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# HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERCULTURAL ISSUES IN FRANCE

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## ABSTRACT

*This project was carried out in order to understand the current situation in the French educational system as far as human rights and intercultural issues are concerned. To this effect, RenaSup conducted a survey among the students and teachers of four Catholic schools as well as independent teachers from other Catholic schools. The results show that French schools have a strong multicultural background with a significant proportion of students of foreign descent. Students and teachers alike view multiculturalism positively. However, recent migrations and the refugee crisis have raised new issues that must be taken into account when formulating new educational policies and methods. Indeed, teachers do think that peculiar skills are needed to teach in a multicultural environment.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- **The main educational system**

The French educational system is divided into primary education, secondary education and higher education. In this study we will focus on lower (4 years) and upper (3 years) secondary education as they relate to students aged 11 to 18.

In France public school is secular, free of charge and mandatory from age 6 to 16. There also exist private schools (attended by about 16.8% of all French students). Private schools are either under state contract (98% of them) or without state contract. 97% of private schools under state contract are under the responsibility of the French Catholic Education, while the rest are Jewish or Muslim private schools.

All educational programs are regulated by the Ministry of National Education. At the primary and secondary levels, the curriculum is the same for all students in any given grade. However, there are specialised sections and students may choose among a variety of options. Students either attend a technological, vocational or general high school at the end of lower secondary school, where they will prepare for a specific baccalaureate.

- **Current strategies promoting integration at school**

French students follow a class called "Civics and Ethics Education" for 7 grades (from age 11 to 18). It is taught for one hour every week in primary school by the main teacher, and one hour every two weeks in secondary school mainly by history and geography teachers, which amounts to 300 hours for a student's complete education. Typically, in lower secondary school, these classes are given in the form of lectures (rules and regulations, rights and duties, institutions, Human Rights etc.). In upper secondary school, the classes take the form of debates (on a topical issue, an ethical problem or during the class' homeroom), and rely on press articles, educational projects (school trips and charity projects), documentary research or presentations.

Since 2009, the definition and prohibition of all forms of discrimination is explicitly stated in every French school rules.

The official language of education is French, but students must also pick two languages to study and an optional third one. The most studied languages are English, German, Spanish and Italian, but some schools also offer Russian, Chinese, Japanese etc. or French regional languages.

Students may also attend Teaching of Languages and Cultures of Origin (ELCO) classes in some schools. These courses are regulated by bilateral agreements signed with 9 Eastern and Southern countries, and are primarily designed for the children of migrants in order to facilitate their integration.

French students may also apply to study in "international sections" if their school offers this program (20 000 students in 2015). International sections are a bilingual and bicultural course of study regulated by the Education Ministry in cooperation with 19 partner countries. These classes are either aimed at French students who have the motivation to learn and study in two different languages or at children from foreign or binational families wishing to integrate into the French educational system while still being taught in their mother tongue.



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Finally, the French educational system guarantees access to education to all newly-arrived students who do not speak French *at all*. In particular, UPE2A classes (Educational Unit for Newly-arrived Allophones Students) allow their students to be enrolled in mainstream classrooms while at the same time receiving special instruction in French as a second language.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

- **Methodology implemented**

The survey was carried out by RenaSup and was taken by the four Catholic schools formally involved in the project as well as several independent teachers from other Catholic schools. Students and teachers could either use the paper or the online forms. Most of them chose the online forms. However, the students who used the paper forms were able to write some commentaries or to slightly amend their answers, which revealed some interesting findings (discussed in 3.2).

- **Students' and teachers involved**

As explained previously, two different groups answered the survey: secondary school teachers and administrative staff, and high school students.

The four schools involved in the projects in the first place answered the questionnaire. There are different types of institutions (high school and professional institutions) and there are some schools from the North of France (mainly around Paris) and some institutions from the South (mainly Marseille, a very multicultural city) in order to have a representative sample of different places in France.

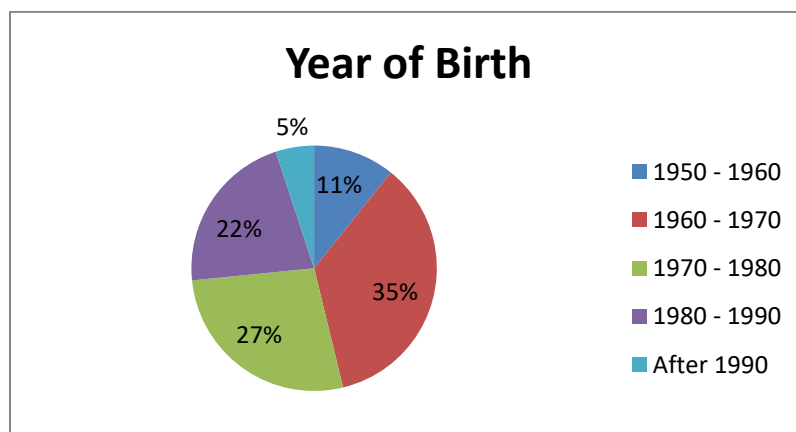
At the end of the administration (in December 2017), 160 teachers/staff questionnaires and 510 students questionnaires were collected.

## 3. MAIN FINDINGS

### 3.1 TEACHERS

- **Implementation of human rights at school**

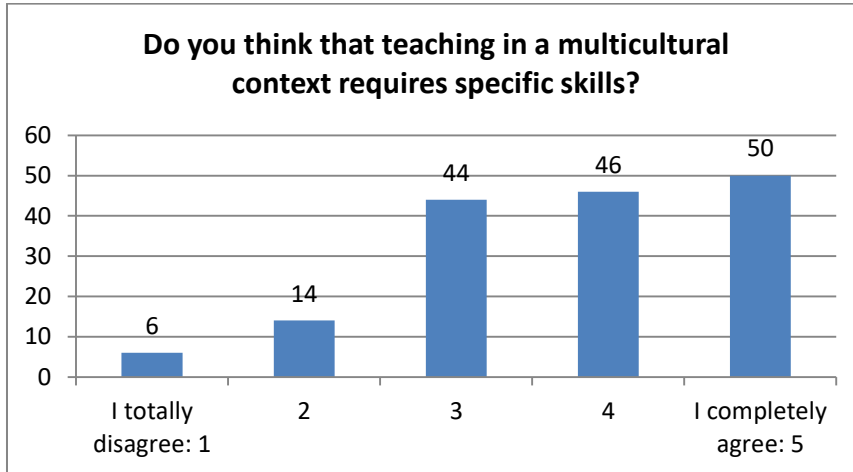
When it comes to the analysis of Teachers/staff questionnaires, one can observe a disparity in the answers: 64% respondents are female while only 36% of them are male. However, this disparity is less present in the breakdown by age group. The chart below shows that all the different categories of age group are represented, except the youngest one (born after 1990) which is only 5 percent of them.



Also, 29% of them have more than 25 years of teaching experience and 32% of them have more than 15 years of experience. Nevertheless, only 19% of the teachers/staff respondents attended a training course on intercultural training and/or inclusive teaching. This result may seem a bit odd considering

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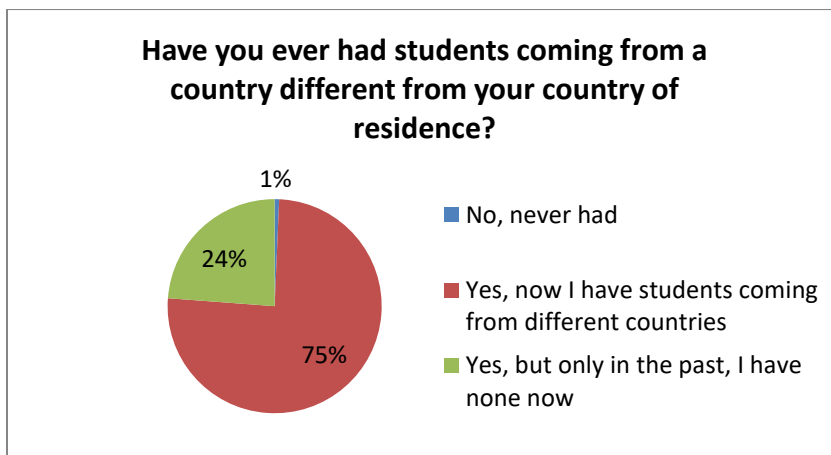
that most of them (60%) think that it requires specific skills to teach in multicultural classes, which is a specific and complex environment to teach in.



- 1 I totally disagree: 4%
- 2: 9%
- 3: 27%
- 4: 29%
- 5 I completely agree: 31%

- **Multicultural issues at school**

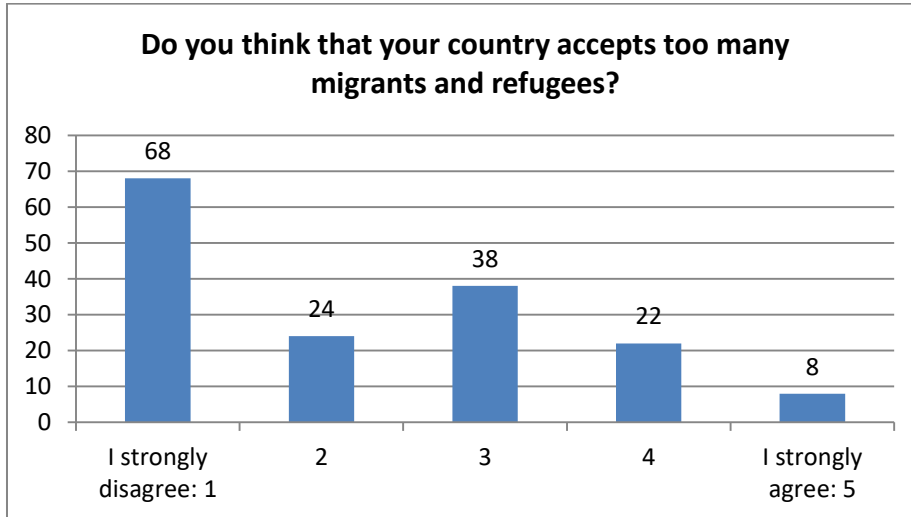
From the answers, this is obvious that teachers experience cultural diversity both at school and in the private sphere. The chart below shows that almost all of them (75%) currently have students coming from different countries in their class. Moreover, around half of them (54%) are used to spend some time with people of foreign origins, generally in their circle of friends.



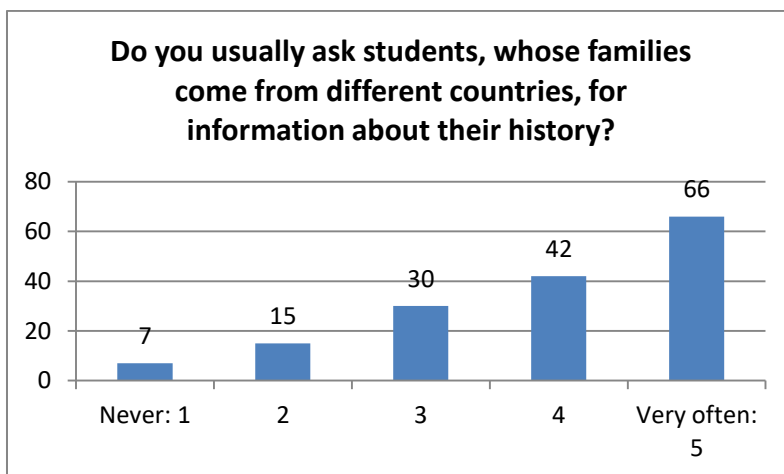
This data is very interesting, since it shows that teachers are used to deal with multicultural classes. However, as we previously saw in this report, most of them are not trained in multicultural teaching, which can be quite a problem. Furthermore, some other information are important. For instance, 80% of the respondents have now neighbours of foreign origins or had some in recent years, and most of them (76%) have a good relationship with them. Also, 78% strongly agree or agree to say that schools must act as a tool of integration for foreign students/migrants/refugees.

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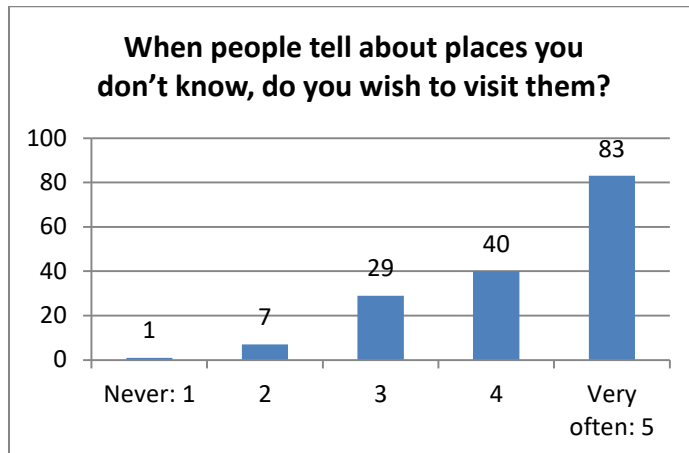
The following graph shows a general tendency of teachers to be in favour of diversity, even if the results are not so clearly divided.



Indeed, 68 respondents out of 160 think that France does not accept too many migrants and refugees. However, we can see for the other respondents there is not a distinctive answer. Indeed, migration and refugees are still very sensitive issues in France, and people tend to be divided on that matter.



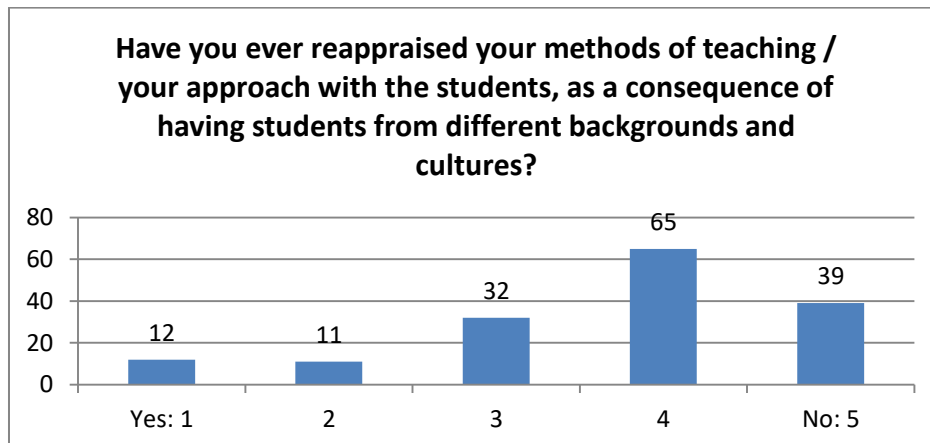
Never 1: **5%**  
 2: **9%**  
 3: **19%**  
 4: **26%**  
 5: **41%**



Never 1: **1%**  
 2: **4%**  
 3: **18%**  
 4: **25%**  
 Very often 5: **52%**

We can see on the two graphs above that teachers are curious about their students' origins and about visiting other places. Indeed, 67% of them tend to ask to their students from foreign origins where they come from, and 77% of them wish to visit places they do not know when they hear about them.

However, the graph below shows that even if teachers are in favour of cultural diversity, very few of them have reappraised their methods of teaching with the students after dealing with students from foreign origins (between 8 and 15% only). This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that very few of them have attended training about how to work with multicultural classes.

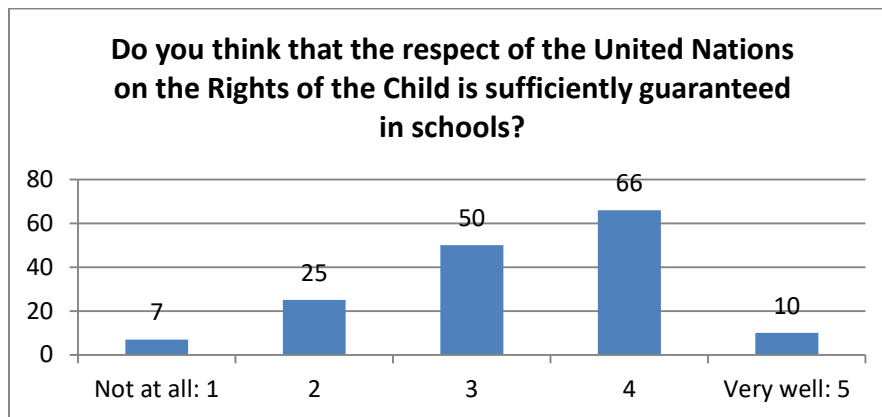
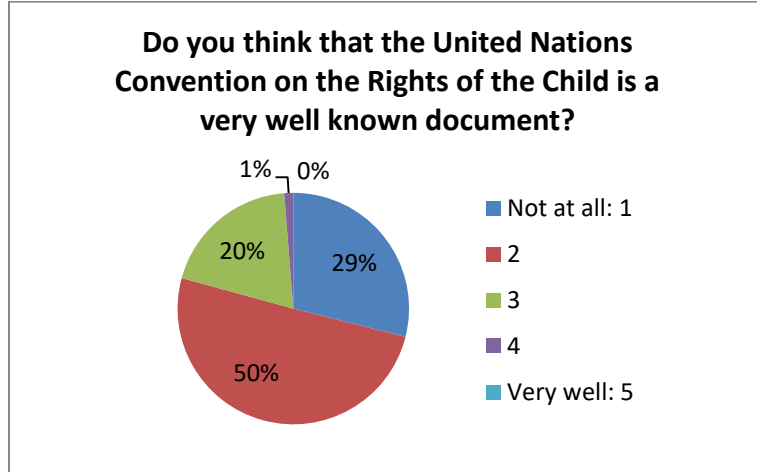


Yes 1: **8%**  
 2: **7%**  
 3: **20%**  
 4: **41%**  
 No: 5: **24%**

Moreover, teachers were asked about human rights and their dissemination at school. Most of them think that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is not a very well-known document, although the respect of the UN Rights of the Child is mainly guaranteed at school. It is positive that those rights

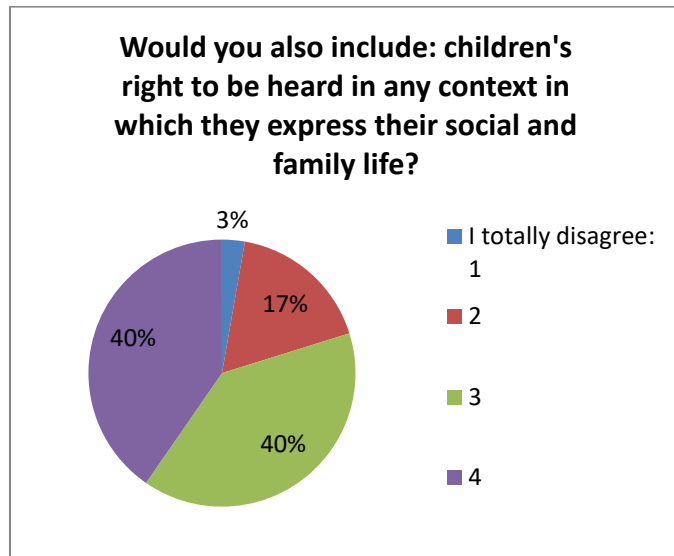
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are respected according to the teachers – however, the knowledge of documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be more widespread.

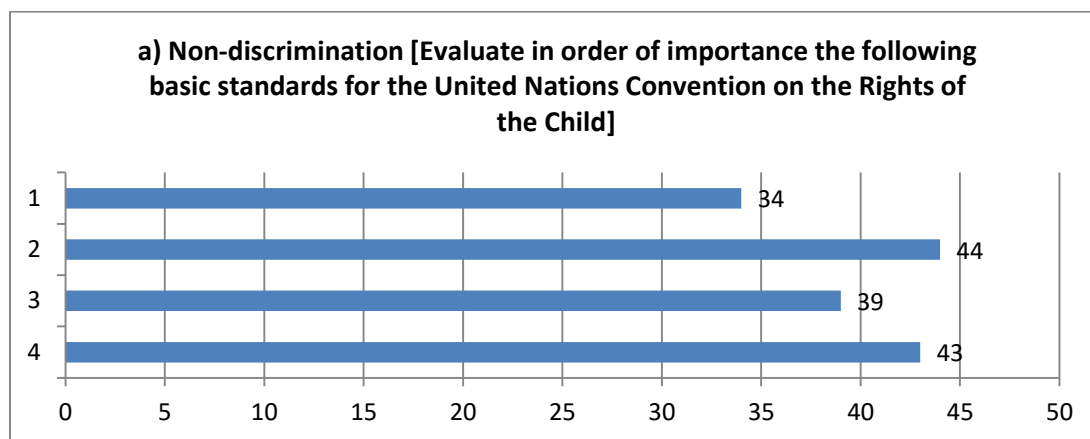


Not at all 1: 4%  
 2: 16%  
 3: 32%  
 4: 42%  
 Very well 5: 6%

Furthermore, almost all teachers (94%) think that human rights education is already included in many school subjects, especially humanities (for instance history, literature, law, social sciences). Even if the disciplines are not directly focused on human rights, the topic is inevitably broached at some point. Besides, according to the graphs below, the priority of school is to provide students with the ability to develop their capacities (42%) and to develop their citizenship skills (28%). In other words, the knowledge of official documents is not the priority – the priority lies in human rights education already present in some school subjects, which should be used and developed in order to improve their abilities as well as their civil skills in everyday life.

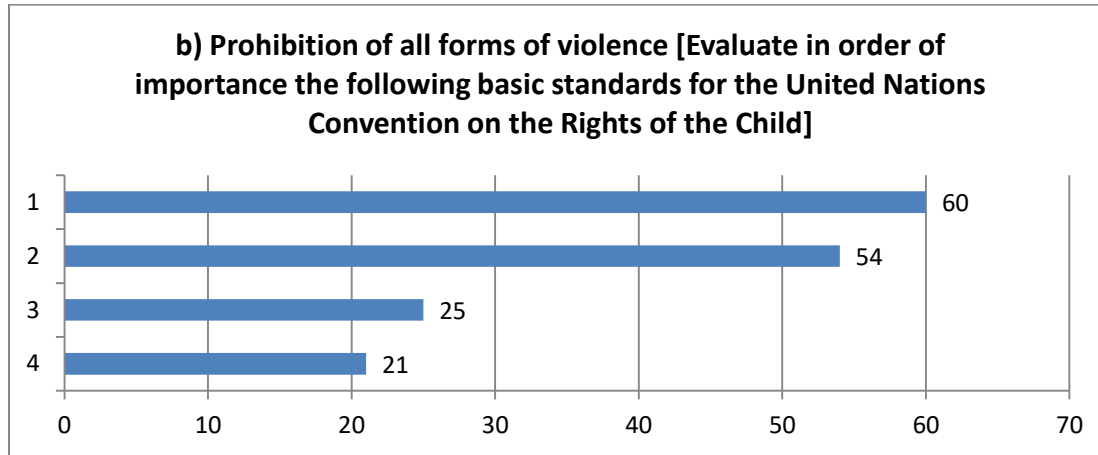


Moreover, according to teachers, the first basic standard of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the prohibition of all forms of violence against children (37% define it as the number 1 basic standard and 34% as the second one). This violence can be present in different contexts of the children's lives, but most teachers (almost 60%) think that violence is more likely to happen in family life or in circle of friends (more than 30%) rather than at school. Besides, it is important to notice that many teachers tend to think that the UN Convention highly promote and encourage non-discrimination (a total of 49% define it as the first and second basic standard).

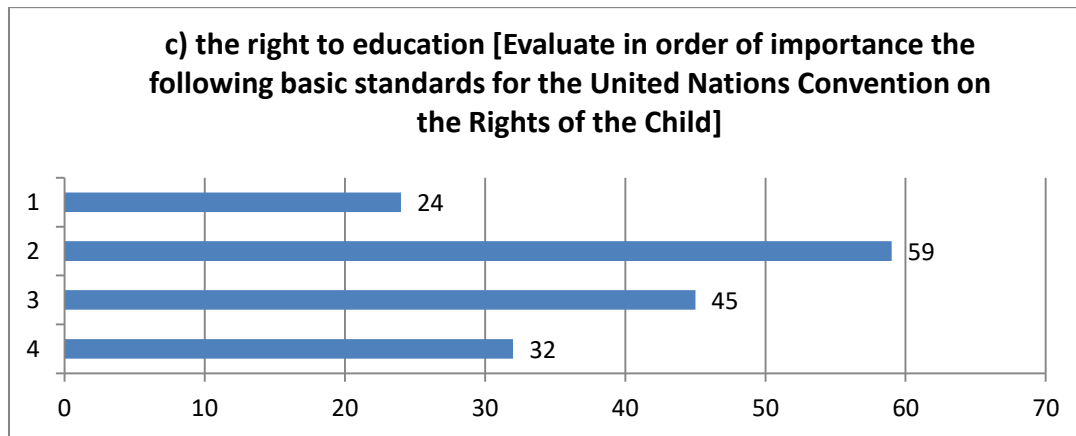


1: 21%  
2: 28%  
3: 24%  
4: 27%

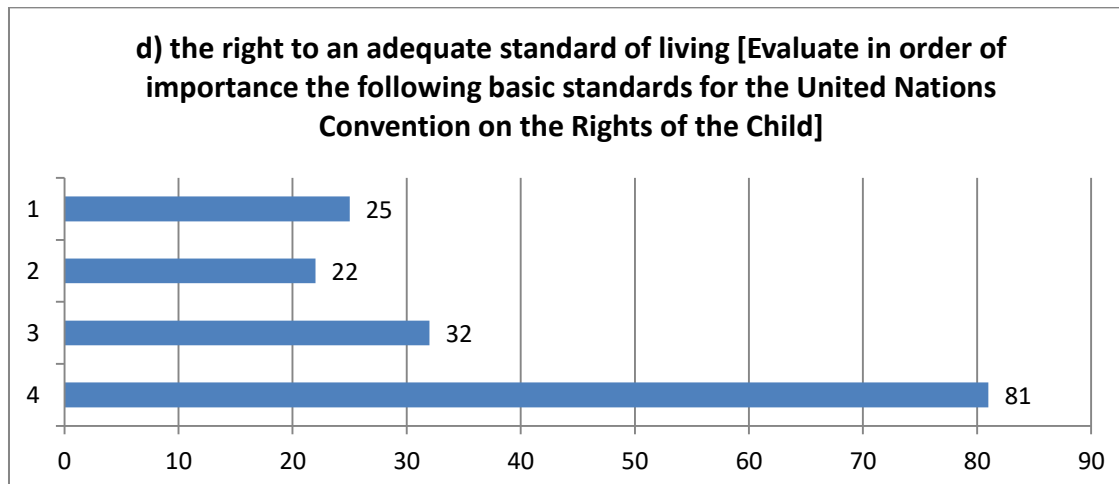




1: 37%  
 2: 34%  
 3: 16%  
 4: 13%



1: 15%  
 2: 37%  
 3: 28%  
 4: 20%

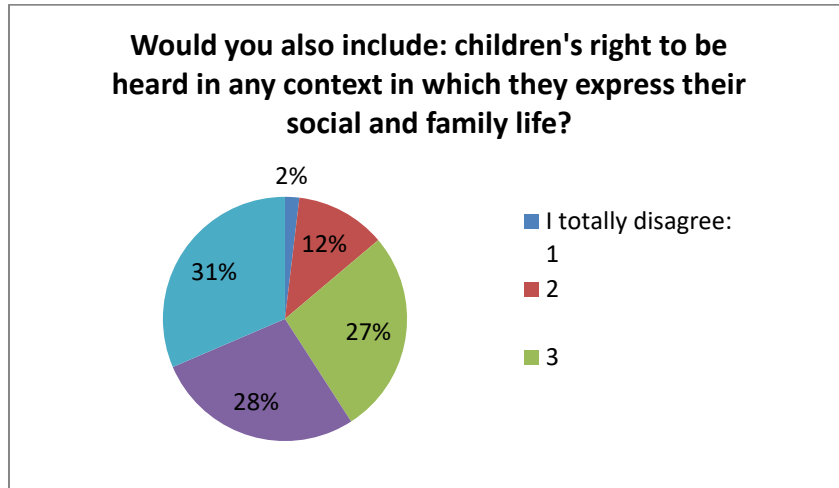




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- 1: 16%
- 2: 14%
- 3: 20%
- 4: 50%

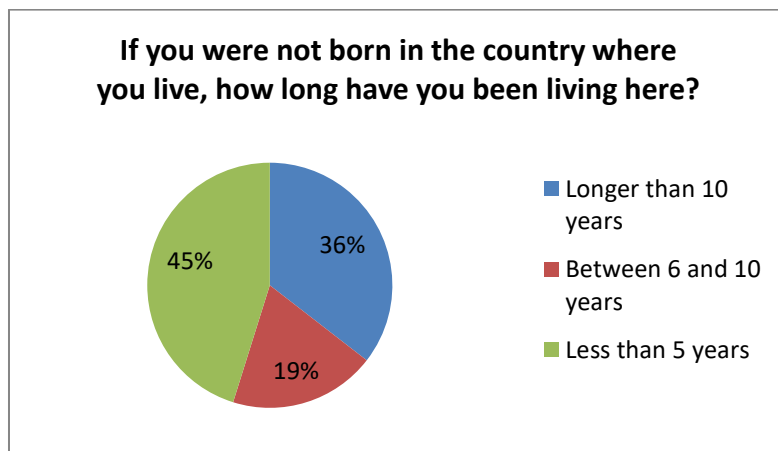
Finally, most part of the respondents think that the UN Convention straightens the standards of children's rights to be listened to in every context of their social and family lives, as we can see on the graph below:



### 3.2 STUDENTS

- **Implementation of human rights at school**

Concerning the students' questionnaires, there is not an important diversity in gender: 47% of the respondents are female, and 53% are male. A few of them (around 7%) were born in a foreign country and live mainly in the South of France (in the Marseille school). Even if this percentage can seem low, it confirms the presence of foreign students and children of migrants. Most of them (45%) have lived in France for less than five years – a phenomenon that can be explained by the recent years' migration crisis. Another important portion (36%) embodies a long-term migration by living in France for more than 10 years.



Moreover, a problem that subsists in France is the problem of mastering foreign languages. Indeed, even if foreign languages are taught at school, it is commonly known that French people do not tend to

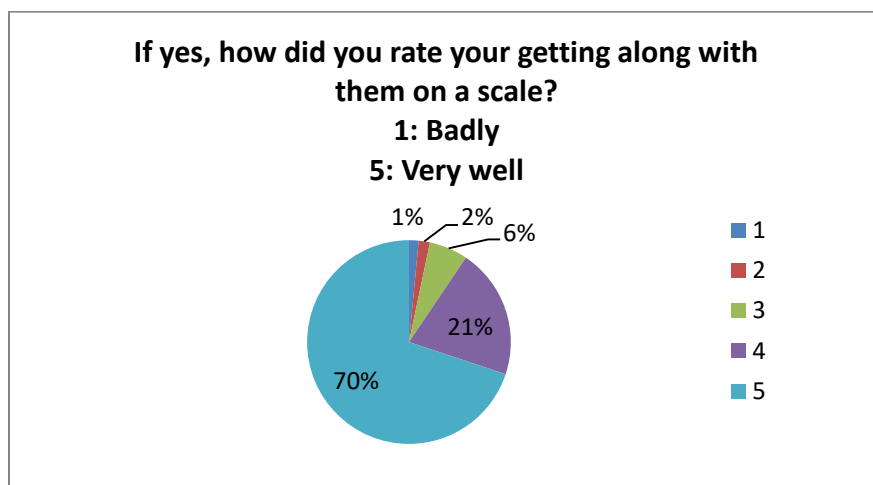
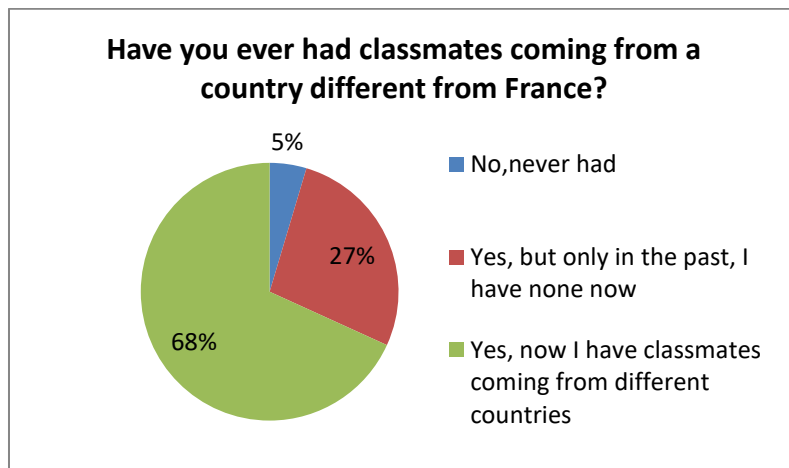


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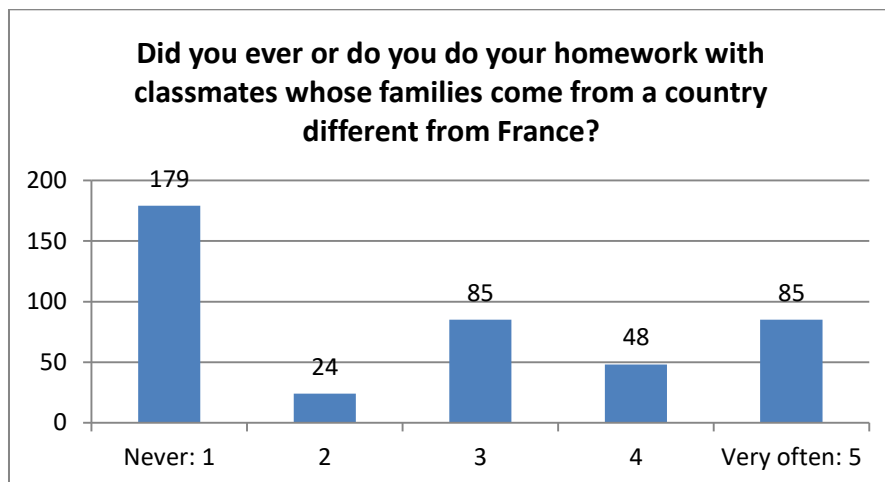
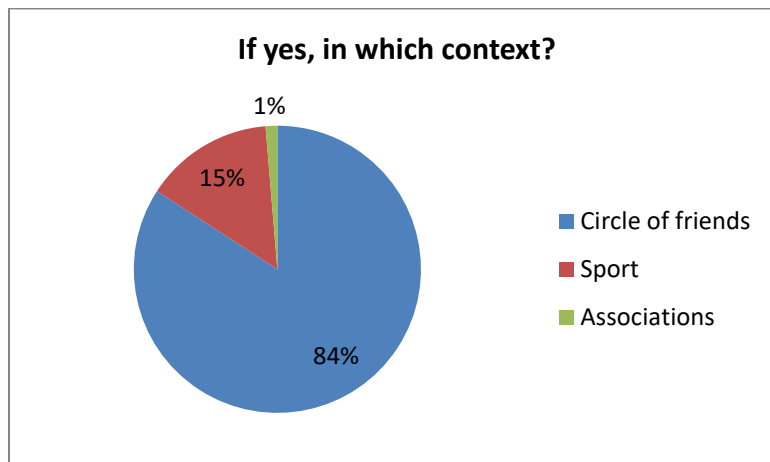
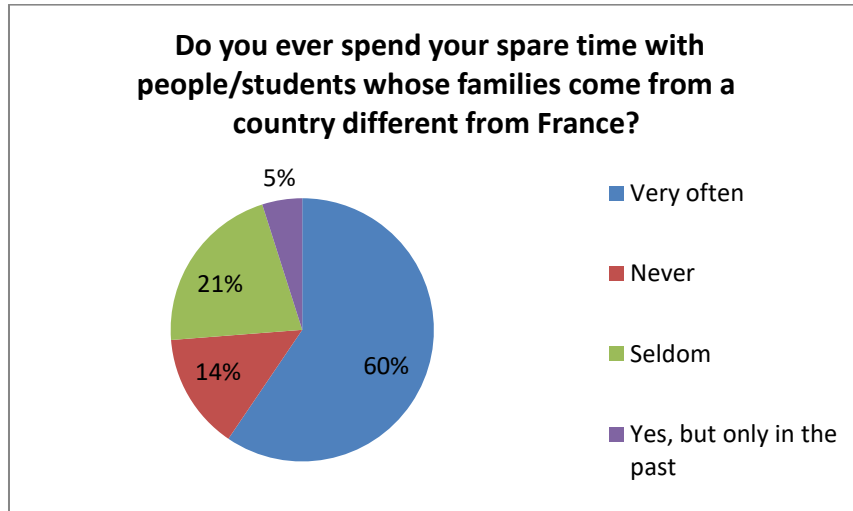
master them, which can be inconvenient for foreign students. Only 1% of students (that is to say, only two people) had the opportunity to attend a language course abroad during the last summer break. Also, 44% of them went on holidays with their parents, but quite an important part of them (35%) stayed at home. This means that not all of them have to opportunity to travel and to discover new cultures and/or new languages.

Concerning the background of students' parents, it is not possible to provide useful data for this report. Indeed, when asking about their parents' degrees, most of them have not replied. We can wonder if it is because they do not know what their parents' degrees are, or if it is due to a sort of embarrassment or discomfort talking about it.

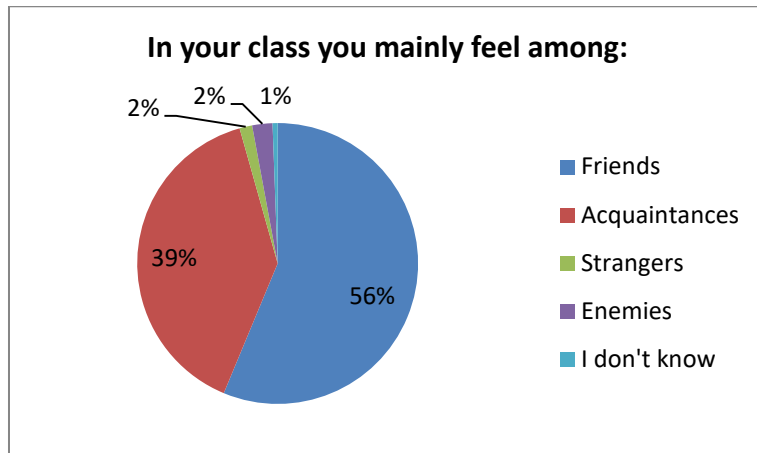
In the questionnaire, students were also asked about their vision of multiculturalism. Almost 70% of them currently have foreign classmates and almost 30% had some in the past. It is reassuring and positive to note that 70% of them have a very good relationship with their foreign classmates. At school, more than half of students (56%) feel surrounded by friends and only 4% feel surrounded by enemies or strangers – a second very positive aspect. Many of them (60%) say that they very often spend some time with people/students whose families are foreigners, and most of the time (84%) it is within their circle of friends. However, considering that most of them (43%) are not used to do their homework with classmates whose families come from foreign countries, it may mean that French students spend some time with foreigners mainly in the school context, but not so much outside of the school.



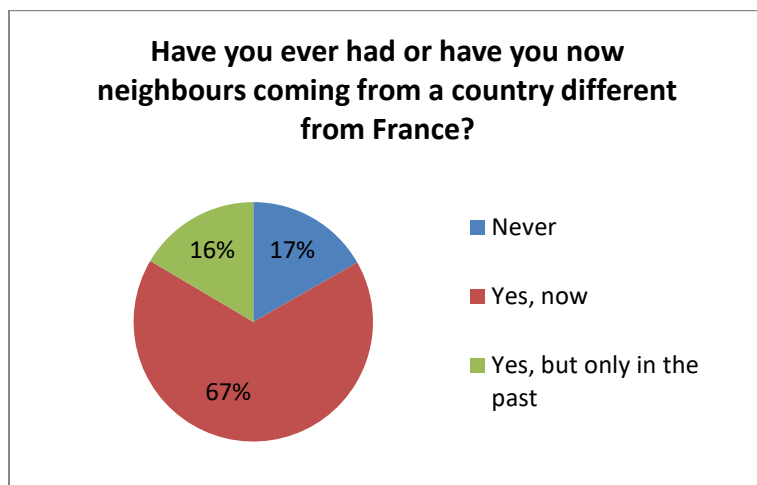
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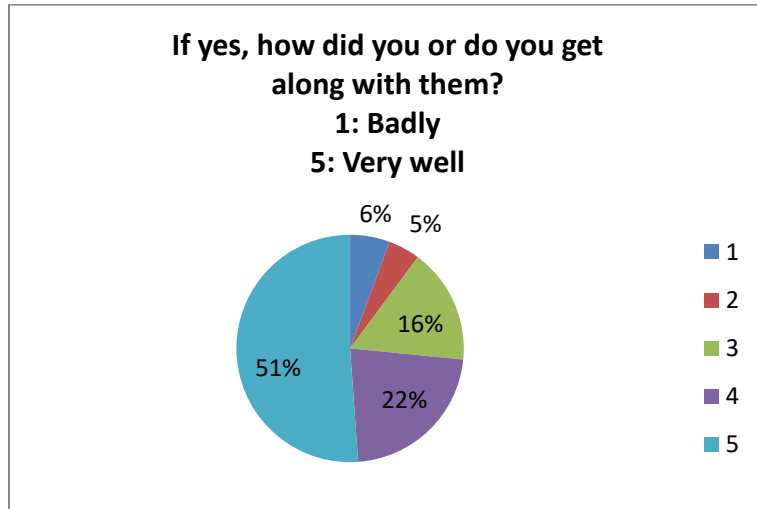


Never 1: 43%  
 2: 6%  
 3: 20%  
 4: 11%  
 5: 20%



Outside of the school environment, many students are used to see foreign people in the private sphere. Indeed, almost 70 % of them currently have foreign neighbours (only 17% never had some), and more than half of them have a very good or a good relationship with them. It is once again positive that these daily contacts (even if no deep relationships are created) are made in good terms, meaning that students tend to have a positive image of foreigners. Until now, we can assert that the students' questionnaires do not show any animosity towards foreigners or migrants – students seem to be quite open-minded in a multicultural environment, at school or outside school. The current tense situation in France about migrants is not really reflected in these young people's answers.





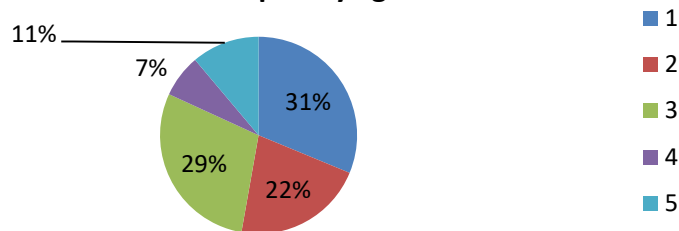
Students' open-mindedness is once again highlighted when almost 70% of them affirm that they do not really mind to see refugees/migrants in the streets wearing their traditional clothes. 21% of them think that it is nice to see people dressed in a different way, displaying some cultural curiosity. On the other hand, only 2% of them stated that if foreigners want to live in France, they have to dress in the same way as French people.

Most of them do not think that the presence of migrants does not require stricter police controls, and 86% of them state that when they hear of a foreign country, they wish to visit it. It shows once again their curiosity towards the world and a desire to know more about it.

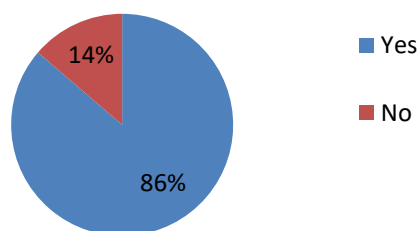


**How much do you agree with the following statement: "The presence of migrants and refugees requires stricter control by the Police"?**

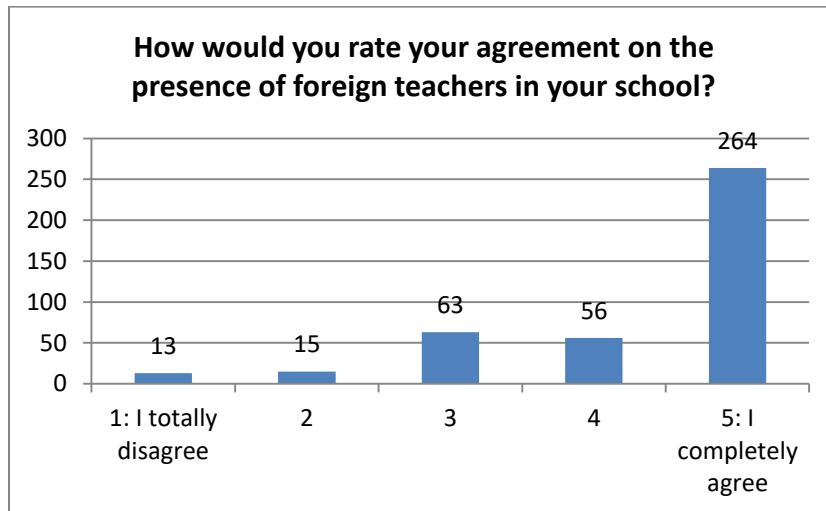
**1: I totally disagree  
5: I completely agree**



**When you hear of different countries from your own, would you like to visit them?**



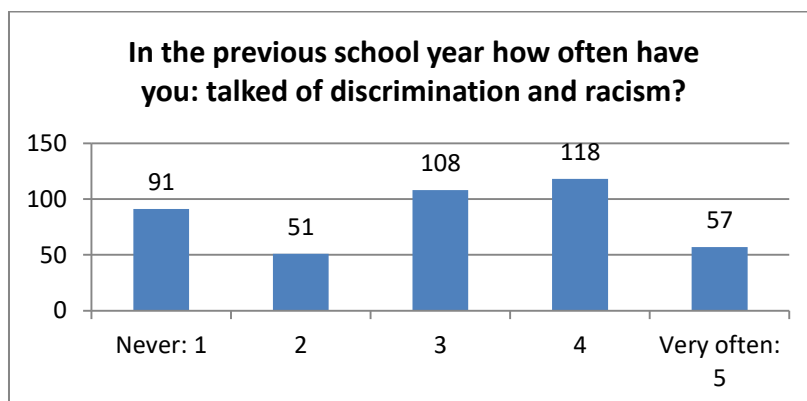
One of questions about multiculturalism deals with the presence of foreign teachers at school. When asked about their agreement on this matter, more than 60% of them completely agree with the presence of foreign teachers in their own school. According to them, this presence is positive for the school environment and for their education and not "frightening" at all.



1: 3%  
 2: 4%  
 3: 15%  
 4: 14%  
 5: 64%

- **Multicultural issues at school**

The rest of the questionnaire dealt with the knowledge of students about human rights, and their opinion on them, especially the question of racism. Many of them (around 60%) already witnessed a brawl or racist incidents, which is quite worrying. When asked whether or not they often talk about racism and discrimination at school, the results are not clear: 21% state that they never talked about it, 28% that they often talked about it, and 14% that they very often talked about it. We can only assume that this issue depends on the school: some might be inclined to talk about it with their students, and some might not be. But we can only conclude that unfortunately, discussions about racism and discrimination are not widely widespread everywhere in France, which is not encouraging considering the amount of migrants coming to the country. Moreover, very few of them have participated in intercultural projects in 2016 – indeed, the vast majority of 40% declared that they had never participated in such projects. This result can be linked to the fact that very few teachers have attended a training course on that issue.

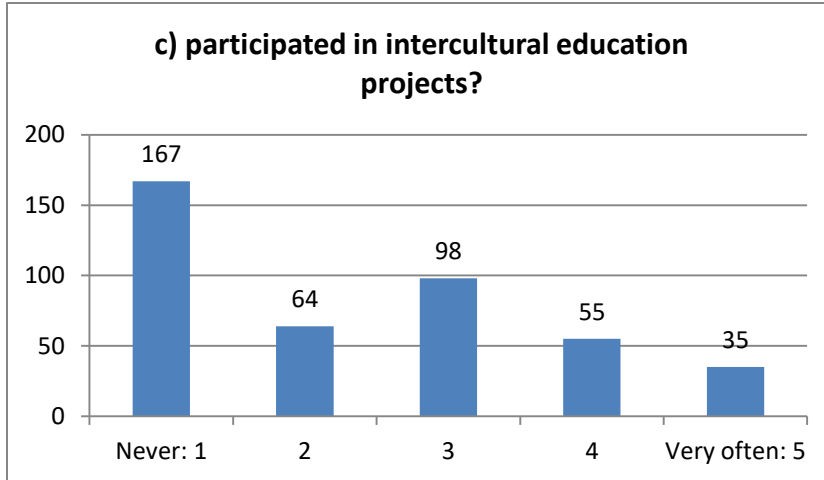


1: 21%



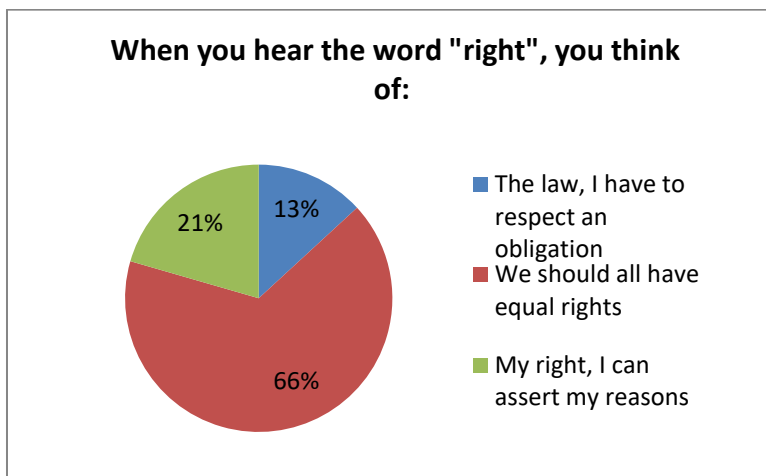
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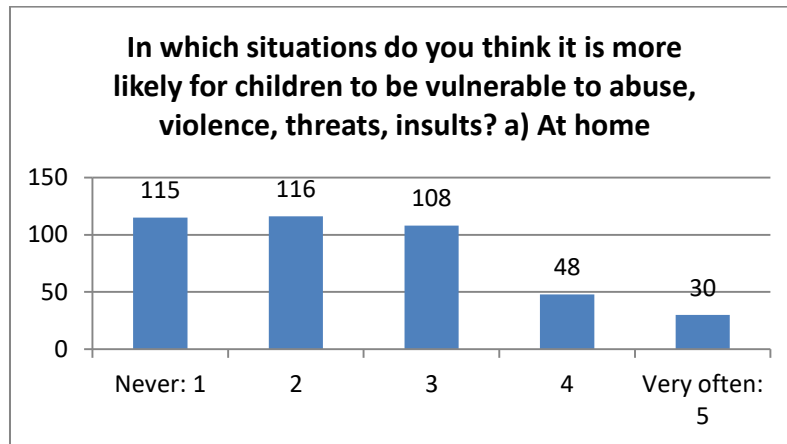
- 2: 12%
- 3: 25%
- 4: 28%
- 5: 14%



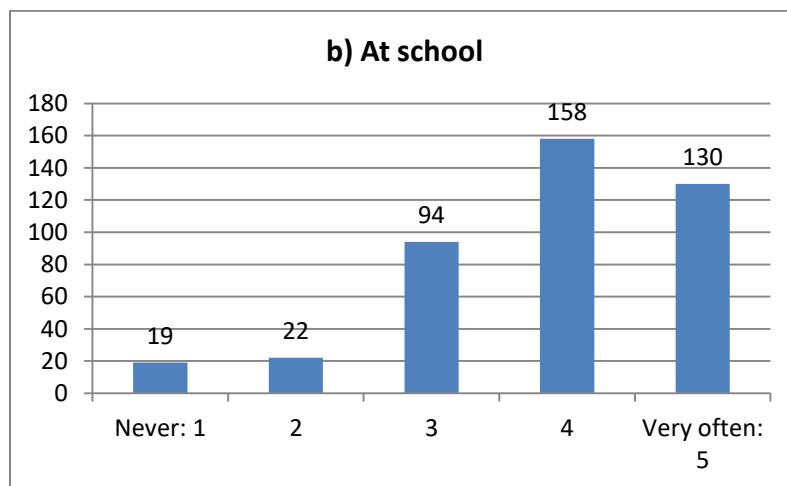
- Never 1: 40%
- 2: 15%
- 3: 24%
- 4: 13%
- 5: 8%

Overall, we can see that students are really attached to the notion of equality, since 66% of them think that the word “right” can be associated to the idea that “we should all have equal rights”. However, only 9% of them know about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is not a very surprising result if they have never been taught by teachers, by their families, or in the media. Furthermore, a very important feature in the answers is the fact that for students, school is the first place where they can be victim of abuse and violence – 68% of them think that if often or very often happens at school while only 18% think that home is the first place where it often/very often happens. It is interesting to compare those results with the ones of teachers, who on the contrary think that the school environment is quite safe for students. This is the result of a lack of exchange and trust from students towards teachers, who are not necessarily aware of what happens outside their classrooms.



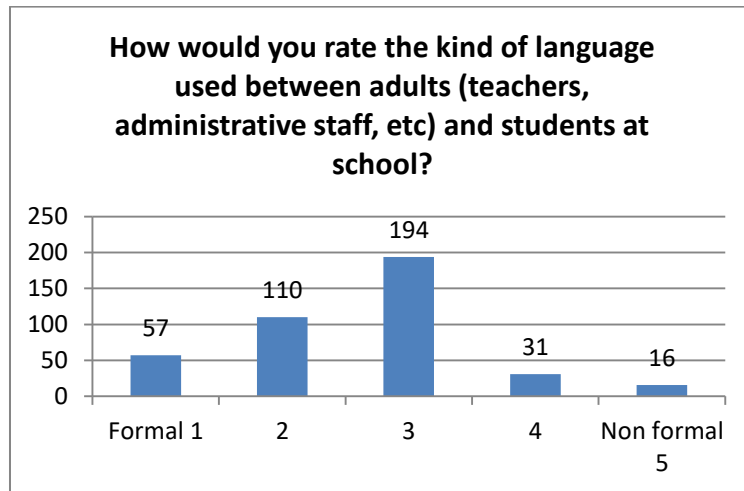


Never 1: 28%  
 2: 28%  
 3: 26%  
 4: 11%  
 Very often 5: 7%

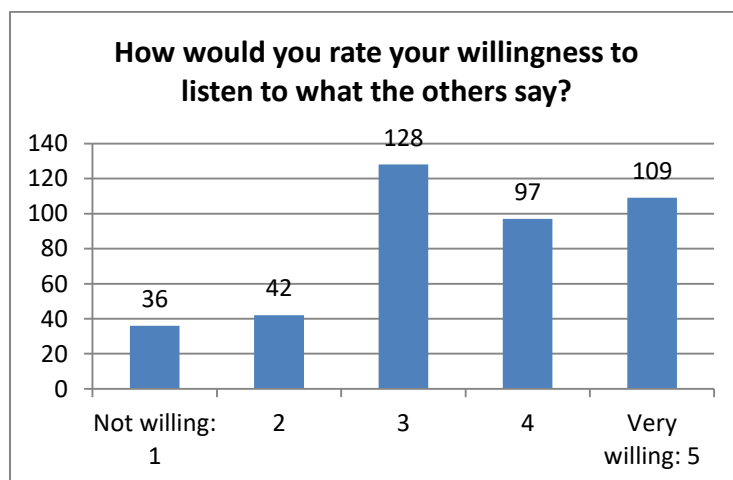


Never 1: 5%  
 2: 5%  
 3: 22%  
 4: 37%  
 5: 31%

Besides, almost 50% of students do not inform teachers when they witness incidents of violence or abuse, but prefer to talk to their friends or their families – confirming once again the lack of trust or proximity with teachers. They define the language used between teachers and them mainly as “neutral” or formal rather than non-formal. Students may feel a distance between teachers and themselves, and do not perceive them as “equal”, while they are mainly willing to listen to what the others say (50% are willing/very willing).



Formal 1: 14%  
 2: 27%  
 3: 47%  
 4: 8%  
 Non formal 5: 4%



Not willing 1: 9%  
 2: 10%  
 3: 31%  
 4: 24%  
 5: 26%

#### 4. CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICE

- **Methodologies**

RenaSup contacted the schools formally participating in the project and asked the teachers involved to provide them with any of their relevant experiences about teaching in a multicultural environment. RenaSup also contacted independent teachers who had carried out significantly successful educational projects about integration, non-discrimination and human rights issues. The case studies that proved most effective according to the teachers and could be replicated quite easily were selected.



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The first best practice (Collection of goods and food donations for the migrants of the Calais Jungle) was selected because it was a project that did not require a lot of means and resources: the voluntary students simply donated what they could and entrusted the donations to a charity organization, taking some of their time to talk and debate with the charity workers as well. This type of project yields tangible results and students can measure the impact of the help they provide while in the meantime learning about the migrants and themselves.

The second best practice ("In the footsteps of Pope Francis": Journey to Assisi, Rome and Lampedusa with students) was selected because of its very good results. Although it targeted a small amount of students (17), the teacher stated that they had profoundly changed and become more mature during the journey to Lampedusa where they met with the inhabitants of the island and learned about their relationship with the migrants. The project required a lot of planning and efforts but the students learned a lot through preparatory work, and then went on to present 4 guideline laws to a European parliamentary group and testify about their experience to the Bishops' Conference of France.

- **Lesson learnt**

The lessons learnt by the case studies collected show that a variety of projects can be carried out with good results. They do not necessarily require a lot of resources.

Some teachers have seized opportunities offered by specific national awareness weeks initiated by the French Ministry of Education with good results.

The teaching is most successful when students are directly involved from the start (such as doing preparatory work on the subject or even initiating the project themselves) and not simply presented with facts from a teacher.

In particular, when it comes to raising awareness about integration, the more social actors and people from different origins the students meet and work with, the better the results and understanding. That is why getting out of the school environment and meeting people that are not from the school staff can be very effective (such as during school trips or debates).

As regards to newly-arrived students starting their integration in the French school system, UPE2A classes are great programs as well since they first evaluate each student individually, teach a small number of students at a time, and allow them to study with their French classmates for half the day.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*The study conducted shows that French schools are multicultural with both a significant students and teachers either having foreign origins or speaking other languages. While human rights are studied in French schools and are included in subjects such as History and Letters, this teaching could be improved in two ways: the widespread presentation and study of legal documents and systems (very bad known in general), and in-depth debates about current issues related to racism and migrations that students have shown to be particularly aware of.*

*When it comes to learning, while students do a lot of group work, school trips and specific educational projects seem to work better for them. Therefore, where schools have enough resources to organize them, they must be strongly encouraged. Schools that have more difficulty in implementing them should be made aware of the steps to follow and possible assistance available through testimonies, whereby the case studies collected will prove useful.*

*Teachers particularly want to learn the right skills and attitudes they must show while teaching multicultural classes. They think that human rights education must first facilitate integration and create a good classroom environment.*

*Students view multiculturalism as positive and relatively open to others and other cultures. However, they do not always put these opinions into practice as violence has been shown to be an issue at school. Indeed, students have answered that they think it is the place where violence is most likely to happen, while teachers do not seem to know about this fact. Therefore, it is important to restore trust and dialogue between students and adults/school staff. Education against bullying and all forms of discrimination must be increased and improved; France has been making efforts to that end since 2015 when a special Plan Against Bullying was introduced by the Ministry of Education.*

