Room for discomfort when teaching about racism

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Many show emotional ambivalence, and in many cases discomfort, when dealing with sensitive topics such as racism, and research has shown that teachers tend to avoid addressing racism in schools because they lack appropriate tools. This article describes a pedagogical method – *giving room for discomfort* – that was conducted in seminars with six groups of pre-service teachers at a Norwegian university in 2018 and 2019. The seminars focused on racism and prejudice and used virtual reality as a didactic tool. Theoretically based in the framework of the Pedagogy of discomfort, the method emphasizes that allowing room for discomfort when teaching about racism can be a valuable pedagogical strategy. By facilitating a classroom environment where both minority and majority students have space to share their perceptions of racism, including those that are uncomfortable, one can both increase understandings of racism and equip students with tools to handle situations related to racism that may arise in their future classrooms.

KEYWORDS

racism, pedagogy of discomfort, norm-critical pedagogy, virtual reality, VR didactics

Introduction

In the fall of 2019, on one of the most popular podcasts in Norway, "Radioresepsjonen", listeners could hear host Tore Sagen reading a note in which he, among other things, compared people with dark skin to monkeys. According to Sagen himself, the episode was intended as satirical comedy aimed toward those who hold racist views in Norway. In the following days and weeks, Sagen and the podcast host, the state-owned Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), faced massive criticism, and chose to withdraw the podcast. Sagen was criticized for reproducing racist attitudes[1] and for being insensitive toward those who have experienced racism[2]. However, Sagen was also defended by some, based on the principle of freedom of speech[3], while others highlighted the positive aspect

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1 Op-ed by Nastaran Marie Kowkabi in the Norwegian newspaper VG, 31.10.2019: *Ut mot Radioresepsjonens Tore Sagen: − Rasisme er ikke humor!*: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/kJxwx6/ut-mot-radioresepsjonens-tore-sagen-rasisme-er-ikke-humor.

2 Op-ed by Zane Khan in the Norwegian newspaper VG, 02.11.2019: *Politisk ukorrekthet for enhver pris*: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/e8RdJO/politisk-ukorrekthet-for-enhver-pris?utm_source=inline-teaser-bottom&utm_content=K3~$\times$~1n6.

3 Op-ed by Erik Mjønes Svendson at www.nrk.no, 01.11.2019: *#JeSuisTore. Hva skjedde med å dø for ytringsfriheten?*: https://www.nrk.no/ytring/_jesuistore-1.14765475

of a white man drawing attention to racism as a societal problem through humour[4]. The heated debate following Sagen's attempt of generating humor of a sensitive topic exemplifies how racism is a topic that evokes strong emotions and often leads to discussions with polarized opinions. It has been noted that debates on racism often become heated because the topic challenges the boundaries between morality, experiences, politics, and science (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 32), making agreement difficult to reach.

A central feature of the debate following the Sagen incident was strong disagreement over how racism should be defined, and consequently whether Sagen's stunt was racist or not. Even within academic research, there are disagreements about what should be included in the definition of racism and where the line should be drawn on what can be called racism[5]. For example, Midtbøen and Rogstad (2010: 32–33) argue that in the Norwegian setting discussing the causes of systematic exclusion along ethnic lines at a structural level is problematic because the concept is emotionally charged and tends to increase conflict levels, as evident in the debate following the Sagen incident. They suggest that the term "systemic discrimination" is more suitable than the term racism to explain how structures in society can have inequality-creating consequences, and that the term "racism" should be reserved for "attitudes of a more extreme nature" (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 46). However, several researchers contemplates this and has argued that replacing the term "racism" with "discrimination" could contribute to denial, minimization, and naturalization of racism as social and political phenomena (Bangstad, 2017; Gillborn, 2006; Titley, 2020). Still, the lack of conceptual clarity in both scientific circles and public debate perpetuates confusion and disagreement about what racism "is".

Debates about racism often end up in entrenched positions where there is much to defend on both sides. Over the past decade, we have seen new voices in the debate in Norway, advocating personal stories about how everyday racism affects their lives. Many minorities feel excluded from mainstream society and contend that racism is not taken seriously by the majority population[6]. On the other hand, some in the majority population claim that accusations of racism are hard to defend oneself against. Midtbøen & Rogstad have pointed out that because the contemporary debate climate is dichotomized, the fear of being accused of racism may motivate the majority population to not act at all against racism (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 34). For example, Sagen stated after the debate that he had become so afraid of being perceived as racist that he is now "done with ethnicity"[7].

In this article, I argue that the described entrenched positions in the public discourse on racism in Norway also creates a tough climate for teachers to address racism as a concept and as a

phenomenon in their classrooms. Many teachers show emotional ambivalence, and in many cases discomfort, when dealing with sensitive topics such as racism (Zembylas, 2010). Norwegian and international research also indicate that teachers often avoid situations related to racism, bullying, or other expressions of group-based prejudices among students, partly because they lack the tools to work on prevention of racism in both short and long term (Harbin et al., 2019; Harlap and Riese, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011).

The purpose of this article is not to evaluate whether Sagen was racist or not, or whether it was right or wrong to satirize racism in the way he did. The purpose of mentioning this case is to introduce aspects of the conversation about racism that are perceived as sensitive by both minority and majority populations, making racism difficult to discuss - and even controversial. Basing the discussions in Zembylas theoretical framework of "Pedagogy of discomfort" (2010), I argue in this article that instead of treating racism as something to be avoided in the classroom, in line with Sagen's statement about avoiding everything related to "ethnicity," there are pedagogical benefits in embracing racism as a topic in the classroom even when it becomes uncomfortable. I argue that by focusing on racism as a structural problem when teaching about racism, the discussion can be shifted from an emotionally charged debate about individual morality and into a framework that can be seen as fruitful from a learning perspective - for both minority and majority populations.

There is relatively little research on teacher educators and teacher student's understandings of racism in Norway. The Norwegian population consist of a white majority population (approximately 80% of the population), where public voices of the minority traditionally have been few. As noted by researchers, there has been a striking silence on concepts such as *race* and *racism* in Norwegian schools, resulting in teachers being deprived of important concepts for dealing with issues of racism and structural inequalities (Osler and Lindquist, 2018). Osler and Lindquist (2018) point out that teacher students seem to lack a shared language to discuss inequality in general and racism and racial injustice in particular. If racism is to be challenged, it must be named. Not naming racism ultimately means that teachers will lack appropriate educational tools to address structural inequalities and racism (Osler and Lindquist, 2018). Røthing (2017) has pointed out that teachers feel uncomfortable when confronted with racism, and that teachers may have simplified views of racism, which can affect their teaching. A study by Rangnes and Ravneberg (2019) finds that Norwegian teacher students seem to have ambivalent feelings toward addressing racism as a topic in the classroom, which emphasize the need for increased focus on racism in teacher education.

In this article, I describe a pedagogical method that I have called *room for discomfort*. The method was conducted in six seminars with pre-service teachers at a Norwegian university in 2018 and 2019, which focused on racism and prejudice. The article describes the method and presents an analysis of students' experience with it. The aim is to give teacher educators and others an practical example of how discomfort when discussing racism in the classroom may be addressed. Situations in which a sensitive topic triggers emotions strong enough to potentially disrupt the learning process are referred to in the educational literature as "hot moments" (Harlap, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011). The article presents two such hot moments: one example in which I was able to create

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4   Op-ed by Shabana Rehman at www.nrk.no, 01.11.2019: *Takk til Tore Sagen*: https://www.nrk.no/ytring/takk-til-tore-sagen-1.14765971.

5   A comprehensive discussion of the concept of racism is too extensive for this article (for a glimpse into parts of the academic debate in the Norwegian setting, see e.g., Bangstad, 2017, 2018; Rasmussen, 2018).

6   See for example this op-ed by Salma Ahmed the Norwegian newspaper VG, 06.11.2019: *Rasismedebatten: -Derfor er jeg lei*: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/P9XEW6/rasisme-debatten-derfor-er-jeg-lei

7   Newspaper article in the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten, 05.11.2019: Tore Sagen: Skal ikke bruke "N-ordet" igjen. https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/50eo1X/tore-sagen-skal-ikke-bruke-n-ordet-igjen

room for discomfort in addressing racism as a topic, and another where I was unable to do so. These episodes provide insights into different aspects of discomfort when engaging with racism as a topic in the classroom. Finally, I reflect on the role the topic of racism can have in Norwegian teacher education.

Experiences from seminars on racism and prejudice

In 2018 and 2019, I conducted seminars on the topic of racism and prejudice with a total of six groups of pre-service teachers at a Norwegian university[8]. The group size varied from 10 to 25 people, and the students were in their first year in a 5-year teacher training. Participation in the seminar was voluntary.

The seminar lasted for 3 h and was designed as a reflection on how to be norm-critical in practice in the classroom. The focus of the seminar was to raise awareness about racism among students by focusing on how ideas of "us" and "the other" are constructed, the various forms of racism that exist and how structural racism is embedded in contemporary society. It addressed the responsibility future teachers have in combating racism and how they can address racism in their future classrooms. A central aspect of the seminar was to focus on racism as a systemic issue and on how structural racist beliefs are maintained in everyday actions. It was central to make students aware of how they position themselves in majority or minority groups when confronted with racism, and how this may affect their conceptualization of racism and prejudice. It is important to note that the seminar was revised several times during the six times I conducted it, as I encountered discomfort in teaching about racism – which I will return to later.

The seminars consisted of a theoretical overview, a film, group discussions and plenary discussions. To address aspects of racism that may be uncomfortable, I wanted to challenge the students to personally engage with the topic of racism and actively put them in a position that challenged the uncomfortable aspects of discussing racism. I chose to use virtual reality (VR) as a didactic method to immerse students and to make the situation as personal as possible[9]. In VR, the viewer, through special glasses, is incorporated into a three-dimensional artificial world, while maintaining a sense of presence in the real world. I used 360-degree film, which is filmed with a camera capable of capturing a full 360-degree view. This creates a three-dimensional storytelling experience that differs from "regular" two-dimensional film, as viewers can turn 360 degrees and choose their own perspective of the story. VR has the potential to create involvement to a greater extent than other media because it combines emotions and bodily sensibility with knowledge (Doyle et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2015), making it a suitable starting point for critical reflection on sensitive topics.

The students watched the film "Is Australia racist?" - a 360-degree VR film produced by the Australian TV station SBS. The film was made in 2017 following a documentary about the

prevalence of racism in Australian society. According to the producer, the film aims to demonstrate the significant impact of racist attacks on individuals using "immersive, dramatic, and empathy-building storytelling techniques" that are "uncomfortably personal" (SBS, 2017). The film revolves around a specific incident on a bus where a person is subjected to severe harassment, primarily based on his skin-color, religious belonging and being a wheelchair user. A key point of the film is that viewers see the incident twice, from two different perspectives: first as a spectator, and later as the person being targeted.

The film can be viewed as a "digital excursion" where the viewer is taken to a place that they would not otherwise have access to. In this case, the film aimed to give viewers who have no experience with racism insight into how racism and hate speech is experienced by those who are exposed to it (SBS, 2017). However, the aim of the seminar was not to present the students with a digital excursion of racism, but rather to use the film as a starting point for reflections on perspective-taking, othering, prejudice and racism, by addressing the oversimplified way the film displays racism. Showing a film that portrait direct racism, where the students is expected to look at it from the perspective of the victim, must be carried out with the outmost care and require strong ethical awareness. The students were introduced to the content of the film beforehand and could decide for themselves whether they wanted to watch or stop during the film. I chose to use VR because the possibility of perspective-taking to reinforce the discomfort of watching a racist event. I took advantage of this discomfort to create a space for reflection on what racism looks like in contemporary Norway.

Theoretical framework

In the planning the content of the seminars, I found theoretical inspiration from various frameworks, which will be presented below. The theoretical framework are also used when analyzing the students' experiences from the method.

Different understandings of the concept racism

In the seminars I aimed to educate the students in racism as a concept, teaching them about the history of racism and how different definitions has varied throughout different times and places, and that being aware of how one defines the concept racism has profound influence on how one understands racism as a phenomenon. Historically, racism has been defined as an ideology postulating that there are human races characterized by persistent physical differences – with a direct link between such physical characteristics and aspects like morality and intelligence – and that these 'races' form a hierarchy where the 'white race' is superior (Gullestad, 2002: 148). This form of *classical racism* can be seen in ideologies such as Nazism, Apartheid in South Africa, racial segregation in the Southern states of the USA, and was supported by attempts to scientifically validate such value-based differences. Post-World War II, science turned its back on racial biology, which subsequently influenced understandings of racism. What has been termed *new racism* does not emphasize biological explanations but maintains the idea of a hierarchical value system where some hold greater value than others. In this understanding of racism, culture is

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8 The seminar was developed as part of my post.doc project, which focused on racism and group-based prejudice in Norwegian schools. The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council (NFR).

9 See (Faye, 2020) for more detailed information on the pedagogical method and how I used VR didactics in teaching about racism.

emphasized over "race" as the meaningful element for hierarchical categorization. This type of racism has been revitalized in the European context primarily through encounters with immigration from non-Western countries (Gullestad, 2002: 149). Both classical and new racism definitions presuppose that one should be able to identify *who* is racist, thus focusing on racism as an individualized phenomenon (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 37). For example, most of the opinions following the Sagen case presented at the beginning of this article, focused on discussing whether Sagen was a racist or not, thereby assigning blame and responsibility at individual level. Sagen also attempted to shed light on racism by creating satire in which he portrayed a person with individualized racist attitudes.

Other definitions point out that racism is embedded in social practices, focusing on structural forms of racism rather than individualized expressions. Rooted in postcolonial theoretical traditions, perspectives that define racism as *racialization* argues that the historical hegemony of the Western world continues to shape relations between the majority population and ethnic minorities. Here, "race" is defined as something that is anchored in fundamental perceptions of reality and serves as a confirmation of the majority population's self-image at a structural or societal level (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 37). Central to this theoretical direction is that the majority has the power to define social groups based on how different they are from the majority. Thus, the majority becomes the center from which *the Others* are defined. Processes of racialization are thus less visible than classical and new racism because it tends to be implicit and appears as a natural categorization of society's members (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 37–38). The notion that racism is a phenomenon embedded in social practice differs from previous definitions by not focusing on the individual attitudes or ideologies behind racist practices. Instead, it enhances that everyday practices and linguistic categories that are perceived as natural by the majority, create overwhelming barriers to the inclusion and participation of minority populations in society (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 38). Within a perspective that defines racism as structural, one is thus concerned with uncovering mechanisms that can explain systematic and systemic differences between majority and minority groups. This means that a person can engage in social practices that are racist even if the person is not *a* racist. Several of the op-eds following the Sagen case presented earlier, for example, argued from such a perspective.

In research on racism, the concepts of the Other and othering are often used to clarify social, psychological, and symbolic differences in positions and power. The concepts originate in feminist literature (De Beauvoir, 2000) and postcolonial studies (Said, 2003; Spivak, 1985). In an othering process, a group, usually a majority, is portrayed as the norm from which others are defined. Here, agency is not recognized as an aspect of the identity of others, thus making them passive objects instead of active subjects (Jensen, 2011: 65). Othering thus refers to the consequence of racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression, manifesting as the symbolic degradation of a group (the Other).

Perspectives on anti-racist work in schools

The pedagogical approach that is described in this article is based in an active anti-racism educational approach. Racism, hate speech, or other expressions of group-based prejudice are topics which to a little degree are discussed in Norwegian schools (Børhaug, 2012; Harlap and Riese, 2014; Osler and Lindquist,

2018; Røthing, 2015). Much of the teaching that has addressed racism or other forms of discrimination in Norway has traditionally focused on uncovering discriminatory conditions and facilitating help and support for groups experiencing various forms of discrimination. This includes working to prevent prejudices and counteract stereotypical perceptions of certain groups, based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or skin color. For many schools, the solution to such discriminatory practices is to focus on diversity as a resource and emphasize the school as a safe space for everyone (Kumashiro, 2002: 34). Often, the focus is on teaching in "culturally sensitive ways" and establishing channels to report unwanted incidents (ibid.). In this perspective, one assumes that not all students fit into a standard, but rather being attentive to the many different social, economic, ethnic, and gendered backgrounds of the students have and how this affects the student and their identity and actions (ibid.). This kind of anti-racist teaching is what Kumashiro (2002) calls teaching *for* the Other.

Another common way to conduct anti-discrimination education in schools, according to Kumashiro (2002), is to teach *about* the Other. This approach focuses on knowledge about the Other as a strategy to erase differences and work against discrimination. A key aspect here is that a one-sided focus on knowledge about a group often builds sympathy for the marginalized group. However, having sympathy for the others is not enough to combat racism and othering. A perspective where the teacher should help students by focusing on their group membership involves categorizing the others based on the teacher's (perhaps limited) knowledge of that group, which risks reinforcing the othering of the student rather than reducing it.

Teaching *for* and *about* the Other has been criticized from numerous perspectives within critical pedagogy for not leading to structural and systemic changes, redefining what is considered "normal" or challenging processes where minorities are othered in encounters with the majority (Arneback and Jämte, 2017; Gorski, 2008; Harlap and Riese, 2014; Jones, 1999; Kumashiro, 2002; Portera, 2014; Røthing, 2015, 2016; Westrheim and Tolo, 2014). There is broad agreement within what is called *norm-critical pedagogy* that these forms of teaching alone are not enough to create anti-discriminatory practices in schools. By focusing one-sidedly on the individual's experience of prejudice or discrimination or other negative experiences, the focus is locked on the others as a group that is problematic (Kumashiro, 2002). Discrimination is not only the marginalization of a group, but also the normalization of the rest, maintains Kumashiro (2002: 37). Norm-critical pedagogy emerged in Sweden in the 2000s, as a direct criticism of what is often referred to as "tolerance pedagogy" (Røthing, 2019: 46). A norm-critical perspective is about training awareness to challenge norms and prejudices that contribute to othering, exclusion and discrimination.

An understanding of racism and discrimination as a structural phenomenon means that the concepts must be elevated above moral criticism of individuals to be able to focus on invisible exclusion mechanisms that contribute to the subordination of ethnic minority groups in society (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 34). A focus on structural racism thus requires questioning the majority society's own norm structure and to identify rules and practices that most people take for granted and that are perceived as "natural" and normal (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 45). Leonardo

(2013) argues that authentic conversations about race, racism, and whiteness must go beyond superficial discussions of diversity and inclusion to directly confront white supremacy as part of structural racism. Matias (2016) argues that emotional responses in teachers may function to center whiteness as the "normal", disrupt critical conversations, and maintain the racial *status quo*. She challenges teachers to critically examine their own racial identities and emotional investments in whiteness, pushing for what she calls "emotional work" that moves beyond comfort and toward genuine racial justice (Matias, 2016).

Room for discomfort when facing racism in the classroom

Taking an active anti-racist and norm-critical approach was central to the pedagogical method presented in this article. A norm-critical perspective can be challenging in the classroom because it places a significant responsibility on the teacher. Teaching about sensitive topics, such as racism, can create discomfort for the teacher, a discomfort that is natural to try to avoid (Røthing, 2019: 42). Zembylas proposes using what she calls a "pedagogy of discomfort" as an arena for potential change (Zembylas, 2010). This theoretical approach stems from anti-discrimination and anti-racist traditions, drawing primarily on postcolonial, queer, feminist and intersectional perspectives and critical race theory. "Discomfort" in this tradition refer to a broad spectrum of emotions, such as frustration, perplexity, irritation, and concern (Røthing, 2019: 45). Educators who take the risk of problematizing established norms and understandings, risk creating discomfort for both students and themselves. In this risk also lies the potential for the unforeseen, the unmanageable, and uncomfortable (Røthing, 2019: 42).

When planning the seminars presented in this article, I developed a method I have called *room for discomfort*. This method builds on the theoretical work of Zembylas and Røthing, and is intended as a practical method to implement a norm-critical perspective in the classroom. Giving *room for discomfort* in the classroom should not be seen as a method for finding facts or truths, but rather as a method for exploring how feelings of discomfort, and the natural urge to get away from discomfort, affect the teacher's ways of thinking and acting and thus has consequences for students' learning. Allowing *room for discomfort* is a strategy teachers may use in their classroom to manage sensitive issues which create emotional ambivalence for both the teacher and the students. Emotional ambivalence is linked to the fact that uncomfortable feelings are often seen as negative and "wrong" in the classroom. Embracing discomfort involves allowing space to articulate feelings that do not always "fit", and exploring how emotions can be used constructively in the classroom – both for the teacher and the student, rather than trying to avoid them. In this work, Bonilla-Silva (2019) argues that emotions are not merely individual or psychological experiences but are socially constructed and play a crucial role in maintaining racial hierarchies. The goal of the method is not to reach agreement, but to challenge and be critical of structural racism by *making room* for what one or several people experiences as uncomfortable. By embracing discomfort, the discomfort itself can become a tool by disturbing taken-for-granted ideas about racism (Biesta, 2006; Dowling, 2017; MacLure, 2003). Finding the balance is, however, challenging, and may lead

to situations that triggers emotions strong enough to potentially disrupt the learning process, which in the educational literature are referred to as "hot moments" (Harlap, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011). This article analyzes two such hot moments, which occurred during seminars where I applied the method.

Kumashiro (2002) argues that one must create reactions and provocations in order to create change. But how much discomfort is it acceptable for students to be exposed to? As expected, critical studies have emerged that address the ethical implications of risk in the classroom. The focus of giving *room for discomfort* is on ensuring a safe classroom environment without this meaning the absence of all discomfort. It is the combination of discomfort and a safe classroom environment that can lead to change (Røthing, 2019). Challenging established norms is not without strain, and teaching that does not affirm and reproduce students' familiar ideas, but rather challenges power relations, can generate engagement and curiosity, but also aggression and crises for students (Røthing, 2019: 42). Providing space to help students through hardship and crises in their encounter with norm-critical education is therefore crucial (Kumashiro, 2002: 62–63). In this way, uncomfortable topics and emotional ambivalence can be transformed into something constructive, by allowing students' perceptions of how the world is structured to be critically challenged. By creating a safe classroom climate where discussing uncomfortable topics feels safe, discomfort has the potential to lead to constructive change in the learning situation. I base my understanding of learning as a relational process, where everyone involved in a learning situation – teachers and students/teacher educators and students – experience, develop and learn together. Teaching and learning are not processes with a sender and a receiver that can be separated, rather they are complex learning processes that are intertwined (Østern et al., 2019: 16).

Materials and methods

The pedagogical method *room for discomfort* was conducted in six seminars with pre-service teachers. To document the method the seminars were used as a platform for collecting empirical data, which forms the base for the discussions later in this article. The methodological design for this study is inspired by Critical didactic incidents method (CDIs), which bears similarities to Critical incident technique (Angelides, 2001). The CDIs method is based on qualitative accounts and analysis of critical moments in the teaching process when content is brought into play (Amade-Escot, 2005). In the educational context, critical incidents are not necessarily sensational, but its criticality is based on the justification, the significance, and the meaning given to them (Angelides, 2001: 431). Such critical events are useful as means to collect qualitative data because it stimulates to reflection (ibid.). The CDIs method focuses on teachers' and students' co-activities and their construction of the meaning of the critical situation in which they are immersed, and includes analysis of teacher activity, students' activities, and content knowledge embedded in the process (Amade-Escot, 2005: 134).

To record student activities, structured focus group interviews was chosen as the main research method and data collection tool. As part of the seminars, the students engaged in group

discussions. These discussions were recorded and transcribed[10], and quotes from the discussions is included in the analysis of the student's experiences from the seminars, including their reflections on, and reactions to, discomfort in the classroom. The student's conversations were organized in line with focus group interview technique as it is described by Bloor (2001), where the participants were given questions for discussion and freely engaged with each other. Group discussions is a well-known teaching method for students and worked effectively as a frame for focus groups. Since I was a teacher educator researching my own students, I was aware that my authority in the situation might lead them to moderate their statements when I was present (Jakobsen, 2012). I was present to ensure the recording equipment was functioning and listened sporadically to the discussions – but made sure that they were given time to speak with minimal interference. The transcribed conversations consistently show that when discussions were allowed to proceed undisturbed, students shared more personal experiences. When I was present they moderated themselves more and presented their answers more as "correct" responses to the questions they had been given.

To record teacher activities, I used an autobiographical method in line with Katz and Csordas (2003). After each seminar, I noted key events that had occurred and my own reflections about them, thus using my own pedagogical practice as an entry point to discuss discomfort when encountering racism as a topic in the classroom. The autobiographical data is central to the description of the second of the two hot moments that is presented in the analysis. Central in these accounts are reflections of my positionality. As a white female representative of the majority population, my background obviously influenced my actions, as will be discussed later. Additionally, I conducted an in-depth interview with the students who was central in this hot moment. Quotes from this interview is presented in the analysis, and the interviewed student has read and provided input on the article.

The analysis of the data consisted of identifying critical episodes in which the content intended to be taught and learned was evident, in line with the CDIs method. The CDIs method concerns analyzing a set of activities linked with the content intended to be taught and learned, in which students and teacher struggle to construe a common meaning and achieve their own but interrelated goals (Amade-Escot, 2005: 135).

To create room for discomfort in the classroom

In the seminar, I challenged the students by actively, but gentle, putting them in an uncomfortable situation by showing a 360 film about racism. Furthermore, I use this discomfort as a tool to shed light on racism by "disturbing" (Dowling, 2017; MacLure, 2003) taken for granted perceptions about racism. The goal was that this would create a room for discomfort in the classroom, which could contribute to increased reflection on racism and its many

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10   Only the students who consented to participate in the research project were recorded – a total of 43 students. The remaining students participated in the seminar without being part of the research project. The research project has been approved by NSD.

ways of expression. In this exploration of discomfort, we took a closer look at what creates emotional ambivalence and how teachers can use emotional ambivalence as a resource in the classroom. In the following discussion, I present two "hot moments" (Harlap, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011) that illustrates different dimensions of accommodating discomfort in the classroom. In the first example, I discuss the discomfort the students experienced in their encounter with racism as a topic, and how facilitating discomfort led to learning processes for the students. In the second example, I discuss an episode where I failed making enough room for discomfort.

Hot moment 1: creating room for discomfort

After the students had watched the film *Is Australia Racist?* a very common response among white majority students was that an event such as in the film do not happen in Norway and that it could not have occurred in recent times. In one of the group discussions, the following typical conversation emerged:

Student 1: "I don't really feel like such brutal racism happens."
Student 2: "Not so often, at least."
Student 3: "Without someone intervening pretty quickly."
Student 1: "I feel maybe in the States and such."
Student 4: "Yeah, maybe."
Student 1: "Not here, though. But like. If you go to – not the south coast, but the southern states [USA]."

These four students all agreed that it's unlikely that racism, in the way it was demonstrated in the film, happens very often, and that it happens in Norway. Creating distance from racism by referring to it as something that can only happen elsewhere or in another time was a typical response to the discussion of what racism is. This was stated in all the six seminar groups, and it was almost always one of the first comments majority students made when discussing in groups. In the film, racism is portrayed as *classical racism* – that is, defining racism as an individual and ideological action (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010). In the film, a man is harassed by a woman with clear racist attitudes. The problematic aspect of such a portrayal of racism is that it reinforces a perception of racism as something that is individually and ideologically motivated, and therefore easy to distance oneself from Gullestad (2002). Researchers have pointed out that extreme racist events contribute to reinforcing an understanding of racism as evil, where a Norwegian self-understanding is adorned in contrast with this as non-racist (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 40). Thus, the understanding of racism as a structural phenomenon is often neglected, which is also reflected in the example with how the majority students reacted to the film. Based on the students' lack of reflections about this I gradually changed my focus during the six seminars to problematizing more the one-sided way of conveying racism in the film – and to contrast this with structural forms of racism. I did this, by, among other things, including a discussion of me and my students' skin color and how this affect our positions in the classroom, to elaborate on what is meant by everyday racism, and not least to confront the students' own definitions of racism.

A key goal of the seminar was to focus on structural racism by questioning how categories of "us" and "the other" are created. The

360 film was produced as part of an anti-racism campaign, where it was primarily the white majority population that was to be given insight into how racism is experienced. In the film *Is Australia Racist*, it is a point that one takes the perspective of two different people; first as a spectator of a racist event, and then as the one who is exposed to racist harassment. Using means to build sympathy for the person who is subjected to harassment, the film aims to convey the story of the Other in such a way that one virtually takes the perspective of the Other. Among the white majority students who participated in the seminars, it became clear in the transcribed group discussions that the film was indeed perceived as an attempt to walk in someone else's shoes by creating an experience of how racism "feels". In the recordings of the group discussions, it was without doubt being in the position of the person sitting in a wheelchair and being harassed that was the strongest experience of the film, as this dialogue exemplifies:

> Student 1: It was more horrible to see it from his perspective. To kind of be the one sitting there. For when you try to look up and around you, it's kind of, in addition to being pressed down he is already put in a lower level. Because she's standing over him and in a way mocking him with those movements and threats, right.
> Student 2: Yes, I felt very small when I sat there, or in the video.
> Student 3: You can't really defend yourself in the way a person who isn't in a wheelchair can.

A dilemma was how minority students, who potentially could identify with the person in the film that the majority students felt sympathy for, would experience this situation in the classroom. How would they experience being seen as "the other" by the majority group?

In the group discussions, one of the most prominent experiences among both majority and minority students was the experience of *sympathizing* with the person in the wheelchair – but clearly for different reasons. While minority students related to the film because they or "*someone like me*", as one girl said, may have been subjected to racism themselves, the majority students mostly felt sorry for the man in the wheelchair. Most of the majority students talked about feelings of injustice, powerlessness, or anger when they explained how they felt when they were supposed to take the perspective of the man in the wheelchair in the film. In other words, the majority students experienced the film as teaching *about* the Other (Kumashiro, 2002). In the seminars I confronted the students' reactions and emphasized that wearing VR glasses cannot lead the majority population to "learn" how racism is experienced. The majority can feel, become upset, and try to understand racism – but they do not experience it. It should also be added that neither the majority nor the minority students themselves raised that it could be problematic for a student group consisting mainly of white majority students to experience how racism feels by wearing VR glasses and watching a film. Feeling sympathy for someone highlights that there is a power dimension where the majority appears as "the normal" (Kumashiro, 2002). Allowing majority students to feel sympathy for others is therefore not problematic in itself; it only becomes problematic if sympathy alone becomes the meaningful aspect of racism education, as this can lead to othering.

In the seminars I aimed to let the students feel their own discomfort with the topic of racism and prejudice, and to allow them space to critically reflect on their own attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. The idea was that doing this in a classroom situation where everyone is "in the same boat" would lead the students to dare to articulate some of their own prejudices, and that this would be an opener for critical reflection on how the categorization of "us" and "the other" arises, how one's position, as privileged or non-privileged due to our skin color, affects how we conceptualize racism and prejudice. Are we all "blind slaves" to our prejudices (Gullestad, 2002: 165), or can we learn to reflect on them? Recordings from group discussions show that several students openly reflected on their own prejudice – including their negative prejudice. For example, one of the ethnic Norwegian girls explained that she had experienced a panic attack on a plane once, because she had seen that the pilot "*looked like a Muslim*". She expressed relief that she could retell this episode in front of the others, and that laughing at herself and her own prejudice felt good. Other students also reported that they felt humor had a relieving effect in this part of the seminar. Several students also said that since the seminar facilitated that they could "*look inside oneself,*" as one student said, it felt safe to say aloud things one had not dared to say before. Several students also said that they had become aware that they had many more prejudices than they had thought of beforehand.

Gullestad defines prejudices as an attitude, and claims that when we become conscious of a prejudice, they cease to be prejudices, and become subject to reflection and discussion (Gullestad, 2002: 165). I do, however, not think it is quite that simple. And I do not think that raising awareness of students' prejudices is enough in teaching about racism. However, the reflections of the students suggest that talking about their own prejudices was enlightening in terms of reflecting on their own position in either the majority or minority population, and how this affects the prejudices they have. Several of the students with immigrant backgrounds shared their prejudices against ethnic Norwegians, for example by referring to the term "potatoes" as a description of white Norwegians. Several white majority students expressed great surprise about this, stating that they had not considered what prejudices against themselves might look like, while they had many examples of prejudices against minorities and non-white. This exemplifies how the students critically reflected on norms related to skin color and how they critically identified how the majority population is assumed to represent what is "normal," in contrast to "the others". An important focus of the seminars was to show students that becoming aware of the assumptions and prejudices they hold about "the other" can be a strategy for gaining better self-insight and for thinking critically about the *status quo*, something many of the students seemed to grasp.

Hot moment 2: when does it become too uncomfortable?

During the seminars, students engaged lively in discussions. However, there were some voices that were less prominent in these discussions, namely the experiences of those who had encountered racist incidents. In all the groups, there was a clear overrepresentation of white majority students, where four out of five were girls. Some of the students from minority groups shared their experiences, but the fact that many did not say anything in these discussions also suggests that there may have been students

present who were afraid to share their experiences. In one of the cases where minority students shared their experiences, an episode emerged that is relevant to retell here, which also opened up for useful reflections on how discomfort can arise in the classroom, and discussions of when it can become *too* uncomfortable.

To confront the responses from majority students who distanced themselves from racism when these came up in the discussion, as in the example above, I chose to retell an episode in the plenum discussions where I had experienced an incident that was nearly identical to the situation in the 360 film, on a bus in my hometown a few years ago. In the incident, there was an elderly man in a state of intoxication who grossly insulted a young girl with a hijab, using very abusive terms related to her head covering and assumed religion, country of origin, and language. The incident ended with the driver stopping the bus after a few minutes and calling the police, upon which the man left the bus, and the bus continued with the girl and the other passengers. I pointed out the fact that almost no one on the bus supported the girl, and that she stood alone in facing severe racist harassment. The students reflected on how they themselves would react in a similar situation. In one of the groups, a young female student raised her hand when I finished the story and said, "*I've also experienced this on a bus in the same town. There was an old man who really hated me. I had completely forgotten about that until you told this now*".

In contrast to how I handled statements from other minority students who had shared their experiences of racism in the plenum, where I have sought to include their stories into the lecture, this time I was completely caught off guard, and I exclaimed, "*Oh my God, was it you on that bus?*". I had not met the student before and knew her only from what I could see: a young woman wearing a hijab. Instead of reflecting together with this student and the other seminar participants on how this uncomfortable situation could be an entry point for discussing racism – which after all was the goal of the seminars, and what I had done in all other cases where someone had shared experiences of racism – I rushed to continue the teaching without delving further into the episode. Why did I do that?

In this incident, as a white teacher from the majority population, I was confronted with precisely the discomfort that Røthing (2019) describes as the possibility of the unforeseen, the unmanageable, and the uncomfortable in the classroom. In previous seminars, I had taught about racism from a distance, as part of the white majority population. This incident made me share a direct experience of racism with someone else. We had both experienced a similar episode, but with very different roles – she as object to racist harassment and me as a bystander and part of the majority population. Even though I had informed all students in advance about what the film would be about and that it might happen that some would relive painful experiences[11], I found it very uncomfortable that I, as a teacher, was at risk of making the classroom an unsafe arena for this student – in a situation where there was already discomfort associated with the topic of

the seminar. I chose not to delve further into the episode because I was concerned about the risk of re-traumatization and that I might cause her a *too* uncomfortable situation dwelling on her story of racism. In other words, it was my fear that she, as a minority, would feel othered by my teaching *about* the Other that triggered discomfort in me.

After this incident, I interviewed the student, where we talked about this episode and how she experienced the situation. She said that although she also experienced some discomfort in this situation, she did not feel discomfort in talking about racism as a topic. For her, the discomfort was primarily related to her experience of having been object to racism several times in her life and not being taken seriously. She explained in the interview that she found the film and the teaching relevant, both because it addressed a topic that she found important, but also personally relevant to her because she had experienced being insulted because of her ethnicity and religion. She also said that she felt safe sharing her experience because the way the topic was presented provided "*a safe ground.*" She experienced that the framework of the seminar (how future teachers can work against racism in the classroom) was so important to her personally that she wanted to share her experiences of racism. Thus, it was my own discomfort that prevented me from addressing the girl's statement, not hers. She had also noticed my discomfort: "*I noticed that you found this uncomfortable*".

The irony of my attempt to avoid discomfort in a seminar that precisely dealt with the importance of exploring discomfort in the classroom is a good example of how inherent and profound educational practice can be linked to the teacher's role as the one who has control in the class. Tensions or conflicts in the classroom often come as a surprise to both teachers and students, and it can be challenging to handle the emotional aspects of the incident (Gressgård and Harlap, 2014: 25). Although my intention with developing and teaching a method to deal with emotions connected to race and racism was good, this example show that discussions about race, racism, and my own racial privilege (Matias, 2016) made me uncomfortable. If the teacher does not address the uncomfortable situation because of a desire to control the situation, it can, however, reinforce the mechanisms that triggered the situation (Gressgård and Harlap, 2014). By not addressing the student's experience of racism because I was uncomfortable and worried about othering her in this situation, I nevertheless contributed to othering her by allowing her story to end with her having experienced a humiliating situation. By not inviting her to tell more, I declined an invitation from her to engage in a dialogue about racism and ended the conversation with it being I (the white majority) who told her story of racism. Thus, I contributed to reinforcing majority hegemony rather than challenging it, as I had intended, because I found the situation *too* uncomfortable.

According to Kumashiro (2002), it is necessary for teachers to create space in their teaching practice to help students through crises to increase understanding. The opposite, when the teacher tries to limit the problem to the situation and restore harmony, it can close the possibility of problematizing mechanisms and markers of social hierarchies (Gressgård and Harlap, 2014: 23). The example above illustrates that it is absolutely necessary for the teacher, both in higher education as well as in primary and secondary education, to confront their own prejudice and modes of understanding in their teaching and engage in a continuous process of making room for discomfort. By making room for discomfort,

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11 Before I showed the film, I retold the plot, and warned that the film included scenes of oral abuse. I warned that if anyone had been exposed to racism, hate speech or other types of violence, this could potentially lead to re-traumatization. I encouraged those who did not want to see the film to watch something else instead, if they did not want to stand out as the only ones who did not see the film. None of the students told me that they did not want to see the film, but a few said afterward that they had started watching the film but stopped before finishing.

one can approach hot moments and difficult feelings that arise in the classroom through a conceptualization of discomfort, rather than something to be avoided or eliminated. By risking that the situation could become more uncomfortable for the student and myself, I could have created a potentially better environment for learning than the one described. This episode of how I tried to avoid discomfort was therefore implemented in later seminars with teacher students as an approach to how discomfort can look like in a classroom situation and how, by not engaging in the discomfort, one can block for important dimensions in teaching about racism.

Closing reflections on teaching about racism in teacher education

In this article I have argued that giving *room for discomfort* when confronting racism in the classroom can be crucial for increased understanding and learning. By addressing racism as done in the seminars described, both majority and minority students can become aware of the discomfort racism creates for the other group – and the consequences this experienced discomfort may have for them as future teachers. The learning potential here is connected to that both minority and majority students are given sufficient room to present their subjective experience of the discomfort racism evoked after watching the film – a process that will naturally be very different for the two groups. It is by no means my intention to equate the discomfort minorities experience when subjected to racism with the discomfort majority students feel in their encounter with racism. Experiencing racism can never be compared to the majority's experience of discomfort. However, I argue that in teacher education, it can be fruitful to recognize that racism is indeed uncomfortable for different groups, for different reasons, and that this discomfort has consequences for how racism is addressed in the classroom. It is in this borderland that I believe the potential for learning through giving room for discomfort is greatest. By acknowledging why other people finds racism uncomfortable, one can move beyond individualized definitions of racism and more easily identify the structural factors that sustain it. Feeling one's own discomfort and allowing space for other people's discomfort is not about learning *about* the Other or *for* the Other, as described by Kumashiro (2002), but rather learning *with each other*.

Gorski argues that teachers must accept that they will not always be liked by students and that practicing intercultural education that challenges the established norms will be uncomfortable (Gorski, 2008: 523). I agree with Gorski and believe that we should dare to use unconventional methods as a gateway to discuss racism in education – even when it is uncomfortable. There is no definitive answer on how to address racism in the classroom. Throughout the seminars, the goal was to challenge both majority and minority students' perceptions and definitions of racism, and to demonstrate that these understandings are fluid and change depending on the context. As future teachers, these students will encounter numerous situations related to racism, and practicing how to handle the unexpected in the intercultural classroom is crucial.

Educators in teacher education programs have a special responsibility to structure their teaching in a way that does not perpetuate or reinforce stereotypes and hierarchies. Critically reflecting on one's own pedagogical practices is therefore necessary, and this article has aimed to contribute with critical reflections on how norm-critical pedagogy can look in practice in a Norwegian teacher education program, by focusing on how to address discomfort and make it a potentially constructive tool for learning.

Author's Note

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This article is translated directly from Norwegian to English by the author. I have made some minor adaptions in order to meet the requirements of *Frontiers in Education*:

- I have changed the word "chapter" to "article".
- In order to meet the needs of an international audience, five references to English literature has been added. These are Gillborn, 2006, Titley, 2020, Bonilla-Silva, 2019, Leonardo, 2013, and Matias, 2016.
- Two references were added to elaborate the methodological design; Amade-Escot, 2005 and Angelides, 2001.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because the research is based on interviews where none of the participants can be identified. The interviews do not contain sensitive information, nor information that can lead to identification of individuals. The ethics committee has concluded that informed oral consent was sufficient.

Author contributions

RF: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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