

Student cultural diversity and how it is defined, perceived, and managed: A review of empirical studies across 3 levels of analysis

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Abstract

Education systems across the world are not only experiencing cultural diversification differently, but are also engaging with it using differing terms, concepts, and practices. Thus, understanding the varying dynamics underlying this global phenomenon of educational diversification is necessary. Through analyzing a group of 35 published empirical studies, this review reveals the key themes that guide how education systems across the world define, perceive, and manage student cultural diversity as it relates to students, teachers, and the curricula.

Keywords: student – culture – diversity – perceptions – management

1 INTRODUCTION

Education systems across the world are becoming increasingly more diversified. Channels of immigration, globalization, and internationalization have made it possible for people to move around, for cultures to collide, and for countries to open up to one another. Curricula, teachers, and students are no exception to this global movement toward cultural diversification¹, which generated varying reactions and outcomes. Some see it as a valuable step toward a more interconnected world and others view it as a destabilizing phenomenon of existing societal and educational norms and traditions. Additionally, while culturally homogeneous classrooms might experience this diversification through the lens of globalization, culturally heterogeneous classrooms might experience it due to patterns of immigration². Education systems across the world not only experience cultural diversification differently, but also engage with it using differing terms, concepts, and practices. Thus, understanding the varying dynamics underlying this global phenomenon of educational diversification is necessary. This review stems from a lack of comparative research in this area³ and focuses particularly on student cultural diversity—a construct that refers to cultural diversity as it relates to students. Through analyzing a pool of published empirical studies, this paper informs researchers in the field of comparative education of the key themes that guide how education systems across the world de-

fine, perceive, and manage student cultural diversity as it relates to students, teachers, and the curricula.

2 METHODS

2.1 Research Purpose and Focus

The purpose of this study is to explore key themes and patterns regarding how student cultural diversity in different classrooms around the world is defined, conceptualized, and handled. Through a qualitative review of multiple peer-reviewed, empirical studies in English and French on student cultural diversity and within 3 levels of analysis (student, teacher, and the curriculum), the following questions will be answered:

1. How is student cultural diversity defined and conceptualized in the empirical studies analyzed?
2. What are the characteristics of the interactions between student cultural diversity and each the following: students, teachers, and the curriculum?
3. What methodologies are used or suggested to manage these interactions?
4. How do the findings on each of the latter questions vary according to the regional and linguistic diversity of the reviewed sample?

Table 1 Keyword combinations in English and French.

Level of Analysis	Keywords for studies in English	Keywords for studies in French
1. Teachers	Culture, Diversity, Teacher, Education Culture, Diversity, Professor, Education	Culture, Diversité, Enseignant, Éducation Culture, Diversité, Professeur, Éducation
2. Students	Culture, Diversity, Student, Education	Culture, Diversité, Élève, Éducation Culture, Étudiant, Enseignant, Éducation
3. Curriculum	Culture, Diversity, Curriculum, Education	Culture, Diversité, Curriculum, Éducation

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection process relied on the Google Scholar database and only took into consideration peer-reviewed empirical studies on student cultural diversity published since 2015. The selection of this specific period of time was meant to make the study up to date with the most recent findings pertaining to student cultural diversity in the classroom. Focusing often on studies with empirical data helped keep the final sample manageable in quantity and reflective in quality of the realities on the field when it comes to understanding how student cultural diversity is defined and managed across the 3 levels of analysis. In addition to studies published in English, studies in French were taken into consideration because of the researchers' fluency in both languages. The keyword combinations used during the search phase for empirical studies on Google Scholar are illustrated in Table 1. The words used for the search were "Culture", "Diversity", and "Education" along with key words associated with each of the levels of analysis such as: "Teacher", "Professor", "Student", and "Curriculum." The data selection following the search for articles happened in 3 steps:

1. Overall selection of peer-reviewed articles that are relevant to the topic and each level of analysis (192 articles retained)
2. Selection of relevant articles with empirical data only (61 articles retained)
3. Final selection of articles that use empirical data that are pertinent to the topic and each level of analysis (35 articles retained)

This data selection process resulted in a final sample of 35 peer-reviewed, empirical studies covering 7 regions and 16 countries. It is important to highlight that the regional variable was not controlled for in the search; it emerged independently and was further amplified by targeting empirical studies in two different languages. This variable will, however, be accounted for in the analysis portion of this paper.

Table 2 summarizes the distribution of the studies, which make up the final sample, by region, country, and language. The majority of the studies reviewed pertain to the region of North America. The rest of the studies are distributed amongst the following regions: Africa,

Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East, and Oceania. Two studies are cross-national and involve more than one country. The distribution of the studies between French and English is fairly equal.

2.3 Data Analysis

Using Dedoose, a qualitative coding and analysis software, the articles in the final sample were divided by corresponding level of analysis, language, and region. The first step of the analysis of the articles in the final sample was deductive and thematic. It targeted the following indicators:

1. Words associated with how each article defines and conceptualizes student cultural diversity
2. Themes characterizing the interaction of student cultural diversity with each of the 3 levels of analysis: students, teachers, and curriculum
3. Methodologies used or recommended to manage the latter interactions

The second step of the analysis was interested in the emergent themes' variations across language, country/region, and level of analysis, leading to the identification of several patterns across the variables of the study.

2.4 Limitations

This review has several limitations that emerge from the small size of the sample. To keep this study manageable, it was necessary to limit the analysis to a small number of articles, which only allowed for the representation of a limited number of studies on student cultural diversity. Additionally, the researcher's bias was partially involved in the selection of the final sample of articles, mainly to ensure its relevance to the levels of analysis and the research questions. Even though the analysis expands beyond studies written in English, a major part of the final sample includes studies from Western countries, with more than 50% of the reviewed articles pertaining solely to Canada and the U.S. To minimize the effect of such an imbalanced proportionality on the regional analysis, only general themes and tendencies pertaining to student cultural diversity were examined.

Table 2 Distribution of the reviewed studies by region, country, and language.

Region/Country	Number of Studies in English	Number of Studies in French
Africa	1 South Africa	-
Asia Pacific	1 Korean, 1 China	1 Thailand
Europe	1 UK, 1 Belgium, 1 The Netherlands	2 France, 1 Switzerland, 1 Ireland
Latin America and the Caribbean	-	1 Colombia, 1 Dominica
Middle East	-	1 Lebanon
North America	7 USA	11 Canada
Oceania	1 New Zealand	-
Cross-National	1	1

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Defining and conceptualizing student cultural diversity

This portion of the analysis includes all of the articles in the final sample and looks for terminologies and concepts used to describe, define, and/or refer to student cultural diversity

Regional Patterns Diversity is associated in the majority of the regions to the idea of heterogeneity^{4;5} or difference⁶. Cultural diversity, particularly, is linked to visible and distinctive characteristics, which can be generally classified as exogenous to the mainstream definition of culture.

Linguistic difference is one of these characteristics and constitutes the main focus of 9 studies in the final sample. While in Europe, specifically in France, there exists a huge focus on allophone students and the place of multilingualism⁶ in the education system, in Canada, more focus is placed on the representation and protection of French-speaking minority students^{7;8;9} in the Anglophone parts of the country. In Latin America and the Caribbean, students’ native tongues and proficiency in foreign languages, like English, constitute a big part of what is considered as student cultural diversity—particularly in the educational context of a country like Colombia². In the U.S., linguistic diversity is just one of many other factors used to define cultural diversity amongst students¹⁰.

Nationality and origin are concepts that are heavily present in studies from Asia Pacific, Europe, and North America. The status of culturally-diverse students in those regions is often given to students who are either non-nationals or whose origins lie outside of the country in question. However, in Europe and North America, unlike Asia Pacific, nationality is always accompanied by the concept of immigration, which is used both as an indicator and as a precursor of student cultural diversity^{11;12;13}. This difference in terminology could be explained by the difference in the migration patterns that exist in these regions and in the ways in which their classrooms have come to culturally diversify. In Europe and North America, the focus on immigration

puts student cultural diversity within the dichotomy of the majority-minority. Students from culturally-diverse backgrounds are often referred to as the “minority”^{11;14} and in some more politically charged contexts as the “other”⁴.

Indigeneity is also incorporated in the definition of student cultural diversity—notably in Canada, the U.S., and New Zealand. In these countries, there is a close tie between a student’s culture and a student’s identity that is not easily seen in other regions such as Europe or Asia Pacific^{15;16;17}. In Canada, the term ethno-cultural diversity¹⁷ is heavily used, making ethnicity a key factor in determining one’s positionality vis-à-vis cultural diversity.

Finally, the use of the term intercultural education^{7;8;18;12;13} to qualify the presence of cultural diversity within the educational space is common amongst the majority of the studies reviewed. However, in studies pertaining to the U.S., the terms intercultural and multicultural education are often used interchangeably¹³. Finally, while cultural competence is identified as a key skill to navigate globalization¹⁸ and internationalization¹²—respectively in Colombia and Korea—it is referenced in the U.S. as a tool to merely manage the country’s internal cultural diversity¹³.

Anglophone versus Francophone Studies Apart from the regional differences outlined in the first part of this thematic analysis, there are differences that can be seen between studies in French and in English. In defining the social aspect of student cultural diversity, the notions of social justice, equality, and equity come up solely in Anglophone studies. These notions exist in the UK, South Africa, and especially in the U.S. where other terms such as: privilege, whiteness, race, and role modeling are associated with the definition of student cultural diversity^{19;20;21}.

3.2 Management of Student Cultural Diversity

After identifying the concepts attached to how student cultural diversity is defined across the sample’s regions and countries, the rest of the paper will focus on how stu-

dent cultural diversity interacts with students, teachers, and the curricula. It is important to note that, throughout this part of the analysis, references to “culturally-diverse” students designate students who exhibit the characteristics used by the studies to categorize them as such. These characteristics, as seen previously, differ from one country or region to another (in France, cultural diversity is attached solely to multilingualism, while in the U.S. it is often attached to ethnicity and nationality). Thus, for simplicity, students who belong to this category in the national or regional context in which they are analyzed will be qualified as “culturally-diverse” students.

3.2.1 At the student level of analysis

This portion of the analysis is comprised of 11 studies from: North America (5 studies), Asia Pacific (3 studies), and Europe (3 studies). The focus is on how all students, in the studies reviewed, perceive and interact with student cultural diversity.

Regional Patterns In Europe and North America, students of culturally-diverse backgrounds find themselves victims of systematized stereotyping either about their anticipated academic achievement^{22;23;24}, personal identities^{14;4;25}, or cultural background^{22;14;4}. These stereotypes originate from somewhat of an ethnocentric lens^{22;4} with which student cultural diversity is perceived in educational spaces, especially in France and Canada. In Grenier and Steinbach’s study⁴, interviews with a group of Quebec-born high school students showcase how students from culturally diverse backgrounds are often seen as “violent”, “criminal”, and simply “incompatible with Canadian culture.” This puts culturally-diverse students in the dilemma of integration versus assimilation vis-à-vis the majority’s cultural background. Both concepts imply the transition of culturally-diverse individuals to becoming a part of the larger culture in which they exist. However, while integration allows for the conservation of the individual’s own cultural identity, assimilation favors the complete and exclusive adoption of the majority’s cultural identity. Even though opinions around whether culturally-diverse students should integrate or assimilate vary amongst the studies analyzed, there seems to be an agreement that the lack of either can cause low academic performance and stress amongst students all students.

In the U.S., university students from ethnic minorities are found to experience what Cokley et al.¹⁴ call “minority status stress”: a form of traumatic pressure caused by a lack of integration and which can lead to imposter syndrome and other mental health ramifications. In Canada, Grenier and Steinbach’s⁴ interviews showcase how Quebec-born students’ desire to assimilate immigrant students causes increases in their levels of anxiety, hostility, and insensitivity toward difference and diversity.

Cockey et al.’s “minority stress”¹⁴ is also present—in studies concerned with international students in Asia Pacific, Europe, and the U.S.—in the form of “acculturative” or cultural adjustment stress^{26;27;12;23}. All of these forms of mental health pressure create systems of physical, psychological⁴, residential²⁶, and linguistic segregation²³ whereby students from culturally-diverse backgrounds are separated from the rest of the students. Despite the dominant negative characterization of student cultural diversity at this level of analysis, there are a few positive attitudes that advocate for establishing culturally inclusive education systems where student cultural diversity can be integrated and valued^{4;12;5}. Finally, in Grenier and Steinbach’s study⁴, Quebec-born students who see culturally-diverse students as individuals rather than representative entities of their countries of origin or of minority populations at large, tend to have a much more optimistic and positive attitude toward diversity and immigrant student integration.

Suggested Methods The following methods to manage student cultural diversity at the student level emerged: provision of psychological and learning support in the forms of motivation⁵, adjustment help²³, and mental health¹⁴ as well as better classroom management⁵ and the use of intercultural teaching approaches^{22;12?}. In Thailand, specifically, there is a focus on teacher training and teacher collaboration⁵. In the U.S., the focus is on community partnerships, which could be related to the country’s incorporation of social justice in its definition of student cultural diversity¹⁴.

3.2.2 At the teacher level of analysis

This part of the analysis is interested in understanding how teachers examine, interact with, impact, and get influenced by student cultural diversity. 18 studies were considered for this level of analysis, covering the following regions: Africa (1 study), Europe (4 studies), Latin America and the Caribbean (1 study), Middle East (1 study), Oceania (1 study), and North America (10 studies).

Regional Patterns Teachers’ interactions with student cultural diversity is characterized mainly by hierarchy and selectivity: two recurring themes that are found in studies pertaining to North America and Europe^{6;28;21}. In dealing with student cultural diversity, teachers tend to appreciate certain forms of difference in favor of others. In France, for example, while multilingualism in general is seen as a form of enrichment, multilingualism without proficiency in the French language makes teachers perceive this form of diversity negatively⁶. In the U.S., Canada, Lebanon, and the UK, hierarchy exists alongside the majority-minority dynamic. For many of the teachers from these regions, students that are categorized as “culturally-diverse” often need to adapt to the standards of the majority group^{20;29;10}.

Similar to what was discussed in the previous level of analysis, individual aspects of diversity tend to be much more valued and accepted than their social or communal aspects. In Bigot et al.'s study⁶ concerning allophone students in France, the teachers interviewed were concerned about students' linguistic diversity only when it affected their ability to speak French, which is a key component of the national French identity.

The dilemma of integration-assimilation, also discussed in the previous level of analysis, is present at the teacher level of analysis in the form of the include-accommodate dynamic. Teachers interviewed in studies in France, Canada, and Belgium were prone to accommodating student differences during their lessons in a spontaneous manner. However, they were either opposed to or simply uninterested in actively integrating student cultural diversity as part of their lesson planning^{11;6;7;8}. Generally, these teachers are the same ones who also view diversity as a barrier to student success or who adopt a colorblind approach²¹ to diversity, whereby they choose neither to see students' cultural or ethnic differences, nor to accommodate for them^{11;6;7;20;13;8}. Teachers, who see diversity as an added value, try to include culturally-diverse perspectives in their lessons. However, they often find themselves unable to do so because of many factors such as: lack of resources, logistical issues, and lack of training—as seen in Benimass and Kamano's study^{7;8} in Canada.

This disparity between intentions and results in dealing with student cultural diversity extends into a broader theme of discontinuity and imbalance. Gaudet and Richard's study²⁸ showcases how teachers, when found in a context of cultural diversity, feel a gap between their personal and academic identities, their cultural status (whether they are part of the cultural majority or minority groups), and their professional identities as teachers. This gap can often lead teachers to become unable to manage student cultural diversity, leading them to develop instead a sense of insecurity, insensitivity, and ambivalence toward it^{6;28}.

The complexity of the relationship between student cultural diversity and teachers is recognized across all of the studies reviewed. There is also a strong emphasis on the constant development of teachers with regards to managing student cultural diversity^{30;10}. Finally, teachers who come from culturally-diverse backgrounds in Canada find themselves at a similar position to students from culturally-diverse backgrounds. While interacting with their teacher colleagues, these teachers also experience bias, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and lack of support^{31;32}.

Suggested methods Most of the methods that teachers are using to manage student cultural diversity are characterized in the majority of the studies as old, outdated, or incompatible with the teachers' or students' reali-

ties^{11;20}. In France and Colombia, methods remain limited to playing multilingual games, teaching of culture through language, and establishing comparisons between the cultures of the majority and minority groups^{6;18}. While France does not incorporate the management of cultural diversity into teaching⁶ the U.S. recognizes the importance of such incorporation¹³. Other countries are moving toward the use of differentiated pedagogy^{7;8}, intercultural mediation³³, multiculturalism¹¹, and social psychology in managing students of culturally-diverse backgrounds³⁰.

The Anglophone countries focus a lot on the necessity of undergoing discomfort and inquiry in the teacher's journey of learning how to efficiently handle cultural diversity^{30;20;13}. In Canada, teachers are encouraged to engage in a process of conscientization²⁸ vis-à-vis diversity, which is labeled in Lebanon as "ethnic and sociolinguistic awareness"³³.

3.2.3 At the curriculum level of analysis

This last analysis is focused on understanding how student cultural diversity is portrayed and managed at the level of the curriculum. Two cross-regional studies and 6 studies conducted in the following regions: Europe (1 study), Latin America and the Caribbean (1 study), and North America (4 studies) are considered.

Regional Patterns The majority of the studies on curricula are centered around themes of indigeneity and globalization as they relate to student cultural diversity. Current curricula in many countries like Canada, New Zealand, and the U.S. have been characterized by the misrepresentation of students from culturally-diverse backgrounds, notably indigenous peoples, in favor of the "de-responsibilization" of the negative impacts of the "white colonizer" or the majority culture on the minority culture^{15;16;17}. In Dominica, similar to the dynamics of hierarchy between the minority and majority groups seen at the student level of analysis, indigenous culture is portrayed in curricula as inferior to European culture³⁴, which is leading to massive acculturation and loss of indigenous languages in favor of Western ones. This pattern of hierarchy is also true for countries that are affected by globalization and whose cultural diversity is reliant upon outside cultures. The debate of misrepresentation of culturally-diverse students extends to the curricula's distortion of the realities of gender relations in Taiwan and religious diversity within denominational schools in Canada^{15;35}.

One of the methods that is suggested to intervene on student cultural diversity at the level of the curriculum is adding aspects of minority students' cultural identities into textbooks (e.g. in Belgium's Agirdag et al.¹¹, Muslim names like "Muhammed" were added to textbooks). In countries with issues related to indigeneity, there is a continuous call for the better representation of the

realities of students who are part of indigenous cultural backgrounds within the curricula¹⁵.

4 CONCLUSION

According to the review of the selected studies, student cultural diversity is often associated with visible heterogeneity and is attached to characteristics that do not always fit the mainstream definition of culture—like multilingualism in France. Phenomena such as migration, globalization, and internationalization have a big impact on how student cultural diversity is perceived and defined. This is seen through the dynamics of integration, assimilation, acculturation, and cultural adjustment that are overly present in how student cultural diversity is managed. In addition to that, the social, political, cultural, and historical backgrounds of countries and regions have an immense impact on how student cultural diversity is defined and managed across all of the levels of analysis. While in Anglophone studies social justice is associated with student cultural diversity, this concept is completely absent from Francophone studies. There are no other strictly apparent differences between Francophone and Anglophone studies at any of the three levels of analysis. The differences exist more on a national and regional basis. Table 3 (Annex i) and Table 4 (Annex ii) summarize the distribution of the key themes that emerged throughout the analysis of the 35 empirical studies.

At the student level of analysis, the majority of the representations of student cultural diversity are negative. The type of cultural diversity (language, origin, etc.) and how it is manifested (individually and/or socially) impact how other students and teachers view it and interact with it. As an example, studies on linguistic differences or internationalization within education have more positive perceptions of student cultural diversity. Studies involving ethnicity and immigration, however, showcase a much more politically-charged perspective on student cultural diversity. Unlike the student level of analysis, the relationship between teachers and student cultural diversity is much more nuanced and balanced between positive and negative perceptions. Teachers' own identities are shown to interfere with how they choose to respond to student cultural diversity. Despite these different attitudes, ensuring student success seems to be at the core of all the studies reviewed. Additionally, mental health concerns are a recurrent theme in characterizing the experience of teachers with managing student cultural diversity. At the curriculum level of analysis, student cultural diversity is closely tied to indigeneity and the misrepresentation of minority populations and their narratives due to the hegemony of the West and the legacies of colonialism. As for the current methodologies used to manage student cultural diversity, they are classified, in most cases, as outdated, superficial,

and inefficient. Student support, student-teacher collaboration, teacher training, and differentiated pedagogy are some of the alternative methodologies suggested to better manage student cultural diversity. Overall, there is a call, across all studies, for educational stakeholders to establish intercultural, multicultural, or culturally inclusive education systems to manage student cultural diversity more effectively.

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Table 3 ANNEX 1

Region	Defining student cultural diversity				The student level of analysis		
	Linguistic difference	Nationality and origin	Indigeneity	Social justice	Stereotyping	Stress	Cultural inclusivity
Africa/ Middle East		✓		✓			
Asia Pacific		✓				✓	✓
Europe (France)	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Europe (Outside of France)		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Latin America and the Caribbean	✓						
North America (Canada)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
North America (USA)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oceania			✓				

Table 4 ANNEX 2

Region	The teacher level of analysis					The curriculum level of analysis	
	Hierarchy and selectivity	Include vs. Disclude	Dis-continuity	Agents of change	Discomfort and Inquiry	Mis-representation	Hierarchy
Africa/ Middle East	✓			✓	✓		
Asia Pacific						✓	
Europe (France)	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Europe (Outside of France)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Latin America and the Caribbean							✓
North America (Canada)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
North America (USA)	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Oceania			✓	✓	✓	✓	