‘We were all sticking with the safe ones’: anti-racism education and Educate Together primary schools in Ireland.

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Abstract

In Ireland, the overwhelming majority of primary teachers are white and from the dominant ethnic group, i.e., Irish-born, settled and Catholic. In contrast, Irish schools and classrooms are racially and ethnically diverse. Teachers play a central role in anti-racism education when they recognise, affirm and represent racial and ethnic identities. The charter and ethical curriculum in Educate Together equality-based schools offer a structural and curricular response to racial and ethnic diversity facilitating an engagement with racial and ethnic identities, equality and justice, and religions, beliefs and worldviews. Limited research exists that specifically explores anti-racism education in Irish primary schools. This qualitative study examines how teachers working in Educate Together primary schools conceptualise and practise anti-racism education. It introduces an original conceptual framework for anti-racism education in Ireland informed by critical multiculturalism, critical race theory and critical whiteness studies. Teacher practices in Ireland have the potential to disrupt the perpetuation of positioning white, settled, Christian identities as the norm. To challenge hegemonic norms, decentre whiteness and bring about more transformative anti-racism education praxis, the study highlights the need for a critical interrogation of the impact of teacher positionality in Irish primary classrooms.

Keywords: anti-racism education, Educate Together, teacher positionality, whiteness, religions and beliefs

Introduction

Racisms are a reality for children in Irish schools (DuPont 2022; Garratt 2019; McClure 2021; McGuirk 2023; OCO 2020). National educational policies, curricula and school interventions, despite being designed to tackle racisms, can have the potential to reinforce inequality (Bryan 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2012). International patterns indicate that teachers generally come from majority-group backgrounds (Keane, Heinz, and Mc Daid 2023). Ireland follows this trend, and due to the Irish historical and educational context, over 99% of teachers working in Irish primary schools come from the ethnic majority group (Heinz and Keane 2018), defined by Bryan (2010, 255) as 'white, heterosexual, Irish-born, settled, Catholics'. This results in a mismatch between the identities of primary teachers with the identities of the children in their classrooms, which are becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse (Devine et al. 2025). This study was motivated by my personal experiences as a white settled teacher engaging in anti-racism education in an Educate Together primary school. Alongside the complexities of formal and informal lessons and discussions about identities, racial and ethnic diversity[1] and racisms, my reflections on difficult conversations, knowledge gaps (known and unknown) and on practice, highlighted the importance of teacher positionality as a rationale and focus for research.

Educate Together provides a structural and curricular response to diversity. Its explicit focus on children's racial and ethnic identities and integrated ethical curriculum enables a form of anti-racism education that has the potential to move beyond the liberal multicultural approaches evidenced in Irish primary schools (Devine 2011; Kavanagh 2013; Lalor 2013; Mulcahy 2006). Such approaches often fail to disrupt ethnocentric hegemony and reinforce racial inequality (Bryan 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2012).

This article, drawing from a larger doctoral study (McGuirk 2023), presents findings on how primary teachers in Educate Together schools understand and practice anti-racism education. Specifically, it addresses:

How do Educate Together's key principles and the Learn Together ethical curriculum influence teachers' conceptualisations and practices of anti-racism education? and,

How do teachers' racialised identities shape these conceptualisations and practices?

[1] Going forward, the word 'diversity' will replace 'racial and ethnic diversity' and unless specified otherwise, it will imply a mix of racial and ethnic identities.

This article makes a number of unique contributions to the literature. First, it presents an original framework for anti-racism education, offering a new lens for conceptualizing, researching, practicing, and reflecting on the topic. Second, it adds to understandings about the theoretical underpinnings of the Educate Together ethos and the 2004 *Learn Together* ethical curriculum in relation to anti-racism education and critical multiculturalism. Third, it adds to understandings about representation and recognition practices in relation to transformative forms of anti-racism education. Fourth, it details the acontextual and ahistorical conceptualisations of racisms of some teachers due to their racialized identities. Lastly, it adds to the literature by foregrounding the ongoing persistent centring of whiteness in the Irish education system via Educate Together contexts.

The Irish context

Recent census results highlight Ireland's increasing racial and ethnic diversity with 23% of the population identifying as a member of a minoritised group other than 'White Irish' (CSO 2022). This includes, amongst others, those identifying as 'White Irish Traveller', 'Black or Black Irish', 'Asian or Asian Irish', and 'Other incl. mixed background'. Religious demographics are also rapidly changing, 69% identify as Catholic, and members of the Church of Ireland are the second largest religious group (0.02%) (CSO 2016, 2022). The population reporting 'no religion' significantly increased from 5.9% in 2011 to 14% in 2022 (CSO 2022). This changing context contrasts with the historical link between church and state, with approximately 89% of primary schools operating under Catholic patronage and only 5% have an equality-based/multi-denominational ethos (DoE 2022b).

Teachers report difficulties responding to increasing diversity and racism (Bryan 2009b; Darmody, Byrne and McGinnity 2014; Devine 2011, 2013; Faas, Smith, and Darmody 2018; Hannigan, Faas, and Darmody 2022). While Intercultural Guidelines[2] (NCCA 2005) exist, minimal initial support or in-service CPD was provided (INTO 2006; NCCA 2006). Research highlights that the guidelines advocate an add-on rather than embedded approach, and that the curricula, practices and resources used in Irish schools serve to reinforce particular messages about citizenship, the national identity, diversity and difference (Bryan 2008, 2009b, 2010; Faas 2012; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Ní Dhuinn and Keane 2021; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013; Waldron and Pike 2006). This, combined with the traditional curriculum taught by majority-group 'White Irish' teachers, allows a

[2] The Intercultural Guidelines are currently under review and redevelopment.

'hidden curriculum' to act as a hegemonic device (Jay 2003; Bryan 2008; Keane and Heinz 2016), and limits the inclusion of minoritised children's identities, knowledges and values. Furthermore, initial teacher education (ITE) inadequately prepares students for diversity, 'race'[3], racism, and intercultural education (Bhopal and Rhamie 2014; Hannigan, Faas, and Darmody 2022). Until 2013, in Ireland, all sites of initial teacher education (ITE) providing undergraduate programmes were denominational in nature; reinforcing power inequalities as teaching was invariably conducted through a particular, dominant and Christian lens. Additionally, and partly due to a 'full' ITE curriculum and the autonomy granted to Higher Education Institutions, compulsory intercultural or anti-racism education is rarely embedded (Hannigan et al. 2022). Ultimately, the impact of the lack of relevant ITE and CPD alongside dated intercultural education policy documents means that teachers are not being supported to engage in research-informed anti-racism education.

Currently, in Irish primary schools, there is no discrete curricular subject that reflects non-confessional multi-belief education or that specifically focuses on anti-racism education. However, in Educate Together schools, the Learn Together ethical curriculum's Equality and Justice strand emphasises social justice, and rights-respecting multi-belief education features in its Belief Systems strand. Given this research's focus, the following section provides an overview of the Educate Together model and of *Learn Together*.

Educate Together

Forty-seven years ago, Ireland saw the opening of its first multi-denominational school, marking a shift from a system where virtually all schools were under denominational, primarily Catholic, management (Hyland 1993, 2020). This came after a three-year campaign by parents, educationalists, and politicians who sought to establish a multi-denominational school where children could be educated together, irrespective of religious affiliation. In 1978, the Department of Education approved the Dalkey School Project. This moment marked the opening up of a space for alternative, inclusive education that came about in response and resistance to the heretofore overwhelming characterization of schooling in

[3] The use of 'race' in inverted commas recognises that 'race' is a social construct and that it has no biological basis. Truths about the concept are changing, contingent, complex and contested. Warmington (2009) advises to disregard what he considers as "scare quotes" when using the term. However, in this instance, this author aligns herself with the use of inverted commas to emphasise the socio-political nature of the construct of 'race' and the associated persistence of racisms.

Ireland as denominational (Kitching 2010). From small beginnings, the Educate Together sector now includes 97 primary schools and 21 secondary schools.

According to Norman (2003, 3), 'school ethos is the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, management and leadership, the use of images and symbol, rituals and practices, as well as goals and expectations'. The Educate Together ethos is still underpinned by the same four principles initially outlined in 1974 by the Dalkey School Project (Mulcahy 2006; Hyland 2020). Educate Together schools are:

- Equality-based, i.e. all children having equal rights of access to the school, and children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds being equally recognised.
- Co-educational and committed to encouraging all children to explore their range of abilities and opportunities
- Child centred in their approach to education
- Democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers (Educate Together 2015)

Learn Together: an ethical education curriculum

These four principles are supported and reinforced by the ethical curriculum, *Learn Together*, first launched in 2004, the result of a collaborative and consultative process that built on the content of the Dalkey School Project Religious Education Core Curriculum (DSP 1989). A revised curriculum has recently been launched, and implementation began in September 2023 (Educate Together 2023).

Educate Together views the curriculum as a 'concrete expression' of its motto, 'Learn Together to Live Together' (Educate Together 2012, 8). The 2004 curriculum cycle is spiral in nature and comprises four complementary strands, Moral and Spiritual, Equality and Justice, Belief Systems and Ethics and the Environment[4]. It aims to equip children with the dispositions and skills to recognise inequality, discrimination, and racisms, and to engage in positive action against injustice in a multicultural society (Educate Together 2004). The two

[4] The four strands of the revised curriculum are An Ethical Approach to the Environment, Equality and Justice, Values and Ethical Perspectives and Belief Systems (Educate Together 2023)

hours allocated for *Learn Together* in Educate Together schools provide ample opportunities for teachers to engage in anti-racism education.

The Educate Together model and anti-racism education

School cultures influence teachers' engagement with cultural diversity, recognition, and representation (Devine 2011). This article considers that the Educate Together model has the potential to positively influence teachers' conceptualisations and practices, in relation to cultural, racial and ethnic diversity and in turn, anti-racism education. By affirming within its charter that its schools are 'equality-based' (Rowe 2015), the Educate Together model offers a structural (through the charter/principles) and curricular (through *Learn Together*) response to diversity. The Charter guarantees equal rights of access and equal respect to 'children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds' and affirms that children, through engagement with the ethical education curriculum *Learn Together*, will avail of an education 'that respects their individual identity whilst exploring the different values and traditions of the world in which they live' (Educate Together 2004, 49). This explicit focus on children's racial and ethnic identities alongside an exploration of diverse perspectives offers potential to shift Irish educational responses to diversity, racisms, and anti-racism.

Teachers mediate the Educate Together ethos partly through the Learn Together ethical curriculum. Educate Together does not explicitly align its schools or curriculum with specific liberal or critical theoretical perspectives and the 2004 curriculum document contains no explicit references to such theories. Previous research indicates that its theoretical underpinning can be interpreted as both liberal and critical multiculturalism (Kavanagh 2013; Lalor 2013; Mulcahy 2006). As such, the curriculum allows for both agency and ambiguity in its implementation. Its overarching message is for schools to foster respectful and inclusive attitudes toward diversity, enabling children to 'make informed and moral decisions and live in a pluralist society that embraces diversity' (Educate Together 2004, 9). Instead of focusing on similarities through a race-evasive approach, children are encouraged to explore their uniqueness and differences while developing both individual and collective responsibility (Educate Together 2004).

Methodology

The study employed an interpretive triangulated qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews, classroom observations, post-observation interviews, and an examination of the

Educate Together Charter and *Learn Together* ethical curriculum. Fieldwork was conducted between April and June 2016.

Social constructivism reflects my assumptions that teachers have varying and multiple conceptualisations of racisms and of anti-racism education, and that they have formed these throughout their lives, through interaction with others and through the influence of historical and cultural norms (Merriam and Tisdell 2016; Rossman and Rallis 2017). A qualitative design was chosen to capture the complexity of participants' views and the social processes informing them. This allowed for an excavation of 'race' and racism in everyday life and of power intricacies in schools (Gillborn 1995; Quraishi and Philburn 2013). As a white primary teacher turned teacher educator researching anti-racism, I endeavoured to be as reflexive as possible regarding my positionality (Milner 2007). 'Race' is a social and political construct that imbues the field of education with racialised understandings and hierarchies that have impacted my research and practice (Ladson-Billings 2012). Thus, I committed to critically interrogating my racial privilege, values, and assumptions and remained cognisant of how racialised thinking could affect my study.

The study used non-probability purposive sampling to include practicing teachers at various career stages from diverse Educate Together schools; urban, rural, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools)[5] and non-DEIS. Using publicly available information, principals were contacted directly, and if amenable, principals then shared study information with interested teachers. Over 70 schools were contacted, resulting in an adequate and pragmatic sample (Braun and Clarke 2021; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, and Young 2018) of eighteen teachers (see Table 1.0),

Table 1.0 Participant Profile

Participant	Age Range	Number of Years Teaching	DEIS status	No. of children from minoritised groups	Lived Abroad
Maeve	36-40	18	Non-DEIS	Medium	Yes
Abigail	46-50	30	Non-DEIS	Low	Yes

[5] The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme is the main policy in Ireland focused on addressing the impact of educational disadvantage at school level. It is run by the Department of Education and aims to provide targeted supports to schools with concentrated populations of learners from socio-economically disadvantaged communities (DoE 2022a).

Amy	20-25	4	DEIS 2	High	No
Annie	26-30	5	DEIS 2	High	Yes
Michael	41-45	11	Non-DEIS	High	Yes
Chloe	20-25	2	Non-DEIS	High	No
Deborah	26-30	8	DEIS 1	High	No
Cathy	31-35	9	DEIS 1	High	Yes
Eoin	31-35	2	DEIS 2	High	No
Aoife	31-35	10	Non-DEIS	Low	Yes
Susan	26-30	7	Non-DEIS	High	Yes
Elizabeth	36-40	17	Non-DEIS	Medium	Yes
Nuala	26-30	8	Non-DEIS	Medium	Yes
Karen	51-55	13	Non-DEIS	Medium	Yes
Janet	26-30	5	Non-DEIS	High	No
Cormac	26-30	5	Non-DEIS	Low	No
Aisling	41-45	10	Non-DEIS	Medium	Yes
Patricia	31-35	8	DEIS 2	High	Yes

As table 1.0 shows, the participants, 16 of whom were born in Ireland, ranged in age from 22 to 53. While only two self-identified as practising Catholics, 15 of 18 stated that they attended Catholic primary and secondary schools in Ireland. Five completed ITE in the United Kingdom. Participants had teaching experience of between two years to 30 years and worked in a broad range of schools across Ireland. Ten described their school communities as having a high or very high number of minoritised children (hereafter 'multi-ethnic schools'), while others had smaller numbers (hereafter 'majority-ethnic schools'). Participants reported

receiving very limited pre-service and in-service professional development in areas relating to the *Learn Together* ethical curriculum, non-confessional multi-belief religious education, intercultural education, or anti-racism education.

Data collection comprised eighteen in-depth semi-structured interviews (60-90mins), 12 days classroom observation with six participants who self-selected for two days' observation (see table 2.0) and 6 post-observation reflection interviews (45-60mins). To support an emergent approach, the research instruments (interview and observation schedules) and the data analysis process were designed and conducted in such a way to allow the possibility for findings to emerge beyond the scope of the conceptual framework (see below). Descriptive and reflective notes were gathered throughout.

Table 2.0 Participant Profile - Observation

Participant	Age Range	No. of Years Teaching	DEIS	No. of children from minoritised communities	Current class level
Michael	41-45	11	Non-DEIS	High	4th
Cathy	31-35	9	DEIS 1	High	Senior Infants
Aoife	31-35	10	Non-DEIS	Low	3rd
Cormac	26-30	5	Non-DEIS	Low	6th
Aisling	41-45	10	Non-DEIS	Medium	5th/6th
Patricia	31-35	8	DEIS 2	High	5th

Initial interviews explored participants' understandings, experiences of and reflections on racisms, anti-racism and anti-racism education. For classroom observation, it was suggested that teachers, over the course of the two days, might teach least one lesson that they felt led to developing anti-racist attitudes, dispositions or skills in the children. Post-observation interviews encouraged participants to reflect on and discuss the perspectives that informed their decisions, behaviours and actions over the course of the two-day observation period. All interviews were audio-recorded, with the participants' agreement, and were subsequently transcribed in preparation for analysis.

The study employed a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022). Alongside the application of the conceptual framework as an analytical lens, the coding process was also guided by interpretative analysis that began with initial interviews and continued throughout the analysis process. To begin, the process involved familiarisation with the data, coding and generating initial themes. NVivo 12 software aided data organization. An iterative process of investigating and crosschecking emergent themes with the conceptual framework, coded extracts and the data set as a whole took place. The process then involved rounds of reviewing, developing and recoding within and across themes until the final themes were refined, defined and named.

A number of limitations exist. A more prolonged or extended participant observation would have benefitted the study. Additionally, the voices of two significant stakeholders are absent: those of the children and those of the parents/caregivers. Hearing the perspectives of children and parents, in particular those from minoritised communities, would have added an additional dimension to the story and would have help to mitigate any potential knowledge gaps related to my identity as an educator who is racialised as white with a background of teaching in an Educate Together primary school.

The next section describes the original conceptual framework that provided the lens guiding the development of research instruments and the data analysis process.

A framework for anti-racism education

This conceptual framework for anti-racism education was developed to recognise the connection between teachers, societal power relations, educational institutions, and racisms in Ireland. The framework presents five interrelated tenets to support research and practice and is applicable to the globalised Irish context where the majority of educators are racialised as white. It reflects both the specificities and the complexities of systemic racisms in Irish educational contexts that advantage and foreground the identities of those who are settled, religious (predominantly Catholic), and racialized as white. Its theoretical design is informed by the combination of the following three interrelated critical discourses; critical multiculturalism, critical race theory and critical whiteness studies.

Related critical frameworks (for example, Banks 2004; Dei, 2000; Gorski 2020; Sleeter and Grant 2006; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997) refer to systems, identity, policy/practice, reflection, authentic representation, curriculum and pedagogies. Building on existing scholarship, this anti-racism education framework incorporates teachers' racialised

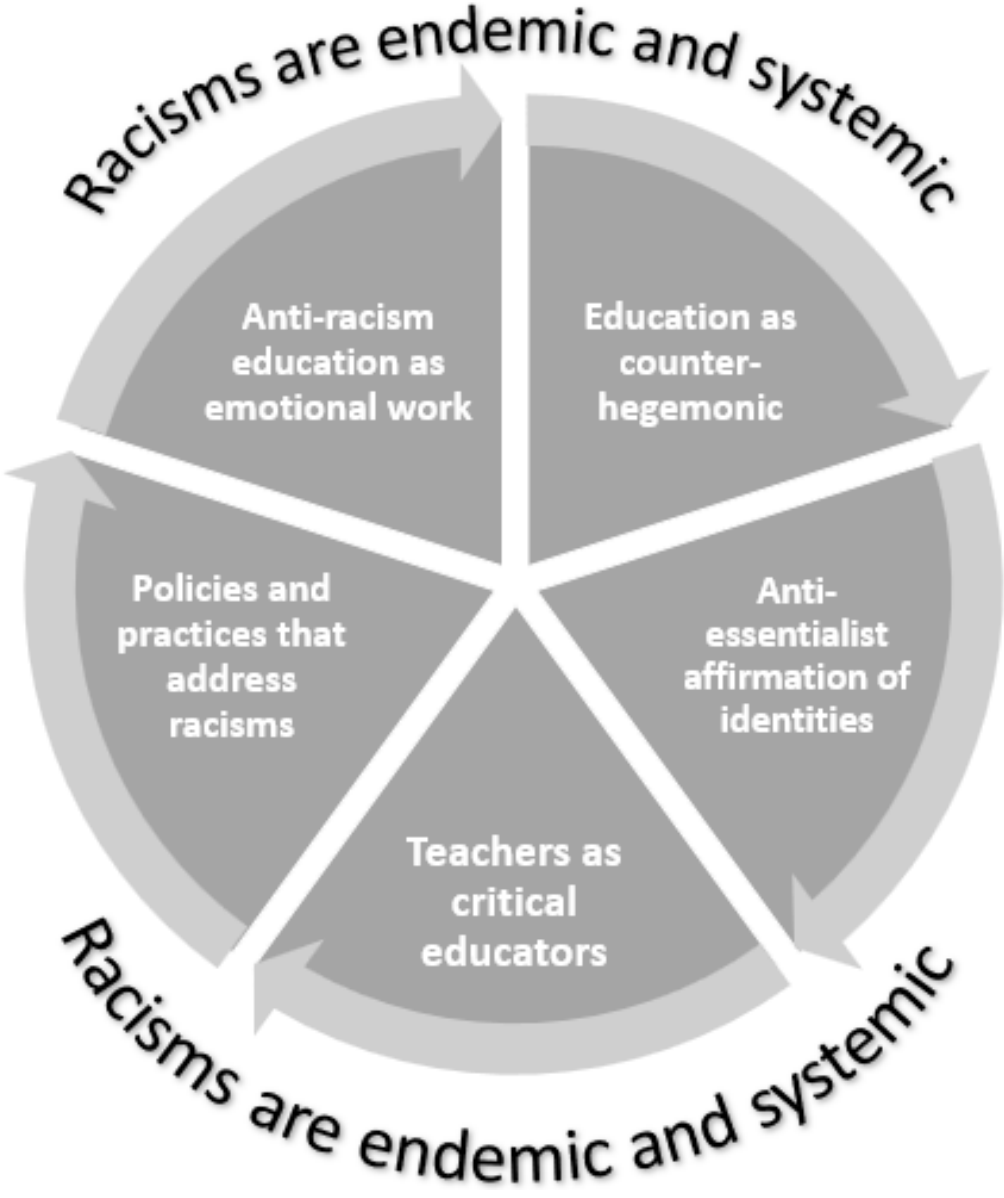
identities due to their concomitant relationship with power and privilege. It also considers the affective dimensions of anti-racism work as prerequisite. The framework interrogates the social and historical construction of difference and acknowledges the nuanced nature of personal experiences (McLaren 1995; May and Sleeter 2010; Troyna 1984). This multifaceted framework places a particular emphasis on teachers' positionality, practices and relationships with students.

Reflecting my belief that anti-racism education should be critical of the supposed neutrality of schools, the framework addresses racisms, discrimination, and power inequities in school contexts (May 1999; Sleeter and Delgado Bernal 2004). In contexts where the majority of teachers are white, it is argued that 'softer' forms of multicultural education fail to engage with power and racisms, and as result, teachers "bring a worldview that tacitly condones existing race and class relations" (Sleeter and Delgado Bernal 2004, 240). As the overwhelming majority of teachers in Irish primary schools are white (Devine 2011; Keane and Heinz 2015; 2016), addressing positionality is particularly pertinent.

Drawing on critical whiteness studies, the framework advocates a questioning of whiteness and a re-conceptualisation of power structures that serve to marginalise minoritised groups (Gillborn 2015; Kitching 2013; Picower 2009; Twine and Gallagher 2008). It is not critical of white people themselves, rather it is critical of how society constructs whiteness as the 'norm' and ascribes "invisible, unearned and not consciously acknowledged" privileges and power to white people and thus serves to reinforce the hegemonic status quo (Picower 2009, 198). In the Irish context, Kitching suggests that "state policies continue to maintain a discrete white Irishness as the privileged (non-Traveller, sedentary, gendered) category of national membership" (2010, 218). White teachers, through their life experiences, gain a particular understanding of 'race' and difference and this can impact how they engage with anti-racism education (Picower 2009). This framework recognises that teachers are racialised actors, and that therefore, it is essential they engage with the complexities and influences of the positions they hold. Accordingly, it facilitates an exploration of how teachers' positionality (as white racialised beings) influences their conceptualisations and practices of anti-racism education. Critical race theory (CRT) considers 'race' as the analytical core of inquiry necessary to identify potential changes at theoretical, institutional and policy levels in educational contexts (Carbado 2011; Warmington 2020). Hence, one of CRT's defining elements underpins the conceptual framework; an understanding of racism(s) as endemic and

systemic (Carbado 2011; Crenshaw 2011; Gillborn 2008; Ladson-Billings 1999; Rollock and Gillborn 2011).

Figure 1.0 Anti-racism education framework



The following section outlines the five intertwining, and equally important, tenets.

Teachers as critical educators

This tenet emphasises the role of critical self-reflection and it considers teachers' positionality as racialised individuals. It acknowledges that any political or educational

endeavour that endorses group difference needs to be accompanied by critical self-reflection and an interrogation of the power relationships of that endeavour (Leistyna 2002; May and Sleeter 2010). It advocates that teachers interrogate their self-identity, positionality and histories of privilege when engaging in anti-racism education and social justice. This is in order to have the transformative potential to challenge racial oppression and the reproduction of dominant narratives in schools and society (Dei 1999; Bedard 2000; Bryan 2012; Kailin 2002; Gorski and Dalton 2020; Keane et al 2023; Ní Dhuinn and Keane 2021). For anti-racism education, the educator's role in repositioning knowledge, raising awareness about racisms, and promoting critical thinking and empowerment, all in collaboration with students, is essential.

Anti-racism education as emotional work

This tenet acknowledges that engaging in discussions about 'race', racisms and anti-racism is emotional work for teachers and students (Husband 2012; Mathias 2016; Zembylas 2012, 2015). White teachers can find it emotionally difficult to engage in anti-racism education and can experience feelings such as anger, denial and fear as forms of white discomfort (Zembylas, 2018). Children from minoritised groups who experience racism and racial trauma, can suffer physical and emotional effects. Consequently, their sense of self and sense of agency can be negatively impacted (Comas-Díaz, Hall, and Neville 2019; Henderson et al. 2019; Hardy 2013; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Newsum and Delker 2020; Ní Dhuinn and Keane 2021). This tenet considers that anti-racism education requires a particular set of affective dispositions and competencies so that, if necessary, educators can respond to both the children's emotional needs and to their own emotional responses, including their own potential discomfort and vulnerability.

Policies and practices that address racisms

The importance of formal and informal teaching and discussion about and for anti-racisms is essential, as is creating safe(r) spaces for children when engaging in anti-racism education. Educational initiatives are often insufficiently critical and do little to address inherent and systemic racisms (Gillborn 2006; Bryan 2008; Sleeter 2017). However, teachers can play an important role in implementing explicit and implicit teachings for anti-racisms that extend beyond an empathetic approach and that have an aim of redressing unequal power-relations and disrupting racisms in all its guises. Equally important is the role schools and educational settings can play to implement school policies and procedures (relating to the curriculum,

pedagogy and assessment for example) that provide a more equitable education for children from minoritised groups (Fleming, Harford, and Hyland 2022; Ladson-Billings 2021; Lynch and Lodge 2002).

Education as counter-hegemonic

This tenet foregrounds a critical questioning of traditional historical perspectives, power relations, knowledge construction, and the hidden curriculum. It recognises that the beliefs, norms, and values of dominant groups are embedded within educational institutions and as such, places a focus on the hidden curriculum as a hegemonic device (Jay 2003; Kitching 2010; 2013; May 1999; May and Sleeter 2010; Stokke and Lybæk 2018). It considers the role of education in recognising and challenging inequalities and injustices that exist in society by critically reflecting on how schools, through the mainstream and hidden curriculum, have the potential to reproduce and reinforce dominant narratives that lead to racisms. Importantly, it also recognises that schools and teachers have the potential to disrupt dominant ideologies, to redress power structures and to promote inclusion.

Anti-essentialist affirmation of identities

This tenet advocates affirming racial and ethnic identities while rejecting essentialism and reification. Identity is complex and dynamic and cannot be categorised into a neat singular group or groups. The way in which racial and ethnic identity is engaged with and recognised in education can affect how an individual views and values themselves and others (Arshad and Harker 2019; Devine 2013a; Lynch and Baker 2005; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Nieto 1999). Therefore, when teachers incorporate information from a variety of identities into curricula and practices in educational settings, it is possible to both represent students' identities and to positively impact on racial and ethnic attitudes (Banks 2004; Kemple, Lee, and Harris 2016; Peterson, Gunn, Brice, and Alley 2015). In the classroom, it is complex but necessary to affirm difference without essentialising, to discuss culture without reifying, and to educate about and against racisms without over-simplifying. Disrupting power structures and white privilege also necessitates adapting the curriculum to include a broader range of racial and ethnic identities, histories, and knowledges.

Findings and discussion

Findings reveal that most participants consciously engage in practices to reflect diverse racial and ethnic identities, though the Traveller Community remains notably underrepresented [6]. Most (bar two) also teach formal lessons about racisms (see Table 5.0). Such practices can have a positive impact on children's sense of belonging and can support the development of knowledge and skills relating to anti-racism. However, the potential for transformative change is often subverted by teachers who omit or dismiss Learn Together curricular aims. Indicative of how whiteness operates in Irish society, the intertwined and intersectional nature of race and religion, alongside participant positionality, emerged as overarching factors impacting all findings. Findings will be detailed in three interrelated sections, recognition and representation, foregrounding religious identities, and an acontextual and ahistorical approach to racisms.

Recognition and Representation

Particular objectives from *Learn Together* (Educate Together 2004) place an emphasis on celebrating "cultural aspects.... e.g. dress, food, faiths" (17), becoming aware of "some of the cultures, lifestyles and customs of different ethnic groups" (33) and on learning to "appreciate diversity" (30) that are reminiscent of liberal forms of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism (Gillborn 2004; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997; Troyna 1984). However, this study shows a growing understanding of and engagement with the complexities associated with racial and ethnic identities in schools. The majority (n = 15) move beyond superficial intercultural approaches by purposely recognizing and representing children's racial and ethnic identities through formal and informal curricula, often highlighting languages, nationalities, and religions (see Table 3.0). Cathy's perspective reflects many participants' understandings, experiences and practices;

Every culture is both recognised and appreciated… and respected really. We are all of an equal base and that we should all, basically Learn Together, whether we are an expert in that particular culture or we're from that culture or religion. Within the school set-up, everybody feels valued, no matter what ethnic or cultural background.

Participants showed an awareness of the importance of having content, people and characters that were reflective of societal diversity in literacy schemes, school and class library books,

[6] Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to present findings relating to the notably limited recognition and representation of the identities and experiences of the Traveller Community.

toys, songs, and textbooks (to a lesser extent). Most participants (n = 15) were aware of the importance of having resources, materials and images in their classrooms and schools that are representative of children's racial and ethnic identities in order to create a learning space wherein the children could see themselves reflected in their environment. This has the potential to communicate messages of belonging and recognition to children (MacNevin and Berman 2017; Souto-Manning, Rabadi-Raol, Robinson, and Perez 2019). However, as this research did not explore children's experiences, it can not determine how children related to this aspect of teachers' practice. Recognition can be defined as "supporting, respecting and defending difference – those identities, cultures and social practices that are not represented by the majority of the public or dominant social norms" (Benjamin and Emejulu 2012, 39). Normalising racial and ethnic identities in this way helps to redress the systemic underrepresentation of minoritised groups in class and school contexts. However, as Lynch and Baker (2005) remind us, recognition is only one dimension of equality and as such a focus beyond children's identities (towards power, resources and care for example) is also required. This is particularly relevant when considering the racialised identities of the teachers in this study and the embeddedness of whiteness in educational contexts in Ireland.

In line with critical multiculturalism, a number of participants (n = 10) were moving outside the parameters of the 'official knowledge' of the 'official curriculum'. They taught beyond what is visible and liberal, by challenging the status quo and by incorporating alternative knowledges, voices, value systems, pedagogies and practices (see Table 3.0). Furthermore, they engaged children in dialogues and pedagogies that promoted reflection, critical thinking and that challenged the status quo (see Table 3.0 and Table 5.0).

Table 3.0 Informal and formal representation and recognition of minoritised identities

Subject Area	Theme/Topic/Resource
Geography	Focus on countries associated with children in class (and their parents/caregivers) Foods around the world Plants from around the world Mapping Civil War states in the US (linked with segregation) Human Rights Blue Star project Migration Windrush Generation/Jamaica
Science	All about my skin
Music	'World' music Songs from children's parents/caregivers home countries

	Songs that name countries of the world
Art	Norman Rockwell- *The Problem We All Live With* (1964) Ruby Bridges Connecting to and learning about artists' home countries
History	Irish Jewish history History of people immigrating into Ireland History of people migrating out of Ireland History of Human Rights Martin Luther King / Ruby Bridges / Nelson Mandela / Anne Frank / Mohammad Ali (Human Rights) *integrated with *Learn Together* Civil Rights Chinese myths and legends (stories) 'African' myths and legends (stories) Indian myths and legends (Sanskrit manuscripts) Challenging hegemonic norms – (questioning prominence of white male historical figures)
SPHE	Foods around the world Uniqueness and differences My identity (hair/eyes/skin) Myself Myself and Others Name-calling
PE	Dance (from different cultures)
Literacy	Representation in reading schemes and class library books Books (named or used by teachers) Handa's Hen / The Ugly Duckling / The Sneetches Happy in my Skin / Let Me In
Learn Together	Chinese New Year Belief systems celebrations Traveller Community Martin Luther King/ Ruby Bridges / Nelson Mandela / Anne Frank / Mohammad Ali (Human Rights) *integrated with History
Aistear	Identity Representation - Hairdressers (different hair types/styles/textures) Chinese New Year
Gaeilge	Representative vocabulary (hijab, braids)
Media	Racist incidences in the news Migration
Maths	Pattern/symmetry/geometry Games: Two stones (Korea/China)

When discussing themes related to the children's racial and ethnic identities, the tendency for participants to foreground religions and religious identities was particularly noteworthy.

Foregrounding Religious Identities

Teachers operationalise the equality-based ethos to include representation, but most participants refer to a limited range of racial and ethnic identities, primarily foregrounding

religious identities and omitting non-religious identities. For instance, Susan's practice reflects this:

At the start of the year, I would always find out what religion or what background the children have come to me from. From their previous class teacher, from their parents, even I would ask the children informally. In September, I would always make sure then that I would design my plans around the children in the classroom…I mean, you have to make them [the children] feel valued and appreciated. (Susan)

On one hand, asking children "*informally*" about their religious identities reflects a relational and flexible approach to planning and has the potential to benefit the children through representation and recognition of religious identities as Susan adapts her teaching accordingly. On the other hand, research in Irish multi-denominational primary schools highlights that some students feel uncomfortable expressing their beliefs and prefer to keep their beliefs private (Malone, Mullally and O'Toole 2021). Although teachers (like Susan above) may be well-intentioned, asking children to name religious affiliations brings their private beliefs into the public space and could potentially serve to exclude or other children with no religion or those children that do not align themselves with their family's religion (Malone et al. 2021). Despite the latest Census showing that "No Religion" is the second most commonly selected category (CSO 2022), very few teachers mention atheism.

Table 4.0 Number of participants who reference teaching the content of the Belief Systems strand

Belief System	Majority-ethnic contexts	Multi-ethnic contexts
Islam	7	7
Hinduism	3	2
Judaism	2	3
Christianity	2	2
Buddhism	1	4
Sikhism	1	2
Jehovah Witness	1	1
Mormonism	-	1
Atheism/Humanism	1	4

This finding is in line with previous research that indicates children equate *Learn Together* with a study of religion and do not include non-theistic beliefs in their discussions of belief

systems (Mulcahy 2006). This can be attributed to how whiteness operates through the aforementioned predominantly denominational nature of education in Ireland that leaves non-theistic beliefs outside many participants' frames of references. Additionally, Susan's comment, "*you have to make them feel valued and appreciated"* is indicative of both the Educate Together structural (the Charter) and curricular (*Learn Together*) response to children's racial and ethnic identities. By naming, affirming and fostering respect for children's belief systems, teachers in Educate Together schools act as agents and transmitters of the democratic values of the equality-based ethos. However, it also bears consideration that as the overwhelming majority of primary school teachers, including this study's participants, are from the majority ethnic group in Ireland (white, settled, Catholic), they hold a privileged position as members of the dominant social group (Bryan 2010; Devine 2011, Heinz and Keane 2018). Membership of the dominant group can inadvertently complicate well-meaning intentions and actions. Thus, Susan, albeit while acting as an agent of democratic values through the rhetoric of inclusion and equality, also positions herself as the 'valuer' of difference, a stance that serves to disguise the power differentials in society (Bryan 2010). Should this stance remain unnamed and unrecognised, it can also serve to reinforce those power differentials. Navigating the space between acting as an agent of democratic values and as a 'valuer' of difference is difficult without an awareness of positionality and privilege.

Despite limited professional learning, many participants include representative content in their planning and teaching. However, an emphasis is placed on the celebratory and cultural aspects of religious festivals, common with a liberal multicultural approach (Sleeter and Delgado Bernal, 2004). Below, Aisling notes this tendency:

We felt that our school didn't have a great policy on Learn Together, that everybody was doing the same feasts and festivals and everybody was doing the same thing. That we weren't covering the broad spectrum of it [the curriculum]. *We were all sticking with the "safe" ones. It's fairly easy to do Diwali or Hanukkah. I mean all you have to do is go on TwinkL* [an educational resources website] *and they're there.* (Aisling)

By using "*safe*" and "*easy*" to describe the feasts and festivals content, she considered that teachers in her school did not teach content that was outside their comfort zone. This suggests that any other content can be perceived as "unsafe", more difficult or uncomfortable to teach and as a result of this white discomfort, teachers avoid it. Almost all the participants (bar two)

grew up and attended primary and secondary school in Ireland. They described their primary and secondary schools as having an enrolment that was "White Irish" (n = 4), "White Catholic" (n = 3), "Irish" (n = 3), "Catholic" (n = 3), "completely White" (n=1), and "local" (n = 2). As Irish schools are likely to reinforce hegemonic and race evasive ideologies, white privilege and are more likely to reinforce rather than contest religious and racial inequalities, it can be understood that the participants' perception of religions and religious differences has been informed by their personal and educational backgrounds (Bryan, 2008; 2012, Devine, Fahie and McGillicuddy, 2013; Kitching 2013b). Indicative of whiteness and of the "religioned institutionalisation of racism in the Irish primary school context" (Kitching 2013, 15), the teachers' experiences of the hegemonic framing of the Irish school system as predominantly religious has influenced both their engagement with and their (dis)comfort levels when teaching about religions, beliefs and worldviews. Participants' lack of deeper engagement with the named content of the Belief Systems strand may also be attributed to a lack of inclusion of content in ITE programmes (only four participants received [limited] education in this area) and to a lack of in-service or continuous professional development (CPD) from Educate Together (no participants referred to Educate Together provided courses). A lack of pre- and in-service support means that teachers have neither the required knowledge nor the pedagogical skills to teach the Belief Systems strand in an informed way.

Religious identities, secular worldviews, and non-religious identities at class and school levels can come to the fore through the Belief Systems strand of *Learn Together*. Religions, belief systems and worldviews are complex social realities and cannot be neatly boxed into categories (Jackson 2019). Those categories have fuzzy edges, permeable boundaries, and, due to the complexity and diversity of cultural expression in different contexts, the nature of traditions, feasts and festivals can be contested. When teaching and talking about religions, beliefs and worldviews, it is necessary to acknowledge the relationship between culture and religion while affirming children's religious and belief identities. This involves emphasising real-life experiences, and challenging the idea of religions, beliefs and worldviews as homogeneous systems (Jackson 2014, 2019; Poppo 2007). Children are not spokespeople for their (or their family's) religion or belief and cannot be grouped into 'categories' that might not reflect their lived experiences (Åhs, Poulter and Kallioniemi 2016; Isik-Ercan 2015; Jackson 2014; Moulin 2011). Despite the presence of a long-established multi-faceted Belief Systems strand, some teachers mainly focus on religious feasts and festivals of the largest 'world religions'. Participants' lack of content knowledge and teaching skills in this area

brings a focus on the "*easier to teach*" aspects and restricts teaching the broader remit of the strand. Thus, this liberal approach places an over-emphasis on religious feasts and festivals, risks essentialising and objectifying belief systems, and diminishes the more critical anti-racist potential of this kind of teaching.

An acontextual and ahistorical approach to racisms

The Learn Together Equality and Justice strand's objectives have the potential to align with a more critical interrogation of racisms. For example, children should be enabled to "explore the concept of discrimination and prejudice; to explore the concept of discrimination in relation to a specific area, e.g. race; to critically reflect on stories/poems about people who have encountered discrimination and confronted it positively; to learn about people who have made a difference through campaigning and protest, and to develop an anti-racist charter" (Educate Together 2011, 30-32).

Sixteen participants regularly teach about racisms, yet their teaching often aligns minimally with curricular or strand objectives that might bring about transformative understandings and actions. Although the objectives do not make specific reference to historical events or figures, many participants have interpreted the objectives to mean events and "people who made a difference" from the past and have chosen historical activists and agents of change (see Table 5.0) as a focus for formal lessons about racisms and anti-racism (Educate Together 2011, 30). There is knowledge and insight to be gained from learning about historical figures and social change. Nonetheless, the data highlight a heavy emphasis on Black historical figures as foci for specific lessons. Teaching about racisms in this historical way is indicative of liberal multicultural education. This approach can suggest that it is only Black people who are victims of racisms and positions the struggle of racial equality as a matter that has been overcome through the efforts of heroic Black figures (Banks and McGee-Banks, 2004; Doharty, 2019; Lee, Menkart and Okazawa-Rey, 2011). Such lessons have the potential to position Black people as one-dimensional characters, as victims of racisms who need to fight for equality, and it can remove the narratives of the lives of the activists and the barriers that they faced along the way. Additionally, historical lessons such as this have the potential to reinforce the Black-white binary in a way that reduces racisms to skin colour positioned in relation to whiteness (Ladson-Billings 2005). Alongside learning about historical activists who came from and subsequently led marginalised and oppressed communities, it is equally important for children from minoritised communities to see themselves taught about in ways

other than as victims of racisms or alternatively, as is the case with the teaching of most of the sample, as people who have encountered racism in the past 'and confronted it positively' (LT, 30).

Despite the potential downfalls of focusing primarily on the past, the consistent inclusion of this content can deepen understandings of anti-racism. Michael's prompt (below) to the children in his class about power and racism exemplifies critical reflection and discussion.

Remember we said that racism is like power, and using power in the wrong way. That's why it's important that when you hear something, that you ask yourself, is that true? Just to be aware, and to think carefully before you say it yourself.

Through formal and informal lessons, a small number of teachers in this study are developing the racial literacy[7] needed to understand and teach about the endemic nature of racisms. However, overall findings indicate that participants apply a liberal and celebratory lens to the curriculum when they operationalise it to focus on historical figures or events. This approach can suggest that racism is a thing of the past and as something over there experienced by somebody else. A critical interrogation of the prejudices, discriminations and injustices experienced by people as a result of contemporary racisms has been side-lined for more accessible and 'teachable' topics like historical agents of change and media bias (see Table 5.0). Whiteness is embedded in teachers' racialised identities and impacts how they experience the world (Devine 2011; Keane and Heinz, 2016; Picower 2009). This liberal multicultural education approach to anti-racism education can limit discussion on the role white people play as either instigators or interrupters of racial inequalities and oppression, both historically and presently. As such, teaching and talking about race and racisms in ways that are historical, race-neutral, race-evasive, tokenistic and that over-rely on victim-hood can disregard related social, historical, and political impacts (Banks and McGee-Banks, 2004; Aronson, Meyers, and Winn 2020; Byran 2012, Doharty 2018; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Lee, Menkart and Okazawa-Rey, 2002; Sensoy and D'Angelo, 2017; Sleeter, 2017).

Table 5.0 Focus of Specific Anti-Racism Lessons

	Lesson Focus	Multi-ethnic contexts	

[7] In the context of schools, racial literacy refers to the ability of teachers to understand the ways in which race and racisms operate in society and it places an emphasis on the development of confidence, skills and language to discuss race and racisms in teaching practices (Grayson, 2017; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020).

			Majority-ethnic contexts
Historical	Black History Month	-	2
	Civil Rights	4	1
	Human Rights	6	1
	Rosa Parks	3	3
	Martin Luther King	6	2
	Nelson Mandela	2	2
	Ruby Bridges	1	-
	Mohammad Ali	1	-
	Jamaica/UK	-	1
Contemporary	Challenging assumptions/ stereotypes	1	1
	Children's attitudes/behaviours	1 -	1 1
	Challenging dominant ideologies	-	2
	Racisms in Irish society	-	2
SPHE	Anti-bullying (racism)	4	4
Equality & Justice	What is racism?	-	1
	Hidden Bias	-	1
	Equal Status Act/Nine grounds of discrimination	1	1
	Human Rights Activists	2	-
Programme/Resource	Show Racism the Red Card	3	4
	Yellow Flag Programme	1	-
Informal/Reactive	Banter/Teasing	1	2
	News item about racism	-	2
	Terrorism	2	1
	Refugee crisis	1	1
Preventative	Naming and affirming children's identities	3	1
	SPHE - Myself/Myself and others	3	1

In addition, this celebratory or liberal multicultural education approach, common amongst participants' perspectives and practices, can also be attributed to, in part, the teachers' own majoritised identities. As mentioned, the majority (n = 15) attended primary and secondary schools in Ireland. The participants' own educational backgrounds were informed and shaped by the racial and denominational nature of the Irish educational system which in the main, comprises teachers who are white, heterosexual, settled and Catholic, and who have way of positioning themselves in a place of power that reflects how whiteness operates in Irish

society (Bryan 2010; Devine 2011; Keane and Heinz 2016). The teachers' racialised and ethnic identities and experiences of whiteness and white privilege have resulted in a disconnect from the lived realities of those from minoritised communities. Only three participants relayed stories of people they knew from their personal lives who experienced racisms. Thus, the majority of participants had no personal understanding of the experiences of racisms that they could relate to when planning or teaching lessons. This, combined with little to no content relating to anti- racism education during ITE, and a lack of CPD has resulted in mostly liberal multicultural education approaches (such as heroes and holidays) and limited racial literacy. A lack of pre-service and in-service critical anti- racism education can mean that any gaps in knowledge or understanding that may have been brought about by teachers' racialised experiences and white privilege have the potential to remain unnoticed and undisrupted. As with research with white participants in other educational contexts, this study's participants' conceptualisations and teaching of racisms as historical suggests that the negative experiences of those with identities racialised as other than white are abstract and distant from the participant's realities (Bryan, 2012; Buchanan, 2015; Todd and Abrams, 2011). It further suggests to children that we are living in a post-racial society. This finding can be interpreted as emblematic of white supremacy in that some participants' practices are an example of the white gaze; in other words, their conceptualisations of racisms are filtered and interpreted through the lens of whiteness.

In contrast, those participants (n = 10) whose teaching extended beyond superficial recognition and representation, and historical racisms had completed ITE programmes in the UK, had lived abroad or had personal connections with people from a religious background different to their own. These participants talked about personal experiences with difference, programme content related to anti-racism education and interactions with fellow students from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, those participants brought both racial and religious literacy and a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of religious and racial lived experiences to their teaching.

Table 6.0 Influences on participants' anti-racism education praxis

Participant	Life experiences	ITE/Further study	Classroom/School experience
Abigail		✓	✓
Aoife	✓		✓

Cormac	✓		
Aisling	✓		
Maeve	✓	✓	✓
Patricia	✓	✓	✓
Nuala	✓		
Michael	✓	✓	
Deborah		✓	✓
Cathy	✓	✓	✓

Conclusion

This study offers a critical perspective on teachers' conceptualizations and practices of anti-racism education within Educate Together primary schools in Ireland. Many positive practices were observed in affirming children's racial and ethnic identities and engaging in explicit anti-racism lessons, thereby disrupting the normalization of whiteness and developing children's understandings of racism and anti-racism. However, the findings paint a mixed picture overall.

A notable finding is the tendency for many participants to foreground religious identities and celebrations, with minimal recognition of non-religious identities. This foregrounding raises questions about the practical interpretation of Educate Together's 'equality-based' principle for children, parents, and school practices, in particular in relation to how diverse religious and non-religious identities are identified and affirmed within the school community. To add to the growing body of research (Faas et al, 2018; Faas, Foster, and Smith, 2020; Kitching 2020; Malone et al, 2021), research specifically exploring the Belief Systems strand, the religious, belief and worldview identities of children, parents/caregivers and teachers, and their experiences of the Educate Together ethos and ethical curriculum is required. To enhance authentic recognition and representation, further research is warranted to examine children's and parents' experiences of how their identities are and can be meaningfully affirmed and reflected in school contexts and curricula. This is particularly relevant considering the Educate Together principle which asserts that schools are democratically run with active parental participation.

Consequently, ITE programmes, in-service and CPD courses, and indeed, any curricula that address areas such as the right to freedom of conscience and belief, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB), and respecting religious pluralism in classroom contexts need

to reflect and foreground people's lived experiences and their associated values and meanings. In particular, alongside the inclusion of appropriate pedagogical approaches, equal value needs to be placed on the inclusion of atheism, humanism and agnosticism in programme curricula.

While the racial and ethnic identities of children attending primary schools in Ireland are becoming increasingly diverse, a stagnancy prevails in the racialised identities of teaching staff in schools (Keane and Heinz 2015; 2016). Although the findings of this qualitative study are not generalizable, they, alongside the framework, provide important insights into anti-racism education that are relevant across contexts. Thus, the study adds to the broader field of research relating to anti-racism education and highlights that a more critical approach to anti-racism education is required. Aspects to be addressed through ITE and CPD include theoretical and pedagogical approaches, as well as a structured process of teacher self-reflexivity that incorporates an engagement with the affective dimensions and competencies of anti-racism education work. Considering the overwhelming majority of teacher educators, teachers and student teachers who are racialised as white, the critical educator journey necessitates an engagement with teacher positionality as a key tenet of anti-racism education praxis. This necessitates a review of the 'official knowledge' in ITE core modules to identify whose voices are valued and whose voices are absent. A similar review is necessary as new national curricula are implemented, in particular the religions, beliefs and worldview related learning outcomes in the new Social and Environmental Education curriculum (NCCA 2025).

The Educate Together model has the potential to positively influence teachers' conceptualisations and practices in relation to racial and ethnic diversity, and in turn, anti-racism education. It provides a structural and curricular response to diversity which facilitates an explicit engagement with racial and ethnic identities. While some teacher practices align with 'softer' liberal multicultural approaches, this study is the first to ascertain that the Educate Together ethos and the *Learn Together* curriculum can be operationalised in ways that are in keeping with a more critical form of anti-racism education, as demonstrated by a small number of teachers.

This research adds to understandings about the ways in which whiteness operates in and through educational contexts in Ireland, and it advocates for critical anti-racism education at all levels, from early years through to higher and further education. Therein lies an enhanced

potential to disrupt dominant narratives and ideologies, redress inequitable power structures and to change the rules of the game.

END

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