

# Education in the French Outermost Regions: Interculturation as a basis for a necessary work of memory?

Rachid Oulahal

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## Abstract:

The French outermost regions are fully part of the European Union though they are geographically distanced from continental France. Moreover, these regions inscribe within France's history though they also have their own history apart from France, a history grounded within their geographical surroundings but also a history between slavery and colonization. In 2022, education is still both a priority and an enigma for the French government when it comes to its outermost regions (Guadeloupe, Guyana, La Reunion, Martinique, Mayotte and Saint-Martin). Strong differences have been pointed out between these environments and metropolitan France regarding the education system and its efficiency. The main issue for the French government is indeed that the Outermost regions are different from metropolitan France but they are also very different from one to another. These various disparities make it difficult to think of a common school system and curriculum. The goal of this article is to provide an update on education issues France has to deal with regarding its outermost regions. We will then investigate how these issues can be related to memory matters, both individual and collective, and how an intercultural perspective can be regarded as a basis for a necessary work of memory towards a more appropriate educational system.

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## Keywords:

France; outermost regions; education; interculturation

## L'éducation dans les régions ultrapériphériques françaises: L'interculturalisation comme base d'un nécessaire travail de mémoire?

**Résumé:** Les régions ultrapériphériques françaises font pleinement partie de l'Union européenne bien qu'elles soient géographiquement éloignées de la France métropolitaine. Par ailleurs, ces régions s'inscrivent dans l'histoire de la France mais elles ont aussi leur propre histoire hors de France, une histoire ancrée dans leurs environnements géographiques mais aussi une histoire entre esclavage et colonisation. En 2022, l'éducation reste à la fois une priorité et une énigme pour le gouvernement français en ce qui concerne ses régions ultrapériphériques (Guadeloupe, Guyane, La Réunion, Martinique, Mayotte et Saint-Martin). De fortes différences ont été relevées entre ces milieux et la France métropolitaine en ce qui concerne le système éducatif et son efficacité. Le principal enjeu pour le gouvernement français est en effet que les régions ultrapériphériques sont différentes de la France métropolitaine mais elles sont aussi très différentes les unes des autres. Ces diverses disparités rendent difficile l'idée d'un système scolaire et d'un programme communs. L'objectif de cet article est de faire le point sur les problématiques d'éducation auxquelles la France est confrontée vis-à-vis de ses régions ultrapériphériques. Nous étudions ensuite comment ces questions peuvent être reliées aux questions de mémoire, tant individuelles que collectives, et comment une perspective interculturelle peut être considérée comme la base d'un travail de mémoire nécessaire vers un système éducatif plus approprié.

**Mots clés:** France; régions ultrapériphériques; éducation; interculturalisation

## Educación en las regiones ultraperiféricas francesas: ¿La interculturación como base para un necesario trabajo de memoria?

**Resumen:** Las regiones ultraperiféricas francesas forman parte de la Unión Europea, aunque están geográficamente distanciadas de la Francia continental. Además, estas regiones se inscriben en la historia de Francia, aunque también tienen su propia historia fuera de Francia, una historia arraigada en su entorno geográfico, pero también una historia entre la esclavitud y la colonización. En 2022, la educación sigue siendo una prioridad y un enigma para el gobierno francés en lo que respecta a sus regiones ultraperiféricas (Guadalupe, Guyana, La Reunión, Martinica, Mayotte y San-Martin). Se han señalado fuertes diferencias entre estos entornos y la Francia continental en cuanto al sistema educativo y su eficiencia. El principal problema para el gobierno francés es que las regiones ultraperiféricas son diferentes de la Francia continental, pero también son muy diferentes entre sí. Estas diversas disparidades dificultan pensar en un sistema escolar y un plan de estudios comunes. El objetivo de este artículo es proporcionar una actualización sobre los problemas educativos a los que se enfrenta Francia en sus regiones ultraperiféricas. A continuación, investigaremos cómo estos temas pueden relacionarse con cuestiones de memoria, tanto individual como colectiva, y cómo la perspectiva intercultural puede ser considerada como base de un necesario trabajo de memoria hacia un sistema educativo más adecuado.

**Palabras clave:** Francia; regiones ultraperiféricas; educación; interculturación

## Educação nas regiões ultraperiféricas francesas: A interculturalização como base para um trabalho de memória necessário?

**Resumo:** As regiões ultraperiféricas francesas fazem parte da União Europeia, embora estejam geograficamente distantes da França continental. Além disso, essas regiões inscrevem-se na História de França, embora também tenham a sua própria História à parte da França, uma História fundamentada nas suas geografias mas também uma História entre escravidão e colonização. Em 2022, a educação ainda é uma prioridade e um enigma para o governo francês quando se trata das suas regiões ultraperiféricas (Guadalupe, Guiana, La Reunion, Martinica, Mayotte e San-Martin). Fortes diferenças têm sido apontadas entre esses ambientes e a França continental no que diz respeito ao sistema educacional e à sua eficiência. A principal questão para o governo francês é, de facto, que as regiões ultraperiféricas são diferentes da França continental, mas também são muito diferentes entre si. Essas várias disparidades tornam difícil pensar num sistema escolar e currículo comuns. O objetivo deste artigo é fornecer uma atualização sobre as questões educacionais com as quais a França tem que lidar em relação às suas regiões ultraperiféricas. Em seguida, investigaremos como essas questões podem estar relacionadas com as questões de memória, tanto individual quanto coletiva, e como uma perspectiva intercultural pode ser vista como base para um trabalho de memória necessário para um sistema educacional mais adequado.

**Palavras-chave:** França; regiões ultraperiféricas; educação; interculturalidade.

## Introduction and context: the European Outermost Regions

Nine ultramarine territories are fully part of the European Union, and they are also referred as “Outermost Regions” (ORs) though this denomination is still not well-known among the European public. These outermost regions are part of 3 European countries: (i) Portugal: Azores, Madeira; (ii) France: Guadeloupe, French Guyana, Martinique, Mayotte, Reunion, Saint-Martin; and (iii) Spain: Canary Islands

In 1997, the Amsterdam treaty introduced legal basis for the outermost regions’ status. At the European level, a strong effort was made to provide support to the outermost regions and ensure them a plain recognition and inclusion within the European Union. But it is only in 2009 that the treaty on the functioning of EU (TFEU) was updated with article 349 to highlight the full integration of such regions within the EU perimeter along with the necessity of an adapted approach for these regions.

Being part of the European Union, the outermost regions must apply EU laws and obligations. They can in turn expect the same level of investment and development, both on the material and human perspectives, though significant differences do exist. Indeed, several specificities make the outermost regions very singular in the European context (Vitalien, 2002; Poirine, 2007; Lemerrier, Muni Toke & Palomares, 2014; Lima-Pereira, 2020). The main singularity relies in the fact that these territories are actually geographically and culturally distanced from continental Europe. They are also characterized by their insularity and rather small size (except French Guyana) but also by the relative dependence to their mainland countries. We can also mention higher unemployment rates than in continental Europe. The outermost regions also present specific topographies and climates that need special attention. As for the linguistic perspective, the outermost regions may have their own dialects made of a plurality of languages: their mainland country’s language and those present in these territories or in the surrounding environment. Such dialects are sometimes referred as a “creole” language.

Located up to 20 000km away from their mainland country, the outermost regions and their inhabitants must deal with geographical and symbolic distance from continental Europe. They also have to deal with specific situations in terms of societal and migration issues: poverty, younger population, higher unemployment rates and longer unemployment periods, low educational level and early school dropout, lack of professional qualification, illiteracy... Especially, with the current COVID-19 situation, outermost regions experiment how singular, sometimes fragile, the link may be with continental Europe. The 2017 Outermost Regions Presidents’ conference resulted with a Memorandum to formulate concrete proposals to renew the outermost regions’ consideration within European policies: “Living in an outermost region does not mean resigning yourself to less development, unemployment, precariousness, giving up having access to a quality services or being condemned to immobility because of lack of

transportation means at an affordable cost” (Outermost regions Presidents’ conference, 2017).

The goal of this article is to provide an update on education issues France has to deal with regarding its outermost regions. We will then investigate how these issues can be related to memory matters, both individual and collective, and how an intercultural perspective can be regarded as a basis for a necessary work of memory towards a more appropriate educational system.

## The French Outermost Territories

The French outermost territories are 12 territories with different legal statuses:

- 2 outermost departments and regions (DROM): Guadeloupe and La Reunion
- 3 unique collectivities: the Territorial Collectivity of Martinique, the Territorial Collectivity of Guyana, and the Department of Mayotte
- 5 outermost collectivities (COM): French Polynesia; Saint-Barthelemy; Saint-Martin; Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon and Wallis-et-Futuna.
- 2 outermost collectivities with a special status : New Caledonia and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands

These territories represent 4% of the French population (2.75 million inhabitants).

In terms of educational systems, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Martinique, and La Reunion are comparable to French continental regions, a common law status facilitating integration into national standards.

Mayotte, the last French department created in 2011, is still on its way (yet still relatively far) to implement the standard national school system. Its rectorate was only created on January 2020 and the main goal now is to set up an administrative organization adapted to the territory and available educational skills.

As for the other French outermost territories, the situation is rather different. French Polynesia, Wallis-and-Futuna, Saint-Barthelemy, Saint-Martin, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, and New Caledonia have specific institutional organizations and several major state competencies, apart which educational matters, have been decentralized.

There are about 670,000 pupils in the French outermost territories which represents 5% of France entire pupil population. The repartition is as follows:

- 555,000 pupils in the outermost regions (Guadeloupe, Guyana, Martinique, Mayotte, La Reunion, and Saint-Martin) for 1700 primary schools and 200 secondary schools.
- 115,000 pupils in the outermost collectivities (New Caledonia; French Polynesia; Saint-Barthelemy; Saint-Martin; Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon; the French Southern and Antarctic Lands and Wallis-et-Futuna) for 500 primary schools and 150 secondary schools.

As presented above, within these 12 territories, 6 are considered European outermost regions: Guadeloupe, French Guyana, Martinique, Mayotte, La Reunion and Saint-Martin.

The French outermost regions are fully part of the European Union though they are geographically distanced from continental France. Moreover, these regions inscribe within France's history though they also have their own history apart from France, a history grounded within their geographical surroundings but also a history between slavery and colonization. Slavery deeply marked the memory and the physiognomy of these societies by its extent and duration. In France, it is only in 1946 that the new constitution will unify the French space, associating continental France with its overseas departments and territories. This constitution also removed the differentiated status that existed between "citizens" and "indigenous": "France shall form with its overseas peoples a Union founded upon equal rights and duties, without distinction of race or religion".

Most societies in the outermost regions developed with bilingualism or plurilingualism. In some cases, the French language has been added to languages spoken beforehand. In other cases, a creole language emerged, mainly from a local adaptation of the French language and exchanges with local languages. For many pupils in the outermost regions and territories, French is not the mother tongue but rather a school specific language.

The education issue in the French Outermost Regions: between the French universality value and the need for local singularities

In 2022, education is still both a priority and an enigma for the French government when it comes to its outermost regions (Martinique, Guadeloupe, La Reunion, Guyana, and Mayotte). Strong differences have been pointed out between these environments and metropolitan France regarding the education system and its efficiency.

In the French schools' curriculum, the allocated time given to the outermost regions and territories' history is minimal, which can however be considered as a first step given the fact that it was long non-existent. It indeed took a long time until this issue was officially addressed.

In 2000, Jack Lang, the then Minister of National Education opened the way to a flexible education system that could adapt to local realities in the outermost regions, these realities often being very different from continental France. This proposition enabled local schools to propose adaptations to the national curriculum so that they can better address local issues. And this was particularly true for history programs where the outermost regions' history is widely forgotten in the French national history program. The adaptations were expected to allow an in-depth work on the local history of each of the overseas territories. However, various investigations showed that 20 years later, the flexible education system is far from an actual reality (Longuet, 2020). This is

mainly due to the fact that the national program is already significant and several major thematic have to be studied with only a few hours of teaching every week. This in turn leaves only a very limited space to include outermost regions' local history.

Almost ten years after Jack Lang's proposition, a French senate's mission report entitled "The overseas departments (DOM), a challenge for the Republic, an opportunity for France" (Dolige, 2009) already underlined significant differences in outermost schools' results compared to continental school's results along with a high level of illiteracy and an inadequacy to local realities that generated an "unacceptable level of school dropout" in the outermost regions. Furthermore, the French National Committee for Human Rights provided feedback in 2017 indicating that the basic right for education was not respected in some of the French outermost regions and territories (CNCDH, 2017). This may seem a paradox as the allocated budget for education in the outermost regions is higher than in continental France, from 30% to 65% higher (Longuet, 2020).

Unfortunately, another French senate mission investigated this issue another ten years later and submitted a similar report on December 2020 (Longuet, 2020). The report, once again, advocates for a better adaptation of the education curriculum to the reality of the French outermost regions. Education is a priority in the outermost regions, especially since illiteracy is a still a tangible reality (1 out of 8 people in La Reunion department for example). The report listed several elements that explain the difficulties experimented by pupils in the outermost regions:

- A lack of public transportation to go to school
- A high demographic evolution that the education system is not able to cope with, especially the number of available schools is not sufficient in some outermost regions (example: Mayotte)
- Linguistic issues as many pupils only learn French when accessing schools. For instance, 70% of the pupils in Guyana speak a maternal language which is not French. This rate is even higher in Mayotte. As such, an important part of the pupils in the outermost regions do not master French, about 20 to 30% but can go up to 45% in Guyana and 75% in Mayotte (Longuet, 2020). This is a strong limitation for outermost regions' pupils as mastering French is a strong prerequisite in the French education system. Therefore, the senate report highlights the need to enable pupils to better integrate the French language but at the same time, the report advise that local languages should not be seen as competitors but should be given a space in the French school programs.
- Migration issues (specifically in Mayotte with migrants from the Union of the Comoros nearby islands and Guyana with South American migration) which raises the linguistics issues in the education systems.

As a result of these specificities, 15% to 50% of youngster in the outermost regions are illiterate (Longuet, 2020).

One after the other, the various senate reports highlighted the need for more adaptations to local realities of these territories and to their diversity. The 2020 Senate report advised the following 4 main recommendations:

- To place greater emphasis on adaptation to local realities
- To adjust modalities to recruit teachers, as well as their training
- To make better use of the priority education system by refocusing it on schools where it is most needed, or even replacing it with a specific system for Guyana and Mayotte
- To increase resources of the academic centers for the education of newly arrived allophone pupils and pupils from migrant families (CASNAV) to better take into account the increasing number of allophone pupils and to better train teachers with respect to linguistics issues.

### **Interculturation: a basis for a necessary work of memory for the education in the French outermost regions and territories?**

The main issue for the French government is indeed that the outermost regions are different from continental France, but they are also very different from one to another. These various disparities make it difficult to think of a common school system and curriculum. Regarding education in the outermost regions, “it’s expensive, and it doesn’t work very well” is how the senate members summed up the situation (Longuet, 2020).

We believe the education issue in the French outermost regions is to be considered between a necessary duty of memory and a necessary duty of history. As Vigie (2011) reminds us, the history curriculum in French schools can’t remain closed to the civil society’s expectations and there should be no other way than necessarily give place to specific requests as long as they are part of an instruction and education process. For the author, this would enable school programs to answer a basic equity requirement between pupils, especially in the outermost regions’ situation where individuals may wish to know more about their own environment and history rather than the more global aspects that are generally centered around continental France. A paradox then appears, how can France provide equity to pupils by enabling them to learn about their specific environments while at the same time guaranteeing a universal teaching that would echoes France’s universality value?

As per Vigie (2011), not answering the legitimate requests from outermost regions to be part of the global curriculum would in turn exclude their pupils from a shared French heritage, which can lead to a lack of interest in the education system and its transmission from one generation to another. The author highlights the need to consider all memories at the same level in coherence with the French republican universalism

goal that all citizens should be considered equals in rights and duty. As such, the main issue that matters would be to know how schools could create a rigorous balance between both political and memorial injunctions.

If we consider slavery for example, the Taubira law approved on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2001 opened the way to an official recognition of France slavery history. A circular published in the Official Journal of National Education in November 2005 then underlined that a special place must be given in schools to reflections and debates on the memory of slavery. The Committee for the Memory of Slavery, in a 2005 report, required that slavery and its abolition are included in the French official educational mission. Leneveut (2021) presents an experiment in France with primary school pupils related to the teaching of France slavery history. Pupils showed interest in the topic and actively participated in the research. The initial representations of the pupils seem to have partially evolved. Some realized that slavery was not only a matter of racism but also a story of domination to exploit a labor force. The relation to slavery history is also applicable for non-French outermost regions, such as Portuguese ones (Ribeiro Da Silva, 2021).

Moreover, The 10<sup>th</sup> May, as the anniversary of the Taubira Law, is now a Slavery commemoration day and many schools will take this opportunity to provide pupils with an insight on this part of France history. However, one should realize that other dates are used in the outermost regions to commemorate the end of slavery: May 27<sup>th</sup> in Guadeloupe, May 22<sup>nd</sup> in Martinique, June 10<sup>th</sup> in Guyana, December 20<sup>th</sup> in La Reunion, and April 27<sup>th</sup> in Mayotte. If we only consider these various commemoration dates, we can understand how difficult the task is for France to accommodate with national global perspective and local histories and specificities. We can also think of the competing memories that have to be considered in the education systems. As per the slavery abolition example, which date should be taught to pupils: the national one referring to the day when France officially recognized its slavery history within its centralized institution or the local commemoration date that celebrates the end of slavery in each outermost region? From global to local, the education issue echoes other matters that are currently sensitive in the outermost regions such as memory and identity.

Therefore, understanding the educational disadvantage mechanisms among pupils is a decisive issue for the French public policy (Valat, 2021). School has an essential role to play in teaching history and we believe an intercultural perspective could provide benefits as a basis for a necessary work of memory. The interculturalization concept is central in this perspective as a process implemented on an individual and collective level in situations of cultural contacts. The interculturalization concept can't be reduced to the encounter of two cultures, where one of the two cultures would have no choice but conformity. At the personal level, each individual is no more perceived as being the bearer of a unique culture, but rather as representing a multiculturalism that he strives to articulate and update through the interculturalization process.

The interculturalization concept relates to situations where various cultures meet in an intermediate zone according to modalities combining both openness and closure. A “third culture” emerges from this encounter. The system then becomes ternary: the two cultures present and the “third culture” emerging from this encounter. Three processes allow us to describe the interculturalization concept: the assimilation (of elements of the cultures in presence), the differentiation (of elements of the cultures in presence) and the creation (of a “third culture”, space in which interaction between the two cultures is possible).

Such co-creation principles could therefore be expected considering relations between the national school curriculum and local ones in the French outermost regions. Between the mainstream and the singular, a “third education system” would enable a better consideration of local specificities while fully associate with the global curriculum. Education in the overseas regions is indeed a matter of equality of cultures and respect for the right to education. Davilla Verdun (2017) who specifically investigated the case of La Reunion came to the conclusion that the transmission of culture as a memory and an identity should be at the heart of the debate on the historical education of pupils in La Reunion.

## Conclusion and perspectives

The outermost regions are part of France’s history, but they also have their own history apart from France, a history between slavery and colonization rooted into their geographical surroundings. Memory as a form of identity is a process that is never completed, and which is constantly in motion. It can be made sacred, for example in school programs, and ritualized with days of commemoration, but Vigie (2011) reminds that new generational or political situations lead to the development of “competing memories” and to a transformation of the collective memory. Promoting interculturalization into the memory and identity processes in the outermost regions could thus facilitate interculturalization within the educational schemes. Equivalently, promoting interculturalization within the educational schemes could also facilitate interculturalization into the memory and identity processes in the outermost regions.

The goal of our article is to highlight to which extent an intercultural perspective could be thought of into the French outermost regions’ education curriculum. As the outermost regions represent a large diversity of cultures, histories and social realities, different from one to another but also different from continental France, interculturalization can be relied on as a basis for an equal consideration of involved cultures and as a basis for a necessary work of memory that could lead to education towards citizenship. As of today, education is still both a priority and an enigma for the French government when it comes to its outermost regions. The multiple specificities make it difficult to think of a common school system and curriculum.

On the intercultural perspective, the outermost regions are facing a dual objective: to be fully part of the European Union and at the same time to develop within each of their specific cultural environments (Africa, Indian ocean, South America). These outermost regions are also facing specific migration situations in their territories that induce singular modalities for migrant's inclusion. The outermost regions therefore represent multicultural and intercultural societies. While such specificity provides them a unique place within the European Union, better understanding is needed with respect to identity processes of their inhabitants and belonging representations. This could in turn enable a better understanding of the educational needs and possibilities.

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**Rachid Oulahal**

La Reunion University, France

DIRE Research Center

French Collaborative Institute on Migration

E-mail: [Rachid.oulahal@univ-reunion.fr](mailto:Rachid.oulahal@univ-reunion.fr)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9120-0512>

**Correspondência**

Rachid Oulahal

Campus du Moufia

15 avenue René Cassin

CS 92003- 97744 Saint Denis Cedex 9

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