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The Intertwining of *Laïcité* and Ethnicity: Observations from Teachers' Practices in State Schools in Provence

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The Intertwining of *Laïcité* and Ethnicity: Observations from Teachers' Practices in State Schools in Provence

Vanille Laborde and Guillaume Silhol***

Abstract: In an approach which complements studies of youth experience, we analyze ethnicity by focusing on situations and actions through which teachers, managers and experts deal with diversity. As it considers discursive categories and institutional constraints, this approach underlines the role of informality and ordinary practices that present ethnicity as occupying a minority status in schools. In this article, we study references to ethnicity in the implementation of a national teacher-training policy in relation to *laïcité*, the system of secularism particular to France. This qualitative study took place in a local education authority in Provence. It shows that the truth regime of *laïcité* generates contradictory, potentially conflictual advice and instructions vis-à-vis ethnicity, according to social position and professional ethics. To the extent that ethnicity can be an unexpected dimension of the implementation of this policy, it illustrates the relevance of analyzing local practices and reflexivity in the management of diversity in schools.

Keywords: ethnic boundaries, secularism, laïcité, France, policy implementation

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Ethnicity and *laïcité*: a bottom-up perspective

Ethnicity, religious belonging and secularism are usually thought together in sociocultural terms and from a macrosocial perspective. Such studies tend to focus on students' experience. However, the contemporary European school context suggests we can also approach these issues from the perspective of teachers who act as street-level bureaucrats. The ways in which students' ethnicity becomes an informal dimension or a "free rider" of teachers' professional ethos[1] and practices provide a relevant case study in this respect. In this article, we present the results from empirical research on ethnicity and secularism in training sessions and educational policies implemented by French state schools. After a brief critical review, we examine our case study and methodology, and introduce the analysis of the social construction of students' ethnicity in relation to the implementation of *laïcité* policies in France.

Theoretical issues

Specialized bodies of literature on ethnicity and on secularism have remained mostly separate in Southern European social sciences, while research on the ethnicization of religious identities is based on a long-established Anglo-American academic tradition (e.g. "Catholics" and "Protestants" in Ireland…). We can outline some features of this paradoxical lack of dialogue, before contextualizing the French case.

Although the distinction between "ethnicity" and "race" as a category is blurred according to some scholars, we focus on the social construction of "ethnic" alterity with a subaltern status (Devriendt *et al.*, 2018, pp. 11-12). Weber's classic conception of ethnicity stressed the individual belief in group solidarity and the activity of communalization as the main factors in collective differentiation from groups deemed inferior (Weber, 1995, pp. 125-136). Barth's later theorization (1969) underlined the role of ethnic boundaries, signs, and practices that are arbitrarily designed, imputed and claimed as markers for ethnic groups, in a relational conception of ethnicity (Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart, 2008, pp. 134-136). Thus, we consider ethnicity as a matter of status and a relational phenomenon, tied to the construction of alterity and symbolic domination, rather than about supposedly primordial cultural differences (Lorcerie, 2003, pp. 24-25). Ethnicity is produced through the so-

[1] We understand *ethos* as a concept which explains recurrences of behavior by actors who share a similar social position. Ethos is the product of a historically constituted social milieu, which is a relational place that favors the internalization of norms, values, ethical principles and a particular relationship to the world. Ethos implies a propensity to generate a type of practices. Moreover, professional ethos is defined as a common denominator for a group of individuals practicing a similar activity, who recognize each other as members of a professional group (Fusulier, 2011).

cial construction of ethnic boundaries and the process of "othering"[2], which interferes with religious markers as well as class and gender statuses.

In France, ethnicity became a public-policy issue mainly in anti-discrimination legislation in the late 20th century. Nonetheless, since the 19th century, state administrations have incorporated a "default" concept of community, built according to the French, Judeo-Christian, white majority, deemed compatible with a secular school ethos, distinguished from forms of "unassimilated minority" (Felouzis, 2008). Consequently, some routine educational practices have diverged from the official discourse about *laicité* and developed unofficial, heterogeneous understandings of diversity (Zoïa, 2012). In the 1990s, the diverse backgrounds of students could clash with the universalistic culture of teachers, who had assimilated the *ethos* of the "classical" national education system. According to Barrère and Martuccelli (1997), this situation was related to status differences, with an increase in students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Ethnicity has been part of ordinary discursive categories and teacher practices, while "cultural differences" provide a common-sense justification in a macrosocial environment of discrimination, stigmatization, inequality and urban segregation. Likewise, in a local school context, ethnicity is co-produced by administrative practices and procedures, parents' "strategies" and students' experience (Lorcerie, 2011).

Conversely, social-sciences research on secularism has often favored a macrosocial or philosophical approach, at the expense of inquiries into its governance in policy sectors. Anglo-American literature on secularism stresses that it is a category originating in the construction of modern Western nations, colonialism and ethnicity (Asad, 2003), or that secularism is closely related to modern conceptions of individual rights, freedom of expression and equality among citizens (Taylor, 2010). The critique of teleological undertones in the classic paradigm of secularization has allowed a reconsideration of specific national trajectories and the contemporary politicization of religious affiliation (Casanova, 1994). Nonetheless, research on secularism does not always account for microsocial variability and for contemporary controversies around its very definition (Altglas, 2010, pp. 493-494).

Indeed, France often appears as an exception when compared to other European countries, due to an apparently "strong" secularism, while Italian secularism for example explicitly includes the constitutionally-guaranteed recognition of religious organizations. However, the fact that the historical laicization of schools with the Ferry Laws, in the 1880s, predated the separa-

[2] Considering the "other" according to an "ethnic origin", different from one's own, a process called "othering", leads to the creation and the maintenance of these ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1969), and to the consolidated distinction between an in-group ("us") and an out-group ("them").

tion of the Church and State enshrined in a 1905 law, based on a pragmatic compromise between "moderate" political elites, suggests that we should understand *laïcité*[3] as a complex historical construct. *Laïcité* retains polysemic characteristics and is employed in conflicting ways, neither restricted to its legal foundations nor isolated from social changes, secularization and diversification, including the institutionalization of French Islam (Frégosi, 2011, pp. 247-290). The core normative elements of French *laïcité* are freedom of thought, the refusal to subjugate religion to politics, and the neutrality of government employees including teachers and school staff, for whom *laïcité* represents a cornerstone of professional identity.

In keeping with the legacies of conflict between the Republic and the Catholic Church over the control of education, conflicts about the definition of *laïcité* have persisted since then, up to the formation of an identity-based, right-wing narrative on the "Christian roots of *laïcité*" in the 2000s, often explicitly anti-Islam and xenophobic (Baubérot, 2015; Nilsson, 2015). The ordinary, "moderate" secularism such as the legal version promoted in state schools can reflect some of these conflictual changes in curricular reforms, in teaching and in practical arrangements in other areas (canteens, chaplaincies), as shown in a few ethnographic studies (Lorcerie, 1996). Before the 2000s, such practices could produce a "closet pluralism" and assign some minority students (e.g. Muslims) with specific requests to a subaltern status, compared to "usual" requests such as Catholic chaplaincies (Massignon, 2000). The implementation of the 2004 law which prohibits "ostentatious" religious symbols in schools has had paradoxical effects, both by unifying norms and by amplifying discretionary domains (implicitly "religious" dress codes, accommodations around sports classes for fasting students) (Vivarelli, 2014). While the "hardening" of political expertise on *laïcité* in the 2010s has been well documented in other administrative sectors (Beaugé and Hajjat, 2014), the implementation of these ministerial efforts to codify *laïcité* in schools has only been recently studied (Lorcerie and Moignard, 2017).

In this context, the politicization and ethnicization of religious markers in French schools, manifest in controversies such as the "Islamic veil affair", are still related to a tradition of State control and injunctions to interiorize religious identities (Jansen, 2011). Indeed, the intertwining of ethnicity with *laïcité* occurs in specific local situations, where it leads to tensions between different "formulae of truth", in relation to claims about identity and alterity of both teachers and students.

[3] While the adjective *laïque* can be translated into "secular" when it refers to teachers' professional identity, we use the French term to retain this term which is particular to the French situation and distinct from the English equivalent.

Preliminary considerations and problematization of the case study of ethnicization in teacher training on secularism

Differences between the implementation of *laïcité* in many policy sectors show that further variations (e.g. in prisons or in hospitals) of *laïcité* are irreducible to an interpretation in intellectual terms and need to be explained empirically. Moreover, the educational management of ethnic diversity, as a social construct, is a "litmus test" for observing the gaps between discourses and practices, and teachers' relations to official statements of educational authorities.

As mentioned above, the contemporary controversies on religion in French state schools have contributed to putting some elements of the school routine on the ministerial agenda. Recently, the left-wing government (2012-2017) showed an interest in *laïcité* and in reclaiming symbolic ownership of a problem traditionally linked to republicanism (Lorcerie, 2015). In April 2013, Minister of Education Peillon received an official report on a project about the reshaping of civic education into a new secular subject of ethics (*Morale laïque*), officialized in the July 2013 law. This school subject, renamed Civic and Moral Education (*Enseignement Moral et Civique*), was only implemented in 2015, while a new charter of *laïcité* had to be displayed in all school-buildings from September 2013. After the January 2015 terrorist attacks, the new ministerial measures on *laïcité* did not produce a *tabula rasa*, but rather a renewed and partly implicit strategy by the Ministry of Education to reaffirm *laïcité* with an ambitious program (Busch and Morys, 2016; Lorcerie and Moignard, 2017). Ethnicity was not a central concern of the policy, but it appeared as an object of interest for participants and a "free rider" of *laïcité*.

By focusing on micro-social practices in the implementation of a teacher training on *laïcité* set up in January 2015 in Provence, we argue that ethnicity has to be understood in regional contexts, in relation to teachers' professional ethos and to conflictual interpretations of norms and values. Our enquiry into the administrative aspects demonstrates that ministerial agenda-setting and political debates have an impact on teachers' practices and their lived experiences of ethnicity. To introduce these aspects, we will use parts of an interview[4] we conducted in 2014, with a 25-year-old history and geography teacher in a secondary school in a former industrial town of 40 000 inhabitants. He was asked about *laïcité* and the secular teaching of religion in the history curriculum. When the new *laïcité* charter was mentioned, he replied ironically that the poster had been in the school building since September, and that it had elicited students' curiosity but not his.

[4] The methodological framework used here is detailed immediately below.

> *Laïcité*, yes, the issue is dear to my heart, but I don't need to be trained in it. I consider myself to have already acquired it, I don't need to be told how to bring the students into line. (Interview, May 2014).[5]

Subsequently, he described his personal background, with an Iranian engineer father and a French teacher mother, and his political activities. He added that he was often asked by students and by some parents whether he was Muslim or not. After a lesson on the history of Islam, a student's mother reproached him for having used Arabic words in front of pupils to name the five pillars of Islam. Yet, he was supported by his superiors and his colleagues, as he respected the rules of conduct associated with *laïcité* for teachers, understood as neutrality without expressing one's political and religious opinions during class. Nonetheless, he assumed he was more interested in religious history than the vast majority of his colleagues.

> Due to my Muslim origins, I'm rather in the minority. I remain neutral, as demanded by *laïcité*, but I express myself in such details. (Interview, May 2014).

As made explicit in this interview, ethnicity and *laïcité* are not merely abstract concepts, but also practical and discursive categories related to situations and routine in schools. The political problematization of *laïcité* in the educational system shows the tensions between different "formulae of truth" in a truth regime (Weir, 2008, pp. 374-380). By focusing on power relations rather than on mere discursive contents, a truth regime is defined by Michel Foucault as a set of techniques that separates true and false statements, which determines how they are sanctioned, and the status of those who speak the "truth" in a society or in an institutional order such as a school system (Foucault, 2000, 2012). School subjects generally obey a scientific or evidence-based "formula of truth", while common-sense and symbolic statements are valued differently because they are related to various configurations of power (Lagroye, 2006). The interviewee quoted above stated that, while he had to deal with his background and with ethnicity in his work, he respected the truth regime of scientific knowledge and the history curricula, as an acknowledgement of *laïcité*. Likewise, the training sessions which we participated in showed the tensions between several elements: central official instructions about the duty of neutrality, local "best practices", some curricular content, as well as symbolic and moral dimensions related to teachers' professional identities. Indeed, teachers' claims that they already have fieldwork-based expertise on concrete aspects of *laïcité*, have been part of what we can call the "care of the secular self". Teachers were asked to reflect on their practices and methods of self-control, to manage their emotions, to

[5] We translated all quotes from interviews and literature from French.

act deontologically and to improve the local situation in conformity with the truth regime of *laïcité*. This regime shows the conflictual receptions of this professional ethos by teachers, who are asked to act as "ethical and responsible civil servants" (Loeffel, 2013). Hence *laïcité*, embedded in the expertise of teachers as well as in informal practices, can operate as a legitimate category compatible with the republican egalitarian school ethos, to reframe issues that would otherwise often be framed as "ethnic". This article does not, however, deal directly with specific experiences of discrimination felt by students nor with their own impressions of the connections between *laïcité* and ethnicity, rather we focus on teachers' views of students' experiences. How do teachers, principals and administrators understand and categorize ethnicity? How is ethnicity framed, euphemized and inserted into policy processes? What role do expert resources and teachers' trajectories play in the implementation of educational policies on *laïcité*? What conclusions can we draw from our position as participant observers?

This article is divided into three parts. After the introductory methodology section, the second section deals with the situation before January 2015, with a description of the empirical data and of the situation in the case study in the Aix-Marseille *Académie*. The third section, attentive to the post-2015 period, is made up of three sub-sections on the involvement of various groups in the implementation of training policies on *laïcité*, on the conflicting relations to the truth regime, and on the broader issue of alterity.

Methodological framework

This study is based on two pieces of research carried out in the French school district (*Académie*) of Aix-Marseille, in the south-east of France. The use of an empirical qualitative methodology in which the data was gathered with a triangulation of methods (observations, interviews, document analysis) enabled a comprehensive approach to teachers' and administrators' views and perceptions. We conducted these studies by taking active roles as representatives of the academic world in local policy implementation. We both worked with the *Académie*, on the basis of our personal and civic interests, our respective fieldwork for our PhDs on religion and *laïcité* in schools, and on the back of previous collaborations with senior scholars/consultants. Our respective positions as a consultant in the *laïcité* commission and as an intern in the *Académie* included tasks of preparing notes, contributing to discussions and taking part in the implementation of training sessions. Our own situated experiences (i.e. white, middle-class "majority" researchers familiar with *laïcité* due to our family backgrounds) did play a part in these interactions. Participant observation in policy processes places researchers in an "uncomfortable" hybrid space, while providing an irreplaceable insight.

The first piece of research is based on observant participation of the *laïcité* commission, conducted by Guillaume Silhol from the end of 2014 to January 2016, as a PhD student and a participant observer. Aside from monthly meetings, discussions and direct observations of two teacher-training sessions in May and November 2015, these observations were complemented by five semi-structured interviews with secondary-school teachers and former educational administrators, as well as an analysis of the grey literature.

The second enquiry involved a qualitative study of teacher-training sessions in the same school district, conducted by Vanille Laborde from February 2017 to June 2017. It was composed of nineteen in-depth interviews with different categories of education professional: teachers, teacher trainers, school leaders, staff from the *Rectorat*, the administrative body of Aix-Marseille *Académie*. It was recently complemented by a series of ethnographic policy studies over a period of five months (from September 2017 to February 2018) in this *Rectorat*, in the department which deals with the issue of religion and *laïcité*. This kind of methodology leads us to consider that agents' practices are not the mere application of political orientations, but are an integral part of the multilateral process of policy writing and implementation; policies exist concretely through what the field agents do. The collected materials varied: field notes of ethnographic observations, reports, and interviews with local actors.

The asymmetrical character of the research data used in our analysis give some considerations a hypothetical character, because they aim to enrich broader sociological reflections. Finally, our conclusions are based on participant observation of a local commission on *laïcité*, which began as a pilot in the northern districts of Marseille in 2012, and then was extended to the entire *Académie* in order to coordinate training initiatives from 2015 to 2017. While it is not rooted in a typical framework of policy evaluation, our case study aims at reintroducing a critical perspective in this research field.

Before 2015, the local management of *laïcité*

The Académie of Aix-Marseille

The setting of this case study has important peculiarities due to its history. In 2016, Aix-Marseille *Académie* provided schooling for 4.3% of French pupils, which made it the ninth largest *Académie* in France.[6] It is made up of different areas with diverse socio-demographic profiles because of rural areas near the Alps, whilst also containing the second most populated French city, Marseille, whose periphery has a high rate of urbanization. These con-

[6] The French territory is divided in thirty-one *Académies*: the largest one is Versailles *Académie* (9.2% of pupils), the smallest one is Corsica *Académie* (0.4%) (MENESR, 2017).

trasting features are described by those working in local education as an additional difficulty, due to the plurality of problems to tackle. The heterogeneity of socio-economic living conditions is marked, and schools reflect these differences in geography. For example, Marseille is often described as a poor French city with deep socio-economic inequalities, where the "northern districts" are reputedly the poorest areas, riddled with educational problems and failures. Media coverage tends to focus on the "northern districts" emphasizing the high unemployment, drugs trade, urban violence, school failure and more recently Islamic religious practices, despite the fact that deprived areas are also located elsewhere , for example Noailles, in the center of Marseille, in Avignon, and in isolated rural areas of the Alps (Peraldi *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, successive migrations into Marseille, related to maritime trade, have made it a cosmopolitan city, full of heterogeneous urban spaces. In the absence of official ethnic and religious statistics, some research estimates that Muslims represent around 30% of the population in Marseille, a proportion above the estimated national average (Geisser and Lorcerie, 2011, p. 28). In a context of heated public controversies regarding Islam in French society, such elements of perception bear consequences on how *laïcité* policies are implemented by local school authorities.

Dealing with new problems of implementation in Marseille-Littoral-Nord before 2015

According to a school principal who has worked in Marseille for two decades, meetings of school leaders to deal with the practical implementation of the "headscarf ban", have been taking place since 2004. The wide perception that the 2004 law had become generally accepted or at least assimilated into routine, replacing the previous case-by-case logic, was repeated by her and several other interviewees. However, after 2008, unexpected "ambiguous" dress (long skirts, gloves…) and behaviors by some students, especially in the north of Marseille, made these principals uneasy.

An interviewee described the emergence of the "integral veil" as a specific issue which needed to be dealt with specifically in education, besides the 2010 law on its prohibition (Laborde, 2017, pp. 177-185). Another school principal, who had worked between 2008 and 2014 as a school middle manager in poorer districts of Marseille, described the visibility of "new" religious signs. She mentioned the difficulties in ascertaining what could be sanctioned in compliance with the 2004 law. Her testimony revealed her perception of the situation but also highlighted the majority representations strongly linked to the professional ethos of the members of the local commission on *laïcité,* which we will discuss later.

> Between 2008 and 2013 more or less, something made its way into our daily lives. Girls did not want to unveil themselves, or they took off

> their veil but they maintained Muslim dress. They had longer skirts as well, and then gloves. […] It was religious, so it was usually forbidden! But facing the difficulty of implementing the 2004 law on *laïcité*, we understood that we had to come to terms with the failure of the "authoritarian" method. (Interview, April 2017).

According to some interviewees, the most obvious tensions about "religious clothing" occurred in the first months of the school year 2012-2013 in one of the four educational sub-districts (*bassins*) of Marseille, Marseille-Littoral-Nord (hereafter MLN), which includes twenty-two secondary schools. Such tensions occurred in secondary schools in relation to female students' clothes such as long skirts, sometimes with male students' *kamis* (long trousers). Yet, the "ethnic lens" of teachers on such clothes (Lorcerie, 2011, p. 4), perceived as provocative and confirming teachers' frequent conception of a lower gender status for Muslim girls, symbolized by religious clothing, played a role in their bureaucratic characterization of these clothes as problematic. In this context, the creation of a local specialized commission on *laïcité* served as an emergency response, promoted by heads of schools to share good practices in a collegial way and to organize training sessions, initially only for managers. For example, a dozen regular participants took part in meetings in the first months of 2014. They were made up of school principals and two inspectors, joined by two social scientists who worked on education and on Islam.

In November 2014, the school principal who supervised this commission described its functions in a symposium on *laïcité*, in front of over 200 local school managers from the *Académie*. His presentation stressed that the MLN zone was populated by poor families with foreign backgrounds. He said:

> [They come] very often from a more or less recent immigration wave: North Africa, Comoros, Turkey. We have children from Mayotte or who belong to the Traveler community as well. (Académie Aix-Marseille, November 2014, p. 22).

He continued by saying that the school's staff was often uneasy with students' expressions of religious affiliation, "most of the time [a] Muslim [affiliation]", and that the norms on the matter could not help deal with imprecise aspects, especially with "what characterizes a cultural affiliation". Indeed, concrete situations required specialized training, and he mentioned the efforts of the MLN commission to work on the concept of *laïcité* in a local training session in May 2014, with the help of the *Académie*'s legal expert, of the two scholars and of "an Imam involved in ecumenical approaches" (Académie Aix-Marseille, 2014, p. 23).

This interpretation of *laïcité* referenced legal norms as resources to be assimilated and used by teachers and school administrators, in ways which could be integrated into common-sense notions of ethnicity and religion.

However, it contradicts other interpretations, specifically rooted in an intellectualized or militant conception of *laïcité* as an overarching principle, which is supposed to defend one's own inner thinking. Such contradictions in the truth regime of *laïcité* entailed different practices of the teachers' secular selves, and rival ideas on what should be done and taught in training sessions (Weir, 2008, pp. 380-385). Indeed, other interventions at the symposium showed how the issue of expertise on *laïcité* was diversely framed by different stakeholders according to their position and to their sensitivity to the mediatization of local controversies. For instance, Alain Seksig, an inspector of the *Académie* of Paris and former member of the High Council on Integration, focused his speech on such "threats" to *laïcité*, which he dated back to the 1990s. He blamed uncertainties about concrete situations for the "ambiguities" of ministerial instructions, which he saw as jeopardizing the professional identity of teachers, staff and managers. In his view, religious symbols had to be absolutely prohibited for parents accompanying pupils on school excursions, not only for teachers and students as required by the law (Académie Aix-Marseille, 2014, pp. 26–27). Unsurprisingly, according to members of the MLN commission in a meeting three months later, Seksig's speech exemplified what ought to be avoided: "telling teachers exactly what they want to hear" (Observation, February 2015). By the end of 2014, this local commission was about to pursue training initiatives and to be extended. Indeed, the official adviser on *laïcité* for the *Rectorat*, who had previously taken an active part as a school principal in the coordination of the MLN *bassin*, considered broadening the mandate of the former commission beyond Marseille. However, the appointment of a new rector for the *Académie* and the ensuing ministerial response to the January 2015 attacks meant that such initiatives became differently oriented in response to the changing political climate.

After 2015, the institutionalization of the MLN experiment: training on *laïcité*, conflicting formulae and ethnicity as a "revealing sign"

The January 2015 terrorist attack in France: a major shift for laïcité *in French state schools*

> On January 7th 2015, Cherif and Said Kouachi, two young Frenchmen, entered the offices of the satirical weekly paper *Charlie Hebdo* and murdered twelve people, including eight members of the editorial staff. This attack claimed by the Yemeni al Qaeda, as well as the murder of a policewoman and of hostages in a kosher supermarket by one of their criminal associates in the following days, marked a time of shock. In France and abroad, it was perceived by many observers as an attack

on liberal values and symbols. The collective reaction elicited by the events reached a rare scale in marches and protests, with about four million people gathering in public demonstrations. The press stressed a "sacred union", a "national communion", or a "Republican burst" to designate the commemorative marches of Sunday, January 11th.

However, a few discordant voices were gradually raised and refused the synonymy between "I am Charlie" and "I am French" slogans. Indeed, some citizens refused to be identify with this satirical newspaper whose editorial line was, previously, frequently criticized. Some of them, especially in left-wing intellectual milieus, highlighted that *Charlie Hebdo*, founded in 1970 with a libertarian, anticlerical stance, had endorsed Islamophobic discourse or at least willingly fueled tensions by publishing caricatures of the prophet of Islam. This criticism was rejected by other, more numerous, republican or conservative intellectuals, for whom it was above all a question of refusing free expression to be questioned by religion. To the former, *laïcité* had become a pretext to ostracize French Muslims. The events of 2015 were therefore accompanied by the injunction of a certain *laïcité,* linked with an affirmation of a specific identity.

In the aftermath, the State education sector was singled out, as the three young assailants had been to French state schools. Facing these accusations, the ministerial cabinet sought to react swiftly. The injunction to organize a collective ceremony in all French schools, before the teachers could discuss the events with the students, caused tensions in some local contexts. Some students refused to observe the "minute of silence" in memory of the victims, while there were a few isolated, provocative stances in support of terrorists. Others raised disturbing remarks, highlighting a "double standard" regarding freedom of expression or collective empathy, considering terrorist attacks in Middle Eastern countries, or about the *Charlie Hebdo*'s stance towards Muslims. While few actual incidents occurred, they resonated with a sensationalist framing in the French media and they were interpreted by conservative and republican editorialists as evidence of an ideological shift in younger generations. On January, 22nd 2015, Minister of Education Vallaud-Belkacem announced a plan to reinvigorate French values centered above all on *laïcité* and the sense of belonging to the Republic. Eleven measures were proposed as part of the policy, ranging from the training of teachers on *laïcité*, and French "republican rites", to measures aimed at reducing social inequalities. The announcement added that universities and researchers would be specifically "mobilized" to shed light on "social fractures […] and on factors of radicalization" (MENESR, 2015). Moreover, the Minister's speech gave the opportunity to announce new components of Civic and Moral Education from September 2015.

The local implementation of the post-attacks policy of the Ministry of Education can be analyzed by focusing on how expert resources were produced, on the frameworks which underpinned their production, and on the workings of the secular self and its "others".

Experts and expertise in the policy process

By considering expertise as a kind of cognitive and symbolic resource, usually related but not restricted to professionals with specialized knowledge, that is utilized and circulates in situations of external solicitations, from governmental, oppositional or informal networks (Eyal, 2013, pp. 864), the policy process after 2015 also shows an inclusive and reformist, sometimes conflictual, use of expertise towards *laïcité* in teacher training.

In our case study, the commission's composition determined many new aspects of the policy implementation after 2015. Indeed, the institutionalization of policy by the *Rectorat* and the territorial expansion implied that the policy-learning process on "best practices" of *laïcité* modified both the networks and the content. The new commission often worked as a "two-tier" structure: the "expert" commission, composed of about twenty members ("trainers' trainers"), built upon the MLN network and with new representatives, and a body of thirty trainers, selected from a sample of 250 voluntary candidates among teachers and staff (Académie Aix-Marseille, 2015). The "expert" commission still relied on principals and inspectors, although they were recruited from the whole area of the *Académie*, while also including managers from the *Rectorat* and teachers working predominantly in priority education areas (*réseau d'éducation prioritaire*, hereafter REP[7]).

Concerning the trainers, their selection aimed to be representative of the entire *Académie*, to diversify the profiles in terms of school subjects (philosophy, sciences, literature, economics, etc.) and school roles, by including intermediary managers, one social worker and one school nurse. Our interviews demonstrated that many teachers and managers were also involved in educational initiatives in the voluntary sector, in feminist groups or in collectives against racism and anti-Semitism. While most of its members had an "ethnic majority" profile, the new commission was therefore not "color-blind" but sensitive to inclusiveness[8]. Although they were seldom financially compensated, trainers' involvement included symbolic recompense, in terms of relational social capital, positive perception by the administration, and in some cases career advancement. These teacher-trainers worked to

[7] The REP label results from different proactive educational policies aimed at correcting the impact of socio-economic inequalities in schooling, based on the principle of differentiated treatment in marginalized areas.

[8] The case of a chemistry teacher, who was selected as a *laïcité* trainer on the basis of his experience, a personal interest in scientific skepticism and a good reputation among members of the commission, illustrates this aspect.

produce hybrid expert resources, which combined evidence-based or learned notions of *laïcité*, sometimes pre-existing, or consolidated by their involvement, and fieldwork experience acquired over years of teaching. Most of them completed their self-training by attending conferences and by reading reference books about *laïcité* as well as about discrimination. Consequently, the hybrid character of this expertise could create tacit disagreements in the commission about the goals of the training sessions, because other members preferred to focus on the legal aspects of *laïcité* and on curricula, rather than dealing with problems such as ethnic discrimination.

Following the ministerial announcement (MENESR, 2015), there was a more significant involvement of social-science and law researchers in the *laïcité* commission. The head of the commission described it as a fundamental shift.

> Scholars came spontaneously to tell us 'Listen, given what happened [in January 2015], we're ready to work with you'. It's unusual enough to be noticed, because scholars are often doing their own stuff separately. (Interview, April 2017).

Our position as participant observers, distant from certain public-service rules on teachers' neutrality, and less related to the immediate practical concerns of school management, had an "elective affinity" with the rejection of an identity-based version of *laïcité*, in favor of a more reflexive version common among academics. For example, a senior researcher in political science, who was already an active member of the MLN commission, assumed an important role in initiatives and in the planning of the training sessions. She justified her participation on the basis of citizen commitment rather than on her professional status. Meanwhile, her academic work on ethnicity in education and on Islam helped to consider both themes, and to avoid limiting the training sessions to legal aspects. Workshops on the issue of Islamophobia and against racial stereotypes, justified on the basis of a "common culture geared toward an open vision of Islam", were part of a reflective relationship to the regime of truth. This conception of "inclusiveness", a relevant term found in the discourse of many other interviewees, suggests a dynamic running counter to ethnic categorization. By promoting an inclusive school system, members of the *laïcité* commission sought to act on teachers' practices of informal ethnicization, with the conviction that the critical work would in turn incentivize their students to relinquish both claims and imputations of ethnic alterity. This orientation was made possible mostly because of a conjunction of favorable political and local factors. The *laïcité* adviser endorsed this approach by underlining that his hierarchy supported a new policy orientation, different from the *laïcité* of the early 2000s.

> Until 2014-2015, public policies encouraged and promoted a "hard" *laïcité*, sometimes aimed at Islam and Muslims. But Minister [of Education] Vallaud-Belkacem made a shift and brought about a change in policy. It could not be publicly claimed because she didn't want to be exposed to criticism from the media and public opinion. So, she created a means of allowing herself to develop this kind of policy without making too much noise. It was very smart. Locally, we decided to lead an in-depth project on the concept of *laïcité*. Because the problem was that a lot of teachers had a hardline secularist (*laïcarde*) vision, that is to say a *laïcité* that considered that religion has no place in school, or should be confined to the private sphere. We had to make it clear to people that this is not *laïcité*. (Interview, April 2017).

Concerning the themes covered under the label of *laïcité*, this had important implications in making explicit some aspects related to ethnicity. Indeed, several commission members organized official events to promote anti-racism in education in March 2016, as part of the training initiatives in the *Académie*. The justifications were still based on civic involvement, although the events were separate from the sessions. In that sense, we can argue that the training sessions were also perceived by their supporters as an opportunity to rectify in professional, legal, intellectual and moral terms a truth of *laïcité*, as distinct from themes of national or majority identity. Members of the commission aimed to restore or develop such a conception of *laïcité*, and to avoid stigmatization by parts of the French population, in particular pupils of immigrant background and young Muslims. For example, the trainers did not promote the usual literature in the philosophy of *laïcité* (Peña-Ruiz, Kintzler…), which are part of the canon in the professional master's at the State Institutes of Teacher Training, but rather history and sociology books. Finally, the purpose was to enable those who would volunteer for the training sessions to acquire a reflective and critical analysis, precisely distinct from any "partisan" notions and from the mainstream narratives of *laïcité* in French society. Consequently, some conflictual aspects could emerge when teachers used the framework of a more rigid *laïcité* based on their own expertise.

Reframing ethnicity at the margins of the "formulae of the truth" of laïcité

Secondly, the implementation of a national policy on training teachers in *laïcité* demonstrated a sensitivity to a spatialization of the issues in the *Académie*, and led to the use of the policy category of *laïcité* as a broad, legitimate concept to deal with blurred situations. The interplay between ethnicity and religion appeared indeed as a recurrent motive for unease amongst commission members, when confronted with the local common-sense knowledge and resources of the *bassins*. Consequently, the differences be-

tween the areas of the *Académie* were acknowledged as a parameter from the outset. In the first meeting of the new *laïcité* commission in February 2015, nineteen participants were included: school principals from the four *bassins* of Marseille as well as from other *bassins* such as Carpentras, administrative personnel, three inspectors, three university lecturers, and one of us as a PhD researcher. Immediately, the local experiment in the northern districts of Marseille appeared as a non-generalizable but indispensable basis of evaluation of the needs of different schools. The coordinator of the local MLN commission stressed that the ambiguity of discussions about *laïcité*, which tended to stigmatize further the REP areas, remained detrimental to their efforts, because such informal categorizations were previously unaccounted for at the ministerial level.

> We need to work to get rid of ideological bias. For some of us, it is painful and difficult to think about our positions as civil servants. […] The relations between boys and girls, issues of *laïcité*, the problems of students of foreign origin, or, to say it crudely, of Muslim origin, is not to be confined to our schools here. Even in Aix or in Vitrolles, we must talk about *laïcité* in "quiet" schools. (Observation, February 2015).

The adviser on *laïcité* of the *Rectorat* replied later that the issues were relevant for smaller "rich towns" (such as Aix and Vitrolles) too, and that professional practices and teacher identities had to be tackled with tact. He gave as examples those who had contested the minute's silence and the refusal of *laïcité* as a value by students, to emphasize that the ministerial requirements were not only symbolic, but also practical.

> The most important thing is to train teachers about debating, between adults and with students, in committees and in the classrooms, not only about content and curricula. […] The provocations relating to *Charlie Hebdo* happened in classes where teachers took a moralistic stance. (Observation, February 2015).

Local differences on *laïcité* became not only an organizational parameter to replicate the sessions in all the *bassins*, but also a default "cognitive map" of other issues, from socio-economic deprivation to, precisely, ethnic and religious differences. We noticed that this regional approach to the policy had to remain informal: rural areas would still be less affected than urban areas with this specific program of measures. Our interviews with several teachers confirmed that, while all students were equal in terms of *laïcité*, some "needed more *laïcité* than others". In the January 2015 government plan, "sensitive districts" were addressed inasmuch as they were described as lacking French values (Kirszbaum, 2015, p. 57), rather than about socio-economic inequalities.

In the area of Aix-Marseille, this meant that teachers' and principals' impressions, related to the othering of students, would occasionally contradict the program set up by the *Rectorat* on the relevance of *laïcité*. For example, the uses and the usefulness of the 2014 charter of *laïcité* triggered very different reactions from teachers, in reference to the composition of their classes. A primary-school teacher from Marseille who was asked for an interview on this policy process deliberately refused it, arguing that she worked in the "wrong" districts for this issue.

> Inside the walls of my school, we didn't put up the charter of *laïcité*. In my career, I have only worked in the southern districts [the richer ones], so this *laïcité* stuff I don't know well. You have to go talk with staff in city-center or northern districts! (Conversation, February 2017).

Other teachers and principals we interviewed, whose schools were in rural areas, replied that the policy of *laïcité* was a waste of time for them, or that they were not concerned by it. By contrast, teachers commonly acknowledged schools in the REP areas as an experience, especially if during their first year, which forced them to take *laïcité* seriously as a professional matter. They emphasized the need for highlighting *laïcité* to this disadvantaged group, where families often had a migratory background.

A primary-school teacher, who worked in a rural area for her training year, stated that the initial training was too abstract, and that the modules on *laïcité* were no exception. However, she was aware that she could be moved to a "sensitive district" where such specialized skills would become useful.

> When you begin teaching, you often find yourself in a REP. So there, you have to be ready for these questions of teaching *laïcité*. (Interview, April 2017).

The verbal characterization of regional differences around *laïcité* operated as a way to deal with issues which were related to ethnicization. The blurred boundaries between what would be "religious" and "ethnic" were typically categorized as problems with *laïcité*, approached with a rhetoric of religious coexistence and with the ambition of managing ethnic plurality. Thus, historian Charles Mercier described a "matrix connection in the school environment between *laïcité* and integration" (Mercier, 2015, p. 43).

As regards the relations between the informal ethnic categorizations, rooted in teachers' common sense, and the science-based truth regime of school disciplines (Weir, 2008, pp. 374-379), further observations from training sessions illustrate the tensions embedded in teachers' practices. The assignation of alterity to certain pupils by some teachers, appeared to be a deviant, if tolerated, practice (Lorcerie, 2003, pp. 178-185), deemed incompat-

ible with the school ethos[9]. However, its substitution by the vocabulary of religious affiliation and cultural difference, dubiously justified by the language of *laïcité* generally understood as a constraining neutrality in schools, meant that it was symbolically requalified as a professional judgement, shared with colleagues. This requalification, which could alleviate their sense of guilt related to a common-sense judgement of ethnic differences among students (ibid., p. 39), exposed the ambiguities of the policy process. For example, during a special seminar on *laïcité* organized by the *Rectorat* in December 2017, participants had to choose between four workshops. One of them, called "Religions in *laïcité*", was conducted by a local organization dedicated to promoting a positive evaluation of the history of migration. Their involvement in this session made the intertwining of religion, ethnicity and *laïcité* explicit. During the training discussions about the negative depictions of Islam in French society, a history teacher participating in the event, testified that at her school, many children felt discriminated against. Her vocabulary in itself reproduced these ambiguities.

> Well, I am in a middle school in which 95% of pupils are Muslims, or in any case those of French culture: zero. And during this school visit, some pupils told me "No, but with you it is different, yes you're French but you love us." (Observation, December 2017).

Her words illustrated that she wanted to denounce ethnic categorization in general as a source of discrimination among youths. Yet, simultaneously, she was compelled to use an arbitrary categorization rooted in common sense, by producing a percentage of pupils whom she deemed to not belong to "French culture". In several teachers' presentations, when the speakers had to talk about *laïcité* and ended up dealing with ethnicity, they felt forced to criticize ethnic categorization immediately afterwards, in accordance with what sociologist Jean-Paul Payet described as the "register of bad conscience" (Payet, 1997, cited by Lorcerie, 2011). The example of this teacher shows that the result is often ambiguous: while she was denouncing discriminations based on ethnic categorization, she made a discretionary categorization too, which was framed simultaneously in ethnic and religious terms.

We can posit the hypothesis that the vocabulary of *laïcité*, as redefined in religious and non-religious terms in common sense, could allow professionals to frame ethnicity in an exculpatory way. In this seminar, for example, the trainer-coordinator rebuffed her sentence by noting that she could not know how many of these pupils were actually Muslims. However, the trainer did not question the opposition expressed in the teacher's discursive categories between "French" and "Muslim". From a "realistic" perspective,

[9] It appeared in the difficulty for teachers to mention of "black students" or "Arab students", leading to the use of long periphrases in which every single word was carefully chosen.

one could ask where this percentage came from, or whether it came from a personal form of categorization, maybe based on family names, and why it relied on an ethno-religious divide.

However, a social constructivist analysis can underline that such expressions uncover the cracks between the version of *laïcité* conforming to the truth regime as an official neutrality, abstention from religious opinions by teachers and staff, and another version as a default cognitive resource to frame differences in terms of socio-economic status or ethnicity. Then, understanding the professional ethics of the French state-school teachers as a social construct illustrates this ethics' dependence on an alterity and on practices of veridiction (Foucault, 2012, pp. 80-81).

The secular self and its "others"

Indeed, the training sessions ultimately led teachers and administrators to formulate explicitly what they considered as their "significant other", as well as what the reciprocal construction of alterity could be. The preparation for the training sessions and some talks in the workshops illustrated such tensions: while ethnicity was not a routine issue for all members of the *laïcité* commission, the teachers who volunteered to be trained, repeated that it could be a very concrete matter for them.

As we mentioned earlier, one of the aims of the commission became the fight against the spiraling ethnicization of relations between teachers and pupils (Lorcerie, 2011, p. 6). The commission on *laïcité* collectively rejected an identity-based approach to *laïcité*, which would consider Islam as a foil for the school ethos, but they took precautions not to disturb their colleagues. For instance, a module on the comparative history of Islam and Christianity triggered tense discussions during which inspectors and school principals complained about its ambiguous implications and its probable criticism by colleagues from "sensitive areas". As a consequence, the original title of "religious culture" was dropped in favor of the official curricular expression of "teaching religious facts" (*enseignement des faits religieux*), more compliant with teachers' secular professional identity.

During the twelve local training sessions in the autumn of 2015, the "best practices" of *laïcité* were promoted in a series of modules, most of which were reproduced in each session. One session, in which one of us took part, was organized at a high school in Arles (a town of 50 000 inhabitants) in early November 2015, with over eighty participants, mainly secondary-school teachers. The one-day session was divided between plenary training sessions about the legal and curricular aspects of *laïcité* and workshops in smaller groups of twenty participants, supervised by members of the commission. In the workshop one of us supervised, three subgroups of seven or eight participants were each asked to work on a critical discussion on one of three items

about *laïcité*, previously chosen by the commission. The first item was Article 13 of the charter of *laïcité*. The second was a cartoon published by French cartoonist Plantu in 2004 on four pupils, one without any visible religious sign, the others with a headscarf, a nun's habit, and an Orthodox Jewish hat respectively, lined up at the entrance of a state school, asking a schoolteacher whether official instructions could be read in Arabic, in Latin and in Hebrew. The third was a cartoon of a red Phrygian hat (a symbol of the French Republic) which acted as an "umbrella" for a crowd against a "rain" of crosses, stars and crescents. The reactions of the participants illustrated both the discomfort and the reflexivity associated with discussing *laïcité*. Those that worked on Plantu's cartoon criticized it, because they felt it singled out negative, stereotyped cases instead of coexistence and collective rules.. The third group said that the cartoon of a Phrygian hat was "inclusive" but inadequate for a concrete school context.

> *Laïcité* is already there normally, we don't have to make it live. On an exceptional basis, it is embodied by us as civil servants or consultants. (Observation, November 2015).

According to some teachers, the mutual feelings of cultural distance with their audience could be used by some pupils to show their opposition to the institution. In a reversal of the stigma, the usual "victims" of ethnic attributions would lay claim to their otherness for a social use: being seen as different would allow them, in turn, to categorize their teachers. This idea arose in a teacher's words, who worked in a school in the northern districts of Marseille.

> When [my students] tell me something and I disagree with them, they often tell me things like "it's normal, you can't understand. You're white, you don't see things the same way, you live in your quiet district." So it cuts short any conversation. (Observation, December 2017).

Generally, the sense of a cultural boundary stems from a reciprocal (if unequal) process of ethnic categorization, perceptible in the discourses of learners (along with their parents) and teachers, both frequently using the opposition between "them" and "us" (Lorcerie, 2003, pp. 163-172). The use of religious markers as mutual substitutes for otherwise uneasy ethnic categorizations, could lead teachers to impute in children an "instrumentalization" of religion to amplify a cultural gap, in some situations. The conversation with a philosophy teacher, who spent a decade in "difficult" secondary schools, during a workshop on professional ethics organized specifically for the trainers, can illustrate this aspect further. She mentioned her curiosity about social-sciences studies into Islam. Once, when she was referring to misunderstandings, she repeated that the cause of hindrances to reciprocal

good relationships was the students' references to religion, and specifically to the Quran, not ethnicity or social inequalities.

> They regularly tell me "Yes, but you can't understand, it's in the Quran", or "The Quran says this", or "The Quran says that"… I tell them: "I have had enough of your Quran, why do you have to contradict me with the Quran? Do I quote Aristotle every time we disagree?" (Observation, December 2017).

Afterwards, she nuanced her narrative by saying she was not irritated by students' religious affiliation *per se*, but by its instrumentalization to contest her as a person. In such ordinary situations, education professionals feel they are themselves ethnicized and constructed as "others" by the appraisals of their students, although the description in terms of "majority" and "minority" would appear uneasy and problematic to them in reference to their professional ethos. Our analysis of what teachers say shows that such situations of cross-attributions, reproduced in ordinary interactions, as well as common-sense explanations of school failures, are inevitably uncomfortable and guilt-inducing. Indeed, the ambiguous insertion of ethnicity into a policy process could contribute to make it more explicit and problematic to teachers and administrators.

Concluding remarks

This study on the intertwining of *laïcité* and secularism elicits remarks on methodological and on theoretical grounds. As regards research on ethnicity and on secularism in schools, qualitative enquiries that look attentively at the weight of institutional history and of truth regimes can bring productive insights into the ordinary aspects of such processes. Although ethnicity is mostly included in French schools in negative terms, its place is not to be underestimated in the classroom practices, administrative procedures and teacher-training sessions.

In our case study, the commission was locally constituted as a response to what was perceived as an administrative gap, linked to manifestations of religious affiliation from students (particularly among Muslims). The policy was previously implemented in a particularly deprived area. Its extension to the whole region, in order to implement a national policy on *laïcité* training after 2015 which was a real turning point for the French school system in determining a policy on "otherness", makes visible previously informal practices. The focus on the local scale shows that policies, ministerial agenda-settings and political debates do have an impact on teachers' practices and their framing of ethnicity.

Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, we observed that ethnicity was often reformulated through the lexical field of *laïcité*,

deemed more compatible with a universalist French school ethos, which still struggles to explicitly take into consideration the plurality of the students. This confusion made by education professionals between ethnicity and *laïcité* led to misunderstandings and inner tensions.

This process interferes with certain professional claims, including claims to neutrality. We can argue that it takes a "methodologically agnostic" perspective on school norms, including *laïcité*, to acknowledge some ordinary aspects of these processes. This does not mean we endorse a general relativism on secularism, but the conviction that research can paradoxically contribute to better public debates on education by abstaining temporarily from applicative aspects.

On theoretical grounds, our research suggests the need for a more contextualized understanding of representational and ideal aspects in secularism as well as in ethnicity. Educational policies on *laïcité* can display apparent contradictions by interfering with processes of ethnicization, yet, their legitimization and their implementation are not foiled by these contradictory representations and narratives. Indeed, the local implementation of the ministerial policy of training teachers in *laïcité* brings about an evaluation of specialized skills, from universities or from previous experiences of civic engagement. Hence, expertise on *laïcité* is not restricted to professional experts, but is claimed by diverse stakeholders who have a hand in the ownership of the problem of *laïcité* in schools, from administrators and academics to school principals, primary- and secondary-school teachers. While ethnicity is not considered a central problem but a question of routine, the "care of the secular self" leads teachers and managers to be confronted with conflicting interpretations. Ethnicity acts as a "revealer" of implicit tensions between different "formulae of truths" when the normative aspects of teachers' identities are tackled by the policy process. The fact that this *laïcité* commission was formally dissolved in late 2017, and subsequently recomposed into specialized working groups on the values of the French Republic, suggests we should take seriously microsocial practices on alterity in State bureaucracies and their consequences for individual experiences.

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