



# Transforming personal experience and emotions through secolarisation in education for cultural diversity: An interplay between unicity and genericity

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## ABSTRACT

When subjects studied at school are close to societal discourses and to the students' social identities, when they have high emotional resonance, is it possible to enable the students to distance themselves from their emotions and personal experience, and to conceptualise them? Examining the relation between emotion and learning through the lens of socio-cultural psychology, the aim of our study was to shed light on "secolarisation" processes, that is, processes that transform personal experience and emotions into conceptualised forms of thinking. We analysed 85 video-recorded lessons in education for cultural diversity involving 12 teachers (of primary and secondary schools). Having identified episodes in which emotions were put into words or personal experience was reported, we analysed the use of pronouns (taken as indicators of secolarisation processes) and found a recurrent pattern: "the unicity-genericity routine". We illustrate the functioning of this routine with various excerpts taken from lessons in education for diversity taught in the classes of two teachers in primary school. The results show that the interplay between unicity and genericity works as a discursive resource for the development of secolarisation processes.

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## 1. Introduction

In Switzerland, as elsewhere in the world, cultural and linguistic diversity is an important social reality, which pervades everyday discourse and has led to major changes in school curriculums. Over the past ten years, the Swiss school system has become more and more sensitive to the need to integrate into the curriculums such themes as might be called "real world issues" (Åberg, Mäkitalo, & Säljö, 2010) or "sensitive social issues", such as cultural diversity, alterity, racism, and migration. In so doing, schools have aimed at fostering the students' social integration and at contributing to create social links in a heterogeneous and complex society.

In order to address these themes, the federal educational policy in Switzerland pays particular attention to the *relation to alterity* (Conférence intercantonale de l'Instruction Publique de la Suisse romande et du Tessin (CIIP), 2003; Lanfranchi, Perregaux, & Thommen, 2000), intended as the possibility for the students to take a reflexive stance on their own representations. The goal of education for cultural diversity is to enable students to reflect on their everyday experience, opinions, or emotions, to consider them from various points of view, and to frame them in the light of more general human and social experiences (Nicollin & Muller Mirza,

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2013). It tries to avoid some pitfalls of what was previously called “intercultural education”, in particular the risk of *culturalism* or *ethnicisation* (Amselle, 2011), that is, the risk to lock individuals in their national, linguistic, gender, cultural, etc., membership. In this respect, education for cultural diversity does not put emphasis on a self-contained Other, but on *Self in relation* with the Other.

Beyond the many variations in the educational policies of each Swiss canton, there are common goals, such as struggling against ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudices, and promoting democratic values (Meunier, 2007). To achieve these goals, education for cultural diversity deals with subjects that have three specificities at least: (1) They are not, strictly speaking, “bodies of knowledge” because the contents to be taught are very heterogeneous: some are bodies of knowledge pertaining to scientific fields (for example, intergroup relationships), others are relational competence or communicative skills, others still refer to moral values, such as freedom and respect. (2) They are not yet stabilised (or institutionalised) in the history of schooling, so that their goals, legitimacy in the school curriculum, pedagogical methods, as well as their position and volume in the school curriculum are not stabilised and may vary considerably. In Switzerland, education for cultural diversity rarely forms an autonomous discipline and subjects taught in this field are generally integrated in other disciplines, for example human and social sciences. (3) They are loaded with political and personal values, and address topics that are closely linked to the students' personal and social identities. Consequently, they raise emotional reactions that may cause heated debates (Muller Mirza, 2012).

Emotions and personal experiences are precisely the focus of this article, and our general questioning is: when school subject matters are close to societal discourses and to the students' social identities, when they have high emotional resonance, is it possible to enable the students to distance themselves from their personal experience, to consider it from various points of view and to conceptualise it? Put differently, how, and under which conditions, can personal experiences and emotions be transformed and undergo what we shall call a “secondarisation process”? We shall examine this question from the perspective of socio-cultural psychology applied to the field of learning, development and identity (e.g., Clot, 2009; Grossen, 2010; Ludvigsen, Lund, Rasmussen, & Säljö, 2011; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Muller Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009; Rochex & Crinon, 2011; Zittoun, 2006).

After a brief recall of Vygotsky's ideas about relations between everyday and scientific concepts, and a presentation of the notion of “secondarisation” developed in French teams (e.g., Bautier, 2005; Jaubert, Rebière, & Bernié, 2004), we present a research project on education for cultural diversity at school that focused on the process of transformation of emotions in the construction of knowledge. Our analysis of classroom interactions was aimed at identifying clues (or indicators) of secondarisation in the teacher's and students' discourse and led us to find a discursive routine – the unicity–genericity routine – that accounts for the transformation of emotions and personal experiences involved in education for cultural diversity.

## 2. Transforming personal experiences and emotions: A secondarisation process

In his discussion of the development of scientific concepts, Vygotsky (1986) showed that the transformation of everyday concepts into scientific concepts is inseparable from the consciousness of concepts, that is, “an awareness of the activity of the mind – the consciousness of being conscious” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 170), which leads to generalisation and mastering. According to him, scientific concepts do not replace everyday concepts, but are related to them. The development of scientific concepts leans on everyday concepts which, in turn, are changed by scientific concepts. There is, in other words, a transformation of everyday (or spontaneous) concepts through the learning and understanding of scientific concepts.

In his comparison between scientific and everyday concepts, Vygotsky showed that the difference between them lies in the child's attitude towards their objects and their apprehension, and results in a development that takes opposite paths. As an example, he compared the everyday concept of “brother” with the concept of “exploitation” or “Archimedes' principle”, two subjects included in school teaching. As an everyday concept, the concept of “brother” is saturated with a child's everyday experience; it is emotionally loaded and confronts a child with his or her own experience. Consequently, children are faced with the difficulty of going beyond their personal and empirical experience, of reflecting on their own personal experiences from a different angle, and of reconstructing it as a scientific concept. Hence, the transformation of the concept of “brother” into a scientific concept might be impeded by their personal experiences and the construction of a different attitude towards personal experiences might be hindered. In contrast, scientific concepts, such as “exploitation” or “Archimedes' principle”, are not (or less) linked to personal experiences, so that a child's difficulty is to understand their meaning and use.

In this light, the confrontation between a child's personal experience and a concept taught at school is an opportunity to transform direct experience. As Clot (2003) put it, it leads to consciousness, which can be defined as a form of transformation of direct experience. Emotions can then be seen as a direct experience, which is liable to be transformed through the child's confrontation with subjects taught at school, as well as by the specific format (or genre) in which these subjects are presented and discussed in the school context.

As one of the main goals and challenges of schooling, this process of transformation of direct experience has led to numerous studies on teaching–learning processes in classroom interactions. Among this research work, Bautier and Goigoux (2004), Rochex and Crinon (2011) and Jaubert et al. (2004) in France have focused on what they called *secondarisation*, a term that captures Vygotsky's idea of a transformation of everyday concepts into scientific concepts, as well as Bakhtin's distinction between primary and secondary (or complex) genres (Bakhtin, 1986). In this context, primary genre refers to a spontaneous and context-bound production, while secondary genre refers to discursive forms that imply “a transformation of the enunciative position, a reflective stance on linguistic production and its construction and elaboration into a specific learning” (Bautier, 2001, p. 154, our translation from French).

As a main goal of school, secondarisation occurs when students succeed in taking a reflective stance on their personal experience and on their position within this experience. It requires a *reconfiguration* of the students' everyday knowledge and personal experiences, that is, an elaboration and restructuring of their experience. According to Bautier (2005), this reconfiguration concerns various aspects: the *concrete material and objects* that can be used in class for other purposes than in everyday life; the *bodies of*

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