

Seeing beyond the local context: the understandings of slavery and the slave trade of students in Reunion Island schools

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In the new millennium model of low definition curriculum, teachers have professional latitude to deliver prescribed disciplinary content through a range of pedagogical and assessment orientations. The rhetoric is that with carefully crafted practice, the goal of high quality/high equity learning outcomes can be achieved for all students. This paper is focused on the experiences of teachers and students from one large multicultural, multilingual, low socio-economic status community from Reunion Island, a remote French department in the Indian Ocean. In their history and geography lessons, the topic of study is a contentious one and closely connected to the students' personal histories, that of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Using an analytical lens that combines the sociological work of Bernstein and Maton, and utilises ranking questionnaires, this study examines the complexity and tensions inherent in teachers' choices and the implications for students' short- and long-term learning outcomes.

Keywords: Reunion Island; history and geography curriculum; minority group students; contextualised knowledge; semantic gravity

Introduction: theorising misalignments and equity goals in education

Teacher enactment of curriculum has been taken by many as the biggest predictor of student learning outcomes (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2003). Bernstein (2000) counterpoints alignments of family cultures and those of schooling, the latter predominantly reflecting White, western, middle-class modalities, in his analyses of how educational identities are determined. Successful outcomes tend to be defined in terms of acquisition of differentiated, decontextualised knowledge, raising issues for all learners as to who they were, are and become. The OECD measures equity in such

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matters as fairness and inclusion and Yunupingu (1999) proposes its extension to the more liberating principle of ‘double power’ that enables minority populations to operate in and negotiate between two cultures. To respect minority group students, ‘double power’ must be the goal of schooling outcomes not merely as pitting two cultures up against each other but bringing them together.

Pursuit of such lofty goals has not notably marked western school curricula and how teachers charged with responsibility for realising such ‘double power’ among minority group students reconcile the many tensions encountered in their work is the object of analysis here. Taking French history and geography curriculum as its case in point, the paper focuses upon lessons about slavery in Reunion Island to examine what different orientations to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are offered to minority group students whose personal family histories are rooted in its experience. The analysis draws on a developed Bernsteinian framework. To develop and extend Bernstein’s code theory, Maton (2009, 2013 forthcoming) conceptualises ‘semantic gravity’ as the degree to which meanings are dependent on their context. Semantic gravity can be regarded, along a continuum, as stronger where knowledge is closely dependent on its context for meaning and weaker where knowledge is less context-dependent for meaning. This concept from Maton’s sociological framework of Legitimation Code Theory is being adopted in substantive studies of curricular and pedagogic practices in education (e.g. Shalem & Slonimsky, 2010). Here, it is drawn upon to analyse data from ranking questionnaire responses of 117 students from the *quatrième colleges* (third year of French Secondary Education) of Reunion Island.

The context: Reunion Island

Reunion is a French island located in the Indian Ocean, south-west of Mauritius and east of Madagascar. Since 1946, it has been a ‘department’ of France.¹ The island is 39 miles long and 28 miles wide, with a population of about 800,000. Its economic, demographic and social situations are critical to understanding its pedagogical situation. During the slavery period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the economy of the island was based on agriculture, mainly coffee and sugarcane. After the Second World War and the ‘departmentalisation’ of the island, agricultural crisis forced Reunion to focus on services. The French Government pushed the development of tourism but, lacking the relative advantages of neighbouring Mauritius, its development experienced difficulty, such that unemployment still amounts to one-third of the labour force. The gap in Reunion between well-off and poor and White ‘metropolitans’ and ‘natives’ remains wide. In addition to these inequalities, the population is growing fast. According to the French National Institute for Statistics and Economics Studies in 2009, the birth rate was 1.73% for Reunion compared with 1.26% for France. Its

most striking impact is upon population age structure. Today, approximately 45% of Reunionese are under 25 years old, of whom 60% are unemployed. Health problems, particularly arising from addiction to alcohol, delinquency and intra-family violence, are some of the ills afflicting Reunion.

Content knowledge: slave history in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Reunion Island

Reunion's ethnic groups include people of African, Chinese, French, Indian and Malagasy origin, as well as many of mixed race, the so-called 'Creole' people. As an overseas department, Reunion Island is an integral part of the French Republic and an outermost region of the European Union and the period from which the term 'Creole' is drawn now seems very remote. Since the introduction of the Taubira Law of 21 May 2001, the preceding era of '*nos ancêtres les Gaulois*' ('our ancestors the Gauls') and the characteristic 'Francocentrism' of French post-colonial education have been consigned seemingly to history by the French state and its overseas departments and regions (DROM). This law commemorates and promotes recognition of the slave trade and slavery as 'crimes against humanity'. Article 5 stipulates that 'educational curricula and research programmes in history and the human sciences should give due importance to slavery and the slave trade' (my translation). In addition, a body entrusted with the responsibility of making proposals on policy issues in teaching, research and culture was created on 5 January 2004: the *Comité Pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage* (CPME), or the Committee for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and Slavery. However, it has failed to generate any significant change (Vitale, 2008).

In order to examine how slavery and the slave trade were treated as components of history and geography curricula by educators and students in the DROM, this paper seeks to provide analyses of both formally prescribed curriculum content and textbook material and the enacted curricula (i.e. how it is taught and assessed in schools) in history and geography.

The field study

The field study was conducted in Reunion Island in April and May 2009 in four *collège* classes, including one located in a *Zone d'Education Prioritaire* (ZEP, priority education area). The schools were located in northern, western and eastern areas of the island. The geographical location of the field study and final choice of sites was largely governed by opportunities provided by the *Rectorat* (local board of education) and head teachers. While in view of the small number of cases and subjects involved, the field study cannot be regarded as statistically representative, it can be regarded as a representative

sample of the island's *carte scolaire* (school map) system where students are assigned to schools based on area of residence. While the French Government withdrew the *carte scolaire* at the beginning of the 2008 academic year, reflecting the accentuated neoliberal emphasis that it laid on 'family choice', inequalities of access to 'good' schools suffered by working-class families and students have only been further entrenched.

The typology of schools which guided our selection of cases was inspired by Dubet (1991), based in particular on a transfer of the typology of the *lycée* system (French sixth-form college, ages 16–18) to the *collège* system (French middle school, ages 11–15) and through a change relating to the final category of new *lycéens*. It is neither normative nor evaluative but rather designed to reflect the ideal-typical social intake and the results achieved by schools as presented in the *fiches d'identité collège*, an official set of descriptions of individual schools published by the *Rectorat*.

The four kinds of school identified by these means for the purposes of this study may be referred to as 'true', 'good', 'new' and 'relegation'. School names in the vignettes offered below have been changed and replaced by the names of famous slaves from Reunion Island.

- The 'true school', Cimendef, had an intake primarily made up of middle- and upper-middle class students who were 'on track' (i.e. had experienced no grade retention). Schools in this category prepare students for prestigious *lycées* and courses of study, particularly science baccalaureates, '*prépas*', post-secondary courses leading to entrance exams for the *grandes écoles*, the most prestigious institutions in French higher education, and the like.
- The 'good school', Manzac, had a broader and more diverse student intake than Cimendef. While the middle classes still represented a significant proportion of its student intake, children of blue-collar workers and employees were also significantly represented. The school achieved good results and had very limited concerns related to discipline, violence and absenteeism.
- The 'new school', Faon, had a less privileged intake, and its most advantaged students are tending to be children of artisans, craftspeople and storekeepers. A significant percentage of parents received the *Revenu de Solidarité Active* (RSA, a type of social welfare), and a significant proportion of students had repeated at least one grade. Results were passable or substandard and incivility widespread.
- The 'relegation school', Mafate, was located in a ZEP with a student intake primarily made up of children of blue-collar workers, the unemployed and RSA recipients. A significant number of students had repeated at least one grade. Results were poor and absenteeism common, as also were issues involving violence and incivility.

The decision to focus on *quatrième* students at colleges was premised on the observation that the problem of teaching slavery appeared to be a more pronounced issue at this level than in other grades. This observation was confirmed by teachers and attendance officers in history and geography in both Metropolitan France and Reunion Island. In the formal curriculum, colonial history has usually been examined in the context of nineteenth-century European expansion. It is primarily in this context that questions of slavery are addressed, with three hours, at most, dedicated to the matter, as prescribed by the French Ministry of Education. For the DROM in general and Reunion Island in particular, the curriculum is officially designed to incorporate the study of local history, that is, ‘the discovery and populating of Reunion Island, slavery and the slave trade, the abolition of slavery, and the indentured servant system’ (my translation – Ministry of Education, 2000). These curricula were modified for the final cycle of the mainstream non-vocational system (Ministry of Education, 2002).

Classroom observation and teacher and pupil interviews

With the agreement of history and geography teachers and senior management, I was permitted to attend lessons on the abolition of slavery. Each of the four schools studied dedicated only one hour in this sequence of lessons to examining abolition. Very few references were made to local history. Only two teachers referred to a worksheet entitled ‘*Une abolition manquée. La question de l’esclavage aux Mascareignes au temps de la Révolution Française*’ (Benteux, Gopal, Jauze, & Tavan, 2000) published by the CRDP (Centre Régional de Documentation Pédagogique – Regional Center of Pedagogical Documentation) of Reunion Island, which includes four poorly substantiated pages on the specific case of Reunion Island.

The preconception that teachers would display marked interest in the history of the island was largely dispelled. Significant detachment from and even indifference to local history emerged from the accounts given by teachers, whether from Reunion Island or Metropolitan France. Although differences in conceptions of teaching and education were apparent, for example all four teachers shared a common ‘Luc-Ferry-style’ mythologising of late nineteenth-century French Republican Education. The view expressed by Teacher A at Cimendef, the ‘true school’, was representative of interview opinions expressed across all four schools: ‘What’s the point of teaching the history of Reunion Island, since it’s not highly valued in higher education and students have little interest in it?’ The very usefulness of the study was challenged by a ‘local’ Teacher B in the Cimendef staff room: ‘What’s the point of a study about teaching the history of Reunion Island? Only a ‘Zorey’ [someone from metropolitan France] would ask that kind of question! You’ve got to stop stirring up the past! People from Reunion Island know their history. It’s the history of other people they need to learn about. Your study’s completely pointless’.

The ranking questionnaire

A ranking questionnaire was given to students in class immediately after a lesson on slavery and the slave trade. Students were informed that there was no obligation to complete, it was not an assessment and that it was, therefore, pointless to copy from another person. Care was also taken to emphasise that the questionnaire would remain anonymous and that students must not include their names. The same approach was adopted in all four classes. Following distribution, the following instructions (in French) were read and when necessary explained orally in French and Creole and also displayed on the board:

Based on your last history and geography lesson, choose five words ranked in order of importance (word 1 being more important than word 2, word 2 being more important than word 3, etc.) to describe and define the slave trade, slavery and abolition. Write the five words on the sheet, and remember to include your gender, age, the occupation of your parents or legal guardian, and their educational level (if you know it).

Response was excellent; the playful dimension and novelty of the task seemed to appeal to students. Analysis of their responses was carried out after data collection and here the focus will be exclusively on the section of the questionnaire relevant to the instruction which they had received. Developed by the sociologist Pierre Vergès (1992) and elaborated within the broader framework of so-called similarity analyses, ‘evocation analysis’ aims to identify the lexemes characterising representations based on a statistical calculation of mean ranks and frequency of use. In linguistics, a lexeme is the basic lexical unit (a lexical morpheme), as opposed to a grammatical morpheme (basic unit of meaning). A lexeme is a lexical unit and a unit of meaning. For example, the French term *chantons* can be broken down into the lexeme ‘chant’ + the morpheme ‘ons’ + ‘er’, etc. Discourse analysis software approaches lexemes through lemmatisation, i.e. a canonical grouping of lexemes. In processing the qualitative data from the corpus, the process of lemmatisation did not reduce grammatical morphemes. In other words, each figure below shows the most representative lexemes found in the evocations; i.e. word choices (Figures 1–4).

Relations between the lexemes need to be considered to interpret a similarity tree. A central core (the lexeme ‘Blacks’) appears in all four classes, along with peripheral ones linked to the central core. The thickness of the connecting lines indicates the statistical significance of the link. The numbers indicating the strength of the links between lexemes are not included to avoid encumbering the paper with tables. Response patterns at Cimendef point to a combination of lexemes referring both to slavery as addressed in class (‘work’, ‘prisoner’) and to words implying a decontextualised form of domination or violence, indicating an operation of cognitive abstraction

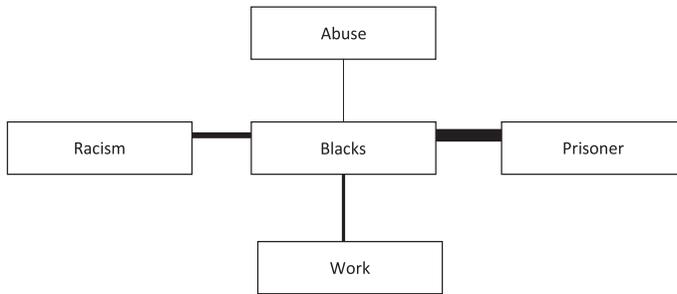


Figure 1. Cimendef similarity tree: the ‘true school’.

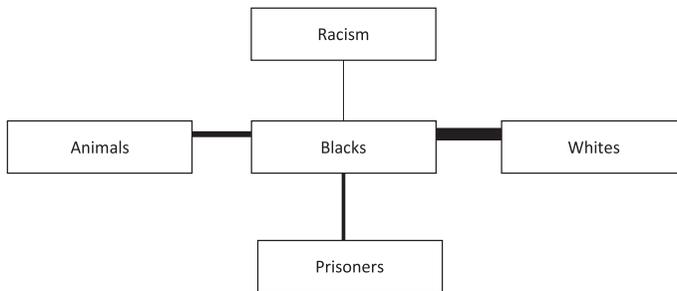


Figure 2. Manzac similarity tree: the ‘good school’.

where students evoked lexical items (‘racism’, ‘abuse’) that apply to wider contexts beyond slavery and its history (Figure 1).

The core element of responses given by students at Manzac was, again, ‘Blacks’. Two significant peripheral elements were also emphasised, ‘Whites’ and ‘Animals’, in contrast to ‘Racism’ and ‘Prisoners’, two key lexemes emphasised in student responses at Cimendef. The ‘Blacks–Whites’ dialectic was more pronounced in this group with a significant number of references to the lexeme ‘animals’, used metaphorically to underline the dehumanisation of slaves. ‘*Lété kom zanimo*’ (they were like animals) was a frequent response in interviews conducted with students at Manzac (Figure 2).

The same central core again emerged from student responses at Faon but with a peripheral element specifying the origin of the ‘White’ man also emphasised by students at Manzac (i.e. ‘France’). Black–White was less significant than the slaves–France opposition at Faon. Three other recurring lexemes underlined the condition and distinctive features of Blacks and slaves, described as ‘poor, in chains and tortured’. Descriptions tended to focus on the figure and experience of the slave rather than on the more general system of slavery. Finally, evocations tended to be more descriptive and often involved interpretations and personal judgements (Figure 3).

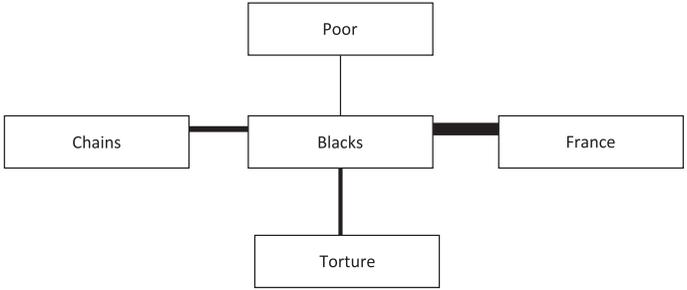


Figure 3. Faon similarity tree: the ‘new school’.

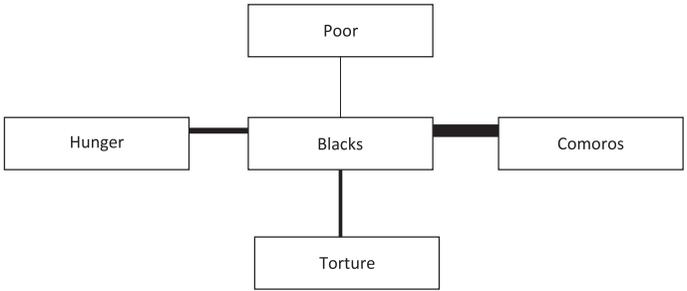


Figure 4. Mafate similarity tree: the ‘relegation school’.

As in the three other schools, students at Mafate mainly emphasised the lexeme ‘Blacks’. Peripheral elements were key features of response distinguishing Mafate students from student responses at Cimendef and Manzac while, more so even than at Faon, lexemes were found to be heavily dependent on descriptive terms, the condition of the Black slave (‘torture’, ‘hunger’ and ‘poor’), and value judgements. Here, the emphasis was not on Black–White dialectics or France so much as assimilation of ‘Blacks’ with the Comorians² Mafate students’ responses thus involved constant shift between a Black-slave theme and more local and contemporary focus. History appears to sit uneasily alongside an interpretation of contemporary Reunion Island, modern slavery and the condition of the Comorians viewed as synonymous with Blacks and slaves (Figure 4).

Several correspondence factor analyses were carried out based on student questionnaire response. Correspondence factor analysis (i.e. Multi-Classification Analysis) uses the representation index Chi2 on data to generate a map; one or several maps or images representing the distribution of values and variables (Cibois, 1994). Correspondence factor analysis is, thus, based on an opposite logic to similarity analysis. While the former focused on terms that likened or assimilated current representations to slavery and the slave trade, what follows will emphasise terms that distinguish representations from slavery and the slave trade. The full range of

terms (420) was analysed rather than the most representative in the hierarchy of evocations. Broadly speaking, it shows that aspects of social origin and gender, representing classical discriminating variables in sociological work, correlated with educational performance in terms of track or grade retention.

It is important to emphasise that the results of the similarity and correspondence factor analyses share a number of common features despite their methodological differences. The term 'Blacks' appears at the centre of the axis of abscissas and the axis of ordinates³ in the four correspondence factor analyses. While it has no value from the statistical perspective, the low incidence of the lexeme in terms of opposition corroborates the fact that it is at the heart of student representations. An initial assessment of correspondence factor analyses also indicated that the lexicon close to the variables largely matched that highlighted in similarity analyses.

Applying semantic gravity: the findings

In correspondence factor analyses, contrasts between social origins (social classes) were distinct and pronounced. Students whose parents were managers, technicians and associate professionals contrast sharply with those whose parents were blue-collar workers, employees and the unemployed throughout the participant population. Even in the 'true school', the same discriminating factors of education as an institution fostering the reproduction of inequality were found: students who had not repeated a grade were generally the children of professionals located at the top of the social ladder. Female students were found to be particularly numerous in this category, thus corroborating sociological studies of the comparative educational success of boys and girls. From preschool to baccalaureate, girls have in recent times invariably achieved higher performance levels than boys (e.g. Baudelot & Establet, 2007). Among the terms emphasized by both groups, the items found in the similarity analysis were also found in the correspondence factor analysis. Responses given by female students who had not repeated a grade and were the daughters of managers were found to be less dependent on the context of meaning relating to slavery and the slave trade.

To explore such findings, I shall draw on Maton's concept of *semantic gravity* (2013, forthcoming) which describes the degree of context-dependence of meaning, where stronger semantic gravity indicates knowledge is more dependent on its context for meaning and weaker semantic gravity indicates knowledge is less dependent on its context. As substantive studies of education are showing (Maton, Hood, & Shay, in press), this concept offers a means of beginning to explore the organising principles underlying knowledge practices. One emerging finding of studies is that where students' understandings exhibit only stronger semantic gravity, this may problematise their access to more powerful forms of knowledge that transcend specific contexts and cumulatively build over time.

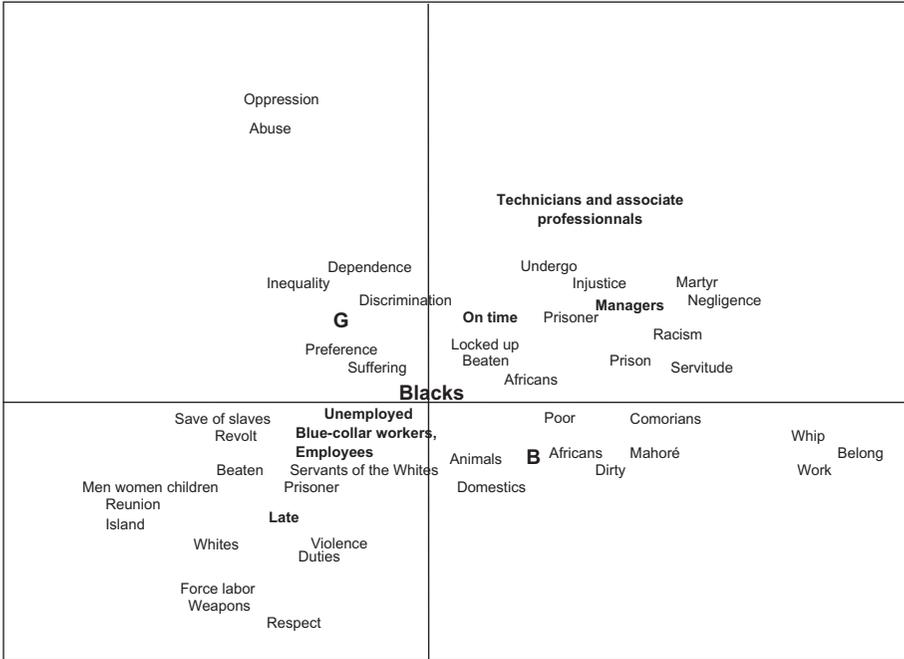


Figure 5. Correspondence factor analysis (Cimendef). The coordinates of each variable are defined by the strength of the correlations (saturation coefficients higher in absolute value than 0.5) with each of the two factors representing the axes of the plane. The axis of abscissas (17%) represents the factor ‘social origin and gender’. The axis of ordinates (22%) represents ‘the degree of dependence of the evocation on its context’.

Among the daughters of managers, the terms ‘injustice’, ‘martyr’, ‘racism’, ‘oppression’ and ‘discrimination’ contrasted sharply with the terms used by the sons of blue-collar workers and employees, such as ‘servants of the Whites’, ‘Reunion Island’, ‘Mahoré’ and ‘Comorians’. All these girls’ terms exhibit relatively weaker semantic gravity by referring to ideas, practices and beliefs transcending specific contexts or groups (for example ‘racism’ rather than ‘servants’). In contrast, the responses of boys exhibited stronger semantic gravity by referring to the specific context of the island, a geographical area not securely included in the official history and geography curriculum (Figure 5).

In Manzac’s correspondence factor analysis (Figure 6), almost the same items were found as in correspondence factor analysis of the Cimendef data, albeit overall with stronger semantic gravity. Among male students, who had often repeated at least one grade and tended to come from socially underprivileged backgrounds, the semantic gravity of terms was relatively strong. Their evocations of slavery frequently involved a contrast between ‘France’, ‘Whites’ and ‘Big colonists’ on the one hand and ‘of Reunion

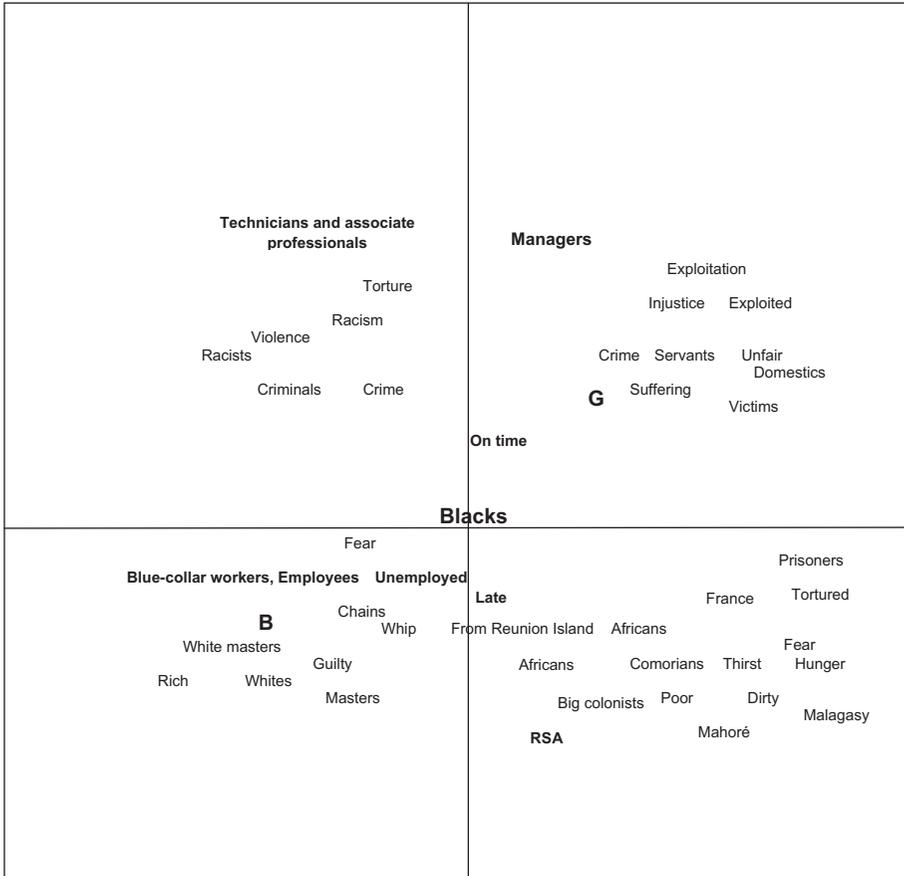


Figure 6. Correspondence factor analysis (Manzac). The axis of abscissas (26,2%) represents the factor ‘social origin and gender’; and the axis of ordinates (34%) represents ‘the degree of dependence of the evocation on its context’.

Island’, ‘Malagasy’, ‘Comorians’, ‘Africans’, and ‘Mahoré’ on the other. Once again, the lexicon used to describe the opposition included adjectives emphasising the condition (‘poor’) and state (‘dirty’, ‘hunger’, ‘thirst’ and ‘fear’) of slaves. By contrast, the responses given by Manzac female students who were the daughters of managers, technicians and associate professionals and who had not repeated a grade included terms characterized by weaker semantic gravity, such as ‘racism’, ‘suffering’, ‘victims’ and ‘crime’ (Figure 6).

While the combination ‘social origin – gender – educational results’ continued to structure the mapping, these distinctions were found to be less apparent at Faon (Figure 7) than at Cimendef and Manzac. The relative uniformity of the social origin of its students as sons and daughters of craftsmen, artisans, shopkeepers and mostly blue-collar workers and employees

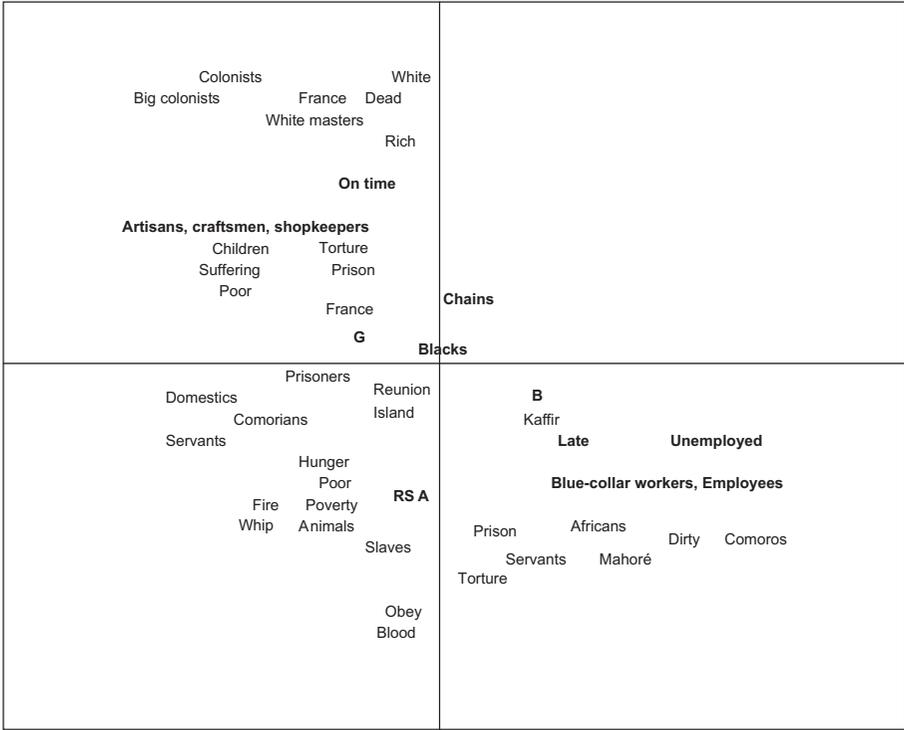


Figure 7. Correspondence factor analysis de (Faon). The axis of abscissas (10,67%) represents the factor ‘social origin and gender’; and the axis of ordinates (36,64%) represents ‘the degree of dependence of the evocation on its context’.

generated significant homogeneity in student responses. At the same time, all other things being equal, the responses of all female students were found to be characterised by stronger semantic gravity than those of males. Whether male or female are at the top or bottom of the social ladder, and irrespective of whether students had repeated a grade or not, the correspondence factor analysis indicates that responses invariably involved lexemes implying a very contextualised and embodied view of slavery and the slave trade. The figure of the slave and the context characterize student responses at Manzac, a finding further reinforced by the contrast observed between a network of terms centring on France (‘colonists’, ‘Big colonists’, ‘White masters’, ‘rich’, etc.) and a network of terms centring on Reunion Island (‘Kaffir’, ‘slaves’, ‘Africans’, ‘Comorians’, etc.) (Figure 7).

The Mafate (Figure 8) data shows the strongest semantic gravity. Even more so than at Faon, it is primarily Axis 2 (‘the degree of dependence of the evocation on its context’) that is found to be representative of the opposition between the various lexemes. This dialectic is, nonetheless, relative, a matter of degree indicating more or less dependence on a context already characterized by temporal and spatial factors. ‘Hold’, ‘ships’, ‘chains’ and

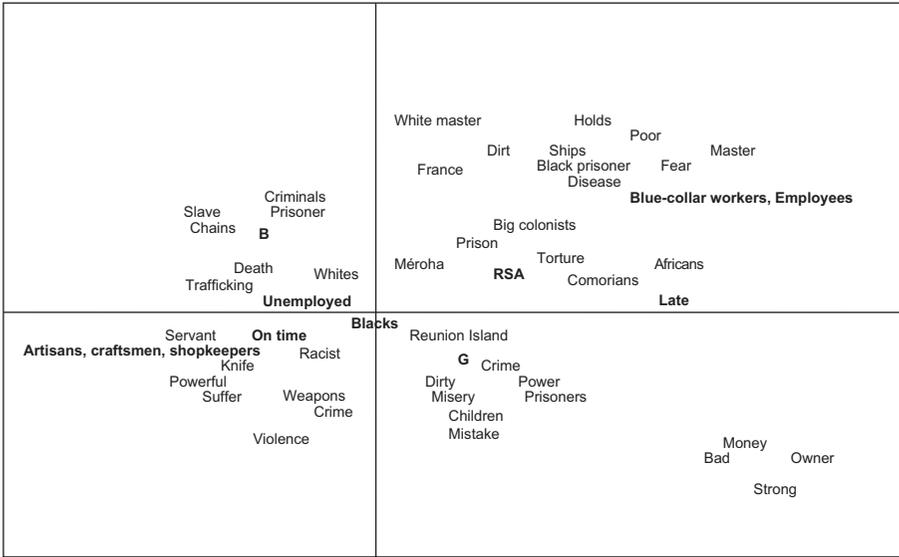


Figure 8. Correspondence factor analysis (Mafate). The axis of abscissas (12,3%) represents the factor ‘social origin and gender’; and the axis of ordinates (39,4%) represents ‘the degree of dependence of the evocation on its context’.

‘weapons’ are some of the terms that appear in the mapping of the lexemes referring to ‘Reunion Island’, ‘France’ and the dialectics opposing the master (‘Whites’, ‘White master’, ‘Big Colonists’) and representations of the contemporary slave (‘Mahoré’, ‘Africans’, Comorians’). These terms all represent very concrete and contextualised understandings.

Discussion and conclusions

What conclusions should we draw from both forms of analysis? Student representations of slavery and the slave trade revealed differing relative strengths of semantic gravity and, thus, capacities for reaching towards abstractions and generalisations that transcend specific contexts. While all students cited the lexeme ‘Blacks’, those from privileged social backgrounds, enrolled in high-performing schools, generated a greater number of associations extending beyond the specific context of Reunion Island than students with parents at the bottom of the social ladder, subject to grade retention and enrolled in less prestigious schools. Students at Cimendef who had not repeated a year tended to use lexemes that extended most regularly beyond the specific context of Reunion Island, their representations tending to focus on recontextualization and interpretation of modern slavery. The relatively weak semantic gravity of their comparatively more abstract responses contrasted most strongly with the relatively exclusive reference to context constituting the strongest degree of semantic gravity of most respondents in Mafate

and, to a lesser degree, in Faon. In short, the higher up the social hierarchy, the more likely that students’ understandings of slavery and the slave trade exhibits weaker semantic gravity where meanings reach beyond the context towards more encompassing, abstract and generalising understandings, and the lower down the social hierarchy, the less likely their understanding will transcend highly contextualized understandings (Figure 9).

Crucially, that students’ understandings struggle to reach beyond affective accounts of contextualised ideas reflects a failure of teaching to engage with those students’ local and personal meanings, which, I argue, represents a necessary precondition for enabling students to build on those meanings to reach a wider horizon of understanding. Students’ educational experiences are intertwined with a specific relation to language in general and to French in particular. Tension between French and Creole usage means that struggling students are alienated from their own linguistic practices and representations of the language, including writing in school. Our data indicated that for many, language production was connected to meanings and experience that were not subject to any particular critical distancing from their own world. Stronger semantic gravity emerges from this tension, problematising the development of information literacy, in the sense given to the term by Goody (2000), and of a cognitive and symbolic space that cannot be disembodied. For struggling students, the world of education and even more so of being taught about slavery and the slave trade is a world that involves ‘an identity and subjective uncertainty manifested as confusion or tension’ (my translation – Bautier & Rochex, 1998, p. 287). How can education enable struggling students to view slavery and the slave trade beyond the confines of their own representations if history lessons only address the history of Reunion Island in homeopathic doses? How can the linguistic and symbolic registers of Creole be dissociated if French teaching fails to incorporate language, knowledge and experiences acquired outside school? It must surely

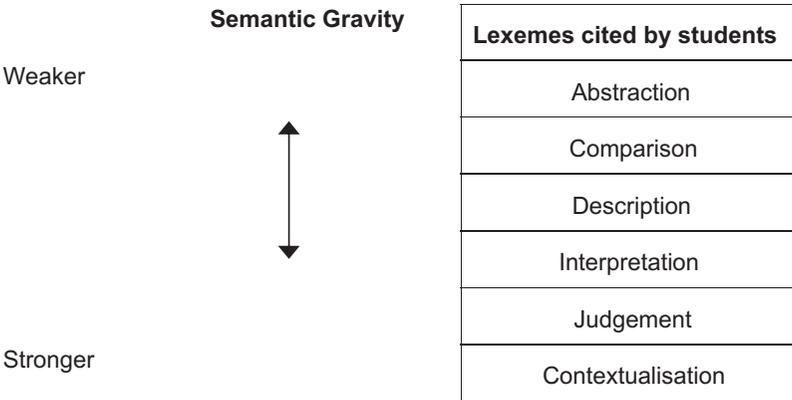


Figure 9. Semantic gravity.

be the case that the teaching of slavery and the slave trade in the DROM cannot afford to overlook local history as a first step towards placing that local history within wider social and symbolic contexts.

A conversation observed and recorded at Mafate during a lesson on slavery and the slave trade usefully illustrates this issue:

Teacher: What happened on 20 December in Reunion Island?

[No answer]

Teacher: What do we celebrate on 20 December on our island?

Student A: The lychee festival.

Teacher: No! Come on, think ...

Student B: Sa la fèt kaf sa! [i.e. celebration of the abolition of slavery in Creole]

[Laughter in the classroom]

Teacher: You know perfectly well that we must speak French in class. And that's not the answer I was hoping for. Right, so you don't know? It's the celebration of the abolition of slavery.

The above exchange between a teacher of history and geography and two students provides a striking illustration of an education and teaching system that persists in refusing to consider students' personal experience and knowledge. The first student referred to the lychee festival instead of the celebration of the abolition of slavery, thereby achieving the strongest degree of semantic gravity. For this student, 20 December is represented by local fruits and marketing operations carried out by supermarkets in Reunion Island, which have referred consistently to the 'lychee festival' over the past ten years – not unlike certain right-wing *mairies* (town halls) that have rejected the term 'fèt kaf', associated with the festival of the Communist Party of Reunion Island. Faced with this issue, the teacher indicated that the student's answer was incorrect without giving any further explanation. By contrast, a relational approach to teaching might have taken account of the student's knowledge and experience and sought to encourage the student to reconsider and revise their personal experience of 20 December. The rejection of the student's answer prevents any further exchange and encloses the student within the limits of their semantic gravity without any attempt to explain why the answer was incorrect. In the case of the second student, the first point worth emphasising is the student's use of Creole ('sa la fèt kaf sa'). The student's 'extra-curricular' language and knowledge are again rejected

by the teacher. Yet, the term *fête des Cafres* is a phrase used by a significant proportion of the population in Reunion Island to describe the date of abolition of slavery. Far from being a racist label, the kaf festival refers to practices, celebrations and ceremonies accompanying a form of political and/or religious and symbolic engagement (see Eve, 2005). The reminder of the rules governing the French education system is the only argument used to invalidate the student's knowledge. Using a form of what Bernstein (1971) termed 'invisible pedagogy', the teacher also adds that the 'fêt kaf' was not the answer being sought but did not explain what kind of answer would be acceptable. Once again, student will almost inevitably fail to understand why the answer was incorrect while being reminded that the history and language of Reunion Island are excluded from the classroom. This may foster tension in pupil relations with their teachers and with knowledge produced by a national education system experienced as alien and unrecognised.

Why is it that these teachers failed to take their students' knowledge and experience seriously? Why reject local language and practices when ten years ago the French Ministry of Education created a CAPES (teacher qualification) in 'Creole languages and cultures' and incorporated specific options in the national curriculum? How can education set about 'mobilising' students, that is, engaging them in activities because they are driven by motives or 'mobiles' (Charlot, 1997), where the knowledge and skills transmitted make sense to them and because they have 'good reasons' to do so? In Charlot's terms 'any relation to knowledge construed as a relation between a subject and their world is a relation to the world and to a form of appropriation of the world: any relation to knowledge implies an epistemic dimension (...) and an identity dimension' (my translation – op. cit. 80). For Charlot, from an epistemic point of view, learning involves places (schools) designed for appropriating a virtual object (knowledge) embodied by empirical objects (books and textbooks) owned by people who already possess this knowledge and these objects. Such learning cannot occur unilaterally on the basis of the ex-cathedra conception of pedagogy inherited from medieval education. The students need the teacher in order to learn but there can be neither classroom nor pedagogy without students. To teach is also to become involved in a relation with students and to understand that students come to school with their own personal knowledge and experience acquired 'outside school' (Bernstein, 2000, chapter 9). The challenge for education and teachers is to enable students to reconsider and revise their knowledge in order to incorporate and integrate it into the knowledge and objects of official education. As Charlot also noted, any relation to knowledge also implies an identity dimension: 'learning makes sense in reference to the History of the subject, to the subject's expectations, reference points, and conception of life, to the subject's relations with others, their self-image and the image they wish to convey to others' (my translation – Charlot, 1997, p. 84). The force of otherness and of the relational dimension of the relation to knowl-

edge is a fundamental aspect of learning history. A lesson on slavery and the slave trade cannot afford to overlook local history and language. If it fails to take into account the local culture, it runs the risk of losing the interest of students and of failing to teach and improve students' relationship to language and developing their capacities for abstraction, and the like. An interesting lesson for students in general and for students in Reunion Island in particular is one that addresses or questions their relation to the world, their relation to themselves and their relation with others in these respects.

The world of both successful and struggling students from Reunion Island is not devoid of social inequalities, unemployment, insecurity and traces of colonisation. Without fear of imputation of determinism, relativism or populism, it may be contended that to ignore or overlook their world is harmful, educationally, socially and psychologically. Teaching approaches and curricula that neglect or overlook the different aspects of the relation to knowledge will only serve to increase educational and social inequalities among students.

This is not, of course, an argument that curriculum in the DROM in particular or the French educational system in general should revert to common sense knowledge. Though there is a need to begin from understandings characterised by stronger semantic gravity, this is not the end point.

As Young argued:

As most teachers know well, they have to take account of the experiences and prior knowledge that students bring to school and what initially motivates them [but] Students do not come to school to learn what they already know. ... Schools are places where the world is treated as an object of thought and not as a place for experience. (2010, 24–25)

This is to argue that relational pedagogy that takes the everyday knowledge of students seriously facilitates processes of building bridges or connections, not least between social experience and school experience. While pedagogy needs to recognise and build upon the experiences of students, the curriculum should avoid sinking into relativism and, pointing towards meanings of weaker semantic gravity that enable the cumulative building of knowledge, seek in the terms of Bernstein (2000) and Bourdieu and Passeron (e.g. 1979/1964) to assuage rather than reinforce inequalities between those who recognise the 'legitimate' culture and knowledge promoted by the educational system and by society and those who do not. As to specifics, this may be no simple task.

Failing this, the gap between the education of children from privileged and less privileged backgrounds will only widen. A realistic curriculum should seek to facilitate transition from the social experience of students to the systematically related concepts of school subjects as objects of thought. However, lowering semantic gravity by normalising both realistic curricula

and mixed pedagogies still leaves the issue of literacy – failure to read still generally represents failure to participate in official curriculum and to take the trip between the everyday and its conceptualised knowledge. This is a formidable issue in the case of postcolonial education in Reunion Island, where 80% of the population speak Creole, a particularly contextualised language.

In conclusion, following Bernstein (2000, pp. 20–26) might ask whether the French education system ought not to identify a number of key skills or competences as a horizon of expectations, conceived as pedagogic rights, which students in general and students in the DROM in particular might acquire, at least in part, through history and geography curricula:

- The right to individual enhancement – i.e. the means of acquiring a critical understanding and new possibilities. Enhancement is the condition for developing confidence toward the education system. Enhancement operates at an individual and cognitive level.
- The right to inclusion – i.e. the right to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally. To be included in this sense is a necessary condition for developing a sense of belonging to an educational community and to society more generally. Integration operates at a social level.
- The right to participation – i.e. the fact of participating and practising in and out of school. Participation is the condition for civic practice and of the revision of acquired knowledge. Participation operates at a political and level.

Since the 1989 Law on education counselling and guidance (Ministry of Education, 1989), students have been viewed as standing at the heart of the education system, deemed to have rights and duties and having a wide array of duties. An entire section of the educational and political community, whose views have been persistently relayed by the media, has repeatedly emphasised incivilities, disengagement and decline of educational standards among successive younger generations. Without wishing to preach excessive optimism and by way of echoing the philosopher Hannah Arendt (2006/1968), this paper argues that it is also a right for students and a duty for society to guarantee that they are able to inhabit their physical and social worlds. A law was required to define slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity. It might be useful to add an injunction on the rights of students in the DROM and elsewhere that enabled young people to view and experience the world, not just be locked within highly contextualised and personal experiences, and to do so without resentment or bitterness and with greater humanity.

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Notes

1. 'Départementalisation' is the process of becoming a department. A department is an administrative and political division within France. There are 101 departments in the mainland ('Métropole') and five overseas ('Départements d'Outre Mer' – DOM): Guadeloupe, Guiana, Martinique, Mayotte, Reunion. These five departments are also 'regions' – territorial collectivities with subnational entities and dependent areas which have an elected local government and local administration. These five overseas entities are the so-called DROM 'Départements et Régions d'Outre-Mer'.
2. Briefly, in Reunion Island, Comorians (from the Comoros, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean located to the north-west of Madagascar and to the south-east of Africa at the entrance to the Mozambique Channel) are perceived negatively by a part of the local population. They are accused of securing jobs that are not deemed to be rightfully theirs and of weighing upon the island's economy.
3. Axis of ordinates: i.e. axis 2 or vertical axis. Axis of abscissas: i.e. axis 1 or horizontal axis.

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