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# Teachers' Understanding of Multicultural Education and the Correlates of Multicultural Content Integration in Flanders

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## **Abstract**

The bulk of scholarship on multicultural education continues to focus exclusively on U.S. education. Previous studies published in this field also have focused largely on topics that are considered relevant for the United States, whereas little attention has been paid to topics that are less problematized in the United States. In this mixed-method study, we explore teachers' understanding of multicultural education in Flanders (Belgium), and we examine whether teacher and school characteristics correlate with the degree to which teachers integrate multicultural content. Survey results with 706 in-service teachers from 68 schools and in-depth interviews with 26 teachers from 5 schools are used. The results point out that teachers focus mainly on religious diversity when they were asked about their understanding of multicultural education. However, their understanding was largely limited to the “contributions approach” and “additive approach” to multicultural education. Multilevel analysis revealed that ethnic minority teachers reported higher levels of multicultural content integration than

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native-White teachers, and teachers working in schools with higher share of ethnic minorities and public (State) schools incorporated more multicultural education than teachers working in elite-White schools and Catholic schools. Implications for both the literature on multicultural education and educational policymakers are discussed.

### **Keywords**

multicultural education, school composition, teacher ethnicity, mixed-method

## **Introduction**

At the time of the writing of this article, the Wikipedia page on multicultural education begins with this warning: “This article has multiple issues.” There are five issues summed up, yet the most remarkable one is “The examples and perspectives in this article may not represent a worldwide view of the subject.” What it means to not represent a worldwide view is actually illustrated by the first sentence of the article: “Multicultural education is a set of strategies and materials in U.S. education that were developed to assist teachers to respond to the many issues created by rapidly changing demographics of their students” (Multicultural Education, n.d.). However, not only is the Wikipedia article on multicultural education U.S.-centered, the bulk of scholarship on multicultural education continues to focus exclusively on education in the American context.

Previous studies published in this field also have focused largely on topics that are considered relevant for the United States, whereas little attention has been paid to topics that are less problematized in the United States. For instance, pedagogical practices with respect to religion are rarely studied by scholars in the field of multicultural education (see Subedi, Merryfield, Bashir-Ali, & Funel, 2006; Dallavis, 2013, for notable exceptions). A recent study has shown that pre-service teachers in the United States are less likely to associate faith/religion with the notion of multicultural than the notions of race, disability, or social class (Silverman, 2010). This is hardly surprising as the religious background of the largest ethnic minority groups in the United States is the same as the White middle-class, that is, Christianity. However, in Europe, the largest ethnic minority groups typically share a Muslim identity, and this religious background is not particularly welcomed in the European context (see Agirdag, Loobuyck, & Van Houtte, 2012; Crul & Schneider, 2010; Merry, 2007). Examining how educators implement multicultural strategies outside the United States is not only relevant for those countries; it is also important for the theoretical development within the field of multicultural education

itself. If similar processes take place in other parts of the world, this will establish the validity of existing theoretical frameworks. Contradictory findings, however, have the potential to fine-tune existing frameworks. Hence, the first objective of this study is to investigate multicultural education outside of the American context. More specifically, we will explore teachers' understanding of multicultural education in Flanders (Belgium) by using semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Most empirical studies on multicultural education use a qualitative approach (for recent studies, see Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2010; Kobayashi, 2012; Picower, 2009; Walker, 2011). These qualitative studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of the topic, and they have been crucial for identifying the knowledge, skills, and beliefs required by teachers to respond to growing ethnic diversity in the classroom. Nevertheless, an exclusively qualitative approach has important limitations. For instance, one recurring finding in previous studies is that ethnically and socioeconomically privileged teachers lack the required knowledge and experience with ethnic diversity and accordingly they are less likely to implement multicultural education approaches into their practice (for reviews, see Sleeter, 2001, 2008; for a critique, see Laughter, 2011). Further, the small sample sizes and the lack of a comparative perspective within many of these studies do not allow for generalizations (see also Montecinos, 2004). Therefore, the second objective of this study is to examine whether the background characteristics of teachers are correlated with the degree to which multicultural content is integrated in the classrooms. Hypotheses about possible effects of specific teacher characteristics will be generated through the analysis of the qualitative data, and these hypotheses will be tested with quantitative data.

Another limitation of previous studies on multicultural education is that they mostly use samples of pre-service teachers (e.g., Ambe, 2006; Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011; Larkin, 2012; Silverman, 2010; for a review, see Castro, 2010). However, studies that exclusively focus on pre-service teachers cannot provide reliable information about the range of possible effects within the teachers' work environment, that is, the effects of contextual school characteristics. While teachers might have general conceptions about multicultural education—which might correlate with their personal background characteristics—it is not far-fetched to hypothesize that teachers will be inclined to adjust their practices to the contextual elements of their work environment. In addition to the pressures of learning targets, class size, and testing regimes, the compositional features of the school, such as the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the student body, will play a decisive role (for an elaborated theoretical rationale, see Van Houtte, 2011). Therefore, the third

objective of this study is to examine how school characteristics affect the degree to which multicultural education is taken up by individual teachers. Again, hypotheses about the possible effects of specific school characteristics will be generated through the analysis of the qualitative data, and these hypotheses will be tested with quantitative data.

## Sociopolitical Context

This study was conducted in Flanders, that is, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. After World War II, Flanders rapidly developed into a multicultural society comprising immigrants from southern Europe and especially Turkey and Morocco. Immigration was restricted by the government in 1973, yet the influx of immigrants continued via family reunification and matrimonial migration (Agirdag & Van Houtte, 2011). In Flanders, many ethnic minority students continue to academically lag behind their native-Flemish counterparts at both the primary and secondary levels. This is true even when social class is taken into account (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012). In addition to having a disadvantaged social-class background, the exclusion of Turkish and Moroccan youth in Flemish schools relates to their religious and linguistic distinctiveness (Merry, 2005). On the one hand, Islam was officially recognized as a religion by the Belgian state in 1974, and in the years that followed, Islamic education has been provided in many Belgian public schools once a minimal threshold of requests has been reached. Currently, about 300 Muslim teachers provide Islamic instruction in public schools. Islamic instruction is even provided in 14 Catholic primary schools (Kanmaz & El Battitui, 2004). While Islamic instruction is offered in a handful of other European countries, the extent to which this is available in Belgian schools remains unrivaled.

On the other hand, Islamic traditions and practices (such as traditional clothing) are increasingly perceived as problematic for “social integration” (Merry, 2005). For instance, in 2009, state schools officially banned the wearing of headscarves. A previous quantitative study has shown that negative attitudes about Islam are common among Flemish teachers, especially in schools that enroll a larger share of Muslim students (Agirdag, Loobuyck, & Van Houtte, 2012). Meanwhile, although the existence of (subsidies) for Islamic instruction in public schools appears to indicate that minority students’ religious identities are partly recognized by policymakers, such a recognition is nonexistent regarding their *linguistic* identities (see Blommaert, Creve, & Willaert, 2006; Jaspers, 2008). Even though languages such as Turkish and Arabic are commonly spoken in Flanders, the use of the mother tongue at school is widely perceived as a problem. Both policymakers and

teachers believe that the achievement gap in Flemish education is mainly caused by the linguistic deficiencies of immigrants themselves (Agirdag, Van Avermaet, & Van Houtte, 2013).

It should be noted that the official Flemish education development goals for primary education state that “intercultural<sup>1</sup> [multicultural] education is a task for *all schools*” (Flemish Ministry of Education and Formation, 2010, p. 89). However, it is unknown whether Flemish teachers have any understanding of what multicultural/intercultural education is, and to what extent *all schools* integrate multicultural practices. These lacunae motivate the research objectives of this study.

## Theoretical Background

Scholars have proposed many different theoretical conceptualizations of multicultural education or/and culturally responsive pedagogy (see Banks, 1989, 1993; Gay, 1988, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1996). The differences between various approaches and their philosophical orientations are beyond the scope of this article (for this purpose, see Bennett, 2001). In this study, we draw upon the theoretical writing of James Banks (1989, 1993) to interpret Flemish teachers’ understanding of multicultural education. Banks’ approach is the most widely used framework in the field of multicultural education, though it has been criticized by both conservative and radical scholars (see McCarthy, 1994; Sleeter, 1995). Given that fact, using his work may appear to some readers to lack theoretical novelty. No doubt, in the North American context, this may be true, given the extent to which various authors have built upon, expanded, and also critiqued Banks’ nomenclature. Yet matters look very different in Europe. In contrast to both Canadian and American discourses, which for decades have examined ways in which minority perspectives, experiences, and contributions might inform and reform what and how education in schools takes place, on the European continent, the conversation has much more recently begun, and evidence of its impact in schools and classrooms remains slight. Indeed, as this study will show, Banks’ work nicely illuminates the state of affairs in the Belgian context given his remarkably lucid conceptualization of multicultural education. Below we map the relevant dimensions and stages of his theory.

Banks (1993) identifies five dimensions of multicultural education. The first dimension is *content integration*, which is defined as “the extent to which teachers use examples, data, and information from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principals, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline” (Banks, 1993, p. 5). The content-integration

dimension is what most people associate with multicultural education. The second dimension is the *knowledge construction process*, described as the extent to which teachers stimulate students to understand and to critically investigate assumptions within the common knowledge base that tends to be biased against minority groups in the society. Third, the *prejudice reduction* dimension highlights lessons and activities used by teachers to help students to cultivate positive dispositions and attitudes toward different ethnic and cultural groups by cross-cultural interactions under favorable conditions (see Allport, 1954). Fourth, the *equity pedagogy* dimension relates to teaching procedures, strategies and styles that improve the academic achievement of students from diverse groups. The last dimension, *empowering school culture and social structure*, focuses on school-level factors (above and beyond the individual teachers) that help students from disadvantaged groups to be treated equitably. An example of an empowering school *culture* would be teachers having consistently high expectations of all pupils, while an example of an empowering school *structure* would be a school system with less rigid academic tracking (Van Houtte, 2011).

Within these dimensions, Banks (1989) further identifies four approaches to multicultural content integration. Like a stage theory, each approach implies an improvement on the previous one. The first stage, then, is the *contributions approach*, which is the most common and the easiest way to incorporate multicultural content in the curriculum. Within the contributions approach, teachers focus on heroes and holidays (e.g., special days, weeks and months) that are considered important for ethnic minorities. This approach is not unproblematic as it often results in the trivialization of ethnic cultures and may reinforce the belief that ethnic minorities are not integral members of mainstream society. The second stage is the *additive approach*, which is used by teachers to integrate themes and examples about ethnic minority groups into the school curriculum. While representing a slight improvement over the contributions approach, the additive approach is still limited in what it can achieve because the “point of view” of the curriculum’s canon largely remains unchanged; moreover, this approach fails to help students view society from diverse cultural and ethnic perspectives. The third stage is the *transformative approach*, which fundamentally differs from the contributions and additive approach inasmuch as the transformative approach actually changes the structure of the curriculum. Within the transformative approach, teachers stimulate students to reflect upon a variety of concepts and themes from different cultural points of view; moreover, students are invited to imagine alternatives to, and even critique, the “facts” as they are presented in the canonical view and found in most school textbooks. Finally, the fourth stage is the *social action*

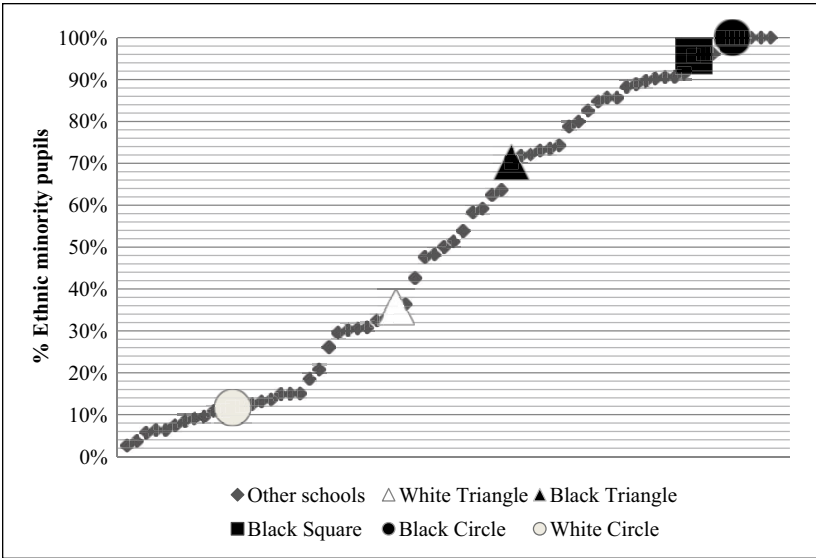
*approach*, in which the elements of the transformation approach are translated into social action by students. The major goal of the social action approach is to enable students to take political action within their schools and communities to actively address social problems such as racism and ethnic inequality.

## Method

### Sample

We use qualitative and quantitative data that was collected between 2008 and 2010. Quantitative data was collected from 706 teachers and 2,845 pupils in a sample of 68 primary schools in Flanders. Multistage sampling was conducted. In the first instance, to encompass the entire range of ethnic composition, we selected three cities in Flanders that had relatively ethnically diverse populations, that is, Ghent, Antwerp, and Genk. Second, using data gathered from the Flemish Educational Department, we chose 116 primary schools within these selected cities and asked them to participate; 54% of them agreed to. Because the nonresponse rate was not related to the ethnic composition of schools, the schools in the data set represent the entire range of ethnic composition: from those with almost no minority pupils to some schools composed entirely of ethnic minorities (see Figure 1). In all schools that agreed to participate, all teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire. All fifth-grade pupils were surveyed; if there were fewer than 30 fifth-grade pupils present, all sixth-grade pupils were surveyed as well.

The qualitative data were collected from 5 schools that were selected out of the 68 schools that are just described (see also Figure 1). These five schools were selected as representative of the entire range of ethnic composition. We use the pseudonyms *White Circle*, *Black Circle*, *Black Triangle*, *White Triangle*, and *Black Square* to refer to these schools, and these pseudonyms loosely reflect their ethnic composition. More than 95% of the students in the *Black Square* and *Black Circle* are ethnic minority students. The share of ethnic minority students in the *Black Triangle* and *White Triangle* are, respectively, around 70% and 35%. There are only few minority children in *White Circle*: around 10% (see Figure 1). *Black Circle*, *White Triangle*, and *White Circle* are Catholic schools; *Black Triangle* and *Black Square* are state schools. It should be noted that in Flanders, more than the half of schools are Catholic schools and no distinction is made between state schools and Catholic schools with respect to state financial support: in institutional terms, both are considered public schools. In some Catholic schools (like in the *Black Circle* in our sample), there are only Muslim pupils



**Figure 1.** Ethnic composition of the sample.  
Note. Qualitatively studied schools are marked.

enrolled. In all 5 schools, the first author conducted in-depth interviews with the school principals, in addition to four or five teachers; a total of 26 respondents were interviewed. The interviews took place in the school. To ensure anonymity, we use pseudonyms for our respondents as well. All the teachers were native Belgians except for one teacher (*Nadia, Black Triangle, female*). The age range of the teachers was 26 to 58, with a median age of 41. During the interviews, teachers were asked to reflect on themselves, their profession as teachers, their schools in general, colleagues, pupils, parents, the school composition, the differences between schools, and issues of multicultural education. There were no explicit questions asked about various dimensions or approaches of multicultural education as this would have an influence on teachers' answers. Rather, we asked in general terms what their understanding of multicultural or intercultural education is.

### Research Design

In this study, we use a sequential mixed-method design (see Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). We first explore the qualitative evidence gathered through the in-depth interviews with teachers and principals. These qualitative findings

will be used for two purposes: (a) to explore teachers' understanding of multicultural education (Research Objective 1) and (b) to generate hypotheses about potential influences of teacher-level and school-level characteristics. Second, using survey data with 706 teachers, we test the hypotheses about the teacher-level influences on multicultural content integration (Research Objective 2), and school-level effects on multicultural content integration (Research Objective 3).

The qualitative analysis is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews in which "the interviewer asks certain, major questions the same way each time, but is free to alter the sequence and to probe for more information" (Fielding, 1993, p. 136). The in-depth approach was necessary to create an informal atmosphere that would allow the respondents to speak at length with the interviewer and generate mutual trust, a process that increases the reliability of the data. The interviews were conducted in Dutch. Because of the translation into English, some nuances and typical Dutch expressions may be lost in this report. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. These transcriptions were analyzed with detailed reading and successive open and focused coding (Esterberg, 2002). For this coding process, we used qualitative data software NVivo 9. The first author of this article was responsible for the primary coding process and the selection of the quotes to be presented in the analysis. To ensure reliability and validity, the second author of this article independently reread the coding and the selected quotes. She provided feedback to the first author in case of disagreement regarding coding and interpretation of the quotes. The third author reread and commented on the selected quotes as well.

The quantitative data consisted of a clustered sample of teachers that were nested within the schools. Because the data are at different levels (individual teacher level and school level), multilevel modeling is most appropriate (SPSS 21, MIXED procedure is used). As is common in multilevel analyses, we start by estimating the unconditional model to determine the degree of variance in multicultural content integration among schools. Then, in the first model, we examine the impact of teacher characteristics variables, that is, teachers' gender, teachers' ethnicity, teachers' family socioeconomic status (SES), teachers' age. In the second model, we add the effects of school-level characteristics, that is, school ethnic composition, school sector, school region. The variables teachers' ethnicity, teachers' age, school ethnic composition and school sector are included as explanatory variables in the models because qualitative evidence pointed out that they are related to the level of multicultural content integration (see results section). School region is entered as a control variable because the sample was drawn from three different regions. Teachers' gender and teachers' SES are included as

control variables as demographic variables might have an influence on teachers' beliefs on issues of diversity (see Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011). Missing data were handled with the multiple imputation procedure: five imputations are requested, and the pooled results are shown (Allison, 2002).

## Variables

The outcome variable is multicultural content integration. To assess the degree to which teachers integrate multicultural content in their classroom, we used a Likert-type scale that consists of five statements: (a) "In the classroom, I focus explicitly on the topic of ethnic diversity," (b) "I offer content that reflects all aspects of the multicultural society," (c) "Because of neutrality, I pay little attention to ethnic differences in the classroom" (reverse coded), (d) "I expose the multicultural social environment in the overall design and the furnishing of the classroom," and (e) "Ethnic diversity rarely occurs in the course material I use" (reverse coded). We are aware of the fact that these items only cover limited aspects of the content-integration dimension of multicultural education (Banks, 1989, 1993). However, these items do reflect Flemish teachers' understanding of multicultural education, which, as our analysis will show, continues to be rather limited (see "Results" section). There were five answer categories, ranging from "absolutely do not agree" (scored 1) to "completely agree" (scored 5). An exploratory factor analysis revealed that there is one underlying dimension. The item loadings ranged between .622 and .796 (Cronbach's alpha of .735). We use the standardized factor score as a measure of the level of multicultural content integration (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

At the teacher level, we included these explanatory variables: teachers' age, gender, ethnicity, and family socioeconomic status (hereafter, family SES). In our sample, the mean age of teachers was 39; 79% of our sample are female teachers (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Teachers' ethnicity was determined by self-identification, and 45 teachers in our sample have identified themselves as ethnic minority (see Table 1). Teachers' family SES was measured by means of the occupational status of teachers' father and mother (Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Portocarero, 1979); the highest of both was used as an indicator of the teachers' SES of origin (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

At the school level, we include three explanatory variables: school ethnic composition, school sector, and school region. A schools' ethnic composition was measured by the proportion of ethnic minority pupils in a school according to our database. Pupils whose grandmothers were born outside Western Europe

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies (N), Range (Minimum and Maximum), Means or %, Standard Deviations.

|                                   | N   | Min   | Max  | M     | SD    |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-------|------|-------|-------|
| <b>Outcome</b>                    |     |       |      |       |       |
| Multicultural content integration | 706 | -4.17 | 2.71 | 0.00  | 1.00  |
| <b>Teacher level</b>              |     |       |      |       |       |
| Gender (1 = <i>male</i> )         | 706 | 0     | 1    | 0.19  | 0.39  |
| Age                               | 706 | 22    | 62   | 38.76 | 9.89  |
| Ethnicity (1 = <i>minority</i> )  | 706 | 0     | 1    | 0.06  | 0.24  |
| Family SES                        | 706 | 1     | 8    | 5.04  | 1.88  |
| <b>School-level</b>               |     |       |      |       |       |
| Ethnic composition                | 68  | 2.63  | 100  | 51.50 | 34.16 |
| Sector (1 = <i>Catholic</i> )     | 68  | 0     | 1    | 0.47  | 0.50  |
| Region                            | 68  |       |      |       |       |
| Antwerp                           | 23  | 0     | 1    | 0.34  | 0.48  |
| Genk                              | 20  | 0     | 1    | 0.29  | 0.46  |
| Ghent (reference)                 | 25  | 0     | 1    | 0.37  | 0.49  |

Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

are considered ethnic minorities. It should be noted that this is a common approach to conceptualize ethnicity in European studies (see Agirdag et al., 2013). The ethnic composition ranged from 2.63% to 100% ethnic minority pupils (see Figure 1 and Table 1). The variable school sector distinguishes between 36 non-Catholic schools and 32 Catholic schools (see Table 1). Finally, school region indicates in which city the school is located: 23 schools in our sample were located in Antwerp, 20 schools in Genk, and 25 schools in Ghent (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

## Results

### *Teachers' Understanding of Multicultural Education*

The results of the in-depth interviews with teachers and principals in different schools indicated that there is a preference among teachers for an “embedded” multicultural education, that is, multiculturalism across different courses, as a part of the daily practice. When we asked for specific examples of embedded multicultural education, teachers’ response was largely focused on religion and religious diversity. Consistent with what Banks (1989) calls the *contributions approach*, teachers mainly referred to holidays and special

days that are considered important for minority students. Given the large number of Muslim pupils in Flanders, teachers more often than not focused on Islamic holidays:

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**Researcher:** The educational development goals for primary education state that multicultural or intercultural education is a task for all schools. What is that, what is your understanding of it?

**Maria:** For us, that isn't a different class . . . but it's a part of our daily practices. If we have a project about healthy breakfast, for instance, I couldn't imagine that we don't make it intercultural. Or, I mean, when it Sugar Feast or the Feast of the Sacrifice [*suikerfeest* and *offerfeest*],<sup>2</sup> or the day extra holiday for [Eastern] Orthodox [Christian] children. That is what we talk about with the children. You do not need to give any different courses for that. So for us, it presents itself, it is a part of our daily routine (Principal, *Black Square*, female, 30 years old).

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**Eric:** When it was Sugar Feast [*suikerfeest*], for example, we did a feast, so just for the children, we participate in the Sugar Feast. We made a Sugar-song, and things like why do you do that? And the children they enjoy to explain why it happens and when it happens, and that it is not each year the same day, and I think that is also important that the other children [i.e., non-Muslims] also know why they celebrate Sugar Feast (Teacher, *Black Triangle*, male, 30 years old).

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**Dimitri:** They grow here with [multiculturalism] and they feel very good about it. Because at religion class, we discuss the Jewish faith, about Muslims, and now we focus on First Communion, but we have also talked about Ramadan and about the Jewish Easter, before that it was Passover, the Holy 40 days, and we made a comparison between Jews, Muslims, and Catholics, the Christian faith (Teacher, *White Triangle*, male, 26 years old).

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A second recurring example of embedded multicultural education was the addition of non-European names in the textbooks. Various teachers stated that in the past their textbooks only included common Dutch names such as Jan, Leen, and Piet, while nowadays these names were partly replaced by typical Muslim names such as Achmed and Mohammed. However, no teacher

indicated that the content or perspectives of the textbooks had been changed. On the contrary, as explicitly stated by Sarah, it was still the same textbook, but only some non-European names and pictures of ethnically minority children were added. As such, this form of multicultural content integration corresponds to what Banks (1989) labeled the *additive approach* because the curriculum itself does not change:

**Sarah:** But actually our manuals [course material books] became very good at it, actually publishers do keep that in mind. For instance, when we read a story during the Dutch class, then it is not only about Jan and Leen, but there is also an Ahmed or Mohammed. That wasn't the case in the past. In the past, in our language course book, it was Jan, Miep and Kees. And know, there are Turkish names, Italian names, and the children learn about a little negro [Here Sarah uses the Dutch work "neger," which many white Dutch-speaking people do not find offensive]. That wasn't the case in the past, we used to have only white children in that *same book* as we have now (Teacher, *Black Square*, female, 29 years old).

**Lise:** For example, when I look at our new language book, our math book, just the pictures in the math book, there are also children who don't look very white. Different colors, but also different names. In the past, it was all about Jan and Piet. And now, there are at some places a Rashid or an Achmed, and so, I mean, it changes more and more (Teacher, *White Circle*, female, 47 years old).

There were no teachers in our sample who had a transformative and/or social action approach understanding of multicultural content integration. Also other dimensions of multicultural education (such as the knowledge construction process or equity pedagogy) were not mentioned. Most interestingly, teachers had a clear understanding of what should *not* be regarded as multicultural education. That is, teachers' spontaneously mentioned and opposed bilingual or multilingual education:

**Researcher:** Our educational development goals for primary education say that school should do multicultural or intercultural education. What is your understanding of it?

**Hans:** I have no idea. No. If that is, like, like we have to teach in Turkish or in Moroccan, than I can't of course, because I am not going to learn.

So I have no idea, in America, in the United States, in the South, they do teach in “Mexican” and in Spanish, right? But I think, if those people should integrate in the United States, why do they have to . . . I don’t get it (Teacher, *White Circle*, male, 68 years old).

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These comments give an idea about Flemish teachers’ understanding of multicultural education, that is, they are limited to the content-integration dimension and limited to a contributions and additive approach. Next, we will explore how teacher-level and school-level characteristics are related to the degree of incorporated multicultural content by teachers. First, four hypotheses will be generated using qualitative evidence, and then, these hypotheses will be tested using multilevel analysis.

### *Hypotheses*

In all schools, teachers discussed some teacher characteristics as being related to the ability to incorporate multicultural content. First of all, teachers’ ethnic background was mentioned as relevant. In line with the literature on Whiteness, ethnic minority teachers were thought to have better multicultural skills than native-White teachers. This perspective is not only expressed by the only ethnic minority teacher in our qualitative sample (i.e., Nadia), but also by a native-White teacher from the *Black Circle*.

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**Researcher:** Do you believe that your teaching materials are multicultural enough?

**Kristof:** No, I don’t think so, but if you make a little effort, than you can find a lot about it on the computer. And if you have a question, we also have Öznur, she is a Turkish teacher and actually always open for questions: How does this work, how is it? She teaches “Turkish religion” for Turkish children, that is something we have chosen to provide Turkish religion to our pupils (Teacher, *Black Circle*, male, 32 years old).

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**Nadia:** So I myself am of Moroccan origin, which is actually good for the school because we have quite lot parents [of Moroccan background] and when it is necessary I can help those people in their own language.

**Researcher:** Is that in Arabic or Berber language?

**Nadia:** I know both. Actually my mother tongue is Arabic, but I've learned Berber . . . I have learned it gradually, so I can usually help parents in their own language (Teacher, *Black Triangle*, female, 37 years old).

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Hence, our first hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Ethnic minority teachers will provide more multicultural content than native-White Belgian teachers.

A second teacher characteristic that is discussed is teachers' age. That is, younger teachers such as Dimitri (*White Triangle*, male, 26 years old) argued that the teacher education programs recently started to pay attention to multiculturalism, whereas an older teacher Koen (*White Circle*, male, 52 years old) explicitly referred to his "old age" as a reason for his conservative perspectives about the headscarf.

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**Researcher:** And during your teacher education, do you think that there was enough attention paid to this topic?

**Dimitri:** When I started, it increased and now it must be even more. That just goes with time, with society and culture. And also teaching goals change in that way. And now there is more change. There are trainings, seminars organized . . . and the society is constantly changing and as a school, we have to follow this (Teacher, *White Triangle*, male, 26 years old).

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**Koen:** But our advantage is that we are with the moderate Muslims, you know, we're not stuck here with the extremists. Fortunately. But still, I have *questions that are probably related to my old age*. For example, I have my questions about parents making trouble like in Antwerp with the headscarf, my God. If it is a rule that you are not allowed to wear a headscarf in a Catholic school or a public building, you can't wear a headscarf, so be it and accept it. When it is a rule that it is not allowed to smoke in a restaurant, and then I have to accept it as well and I am not allowed to smoke (Teacher, *White Circle*, male, 52 years old).

As such, our second hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 2:** Younger teachers will provide more multicultural content

Teachers also discussed some characteristics of the school. More specifically, teachers argued that in schools with higher concentrations of ethnic minority children, attention to multicultural education is simply a given. Meanwhile, teachers in schools with fewer ethnic minority children argued that it is difficult to talk about multicultural differences when there are no ethnic minority children in the class. Again, it should be noted that these quotes again make clear that religious diversity and a contributions approach principally determine what teachers' understanding of multicultural education in Flanders is:

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**Researcher:** For a couple of years now, the educational development goals for primary education say that multicultural or intercultural education is a task for all schools. What is your understanding of it?

**Laura:** Intercultural education, that is how we work here. Different cultures, different mentalities, different opinions, a lot of diversity, and respect for other values and norms. Here, that is in fact an automatism. [Our] children don't question it, like different religions or something, that is an established fact, just normal with all [our] different nationalities. We don't question that, because it is a normal [thing], which is automatic. When it is Sugar Feast or Feast of the Sacrifice, we automatically talk about that. Or when children have First Communion, other children will ask about it (Teacher, *Black Square*, female, 34 years old).

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**Researcher:** You said that you have three ethnic minority children in your class. Does that have an impact on your . . .

**Mieke:** Yes, for sure. If I did not have minority children in the class, I couldn't make comparisons, because I want to relate it to their home situations. So, when I talk about religion, I try to, and when you don't have any ethnic minority children, then you might still talk about other cultures and things like that, but when they are not in the class, then you don't have any feeling about it, so it is important to have a mix (Teacher, *White Circle*, female, 38 years old).

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Hence, we can formulate a third hypothesis about the relationship between ethnic school composition and the extent of multicultural content integration:

**Hypothesis 3:** A higher percentage of ethnic minority children in a school is related to higher levels of multicultural content integration.

A second school characteristic that is discussed by the teachers is school sector or school denomination. As mentioned earlier, around half of the publicly funded schools in Flanders are Catholic schools. Interestingly, owing to their location and demographic changes some of these Catholic schools serve a homogeneous Muslim student population like the *Black Circle*. While Kelly (*Black Circle*, female, 26 years old) argued that teaching in a Catholic school provided opportunities to pay more attention to religious differences, other teachers such as Simon (*Black Circle*, male, 55 years old) argued that Catholic structures were largely unsupportive when it comes to multicultural issues.

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**Kelly:** We are a Catholic school, so of course we do have some Christian things we still want to teach to Muslim children, for example, I mean, they learn a little from us [and] we learn from them. But it happens in a very natural way. For example, at Christmas we have a “Christmas Café” where there is a Christmas tree and presents, that is a bit like our tradition. But at the Feast of Sacrifice or something, we celebrate it as well, and our Flemish kids learn about it in religion class, they also talk about it. I mean, we are thinking about it, in our school, about our differences, and we deal with it well (Teacher, *Black Circle*, female, 26 years old).

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**Simon:** Now we have a new archbishop and this is a Catholic school . . . . The first thing that comes to my mind is: Oops we also have an Islamic teacher here. Imagine that the new archbishop says, “In Catholic schools, we absolutely don’t want to give Islamic education and subsidize it.” Then we have a very big problem here, because we only have Muslim children and we provide [Islamic education]. The Catholic administration never allows that, actually they do not want that. That’s a Catholic aspect, [and so] on this issue, we should expect very little support from the Catholic church (Teacher, *Black Circle*, male, 55 years old).

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In other words, the qualitative data suggest that the relationship between Catholic schools and multicultural education is an ambivalent one. Hence, our fourth hypothesis actually yields two contradictory expectations:

**Hypothesis 4a:** There will be higher levels of multicultural content integration in Catholic schools.

**Table 2.** Multilevel Analysis: Teacher-Level Influences on Multiethnic Content Integration.

|                                 | $\gamma$    | SE          | $\gamma^*$  | <i>p</i>    |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Intercept                       | -.236       | .206        | —           | .252        |
| Age                             | .003        | .004        | .031        | .445        |
| Gender (1 = male)               | .073        | .102        | .029        | .471        |
| <b>Ethnicity (1 = minority)</b> | <b>.476</b> | <b>.161</b> | <b>.116</b> | <b>.003</b> |
| Family SES                      | .016        | .023        | .030        | .493        |
| Variance components             |             |             |             |             |
| Between school ( $\tau_0$ )     | .043        | .026        |             |             |
| Within school ( $\sigma^2$ )    | .965        | .056        |             |             |

Note.  $\gamma$  = unstandardized gamma coefficient;  $\gamma^*$  = standardized gamma coefficient; SES = socioeconomic status. Statistically significant effects are bolded.

**Hypothesis 4b:** There will be lower levels of multicultural content integration in Catholic schools.

### *Correlates of Multicultural Content Integration*

Before we test the above-outlined hypotheses, we examine whether the school context matters with respect to the multicultural content provided by teachers. For this purpose, we calculated the variance components in the null model, which is the model without predictors. We found a between-school variance ( $\tau_0$ ) of .052 and a within-school variance ( $\sigma^2$ ) of .949. The variance at the school level can be computed as the between-school variance component divided by the sum of within-school and between-school variance [ $\tau_0/(\sigma^2 + \tau_0)$ ]. We calculated that 5.19% ( $p < .001$ ) of the variance in multicultural content integration lies between schools. As such, a small but significant amount of the variance in multicultural educational practices is at the school level. This justifies the need for a multilevel analysis.

In Table 2, we include teacher-level influences of multicultural education. Here, we report standardized gamma coefficients ( $\gamma^*$ ) to determine the strength of the effects. Standardized coefficients are achieved by multiplying the unstandardized coefficients ( $\gamma$ ) with the standard deviation of the explanatory variable divided by the standard deviation of the dependent variable (Hox, 1995).

From all teacher characteristics, only teachers' ethnic background is significantly related to multicultural content integration: Ethnic minority teachers report higher levels of multicultural content integration than native-White

**Table 3.** Multilevel Analysis: Teacher-Level and School-Level Influences on Multiethnic Content Integration.

|                                 | $\gamma$     | SE          | $\gamma^*$   | $p$         |
|---------------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Intercept                       | -.353        | .218        | —            | .105        |
| Teacher level                   |              |             |              |             |
| Age                             | .004         | .004        | .037         | .370        |
| Gender (1 = male)               | .088         | .101        | .035         | .381        |
| <b>Ethnicity (1 = minority)</b> | <b>.448</b>  | <b>.161</b> | <b>.109</b>  | <b>.006</b> |
| Family SES                      | .023         | .023        | .044         | .308        |
| School-level                    |              |             |              |             |
| <b>Ethnic composition</b>       | <b>.005</b>  | <b>.001</b> | <b>.185</b>  | <b>.000</b> |
| <b>Sector (1 = Catholic)</b>    | <b>-.163</b> | <b>.085</b> | <b>-.082</b> | <b>.054</b> |
| <b>Region: Antwerp</b>          | <b>-.319</b> | <b>.108</b> | <b>-.152</b> | <b>.003</b> |
| Region: Genk                    | -.122        | .112        | -.056        | .278        |
| Region: Ghent                   | Ref          | Ref         | ref          | ref         |
| Variance components             |              |             |              |             |
| Between-school ( $\tau_0$ )     | .005         | .017        |              |             |
| Within-school ( $\sigma^2$ )    | .969         | .054        |              |             |

Note.  $\gamma$  = unstandardized gamma coefficient;  $\gamma^*$  = standardized gamma coefficient; SES = socioeconomic status. Statistically significant effects are bolded.

teachers ( $\gamma^* = .116$ ;  $p = .003$ ; Table 2). Teachers' gender, family SES, and age are not significantly related to the level of multicultural content integration. Hence, we find support for Hypothesis 1 (about teacher ethnicity), but not for Hypothesis 2 (about teacher age).

In Table 3, we include teacher-level influences of multicultural education. In schools with higher proportions of ethnic minority pupils, teachers tend to incorporate more multicultural content ( $\gamma^* = .185$ ) than in schools with lower levels of ethnic minority children. We also find that school sector is related to the extent of multicultural content integration: Teachers report less multicultural-content-integration activities in Catholic schools than in non-Catholic (state) schools ( $\gamma^* = -.082$ ). Finally, our results indicate that schools in Antwerp focus less on multiculturalism than schools in Ghent ( $\gamma^* = .152$ ), while schools in Genk do not significantly differ from schools in Ghent with respect to integrated multicultural content.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As most Western societies are becoming increasingly more ethnically diverse, school boards, policymakers and classroom teachers are searching for

appropriate ways to serve these diverse student bodies. One particular response to the challenge of education in a multiethnic society is to implement multicultural educational practices. However, as we explained in the introduction earlier, a great deal of the scholarship on multicultural education is limited to the American context. Moreover, empirical studies have largely focused on pre-service teachers; as a result, the correlates of teachers' incorporation of multicultural education remain sorely neglected. This mixed-method study has aimed to fill these lacunae by exploring teachers' understanding of multicultural education, and by investigating teacher-level and school-level correlates of multicultural content integration in three Flemish cities.

The results of the semi-structured in-depth interviews indicate that Flemish teachers mainly focused on religion and religious diversity when they were asked about their understanding of multicultural education. This understanding arguably departs from how multicultural education in North America is normally understood or practiced (in part because public school teachers in the United States are not inclined to broach religion in the classroom owing to their understanding about the separation of church and state). However, at the same time Flemish teachers' understanding of multicultural education was largely consistent with what Banks (1989, 1993) calls the multicultural-content-integration dimension, and more specifically limited to the contributions approach (i.e., celebrating heroes and holidays) and additive approach (i.e., adding multicultural content without changing the authorial point-of-view). Discussions about Islamic holidays were typically mentioned along with the presence of non-European names in textbooks.

Based on the in-depth interviews, we formulated four hypotheses about teacher-level and school-level influences on multicultural content integration. Three of the four hypotheses were supported by the results of multilevel analyses. First, in line with our expectations and the literature on teacher Whiteness (see Applebaum, 2005; Sleeter, 2001), we found that teachers' ethnic background is related to the degree of provided multicultural content: Ethnic minority teachers reported higher levels of multicultural content integration than native-White teachers. However, in contrast to our second hypothesis, teachers' age was not related to the extent of incorporated multicultural content. Furthermore, our results also supported the third hypothesis: At the school-level, we found that the ethnic composition of the student body is a strong predictor of the multicultural content integration. That is, teachers tend to incorporate more multicultural educational in schools with a higher share of ethnic minority students. Finally, with respect to the effect of the school denomination, we had two contradictory hypotheses. Our results suggest that teachers in Catholic schools focus slightly less on multiculturalism

than teachers in non-Catholic schools. The sample of this study comes from three different cities in Flanders, which we controlled for in the models. While we did not have a particular hypothesis about the influence of the region, we found that schools in Ghent provided more multicultural education than schools in Antwerp, while schools in Genk do not differ from schools in Ghent.

These findings have various implications. First, as we have shown, Flemish teachers focus on religious diversity. Second, there is an strong aversion toward multilingualism reflected in how the understanding of multicultural education is embedded in the national sociopolitical context. The negative attitude toward use of minority language at school has a disproportionate impact on the Muslim minority population, and is consistent with other findings about the political climate in Flanders that for more than 20 years has not been favorable to Muslims or to their specific needs (see Agirdag, 2010; Merry, 2005). Nevertheless, this study shows the relevance of regional differences with respect to multicultural content: The fact that there is more multicultural education incorporated within Ghent's schools than in schools in Antwerp reflects very much the political context of both cities: Leftist politics are more common in Ghent, while Antwerp is a city with large support for (extreme) right-wing Vlaams Belang, an openly anti-immigrant party (Swyngedouw, 2000).

Several items for future study recommend themselves. First, the role that religion plays in discussions of multiculturalism deserves much more attention. For instance, U.S. scholars rarely focus on religion as relevant for multicultural education, even as Christianity (especially Catholicism and Pentecostalism) play an important role in the lives of many Latino immigrants, similar to the way that Islam plays a role for Turks and Moroccans in Belgium. The fact that some ethnic minorities such as Latinos share the same religion as the mainstream society does not make religion less important in their educational experiences. Second, the degree to which multicultural education is or is not incorporated into school curricula—and more broadly into the school culture—and how this also corresponds to national and/or regional differences, also deserves further study. Clearly the local or national political climate can and does influence the attitudes of school board members and teachers, but also are often decisive in influencing what can and should be taught.

Furthermore, our finding that ethnic minority teachers more easily and more frequently incorporate practices of multicultural education underscores the acute need for more ethnic minority teachers in Flemish schools. Finally, our results suggest that Flemish Catholic schools' position with respect to multicultural education is an ambivalent one. While some teachers argued

that the Catholic identity provides a potential to focus on religious diversity, other teachers perceived the Catholic administration as non-supportive when it came to their Muslim students. Taken together with the results of the quantitative survey that indicates that there is slightly less focus on multicultural education in Catholic schools, policymakers of Catholic education in Flanders might reconsider their current position on multicultural education.

Most importantly, the significant relationship between school ethnic composition and multicultural education is a predictable, yet disturbing, finding. It is not a little bit ironic that multicultural education is most in evidence in precisely the schools where students arguably are most aware of what it means to be a member of a multicultural society. Indeed, it would be virtually impossible for a Muslim child to grow up in Belgium or any other European country and not be (made) aware of how one is marked as different from the mainstream. Sadly, too, encounters with differential treatment on the basis of one's ethnic and religious difference *begin at the school*.

Hence, just as single-sex schools do not only provide single-sex biology, there is no fundamental reason why only schools with ethnic minority pupils should focus on multicultural education. On the contrary, in particular there is a need for native-White students, who are largely separated from their ethnic minority peers in White-segregated schools, to become more familiar with ethnic diversity. While ethnic minority students learn in many contexts about the mainstream society in which they live, for native-White students the school context might be the only places where they can have meaningful encounters with ethnic and religious others (see Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the absence of ethnic minority peers should not result in teachers ignoring multicultural education, with the attendant result that native-White students remain largely ignorant (read: unaware) about ethnic and religious others. This ignorance not only extends to superficial knowledge about cultural or religious facts but also to the structural inequalities that students from ethnic minority backgrounds experience. However, whether teachers in all-White settings are equipped to facilitate these discussions is another matter. Whatever the case, our study has shown that the need for multicultural education may even be greater in all-White contexts.

This finding has implications for both policymakers and theorists of multicultural education. Policymakers (and teacher education programs) should emphasize the importance of multicultural education in schools with few ethnic minority students not only to "raise awareness" about otherness but also to challenge underlying assumptions about ethnic and cultural dominance that typically go unnoticed and unexamined. However, scholars in this field might first consider a reconceptualization of multicultural education. That is,

within the approach of James Banks, but in other frameworks of multicultural education as well, the focus is primarily on the “other” and on the exclusion of “otherness” in mainstream curricula. Consequently, teachers who work in advantageous settings where privileged students are enrolled ironically consider multicultural education to not be relevant for their students. Yet as many Whiteness studies scholars and critical race theorists have argued, future work in this field should emphasize how multicultural education is relevant for privileged students and for non-diverse schools (Applebaum, 2005; Sleeter, 2001).

In sum, this study shows the importance of studying multicultural education in a different context than the United States. On the one hand, our findings validate the helpfulness of Banks’ theoretical writings: As in the United States, most Belgian teachers’ understanding of multicultural education is limited to the content-integration dimension, with a specific focus on the contributions approach and additive approach. On the other hand, our results show that teachers’ understanding of multicultural education is contextually embedded. Indeed, only is the understanding of what “multicultural” is dependent on the national context (e.g., in contrast to the United States, Belgian teachers clearly focus more on religion than on ethnicity), but also the regional context (e.g., regional politics) and the school context (i.e., school ethnic composition and school sector) will likely influence how teachers implement multicultural content in their respective classrooms.

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### **Notes**

1. In the literature, there is a discrepancy between the concepts interculturalism and multiculturalism (see Meer & Modood, 2012). However, in Belgian policy context and in this article, these are used interchangeably.
2. These are Dutch expressions for two most important religious holidays celebrated by Muslims, respectively, named “Eid al-Fitr” and “Eid al-Adha” in Arabic.
3. Yet given the differential treatment minorities frequently encounter in mixed schools, it is not a foregone conclusion that meaningful encounters are likely, or even possible (See Merry 2013).

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