech genre (i.e. a certain way of talking about a given state of affairs). The notion of *speech genre* refers to Bakhtin (1986), who differentiated between primary and secondary speech genres. Whereas a *primary* speech genre refers to familiar, everyday language, *secondary* speech genres are specialised genres (e.g. pertaining to science or literature). An example of secondarisation in physics would be to understand that what we call *weight* in everyday life is not what is called *weight* in physics. In his studies of teacher-student learning interactions, Bonnéry (2007) reported many observations of obstacles in secondarisation and students' misunderstanding of their teachers' expectations. For example, he reported the case of a 10-year-old student who, in a biology lesson on respiration, mentioned his personal experience of breathing when doing sport and failed to understand that the lesson was about the biology of respiration. In this case, secondarisation would have consisted of understanding that the lesson was about the biological mechanisms of respiration involving different organs and their relationships, and using a language pertaining to biology and shared by certain discursive communities (Jaubert et al. 2004). According to Bonnéry, teaching settings or tasks that are very close to everyday situations are liable to elicit sociocognitive misunderstandings. Indeed, framing a new subject by drawing heavily on everyday concepts requires students to grasp that, despite obvious references to everyday life, the lesson is not about their personal experience but requires them to approach the new subject from a scientific angle. In the case of cultural diversity, we can assume that secondarisation is difficult because of the sensitivity of these societal issues and their closeness to students' everyday experience. This should not, however, deter schools from striving to foster the secondarisation of these issues.

The second theoretical element draws on Bakhtin's theory of language (Bakhtin 1981, 1984) and refers to *dialogical tensions*. It emphasises that any discourse is part of a dialogical chain and is linked to previous discourses produced elsewhere by other speakers. Any discourse echoes the voices of previous discourses. As Bakhtin (1981) put it, "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated with intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word" (p. 293). Any utterance is therefore in dialogical relations (Bakhtin 1984) with other utterances, thus creating microdialogues between different conflicting voices. From this point of view, the term *dialogue* is not synonymous with interaction (Grossen 2009, 2010; Grossen and Muller Mirza, 2019). Rather, as Linell (2009) put it, it has to be understood in an "abstract and comprehensive sense" (p. 5), and refers to "any kind of human making-sense, semiotic practice, action, interaction, thinking or communication" (p. 5). This definition implies that any situation that brings together two or more interlocutors is made up of both a *dialogue in presence*, that is, the discourse they address to each other, and a *distant dialogue*, referring to absent voices that are echoed in the participants' discourse (typically in reported speech) (François, 2005; Salazar Orvig, 2005). More generally, this means that a given situation is always connected to other situations (Bronkhorst and Akkerman 2016), inasmuch as it shares some similarities with them. For example, when a parent does homework with his or her son or daughter, the interactional routines, the material, the way of talking

together and of working is in distant dialogue with classroom dialogues (Kakpo 2012). This point of view invites us to pay attention to what happens not only within a given situation, but also *between* this situation and others. It is therefore an incentive to focus on the dialogical tensions between various situations or spheres of experience, that is, "a configuration of experiences, activities, representations and feelings, recurrently occurring in a given type of social (material and symbolic) setting" (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016, p. 8). The notion of dialogical tensions therefore refers to tensions or conflicts (in the broad sense of the word) between the different voices echoed within any discourse and, more generally, between different situations or spheres of experience (Grossen and Salazar Orvig 2011; Linell 2009; Marková 2016; Zittoun and Grossen 2013). In the example reported by Bonnéry, the confrontation between the everyday situation of a student playing sport and a teaching–learning situation focusing on the biology of respiration was a source of dialogical tensions and was an obstacle to secondarisation. These dialogical tensions can be more or less marked, but can apply to any teaching–learning situation.

In line with this theoretical framework, the present study was intended to examine how students make sense of themes related to cultural diversity. We tried to ascertain whether secondarisation took place and, if it did not, to identify the dialogical tensions that may have hindered this process. From this perspective, we involved the students in a focus-group situation whose procedure differed from usual classroom routines.

## Research design

The present study was part of a broader research project, entitled "Transformation of Emotions and Construction of Knowledge: Identity in Classroom Practices in Intercultural Education" (TECS). This research project aimed at documenting teaching–learning practices in education for cultural diversity and was carried out in schools in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Twelve teachers (11 women and one man[1]) and their students ($n = 232$) participated in the research project. Six of these teachers taught in primary school (11- to 12-year-old students) and six in lower secondary school (13- to 14-year-old students). They all participated on a voluntary basis. They were interested by treating cultural diversity with their students but had no training in teaching this subject.

The complete research design (cf. Table 1) included three different situations: (a) a classroom situation in which the teachers introduced themes re7lated to cultural diversity through pedagogical documents; (b) the writing of a text inspired by a photograph (Photograph 36; cf. Fig. 1) taken from one of these documents—a Photolanguage document entitled "L'Humanité en Mouvement" (Humanity in Motion) (2005); and (c) a focus-group situation that followed a few days later and was designed to create, firstly, a situation in which the students were encouraged to express their thoughts and opinions (Marková, Linell, Grossen and Salazar Orvig, 2007; see also Myers 2004), secondly, a context which, as we explain below, had both similarities and differences with the classroom situation, and would therefore set up dialogical tensions between the two situations. Because of this sequentiality, the lessons taught in the classroom could be regarded as the context that framed the students' discourse in the focus groups.

The present study concerns only the data collected in the focus-group discussions (see Muller Mirza et al. for further details on the complete research design).

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[1] To preserve the anonymity of the male teacher and because any comparison based on gender was impossible, female pseudonyms were given to all the teachers.

**Table 1** Overview of the research design

| Situation | Pedagogical documents | Procedure | Participants | Data |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lessons (in the classroom, in the moderator's presence) | (a) Photolanguage (50 photographs)<br>(b) Wordless comic book (Tan, 2006) | • 1st lesson: Write a text on Photograph 36<br>• Next lessons: left to the teachers' pedagogical goals and choices | 12 teachers<br>232 students | 85 lessons<br>• 53 with Photolanguage<br>• 32 with the wordless comic book |
| Focus groups (outside the classroom, without the teacher) | Photograph 36 | (1) Providing as many interpretations as possible of Photograph 36<br>(2) Agreeing on one interpretation of Photograph 36<br>(3) Discussing a dilemma about Photograph 36<br>(4) Confrontation with the text written by the students in the classroom<br>(5) What did you learn? | 10 focus groups<br>61 students | Video and audio-recording<br>Full transcriptions |

## Participants

Ten[2] focus groups were set up: five in primary school (grades 5, 5 and 6 mixed, and 6), and five in lower secondary school (grades 8, 8 and 9 mixed, and 9). The groups were composed of six or seven boys and girls, as this size favours a good conversational dynamic. In each group, one or more students had a history of immigration. The groups were composed according to two criteria: (a) the texts the students wrote about Photograph 36 in the classroom situation and (b) the observations we made during the lessons. Students who based their texts on different interpretations of Photograph 36 and exhibited different levels of personal involvement and verbal participation in the classroom were put together, in order to favour discussion and argumentation. Table 2 shows the composition of each focus group.

The discussions lasted 27–55 min. They were video- and audio-recorded, then transcribed (see norms in Appendix 1).

Two researchers (both women) collected the data, each responsible for six classes and five focus groups. The focus groups were moderated by the same researcher who made the observations during the classroom lessons.

## Procedure

Some days after the lessons taught in the classroom, the focus groups took place in an empty classroom during school time in the teacher's absence.

In her initial instructions, the moderator (M) referred to the activities carried out in the classroom and told the students that they would have to discuss a photograph they had already

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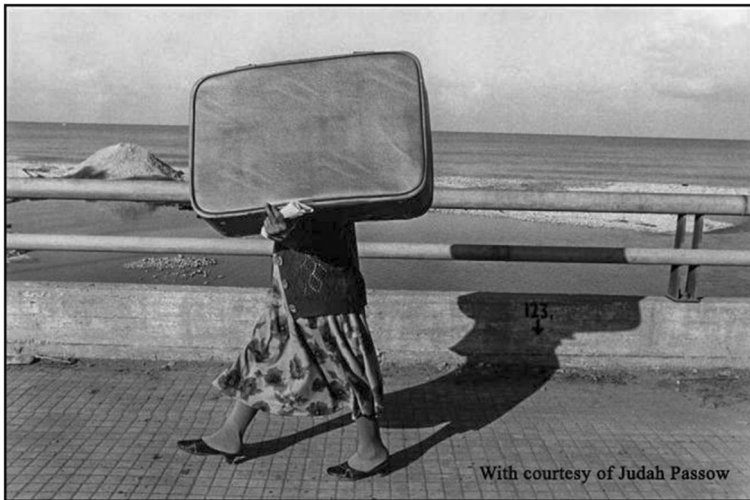[2] For practical reasons, focus groups could not be organised in two classes.

**Fig. 1** Photograph used to inspire the writing of a text. © Courtesy of Judah Passow

seen during the lessons (Photograph 36). She set out five rules[3] they should follow in order to have what she called a "nice group discussion", and encouraged them to talk as freely as possible. She also stressed that there were no right or wrong answer. She tried to be as nondirective as possible, that is, to intervene as little as possible in the discussion.

The focus-group discussion was organised in five parts, each of them dealing with Photograph 36, except part 5. The instructions and procedure were as follows: part 1: *Provide as many interpretations as possible of Photograph 36*: after giving this instruction, M left the room and let the students talk on their own for 3 min; part 2: *Agree on one interpretation*: here again, after giving this instruction, M left the room for three minutes, then returned and asked the students to give her their interpretation; part 3: *Discuss a dilemma*: M presented two interpretations of Photograph 36, which raised a dilemma between two different attitudes towards life transition:

> The woman in the photograph sets off on a journey, and while travelling to a new destination, she meets a person who says, "Put your suitcase down, leave your past behind you so that you are lighter when you start a new life". She then meets another person who says, "Keep your suitcase, as everything will be of use to you in your new life". So what do you think?

Part 4: *Confrontation with the text written in the classroom*: M showed the texts that the students wrote about Photograph 36 in the classroom and asked them to discuss them; part 5: *What did you learn?* M asked the students to say what they had learned from the lessons taught in the classroom.

The focus-group situation had several similarities with the classroom situation, including the context of the discussion (school), the theme under discussion (cultural diversity), the use of Photograph 36 and the fact that the students had already met the moderator. The main

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[3] These rules were inspired by research on "exploratory talk" (e.g. Mercer and Howe 2012) and were as follows: "don't all talk together", "respect each other turns to speak", "do not make fun of the others' answer", "don't feel shy", "take the floor, just say what you think".

**Table 2** Composition of each focus groups by school, grade, age and number of participants

| Focus group | School | Grade | Age | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| FG 1P | Primary school | 5 | 10–11 | 6 (4 girls, 2 boys) |
| FG 2P | | 5–6 | 10–12 | 7 (4 girls, 3 boys) |
| FG 3P | | 6 | 11–12 | 6 (4 girls, 2 boys) |
| FG 4P | | 6 | 11–12 | 6 (3 girls, 3 boys) |
| FG 5P | | 6 | 11–12 | 6 (3 girls, 3 boys) |
| FG 6S | Secondary school | 8 | 14–15 | 6 (4 girls, 2 boys) |
| FG 7S | | 8 | 14–15 | 6 (3 girls, 3 boys) |
| FG 8S | | 8 | 14–15 | 6 (3 girls, 3 boys) |
| FG 9S | | 8–9 | 14–16 | 6 (4 girls, 2 boys) |
| FG 10S | | 9 | 15–16 | 6 (4 girls, 2 boys) |

differences lay in the tasks, the place where the discussion took place (an empty classroom in the school), the setting (small groups, the absence of the teacher) and the interactional routines (no need for students to raise their hands to ask for the floor, moderator's intermittent absence, rules for joint discussion).

## Research questions

To answer our general research question (how do students make sense of themes related to cultural diversity), we asked three specific research questions: (1) How did the students make sense of the focus-group situation and of the tasks that they had to complete? (2) How did they talk about themes related to cultural diversity? Did they use a secondary speech genre? (3) Did they make links between the themes related to cultural diversity and other spheres of experience outside school?

## Analysis of the data

To analyse the data, we used a qualitative method that was inductive and, therefore, rooted in the specific features of the data (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006; Strauss and Corbin 2015). Adopting a bottom-up approach based on the repeated reading of the material, we identified recursive observations and concrete indicators liable to inform the research questions.

To answer the first question, we considered students' comments on the definition of the situation or tasks, assuming that students (a) would go beyond the instructions given by the researcher and actively construct their interpretation of the situation and (b) orient their activity according to their particular definition of the tasks and the situation.

To answer the second question, we considered how things were said, notably the use of hedges, litotes, euphemisms and other ways of dealing with sensitive topics (Linell and Bredmar 1996). We also looked for markers of speech genres, such as the use of certain words, or (in the case of everyday discourse) colloquial expressions or bad language. As categorisations were frequently related to cultural differences and identities, we systematically looked for categorisations of absent third parties (persons or groups) (e.g. "Tamil is not racist"), self-categorisations and other-categorisations (e.g. "the three of us are Arabs" or "well, no, you are Swiss").

To answer the third question, we identified references to personal experience (in the form of utterances or more elaborated narratives) and analogies between the themes

discussed in the focus group and other discussions held in the classroom or outside school.

In a second step, we checked several times the general coherence of the analysis. We also checked that a quantitative analysis was not relevant, as frequent comments could just be due to multiple rewording, and rare comments could be very informative. As we did not find any difference between the younger and older students, the results concern all the focus groups taken together.

## Results

In the next sections, we report the main results concerning each of the three research questions.

### Defining the situation and the tasks

The students were not accustomed to tackling themes related to cultural diversity in the school context. The focus-group situation, featuring the procedure we have just described, was even more unusual for them. Hence, our first research question examined students' particular definition of the tasks and the situation, as this was liable to frame their discourse.

The results show that in all the focus groups, students made comments about the definition of the situation and the tasks to be carried out. Comments on the situation were typically questions about the goal of the situation:

[1] (5, FG5P[4])
163 Camilia what's actually the purpose of what we say'
138 Moderator to see if this material is actually adapted for you or not

When they were left alone with the instruction to produce as many interpretations as possible of Photograph 36, Rodolphe and Rita also postulated about the moderator's goals and intentions:

[2] (1, M absent, FG1P)
11 Rodolphe because I know why she ((M)) gave us this image BEFORE telling the story here the big story because-
8 Rita yeah and after to see the difference
12 Rodolphe then she wanted to explain to us what emigration and immigration are, […] so what she wanted us to know- first she wanted to know whether we already understood the [thing of emigrating and immigrating] a little bit
5 Rachel [here she emigrated]

The students also proposed their own definitions of the situation: "it's an interrogation" (Paul, FG7S), "it's an assessment" (Luc, FG3P), "a trick" (Stéphanie, FG8S), "we're not in a geography lesson" (Laurence, FG3P).

Other comments were judgements on the task. For example, Penelope argued:

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[4] In the parentheses, the first number indicates the part of the focus group from which the excerpt was taken, and the second is the focus group number; P means primary school and S secondary school (see Table 2). Further on, "M absent" means that the moderator was absent. The turns are numbered by speaker. The excerpts in the original French language are provided in Appendix 2.

[3] (3, M absent FG7S)
77 Penelope well, first of all I think these sentences ((the dilemma)) are completely stupid, hmm, frankly, sorry

There were also comments about the difficulty of the task, such as having to agree on a single interpretation of Photograph 36, or comments about what they did or did not like in the tasks.

Some students wondered why they had been chosen to participate in a focus group. Pascal answered with a joke:

[4] (1, M absent, FG7S)
16 Pauline but why us / actually xx why did she choose us' (…)
10 Pascal she chose the list / she did like this ((closes his eyes, moves his finger and stops it as if a name was randomly chosen))

When M comes back, Pierre asks her why they were chosen, but Pascal cuts him off.

13 Pascal because we look like we're TV

Some students were aware that absent third parties might observe them and that they should behave accordingly:

[5] (1, M absent, FG2P)
9 Adam but talk sense we are being filmed
[6] (2, M absent, FG3P)
16 Lucas but it will be played in a university, you you are talking nonsense
[…]
59 Luc if the teacher sees it, we're finished

These observations show that even though the students received explicit instructions about the goal of the situation and the moderator's expectations, they actively tried to make sense of the situation and to understand "what is going on there" (Goffman 1974, p. 8). They tried to decipher the moderator's intentions and expectations, passed judgement on the tasks and were quite aware that even when they were left alone, their discussion was being observed and recorded for the researcher and other absent third parties. Put differently, they treated this situation as a public situation.

## Talking about cultural diversity: a difficult issue

There are two main obstacles to talking about cultural diversity at school: first, as already mentioned, this is a sensitive topic, as it relates to identity issues; second, as a taught subject, it needs to be talked about in a secondary speech genre (Bakhtin 1986) required in the school context. This led us to formulate a second research question (how did the students talk about cultural diversity?) and to examine some of the characteristics of the students' discourse.

Our analysis revealed two main features of the students' discourse: the use of markers (e.g. euphemisms or litotes), which is characteristic of sensitive topics, and the use of slang, jokes and taunts (i.e. everyday language).

As we pointed out, the students were quite aware of being in a public situation, as reflected in their caution in formulating certain utterances referring to cultural differences. This is a typical feature of conversations dealing with sensitive topics (Linell and Bredmar 1996;

Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1997) and is illustrated in the next excerpt in which Tatiana talked about the colour of the skin:

[7] (5, FG6S)
113 Tatiana ((referring to the classroom situation and to Photolanguage)) the first ((photograph)) I chose (…) the one (…) where you know there was err (…) a man hmm / err of dark complexion / well let's say black (("black" also in original French language)) / and then err somebody white who who hugged I think I don't know

Tatiana cautiously reformulated "dark complexion" as "black" (same word in French) associated with a hedge ("let's say"), showing her awareness that "black" might not be an appropriate formulation. The same caution was observed in the next excerpt, in which the use of German language prompted laughter but also glossed over the sensitivity of the topic:

[8] (2, M absent, FG2P)
4 Anne but she's first a lady and then she's black ((French word "noire"))
31 Agathe yeah we know that she is she's a LADY
15 Adriano she's black ((same word in French))
32 Agathe she's she's African
12 Alain she is SCHWARZ (laughter) ((meaning "black" in German))

Anne, Adriano and Alain used French, English and German to refer to the character in Photograph 36, while Agathe contrasted two categorisations that did not concern skin colour: "lady" (31) and "African" (32), and which in this context seemed to act as a repair. These successive reformulations, which can be interpreted as a sign of emotional uneasiness (notably through laughter), eventually led to provocation:

[9] (2, M absent, FG2P)
29 Anne [it's a black ((same word in French)) lady carrying something small]
42 Agathe [but maybe she's going to meet up with somebody]
16 Alain you've XX French
29 Abélia nein nicht black sauber ((German: "no not black clean"))
53 Student eine Mädche ((for "Mädchen": German for girl))(laughter)
43 Agathe nicht black nicht schwarz (("not black [same word in French] not black"))
54 Student SCHWARZ ((German: black))
19 Adam nicht schmutzig ((German: "not dirty"))

Drawing on Anne's categorisation "black" (29), Abélia (29) associated skin colour with cleanliness. She did it by switching to German (a language taught at school but neither spoken nor mastered by the students) and other students immediately joined in. In their dialogue, code-switching was not just a pun, but served as a hedge that reduced the illocutionary force of their words and their responsibility as speakers, and therefore, enabled them to hold an increasingly provocative and ambiguous discourse. The focus-group situation, which mingled features of school situations with features of informal situations outside the classroom, led the students to engage in discourse they had never publicly held in the classroom, in the teacher's presence.

In line with this last excerpt, the use of slang, swear words and bad jokes, were often followed by repairs. For example, Soroya (FG8S) used the word "dough", which Sébastien immediately corrected with the word "money", showing again the students'

awareness of being in a school situation and being involved in a distant dialogue with absent third parties.

To sum up, our analysis of *how* the students talked about cultural diversity resulted in two main observations. First, students treated themes related to cultural diversity as sensitive topics. Consequently, they paid great attention to the words they chose to discuss them and seemed to be aware that such themes might arouse disagreement, be face-threatening and involve a moral dimension. More specifically, they seemed to face two related problems: how to express their views and provide arguments, and how to display their sense of morality and their desire to be seen as reliable, accountable and morally irreproachable persons. Second, in the context of these focus-group discussions that unfolded in the teacher's absence and followed unusual interactional rules, they used slang as in everyday language, but then used repairs. Both observations attest to the presence of dialogical tensions between (a) two speech genres (the secondary genre expected in the classroom context and the everyday genre) and (b) what can be said in this situation and what cannot.

## Linking the themes under discussion to personal experience

Subjects taught in school are always related in some way to the students' experience and knowledge outside school, and so is it for cultural diversity. This relation may create dialogical tensions, that is, divergences and differences between the two, in particular because the activity and the context are not the same. Hence, our third research question was: Did the students draw links between the themes related to cultural diversity and other spheres of experience outside school?

On a general level, results showed that many students mentioned that they had already seen Photograph 36 in the classroom or that the task was similar, which suggests that they perceived a link between the classroom and the focus-group situation. At a more subtle level, we also observed that students frequently referred to other situations outside school. For example, they mentioned voices in the media, showed their knowledge about various countries, international organisations, drew links between the dilemma presented in part 3 and the fact that all stories should have an ending. Referring to her personal experience, Sandrine suggested that the woman in Photograph 36 might be "one of those people who sell things by the roadside along the beach" and she cautiously added:

[10] (2, M absent, FG8S)
37 Sandrine but sorry sorry you guys but those who do it ((selling in the street)) are mostly Africans, well, persons with black skin

Some students also made links with their personal experience of migration. In her discussion about the dilemma, Pauline argued that the woman in Photograph 36 should leave her luggage and begin a new life. She based her argument on her own experience:

[11] (3, FG7S)
60 Pauline I left everything when I came here / and then frankly err I think it's good / yeah I think so and then after err
37 Pascal forget everything'
61 Pauline what'

38 Pascal forget everything'
62 Pauline yeah […]

Penelope did not agree and also pointed to her personal experience:

78 Penelope well because I personally have already moved (…) and err well err when I
arrived at ((place)) well / I didn't talk to them ((her friends)) for a long time and then it
wasn't a reason why I was less less sad/more sad to move actually /eventually you
always have to keep in contact with the things that were before and then err / well I kept
the things I had when I moved (…)

In such cases, the dilemma with its fictitious character worked as an incentive to disclose
private events and share personal feelings.

A third observation was the presence of narratives reporting an event in which the student
(and his or her family) displayed kind or charitable behaviour towards a poor or vulnerable
person, as in the case of Raphaël:

[12] (5, FG1P)
84 Raphaël err I err once it was a case a bit like this one / because I went to see my
family in Spain, and then we stayed for a month, and then when we went to fetch food
err in a shop, we walked, and then when we came back to the apartment, there was a
person who was begging / so (…) we gave him some money, and afterwards when I
went out I gave him money and he thanked me each time and then he said thank you to
me in Spanish //

We called such narratives *exemplary narratives*, as they featured the student (and sometimes
his or her close relations) as a morally accountable person. These narratives suggest that for
some students, talking about cultural diversity means at least two things: dealing with poor and
disadvantaged people, and learning to be good to poor people.

A fourth observation was that linking themes related to cultural diversity to personal
experiences could have unexpected outcomes. Some of the jokes that appeared in the students'
discourse were taunts that pointed to differences among the students themselves, more
specifically in their skin colour or nationality, as did Rachel who compared the skin colour
of the woman in Photograph 36 with that of Rebecca:

[13] (1, M absent, FG1P)
19 Rebecca it seems that she ((the character in Photograph 36) has a skin colour a little
bit like err
11 Rachela little bit like you ((Rebecca))
10 Régine but it's ((Photograph 36)) black and white
20 Rita it's in the photograph
11 Régine it's black and white (laughs)

Consequently, differences between the students themselves became salient:

[14] (5, FG6S)
54 Teddy (...) there was an image with a lady, she- a white lady and it's not to mock you
((to Théophile)) she, all d- besides a young Tamil
61 Moderator mhm
55 Teddy we say a young Sri Lankan, you see

62 Tina no Tamil it's a race too
116 Tatiana Tamil it's not being racist hmm?
56 Teddy yeah
52 Tiffany yes but it's because black we may be racist, well black I mean dark

Teddy (54) remembered another photograph presented in the classroom and faced a difficulty: how should he talk about one of the characters who looked like one of his classmates (Théophile)? After a preface (54: "it's not to mock you") indicating the presence of a sensitive topic, Teddy proposed a categorisation ("young Tamil"), that he corrected to "Sri Lankan". As a result, Theophile was publicly categorised as a "young Tamil" or "Sri Lankan". Moreover, the notion of "race" mentioned by Tina (62) remained unchallenged, even though being or talking in a "racist" way remained a concern for students ("Tamil it's not being racist hmm", Tatiana, 116).

The next excerpt followed a lively discussion about whether the woman in Photograph 36 was homeless:

[15] (2, M absent, FG8S)
21 Sébastien but Simon ((who comes from an African country)), it's not against- it was not directed against you, hmm
32 Simon o::h I am not homeless
22 Sébastien but I didn't say you're homeless, I never said that (Simon gives him a finger) sorry (looks at the camera, Stéphanie laughs and makes a gesture of apology towards the camera)

M came in and the conversation continued:

59 Stéphanie ((to Sébastien, sotto voce)) but you don't say ((to M)) the thing about the sellers

Here again, the discussion, which first focused on the fictitious character in Photograph 36 (was she homeless or not?), shifted to the life of their peer, Simon. Instead of leading to a broader reflection about social differences, the discussion narrowed to the real-life case of a participant. In the next excerpt, the students discussed what they learned and showed that they were quite aware that discussing about personal matters might prove difficult:

[16] (5, FG10S)
99 Natalia for example we learned things about our friends, that certain persons did not necessarily know
79 Moderator mmh
100 Natalia and then that I don't think they want certain persons to know either' (…)
75 Nina you know, we are also afraid to be judged for w- for what we lived
102 Natalia yeah they exclude you
76 Nina because let's say that school is the the place where one is judged (…)

In other words, the students seemed to realise that a risk of such discourse was to be judged for what they are outside school (their personal history, lifestyle, opinions, family relationships, etc.) and, at worst, to be mocked outside school.

All these observations show that referring to everyday experience may have helped the students make sense of the themes discussed in the focus groups and think about cultural

diversity. However, in the school context, we observed an unexpected outcome, as it focused students' attention on the differences among themselves, thus making them salient and possibly stigmatising.

## Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine how students made sense of themes related to cultural diversity in a focus-group situation that created dialogical tensions with the previous classroom situation. The analysis of the discourse held in the ten focus groups raises three main discussion points.

First, the students' comments about the situation and the tasks showed that they were conscious of the unusual nature of the focus-group situation. They asked many questions about the purpose of the situation and the reason why they had been chosen to participate in the focus groups, and tried by various means to decipher the moderator's expectations. They were quite aware of being observed and having to be accountable for what they said in this context. In other words, they considered themselves to be in a public space and to address absent third parties. This result shows the need to consider discursive spaces created in the school context as parts of broader and distant discursive spaces. In line with Bronkhorst and Akkerman (2016), it also questions the conditions under which connections between teaching–learning situations and other spheres of experience are liable to foster learning.

Second, results revealed that even though the students mainly used a speech genre pertaining to everyday language, they tried to gain control over their discourse and treated these themes as sensitive topics. What became problematic and sensitive was what words "do" (Austin 1962) to the addressees, as well as to the speaker. Questions such as: What should be said and what should *not* be said? What words would harm or shock the present and absent addressees? Would they undermine the speaker's morality? seemed to underpin their discourse, showing that their activity consisted not only of discussing cultural diversity as a philosophical, political, social or moral issue, but also of assessing what could or should be said in that situation. In other words, the students' discourse, like any discourse, was addressed both to the present participants *and* to absent third parties. It was shaped and modulated by the expectations the students ascribed to these addressees, as evidenced by their comments about being filmed.

Third, the students frequently drew links between the themes under discussion and other spheres of experience in everyday life. However, they also linked cultural diversity to differences with their own classmates. This had an unintended consequence: some students were put under the limelight, exposed to personal comments and categorisations (typically based on their skin colour or nationality). Instead of encouraging the students to consider cultural diversity as a concept needing to be thought about and analysed, the discussions sometimes led them to treat cultural diversity as an objective fact, that is, to reify it. One unexpected outcome of this reification may have been to legitimise the categories that the students spontaneously associated with cultural diversity, typically skin colour. Even worse, it may have *created* categories that had not previously been relevant to the students.

As regards the process of secondarisation, the results did not lead to a clear-cut conclusion. We cannot assert that none of the students revisited their everyday conceptions of cultural diversity and engaged at least partially in a secondarisation process. This is certainly a limitation of this study but also shows the difficulty of identifying secondarisation as it does

not only manifest itself in the school context. However, the results highlighted the difficulty of achieving secondarisation. One possible explanation lies in the characteristics of both the classroom situation and the focus-group situation. In line with Bonnéry (2007), we can hypothesise that since both situations looked somewhat informal, the students interpreted them as an everyday discussion and not as a learning situation. A second possible explanation is that themes that are deeply anchored in students' everyday experience (e.g. cultural diversity) and give rise to many divergent discourses are especially difficult to submit to criticism, as they have a highly emotional overtone and touch on identity issues. In this light, our focus-group setting created a heterogeneous discursive space where diverging voices mingled and created dialogical tensions that may have hindered secondarisation. A third possible explanation also deserves mention: conceptualising the various facets of cultural diversity is complex and requires teachers to have a thorough knowledge of the subject (notably in social sciences). Moreover, responding to students' unexpected questions or reactions requires the sort of experience and knowledge that are not part of basic teacher training. Hence, education in cultural diversity requires appropriate teacher training.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study and the caution that needs to be taken when generalising its findings, some broader conclusions can be drawn.

As a basic consideration, it is worth emphasising that introducing real-world issues into the classroom requires substantial work both to master the knowledge needed to tackle them and to design an educational setting that will elicit secondarisation. In this regard, our observations showed that provoking a lively, passionate or pleasant discussion does not in itself imply that the students will learn and transform these themes into scientific concepts or, put differently, that secondarisation will take place (de Diesbach Dolder 2018; Muller Mirza 2016; Muller Mirza et al. 2014). Talking about cultural diversity in the school context requires students to understand that the task does not just consist of expressing personal *representations*, *opinions* or *attitudes* (whatever the term), or personal experiences and emotions. Secondarisation is at stake and requires students to adopt a different position from that of everyday life. Moreover, there is no such thing as a discourse that simply reflects the person's *real* or *genuine* beliefs, representations or emotions. Every discourse is directed towards a present or absent addressee, so we need to consider *where* these words are said, *to whom*, *for what purpose* and *with what outcome*, both for the speaker and for his or her addressees. Consequently, a threefold challenge for education in cultural diversity is to design teaching/learning settings that channel the participants' discourse towards the intended educational goals, avoid creating a discursive space that allows too much room for everyday discourse and carefully select the context in which the discursive space is created. In the same vein, attention should be paid to the dialogical tensions between the students' various spheres of experience: the school context with its classic subjects and specific speech genre and practices (Bautier 2001), but also the students' social and personal history and experience outside school. However, it should be stressed that in our study, as in many similar settings, we had no means of knowing what took place between the students (or other persons) once they were out of school, could speak without being heard by the teacher or researcher, or heard divergent discourses. Important questions therefore remain unanswered: did the students actually expand their understanding of concepts related to cultural diversity, that is, achieve some sort of secondarisation, or did they just learn what they should or should not say in the school

context and, more generally, in a public arena? This question shows that one major educational challenge is to construct a dialogue that opens up a thinking space (Perret-Clermont 2004) or a potential appropriation space (Grossen, Zittoun and Ros 2012), and enables students to conceptualise their personal experience, consider it from different standpoints and link it to more general experiences.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** This study, as well as the writing of this paper, was carried out in accordance with the ethical standards of the Swiss Federation of Psychologists and the Swiss Society of Psychology.

## Appendix 1 Transcription norms

| (…) | Part of the excerpt not presented |
|---|---|
| - | Sudden interruption |
| <…> | Uncertain transcription |
| (…) | Nonverbal behaviour |
| ((…)) | Transcriber's comment |
| XXX | Incomprehensible segment, each X corresponds to a syllable |
| CAPITALS | Louder syllable |
| :: | Syllable stretching, the number of : indicates the duration of the stretching |
| . | Falling intonation |
| , | Slightly falling intonation |
| / | Pause of half a second |

## Appendix 2 Excerpts in original French language

[1]

163 Camilia en fait ça sert à quoi ce qu'on dit'

138 M pour voir si ce matériel il est vraiment adapté pour vous ou pas

[2]

11 Rodolphe parce que moi je sais pourquoi elle nous a donné cette image AVANT de faire l'histoire là la grande histoire parce que

8 Rita ouais et après pour voir la différence

12 Rodolphe après elle voulait nous expliquer ce que c'était émigrer et immigrer alors ce qu'elle voulait qu'on sa- en premier elle voulait savoir si on avait déjà compris un petit peu le [truc de émigrer et immigrer]

5 Rachel [là elle a émigré]

[3] 77 Penelope déjà les phrases je les trouve complètement stupides hein franchement excusez-moi [4]

16 Pauline mais pourquoi nous / en fait xx pourquoi elle a choisi que nous' (…)

10 Pascal elle a choisi la liste elle a fait ((mime avec son doigt que les noms étaient pointés au hasard les yeux fermés))

(…)

13 Pascal parce qu'on avait des têtes à passer à la TV

[5] comment cancelled

9 Adam mais parlez pas de n'importe quoi on est filmé

[6]

16 Lucas mais ça va passer dans une université, vous vous faites des bêtises (…)

59 Luc si la prof elle voit ça après on est mort

[7]

113 Tatiana la première là ((image)) que j'avais choisie (…) celle (…) où vous savez y avait euh (…) un monsieur hein / euh de teint foncé / enfin on va dire black / et puis euh quelqu'un de blanc qui qui se qui se faisaient un câlin je crois je sais pas

[8]

4 Anne mais c'est une dame en premier et puis elle est noire

31 Agathe ouais on sait qu'elle est c'est une DAME

15 Adriano elle est black

32 Agathe elle est elle est africaine

12 Alain elle est SCHWARZ (rires)

[9]

29 Anne [c'est une dame black qui porte un petit machin]

42 Agathe [mais peut-être que:: elle va rejoindre quelqu'un]

16 Alain t'as XX français

29 Abélia nein nicht black sauber

53 Elève eine Mädche (rires)

43 Agathe nicht black nicht schwarz

54 Elève SCHWARZ

19 Adam nicht schmutzig [10] 37 Sandrine mais excuse- moi excusez-moi les mecs c'est souvent les Africains qui font ça//enfin des personnes de couleur noire

[11] 60 Pauline moi moi j'ai tout laissé quand je suis venue là / et puis franchement euh je crois que c'est bien / ouais je pense ça et puis après euh

37 Pascal tout oublié'

61 Pauline hein'

38 Pascal tout oublié'

62 Pauline / ouais

78 Pénélope ben parce que moi aussi personnellement j'ai déjà déménagé (…) puis euh ben euh quand je suis arrivée à (place) ben / je leur ai plus parlé pendant un long moment et puis c'était pas ça qui faisait que j'étais moins moins triste/ plus triste de déménager en fait/ au final il faut toujours garder contact avec les choses qui étaient avant et puis euh / ben j'ai gardé des affaires que j'avais quand j'ai déménagé (…)

[12] 84 Raphaël euh moi euh une fois c'était un peu un cas comme ça / parce que j'étais j'ai été voir ma famille en Espagne, et puis on est resté un mois, et puis quand on est allé chercher à manger euh dans un magasin, on est allé à pied, et puis quand on revenait dans l'appartement y avait une personne qui mendiait / alors (…) on donnait trop de monnaie, et puis quand moi je sortais un peu avant puis je lui donnais l'argent et puis il me remerciait tout le temps et puis il me disait merci en espagnol //

[13]

19 Rebecca on dirait qu'elle a une couleur de peau un petit peu comme euh

11 Rachel un peu comme toi

10 Régine mais c'est noir et blan::c

20 Rita c'est sur la photo

11 Régine c'est noir et blanc (rit)

[14]

54 Teddy y avait une image y avait une image où y avait une dame elle une dame blanche et c'est pas pour me moquer de toi ((à Théophile)) elle tout se d- à côté d'un jeune tamoul

61 Mmhm

55 Teddy nous on dit un jeune Sri-lankais je sais pas

62 Tinan on tamoul c'est pas une race aussi

116 Tatiana tamoul c'est pas être raciste hein'

56 Teddy ouais

52 Tiffany oui mais c'est parce que noir on peut être raciste, enfin noir je dis foncé

[15]

21 Sébastien mais Simon c'est pas contre- c'est pas dirigé contre toi hein

32 Simon o::h je ne suis pas un SDF'

22 Sébastien mais j'ai pas dit que t'es un SDF, j'ai jamais dit ça (Simon fait un bras d'honneur) désolé ((regarde la camera, Stéphanie rigole et se tourne vers la caméra et fait le signe de s'excuser, la modératrice entre dans la classe))

59 Stéphanie mais tu dis pas le truc des vendeurs

[16]

99 Natalia par exemple on a appris des choses sur nos amis, que certaines personnes savaient pas forcément

79 Mmmh

100 Natalia et puis que:: je pense pas qu'elles veulent que certaines personnes le sachent non plus' (…)

75 Nina tu comprends on a aussi peur d'être jugés de c- de ce qu'on a vécu

102 Natalia ouais ils t'excluent

76 Nina parce qu'on va dire l'école c'est la l'endroit où on se fait juger, on va vraiment être nous-mêmes / donc ouais

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*Current themes of research*:

Learning and Social Interactions.
Intercultural Education.
Adult and Continuing Education.
Sociocultural Approach in Psychology of Education.

*Most relevant publications in the field of Psychology of Education*:

Muller Mirza, N., Grossen, M., de Diesbach-Dolder, S., & Nicollin, L. (2014). Transforming personal experience
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