



Towards a better understanding of cultural diversity approaches at school: A multi-informant and mixed-methods study[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates two types of cultural diversity approaches at school, namely (1) fostering *equality* and (2) promoting *cultural pluralism*. Adopting a mixed-methods design, this study assesses teachers' ($n = 207$) and students' ($n = 1,644$) self-reported perceptions of descriptive norms and evaluates school practices and artefacts in the physical and virtual environment of 22 secondary schools in south-west Germany. Results showed that in all schools under investigation teachers and students perceived descriptive norms fostering mostly *equality*. A wide variety of practices and artefacts was found, revealing a third distinct cultural approach leaning towards *endorsing the majority culture*. Different practices and artefacts were linked to an emphasis on *equality*, *cultural pluralism*, and *endorsing the majority culture*. Implications for educational policy, as well as applied diversity research, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

One inescapable aspect of a globalised world is the intensification of cultural diversity in society. For many countries, a crucial challenge is to develop a social climate where cultural diversity is respected and seen as a resource rather than a burden or a threat for peaceful coexistence. School is a key context that largely contributes to the creation of such a social climate (Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysochoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012). However, there is little agreement about how schools around the world should aim at dealing with cultural diversity (Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014). Schools implement a wide range of practices (e.g., a theatre performance against racism), and artefacts (e.g., displaying images of diverse people in the posters on classroom walls) to address cultural diversity. These practices and artefacts are supposedly related to descriptive norms of the schools and together reflect the approach schools adopt for cultural diversity. The present study examines the descriptive norms and related practices and artefacts adopted to deal with cultural diversity in schools located in south-west Germany.

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Although the increasing cultural diversity may represent a challenge for all stakeholders in education, teachers have a crucial role in ensuring students' social inclusion. The practices and artefacts teachers adopt in order to value cultural diversity are essential in developing a warm and supportive environment for students' individual needs (Gay, 2010), and are linked to positive academic adjustment, notably for immigrant and ethnic minority students (Aronson and Laughter, 2016). Practices and artefacts may reflect or be influenced by the descriptive norms shared in schools, which guide interactions between teachers and students (Horenczyk and Tatar, 2012). Descriptive norms are unwritten rules that serve important social functions, as they help individuals coordinate their social actions to achieve favourable outcomes (Gelfand and Harrington, 2015). Therefore, the first aim of the current study is to gain an understanding of how cultural diversity is addressed in German schools by investigating teachers' and students' perceptions of descriptive norms.

Teachers have greater control over daily tasks than students do (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010), and, although informally, possess more power than school administrators due to their proximity to students (Hanson, 2002). A number of other features qualify teachers as high-power individuals in school, including traditions of autonomy, professionalism, and collegiality (Hargreaves, 2000). Collectively, teachers have the opportunity to manage schools' interaction patterns and activities, fostering the engagement of all students (Farmer, Lines, & Hann, 2011). It remains unclear how teachers' perceived descriptive norms regarding cultural diversity are expressed in practices and artefacts at school. Accordingly, the second aim of the study focuses on how teachers' and their students' perceived descriptive norms might be related to practices and artefacts manifested in the physical and virtual school environment.

1.1. School approaches to cultural diversity

Based on social psychological research on intergroup relations (Park and Judd, 2005; Plaut, 2002), and multicultural education perspectives (Banks, 2015; Gay, 2010), two approaches to cultural diversity may be distinguished: the first focuses on the promotion of *equality*, while the second values *cultural pluralism*. Schools may tend towards adopting one approach or combining elements of both (Schachner, Noack, Van de Vijver, & Eckstein, 2016; Hachfeld et al., 2011). Yet, there is little empirical evidence of how perceived descriptive norms and their related visible aspects (practices and artefacts) are reflected in different cultural approaches at school.

The emphasis of *equality* is primarily on promoting contact and cooperation across groups to undermine stereotyping and prejudice (Allport, 1954) and to restrict the direct expression of racism (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986). Descriptive norms underlying the *equality* approach in school may be linked to practices, such as cooperative learning, or artefacts calling for respect and tolerance. An emphasis on *equality* gives little consideration to the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds (Hachfeld et al., 2011). On the other hand, the *cultural pluralism* approach acknowledges and promotes cultural differences, thereby seeing diversity as a resource and an added value (Banks, 2015). In the educational context, descriptive norms that are more *cultural pluralism* oriented may go hand in hand with school practices and artefacts that value cultural differences, such as organising school events where diversity is discussed or celebrated and adopting classroom material that is culturally sensitive (Gay, 2010).

To better understand what approach schools implement to deal with cultural diversity, previous research has emphasised the need to assess teachers' as well as students' perceptions of descriptive norms (Farmer et al., 2011), and to compare their level of congruence (Thijs, Westhof, & Koomen, 2012). One study found a marginally significant positive correlation between students' and teachers' perceptions of whether multicultural education was implemented in classroom and school (Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002). Yet, in a study comparing six European countries, Fine-Davis and Faas (2014) found a mismatch between students' and teachers' perceptions of whether the presence of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds caused difficulties in the classroom, with teachers having greater estimates of difficulties posed by cultural diversity than students. The discrepancy concerning perceived descriptive norms might be related to the mismatch of cultural backgrounds between students and teachers (Van de Vijver and Leung, 1997). In contrast to most students, the majority of teachers in many parts of the world, including Germany, represents the cultural and ethnic majority (Sleeter, 2012). In addition, a lack of teacher preparation or negative beliefs towards cultural diversity may also largely contribute to the discrepancy between students' and teachers' multicultural views (Gay, 2010). Overall, then, teachers' and students' perceptions of descriptive norms may not necessarily correspond.

1.2. Practices and artefacts in the physical and virtual school environment

Practices and artefacts are the most tangible aspects of a school approach to cultural diversity. Practices refer to events or activities that are implemented in the school and classroom, whereas artefacts include all the visible products of an underlying set of school practices (Maslowski, 2006). Although practices and artefacts are distinct, they are closely interrelated. For example, reporting the list of values at the school entrance or on the school website is an artefact, but also implies that members of that school (i.e., teachers and students) have discussed these values. Practices and artefacts may develop from individually or collectively reinforced behaviour of teachers and school staff (Maslowski, 2006). Thus, both practices and artefacts contribute to our understanding of how cultural diversity is enacted in schools.

Although structural variables at the school level, such as school size or ethnic composition, are important to consider when examining cultural diversity approaches (Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014), other more visible aspects of a school that also might reflect practices and artefacts, are rarely investigated (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). For example, schools' public spaces (e.g., entrance hall) and classrooms' walls may reflect a school's cultural diversity approach. S. R. Harper (2015) took over 500 photos in 40 secondary schools located in a large metropolitan area in the United States. These pictures were taken mainly in

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