



# PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

## Collective Identity Formation in the French Classroom: The Discourse and Incorporation of Immigration History

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Thanks to the Council for European Studies Fellowship, I just returned from an invaluable month of pre-dissertation research in Paris. Setting out, my main objectives were: 1) to study the education initiatives and work of the National Center of Immigration History (CNHI); 2) to conduct interviews with high school history teachers to test interview protocol and see what issues teachers are raising as most salient in regards to teaching about immigration; 3) to make contacts at high schools in the region to identify potential sites for my study next fall; 4) to meet with scholars in my field. All of this I set out to accomplish with an eye to guiding and focusing my research questions and methodology for my dissertation.

I started my research at the CNHI where during my first two weeks in Paris I observed three teacher training sessions. These sessions, which generally included a lecture and a guided visit of the immigration history museum followed by a group discussion, were extremely interesting in terms of understanding how the CNHI Education Department is working with and approaching teachers, as well as how their advocacy for the teaching of immigration history is understood and received by teachers. These sessions also proved to be extremely fruitful for me in terms of making contacts with teachers and schools. One of the teacher trainers I met at the first session I attended sent an email out on my behalf to teachers in the Versailles school district, and it was through this email that I recruited most of the teachers I interviewed. In addition to these training sessions, I spent some time in the newly opened library and media center at the CNHI where I was able to consult books and film that I cannot access in the United States. I also interviewed the head of the Education Department and a history teacher who works closely with the CNHI on designing their education materials.

I conducted a total of five interviews in January. These interviews were extremely beneficial to my research as they allowed me to test out my questions, become a more experienced interviewer, and even with this small sample, see some common themes emerge from the data. Additionally through each teacher I interviewed I was able to learn more about their school and with some spoke about the possibility of conducting research at their institution next year. Finally, the process of recruiting interviewees was extremely rewarding, as there was clearly high interest among teachers to be interviewed on my topic. However, because of my time constraints, I was unable to meet with and interview all of the teachers who contacted me. I therefore have a reserve of contacts for my future research trips.

Through teachers, the CNHI staff, professors and other contacts, I visited high schools in the Paris region (both in the city proper and in the suburbs) to identify and gain access to schools for my research starting next fall. This was the most challenging task, as I knew that cold calling

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schools would not get me far, and therefore I was reliant on the contacts I made. I identified one suburban school that could be a good fit for my study, and where I was able to spend an entire day during which I sat in on classes, spoke with teachers and students, and met with the principal who said I was welcome to conduct research at the school next year. However, I was unable to spend this much time at other schools where I made varying degrees of contacts. Furthermore, I am looking for three schools that fit my methodological criteria, as I am planning a comparative case study where I will compare schools based on differing student demographics. Therefore, my main objective for when I return to Paris in May will be to visit more schools and meet with more teachers and principals in order to finalize the site selection for my study.

Between observations, interviews, and school visits, I met with several key scholars in my field to get their input on my research. In particular I met with historians Nancy Green and Philippe Joutard who have both worked extensively with the CNHI (Joutard is currently President of the CNHI Pedagogy Committee) and were helpful in talking through my research plans. I also spent a day with sociologist Nacira Guenif-Souilamas at the University of Paris Nord. In addition to discussing my research, I sat in on one of her education classes where I was able to talk through my project with her students. Finally, I met with researchers (and history teachers) working for the National Institute of Pedagogical Research (INRP), Benoit Falaize and Laurence De Cock, who have published studies on the teaching of controversial topics such as immigration and colonization which sit at the crossroads of research and practice in history education. They were extremely helpful in pointing me towards resources for textbook and curricula analysis and have also invited me to speak at a conference next fall.

My research is situated within the context of public debate in France over immigration and national identity. It was therefore excellent timing for me to be in Paris this January, as I was able to attend two of the public town hall forums/debates on national identity that were organized (amid much controversy) by the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development between November 2009 and January 2010. I also attended a press conference for the launch of a book/call to action, "Call for a Multicultural and Postracial Republic," put together by five prominent scholar activists. These public events provided me with rich data, as well as a more nuanced understanding of how issues of national identity, immigration, and multiculturalism are viewed today in France and how the education system relates to and reflects these debates.

While I am still in the process of transcribing and analyzing the data I collected, it is clear to me that this month of research will shape my dissertation. My interviews, observations, readings, and conversations with scholars and practitioners have shed light on those questions that are most salient. For example, one of the issues that caught my attention was the omnipresent debate over whether teachers should have students work on projects related to their own family history while studying immigration. This seemingly trivial question has been raised in the French education literature and came up in the teacher training sessions I observed,

as well as in my interviews. I also began to see how it relates to issues surrounding the use of different pedagogical approaches based on the immigrant or ethnic origin of the student population in question. The debate, I believe, goes straight to the heart of the tensions in France today surrounding the traditional assimilation model and how schools and society construct and define what it means to be French.

After years of reading about, discussing, and studying these questions from afar, it was a thrill to be at the debate, in the classroom, and speaking face to face with French scholars, teachers, and students about my research. Thank you again for this generous support of my work.

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