
Working with Linguistic Microaggressions in Initial Teacher Education: A French Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The article presents the results of a study which considers how French preservice teacher training develop intercultural competences in a 'disruptive' training device. The study focuses on 22 collaborative written texts on the basis of an American photographic project that denounces linguistic microaggressions. Various traces of the process of critical awareness are observed. Suggestions for improving the course design are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural skills, preservice teacher training, linguistic microaggressions, collaborative written

I. INTRODUCTION

Things began with a comment from a group of four preservice M.Ed students in France in my 'Languages and Interculturality' courses on the Masters in Teaching, Education and Training at the Institut National Supérieur du Professorat et de l'Éducation. This group of students took part in a report on the implementation in primary classes of pedagogical sessions designed to "take into account the diversity of pupils" (Ministry of Education, France, Official Bulletin of 25-07-2013). The group of four students told that it was not possible to implement the project it had planned: "Before starting the lesson, we asked the pupils in the class 'where are you from?' As some most pupils didn't understand this question and what we were waiting for, we couldn't implement our session". I was first stunned by this comment. This experience confirmed the eternal principle of division conceptualised by Delphy (2008), in which each person is necessarily classified into one group or another. We are, of course, aware of the widespread use of this expression in common discourse, "avoir des origines" in French, as well as its trivialization, but I still wondered how masters students could make such remarks without batting an eyelid. The violence of being locked into the question of origins, which often, as Dumitru (2015: s.p) reminds us, "means nothing other than what race are you?". The dichotomy between those who have origins and those who do not, which is at best comical and at worst absurd, should have been mitigated by the observation that there is a cruel lack of training in intercultural issues, both in France and internationally (Auger and Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2022; Azaoui et al, 2020; Samuels, 2018; Landsman and Lewis, 2006).

As a result of this experience, I have proceeded on the basis that preservice teacher training has to recognize its responsibility to develop intercultural skills in the courses. From an educational and teaching point of view, the course has to teach controversy (Cock-Pierrepoint, 2007) based on a sensitive, ideologically-charged subject to upset some given ideas. I designed and implemented a teaching programme aimed at better equipping students with the intellectual and practical skills to develop a critical consciousness (Watts et al., 2011) of their own beliefs and the effects on others, as well as their civic actions in society, particularly in the context of their profession. They also need to be able to question the social practices embedded in political and educational ideologies, particularly in schools, where racism "that does not speak its name" (Tripier, 2004: 13) is commonplace and trivialized. I then evaluated the training programme through this study designed to challenge and improve my own teaching on intercultural issues. As bell hooks (2019 [1994]: 35) puts it, one of the roles of university education is to develop critical awareness of relations of domination, so that future teachers can offer more inclusive and social justice oriented pedagogies. While power at stake can be seen, domination must be revealed (Wagner, 2018: 68) through awareness-raising.

The study is based on an analysis of 22 collaborative texts by 74 student teachers at a French university. These texts are based on work on Kim Kyun's photographic project, Racial Microaggressions (2013). The study investigates how students develop intercultural skills in a pedagogical device that is intended to be disruptive, by becoming jointly involved in a collaborative written production. The article focuses on the theoretical pillars of the pedagogical device, as well as on its semiotic medium, the photographic project. It presents the results of the analyses of the 22 productions and suggests ways in which the issue of plurality can be better addressed.

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II. OPENING DOORS TO DEVELOP INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

In the teaching method I have designed and implemented, "to disrupt" means to bring students to understand and accept that the issue of cultural diversity can take on other facets than those often imagined "of a rainbow coalition, where we would all be together with our differences, but all polite and smiling" (bell hooks, 2019 [1994]: 36). Indeed intercultural education is particularly powerful to reinforce particular ideas about norms, values, gender roles and culture. My teaching methods are designed to facilitate developing intercultural skills by working on the process of critical awareness by collaboration between students. It aims to ensure that students are able to question everyday practices in which otherization occurs, i.e. the fact of "imagining someone as foreign and different from 'us', so that 'they' are excluded from 'our' group" (Holliday et al., 2004: 3), or racialisation, which refers to "the construction of race as a social entity and the processes of assignment that constitute it" (Brun and Cosquer, 2022: 29).

More specifically, the pedagogical choices enable to work on two of the three elements of critical consciousness (Watts et al., 2011): critical reflection and political efficacy. The third element, critical action, cannot be evaluated insofar as it requires observations of concrete civic actions in society. To develop critical thinking, the course I have designed and implemented aims to challenge and question received ideas relentlessly. I have opted for non-consensual teaching aids, such as Kim Kyun's photographic project "Racial Microaggressions" (2013). The input of theoretical notions involves debates that rarely take place without a confrontation of ideas and beliefs. In order to develop political efficacy, i.e. the declaration by students of an ability to change things (Watts et al., 2011: 50), the training modalities recognize the importance of students' experiences and beliefs in shaping their view of the world. Collaborative work, in which opinions, prejudices and knowledge that often need to be updated clash, is encouraged. By distancing themselves from the beliefs that operate with evidences that the students have to go beyond, the students are encouraged to see themselves as ambiguous subjects (Zembylas, 2010), rather than keep developing normative binary thought (Them *versus* Us, "those with origins" versus "those without"). In my training modalities, described in more detail in a previous article (Lemoine-Bresson, 2021), I have chosen to place characteristic medium at the center of the learning system, at the risk of destroying any desire to enable, in the words of bell hooks (2019 [1994]: 36). In addition, it has led to "shifts in relations between students" and a reflection of the classroom as a safe and harmonious place.

III. RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Kim Kyun's photographic project (2013), "Racial Microaggressions"¹, provides pedagogical medium by showing 20 photos of students at an American university reporting an experienced microaggression [Table 1 in appendix]. The device follows on from teachings on the notion of microaggressions (Chester Pierce Middleton in the 1970s; Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986; Sue, 2010; Oluo, 2018). A great deal of research has already highlighted the value of using photography to explore students' critical thinking about societal issues (Wang et al., 1996; Wang and Burris, 1994). The work of Carlson, Engebretson and Chamberlain (2006) shows that working with photographs leads to critical reflection in four stages which we have partially adapted for the device: (1) Identification of microaggressions (2) Emotional engagement (3) Cognitive arousal (4) Intention to act.

Kyun's project is only about relations rooted in domination of Whites versus Afro Americans (7 photos in the project) /Asian Americans (8 photos) and Latino-Hispano Americans (5 photos). It provides an opportunity to point out the racism that intrudes surreptitiously and repeatedly into everyday interactions, sometimes said as a compliment, but not recognized as such, in verbal or nonverbal form, with a degree of unawareness (Solórzano and Pérez Huber, 2020; Sue, 2010). At the same time, the photos in the project "Racial Microaggressions" sometimes combine several human dimensions (race and gender, for example). It is clear from reading the American students' texts that the discourses structure a multifaceted hierarchical principle between self and other, historically rooted (Hipfl and Loftsdóttir, 2012) and frequently ignore its impact on the person experiencing them. E.g. a microaggression such as : "Where are you really from?" contains what Sue (2010) calls "an hidden message". The aim for students is to develop intercultural skills by uncovering hidden messages and underlying historical, political or educational ideologies. Fanon (2014/1952: 26) denounces the "You, stay where you are" contained in the demand for origins and which is part of the theme of the foreigner in his own country. Through this work in the preservice training, a social justice issue is placed on the side of the students' class practices.

IV. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore the development of intercultural skills in 74 preservice M.Ed students in Teaching, Education and Training, at a university in Hauts-de-France (North of France's area). More specifically, it examines the students' awareness-raising process through the development of critical reflection and political effectiveness, in a compulsory ten-hour course entitled "Managing relations and interactions between different cultures". The students work two days a week in a primary

¹ Online project: <https://nortonism.tumblr.com/>

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or secondary school. For the rest of the week, they take part in a professional university course. The participants in the study showed a keen interest in the subject of microaggressions, declaring themselves to be fully concerned by the subject as victims or potential victim, sometimes as perpetrator or witnessing the microaggression.

The 74 participants worked in 22 collaborative groups of two to four people to realize the following task: " 1. Choose a photo from Kim Kyun's project (directly on the website in English). 2. Justify your choice and analyze the document, i.e. question what is said and how it is said". I collected 22 collaborative productions. Reference to the course, but also to personal knowledge and experiences, is encouraged, as is research on the topic on the internet. Participants are invited to think about concrete examples from their own lives. They also have the opportunity to explore concrete learning aids for their professional practice.

I collected and analyzed data from the 22 collective written productions, each representing approximately one page/one and a half pages of Word. The groups' productions are anonymized by simple coding, from GR1 to GR22. I used content analysis procedures to uncover elements of critical reflection and political efficacy. I drew inferences from the latent content of the textual data (Krippendorff, 2004) to gain a better understanding of what the students might have meant. I started with open coding and then generated codes based on the elements of critical awareness. For critical reflection, I analyzed:

- The impact of the subject on students.
- Identifying and contextualizing microaggressions (situations, forms, etc.), references, effects).
- Taking account of the microaggression reported to question more general social issues. For political efficacy, I examined references to personal experiences in relation to the theory, and students' proposals to open up opportunities for change in teaching. At the end of this stage, I proceeded to re-contextualize and organize the categories constructed, in order to structure the presentation of the results along two main dimensions.

V. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The results show that only 11 of the 20 photos proposed in Kyun's project were chosen by the French students [Table 1 in appendix]. Eleven groups chose a photo with an Asian-American student, eight with an African-American student and five with a Latin-American student. Of the 22 groups, 10 said they were emotionally affected. They explicitly referred to the photo as "shocking" and "brutal", but at the same time, they said they were not so surprised by the microaggressions reported, which reveal how racism is experienced in everyday life. Although the American students discourses analyzed by the participants provide traces of their process of critical awareness. The development of critical reflection and that of political effectiveness are unbalanced and lacking in certain aspects.

A. Critical thinking in progress

Seven of the twenty-two groups explicitly stated that the pedagogical modalities raised awareness of the problems of racism underlying the issue of microaggressions. One group out of the seven seems to exempt itself from this awareness-raising work (perhaps taking it for granted), stating that "it is important for people to become aware of these societal problems" (GR9). I emphasize the word "people" to indicate that this group excludes itself (certainly unconsciously) from those who need to be made aware. Eighteen groups went beyond the simple reading of the microaggression denounced by the American student to understand the problems at a more general level for society. Five of these groups argue that the microaggression is emblematic of "systemic racism", which for some of these five groups means that society as a whole is racist and that we are educated in a racist way. This minimizes the interest of the expression put forward by the five groups that speak of "systemic racism", insofar as few of them specify whether they are referring to practices that penetrate to the heart of institutions, or whether they are pointing to the way in which racism is surreptitiously actualized in social relations (Mazouz, 2020). GR9 states that in his own time, Fanon emphasized the intense vexation felt by the fact that there was no intention to offend and said that "it is precisely the absence of any intention to offend that is the cause of racism". In his day, Fanon emphasized the intense vexation felt by the fact that there was no intention to offend, saying that "it is precisely the absence of will, this casualness, this nonchalance, this ease with which it is fixed, with which it is imprisoned, primitivized, anti-civilized, which is vexing" (Fanon, 2014/1952: 24). And above all, in his view, it is "the stigma of a decline in our human relations" (ibid.). GR20 stresses the role of education, in the broadest sense, in the way we categorize others: "Since childhood, we have been conditioned; it is what we learn at school, what we read in occidental-oriented books, what we see in the news that makes us say things about others". For Darmon (2010), this learning about race but also gender and class through socialization leads children to internalize ways of positioning themselves in relation to others, and in some cases to position themselves in a relationship of domination.

Thirteen out of twenty-two groups became aware of the process of otherization, whereby the absent interlocutor constructs the other by arrogating to himself the power to define him. As Delphy (2008) reminds us, there is the one who has the power to label, to classify, in short to name others. In their discourse, the groups identify a hierarchical relationship in which they reveal the way in which the American student is inferiorized by the voice of the absent interlocutor. Nine of the thirteen groups provided some insight into the hierarchical nature of the microaggressions. They gave short definitions (GR2 defined "race") and used certain

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words like differences, standards, deficit, indicator of superiority. Others identify certain linguistic formulations that hierarchize and define a boundary between Whites and non-Whites, in a superior-inferior relationship (as much as White). These signs of understanding can be linked to notions of race, racism or racialisation.

Two groups cited historical elements at a macroscopic level in an attempt to better understand microaggression at a microscopic level: "The weakening of segregation in the USA in the 1960s" (GR4), which could have led, according to the group, "to the disappearance of racism". On this subject, Ndiaye (2021: 79) stresses that in the 1960s, "the perverse and destructive system of segregation was down" but that "the fight against discrimination continued". GR5 takes a broader historical sweep, with heterogeneous references to "slavery between the 15e and 19e centuries, to events such as the actions of Luther King and the election of Obama in 2009, which mark developments for black civil rights". However, the group concludes that "the problem of racism is still with us, even in the 21e century". GR5 shows that certain elements of history (political speeches, elections), while they do not put an end to racism, do transform "a demonstration into a historic event by recalling the ideals of justice and equality, by demanding that the color of a person's skin be taken into account".

None of these groups referred to the French colonial issue, in order to examine the French context and start a debate, nor to the four centuries during which Europe produced the hierarchy of races through learned treatises, widely disseminated in society and particularly in schools (Blanchard and Boëtsch, 2021). I note that no group rejected the study of microaggressions from a US perspective, and no group used the project to argue that the United States was a counter-example to what was happening in France. On the contrary, the majority of the 22 groups see the phenomenon of racial microaggressions as something cross-cutting and commonly shared by the USA and France, and other countries in the world.

Discussion about points concerning critical thinking:

- Using microscopic phenomena such as microaggressions can highlight the social relations of domination that structure interactions and social experience, in France but also in other parts of the world.
- Segregation and slavery are mentioned, but not colonial legacies.
- The importance of socialization in the reading of the world, and the effects on people's status and functions, underlines the key role that teachers can potentially play with students at school.
- In the way we perceive the world, despite certain advances, race is omnipresent and timeless and is often interconnected with other aspect of discrimination.
- The vast majority of groups do not use the term 'race' to describe socially constructed practices of domination (or racialisation), as if the word itself was 'racist' and not a tool to describe racism. They often use the word racism not as a concept but as a phenomenon that includes hostility and effects on others.

B. Political effectiveness at half-mast

Only 6 groups out of 22 stated that it was possible to bring about change through their civic actions. These groups made future planning at different levels where they felt it was possible to make changes in the classroom, in the school or in the political institution of school. Two groups stated that they wanted to develop human values with their pupils, two groups saw the school subject of Moral and Civic Education as an opportunity to work on respect for others, and one group thought that only a consistent school project shared by the educational community could change things. Finally, one group is putting forward educational proposals to recognize the cultural and linguistic plurality of pupils. But, for over forty years, many researches and my own research (Lemoine-Bresson and Trémion, 2022) have shown that the actions envisaged by this group exacerbate differences and reinforce stereotypes, if the proposal are not discussed.

Of the four groups that chose the photo of Winter, a young black woman in Kim Kyun's project, which denounces "You're really pretty... for a dark skin girl", only one group shows an area of intersection between race and gender. The student groups do not seem to be taking up the issue of race in order to take serious account of the diversity of their experiences (Mestiri, 2020) and better question the complexity of relations of domination and group membership in a dominant/dominated relationship. It has to be said, however, that the framework used to interpret the experience of the American students is that of racism. Perhaps this is why French students have little use for intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2023) in analysing the experience of the black women students in the photographic project. As this approach was not taken, it is possible that the students did not better understand that our European middle-class values and standards were not the normal way of being. This may raise questions about their positions if they were to become involved as effective political actors (Watts et al., 2011). The four groups question standards of beauty at the heart of the wider issue constructed by science and history, whereby black people have been defined as inferior in every way and particularly aesthetically. It has not escaped them the extent to which "the predominance of extremely normative racial and gendered imaginaries" (Blanchard et al., 2018: 16), such as the hierarchical view of skin tones between people, plays a role in relations of domination. Some groups identify the basis on which the hierarchy is organized. For 14 groups, it is based on a visible sign such as skin color or slanted eyes. For them, racial differences are visible and form part of the process of minoritizing.

GR 20 says: "There is a preliminary stage in the interviewer's mind. The first stage is visual. He notices the black hair, the slanted eyes, the shape of the face".

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However, scientific research shows that "physical differences do not exist prior to the practices that make them visible" (Brun and Cosquer, 2022: 94). But, as Mazouz (2020: 40) points out, critical use of the notion of race (alongside those of class and gender) makes it possible to separate the racial issue from skin color, and to direct the analysis towards the status and social experience of racialized people. GR8 questions a possible racialized reading of the world, citing "existing racial stereotypes that could skew our interpretation". It puts forward the hypothesis that "there is a general consensus on what a person of color should be and do, and a fortiori a social pressure for them to do so".

Discussion about points concerning political effectiveness:

- Avoiding the use of the concept of race, even though it would be more appropriate to talk about the condition of racialized people than their skin color.
- Taking into account the intersection of several relations of domination (race, class, gender) would enable a more complex analysis of the world and more fruitful civic participation.
- The knowledge that has yet to be built up is holding back political effectiveness, if any action is planned at all.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the light of the research I have carried out for over 10 years into the relationship between interculturality and 'race/racialisation' and various relations of domination (Lemoine-Bresson, 2024), and the results of this study, it is crucial that the preservice training of future teachers enable them to reflect on and engage in collaborative exchanges in order to analyze the world in all its complexity by linking the complex dimensions of situations. There seems to be an urgent need for students to be able to examine these notions in their "involvement in the social experiences and conditions of existence of racialized people" (Vermeren, 2015: n.p.). Furthermore, in the space of training, it becomes imperative to offer students fields and place where they could engage in individual or collective action to change aspects of society that are perceived as unjust (Watts et al., 2011). Critical action as the third element of critical consciousness should no longer be an option, provided that critical reflection and political efficacy have been worked on beforehand. Indeed, in agreement with Hipfl and Loftsdóttir (2012), changes in students' discourses do not automatically lead to the suppression of racist practices. From an educational point of view, the device questions the relationship between knowledge and teaching practices. It gives a voice to the French students through the voices of the American students in Kim Kyun's project, displaying their experiences. Exposed to a semiotic support, they felt comfortable exploring their own biases and prejudices. They said they were interested in a subject that was not often covered in masters courses. There were at least two positive aspects to the scheme: (a) The development of reflection and the mirror effect to examine how we (inter)act or don't act with students whose cultural diversity is a fact of life (b) The possibility of apply this approach to their own classrooms, making it possible to promote emotions (including the effects on others), cognitive development and to activate pupils' desire to act in society. Despite its limitations of the study, such an approach would open doors to expression and reflection on the process of undermining so-called 'heritage' students. It should enable (future) teachers to distance themselves from the assumptions they make, as well as from culturalist interpretations of a pupil's behavior or difficulties at school. Conversely, maintaining an essentialist stance could distance them from the goal of inclusion for all. With improvements, the pedagogical modalities could foster a space of/for change (Hipfl and Loftsdóttir, 2012: 11) insofar as there are some encouraging signs in the students' discourse. Once again, the responsibility of training is at stake in promoting and supporting greater inclusion in the justice-oriented education.

VII. APPENDIX

TABLE: DESCRIPTION OF MICROAGGRESSIONS ON THE INTERNET WEBSITE AND CHOICES OF THE FRENCH GROUPS (GR1 TO GR22)

French groups	First name of US students	Text of the microaggressions
-	Amber	"Why do you sound White?"
-	Darby	"You don't act like a normal black person, you know?"
GR21, GR22	Amanda	"Can you read this?" He showed me a Japanese character on his phone"
-	Jaime	"When I gave a speech about racism, the emcee introduced me as 'Jaime Garcia'. My name is Jaime Rodriguez; not all Latinos have the last name Garcia"
-	Cesca	"What <i>are</i> you?' Human. Being biracial doesn't make me a 'what"
GR19, GR20	Sandra	"So... you're Chinese... right?"
GR18	Sri	"You don't speak Spanish?"
GR16, GR17	Kristina	"This girl sitting next to me moves, to sit closer to someone she's talking to, and this white guy whispers loudly that she moved because I... "smell like rice"

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GR15	Aj	"You're not <i>really</i> Asian"
GR14	Maja	"Just because I'm Mexican that doesn't mean I should be the automatic 1st choice for the role of Dora the Explorer in the high school skit"
GR12, GR13	Michele	"No, where are you <i>really</i> from?"
-	Aja	"So what does your hair look like today?' She said as she pulled off my hat <i>without my permission</i> "
-	Garrett	"So, like, what are you?"
-	Jackie	"Not your fucking China Doll"
GR9, GR10, GR11	HP	"Can you see as much as white people? You know, because of your <i>EYES..?</i> "
-	Mika	"So what do you guys speak in Japan? Asian??"
GR8	Courtney	"Courtney I never see you as a black girl' #swerve #OPENYOUREYES!"
GR4, GR5, GR6, GR7	Winter	"You're really pretty... for a dark skin girl"
GR1, GR2, GR3	Josh	"The limited representation of my race in your classroom does not make me the voice of all black people"
-	Nisarah	"When people think it's weird that I listen to Carrie Underwood"

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