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Starting a conversation about racism with teenagers: using the social work research Dialogue Approach

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Increased migration over the last two decades has resulted in greater diversity within Irish society. There is much debate around multiculturalism, diversity and integration, and how this is best achieved. As microcosms of society, schools have also experienced substantial growth in diversity. Over 90 per cent of second-level schools in Ireland record migrant students on their roll, with between 2 and 9 per cent of the school populations being migrant students. Moreover, research indicates that not only do teachers often struggle with increased diversity in the classroom but racism and inclusion are also not adequately addressed through the curriculum. Although Ireland sometimes prides itself on being a friendly and welcoming nation, racism is noted as a persistent issue. This article explores the topic of racism with teenagers in an Irish school, using the social work Dialogue Approach. This co-created study examines how students and teachers conceptualise racism and its impact. It is argued that exploring attitudes and encouraging dialogue among young people about the impact of racism and exclusion is fundamental to social work values.

Key words social work Dialogue Approach • racism • co-created research •
social work education and students

Introduction

The death of George Floyd in the US in the summer of 2020 triggered outrage at the manner of his death, highlighting forms of persistent and pervasive racism, and prompting growth in the Black Lives Matter movement, not just in the US but globally. The outrage led to many asking what they could do differently to stop racism within their societies. These same questions were asked in Ireland. This article reports on a study carried out in a second-level school in Dublin, Ireland. In the wake of the global response to George Floyd's death, the school engaged two academics to undertake work to explore the topic of racism within the school community, using a Dialogue Approach to research.

The Dialogue Approach to research (Flanagan and Wilson, 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2021; 2022; Flanagan et al, 2021) draws on the strengths of participatory research, experiential learning and dialoguing with others in teaching research methods. The approach was originally devised by the authors to provide experiential and publication opportunities for social work students within the confines of a semester-long module, and was adapted here for application outside a university setting. The Dialogue Approach employs four components: a meaningful topic; collaborative experiential learning; dialogue with key stakeholders; and disseminated output.

Literature review

Large-scale migration into Ireland is a relatively new phenomenon, with migrants in the Irish population increasing from 3 per cent in 2003 to over 12 per cent in 2019

(Byrne et al, 2010; Central Statistics Office, 2019). Moreover, preliminary findings from the 2022 National Census indicate a further increase in net migration (Central Statistics Office, 2022). More than 200 different nationalities now reside in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2016).

Racism has many different meanings and takes many different forms, so identifying one overarching definition of racism is troublesome. Due to the contested nature of the definition of racism, and to assist the secondary school students involved in the project, Moore's (2002: 30) discussion of the different meanings of racism was helpful. Moore's work identifies narrow, wider, cultural and institutional definitions of racism. The narrow definition focuses on distinct biological races and the racist perception that some races are superior to others. The second, wider definition posits that groups are permanently different due to their different biological characteristics and that interaction between such different groups is harmful. Cultural racism espouses a defined national culture with other minority ethnic groups marginalised. Institutional racism refers to practices or policies in organisations that discriminate against minority ethnic groups.

While Ireland is typically characterised as a welcoming nation in popular media, research shows that there is frequent discrimination across a range of social institutions and that minority ethnic groups are often subjected to racism. Although race and ethnic discrimination are included in the 2000–15 Equal Status Acts and (1998–2015) Employment Equality Acts, Russell et al (2010) explain how Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) individuals and communities are more likely to report discrimination in relation to housing, shops, pubs and restaurants, financial institutions, transport, and education.

Children and young people are not exempt from racism and discrimination. A study by Jarman (2003) in Northern Ireland reviewed the relationship between racial harassment 'of' and 'by' children and young people, using evidence from police records. He found that 21 per cent of all recorded incidents involved children, some as young as two years old. Boys were more likely to be victimised, with almost 66 per cent of recorded incidents of such racial abuse. The incidents were experienced by children from many ethnic backgrounds but were highest among Indian and Black children, at 28 per cent and 18 per cent of all cases, respectively. All recorded incidents involved verbal abuse, but 40 per cent also involved physical violence. Notably, this was higher than the rate of physical violence recorded for adult victims. Children were also more likely than adults to be abused by groups. The most common settings for racial abuse were on the street and in public venues, such as shops, fast-food outlets and other leisure venues.

Racism in Irish schools

Although some research on racism towards BME children and young people in Irish schools has been carried out, this remains a largely underdeveloped area of research, with Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2021: 2) concluding that 'we still know relatively little about the experiences of these students in Irish schools'. Over 90 per cent of second-level schools record migrant students on their rolls, varying between 2 and 9 per cent. A total of 58 per cent of schools have Asian students and 55 per cent have African students on their rolls, though these are highly diverse groups, consisting of many different nationalities, languages and religions. Changing policy on Traveller education

has also led to increasing numbers of Traveller students in mainstream second-level schools (Gannon, 2004).[2]

Although migrants are broadly dispersed around Ireland (Byrne et al, 2010), migrant students tend to be over-represented in large schools, urban schools and those in disadvantaged areas. Schools that have traditionally been characterised as 'Catholic, Gaelic and white' now have notably more diverse student populations, and research reports that they are now struggling to promote cultural diversity (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson, 2013). Where there are moves to promote diversity, these are often viewed as tokenistic and further ostracising of BME children. Many schools do not have an anti-racism policy, do not adapt uniform policies to accommodate different cultures, have ethnocentric curriculums and have poor knowledge about the educational attainment of students from different cultural backgrounds (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson, 2013). Similarly, research by Devine (2005) found that teachers can struggle with the provision of education to immigrant children, including difficulties with providing language support and accommodating cultural and religious differences and requirements. For teachers, these challenges varied according to the background of the children, with Eastern European and Asian children often viewed as prompting fewer challenges, while African and Romanian children presented more challenges.

Gannon (2004) sought to find the mechanisms through which educators understood and responded to cultural diversity in schools. While the teachers suggested such values as respect, tolerance, human rights and equality, this varied in practice. Gannon discovered that the majority used limited resources and often understood: BME students to be problematic and/or requiring more attention; equality as meaning the same treatment for all students; racism as isolated incidents; culture as a product, rather than a dynamic process; and Irish culture as the norm, with interculturalism as something that only affects BME students. This created a dynamic where BME students were viewed to be separate to Irish students, and the steps that were taken to help BME students were carried out with the aim of reducing disruption to the school. Teachers were found to have a poor awareness of the methods they were using, of institutional racism and of how schools contribute to it, as well as a shallow understanding of culture. They were concerned about the loss of Irish culture and often focused on assimilation and helping BME students to conform. Cultural diversity is now the norm and must be integrated into school policies, practices and curriculums. To do this, individual teachers need to improve their understanding of culture and ethnicity, reflect on their own perceptions and attitudes, and clarify their values. However, teachers also require support, such as additional training, to do this and to integrate it into classroom practices.

Theory and concepts

There are number of theoretical perspectives and concepts that can help explain these thoughts, behaviours and educational policies.

Critical race theory

To understand these issues of racism and discrimination, a knowledge of critical race theory (CRT) is often used to explore the relationship between race, racism and power. CRT holds that racism is embedded in the laws, policies and procedures

of institutions and society leading to differential outcomes by race. CRT therefore holds that racism is a common, everyday experience, though one that is often not acknowledged institutionally and societally (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). While neoliberal policies tend to champion the notion of a post-racial society, where racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist, Bhopal (2018) argues that this merely hides the inequalities that still exist. CRT is underpinned by an understanding of race as socially constructed. This means that race is not a fixed, biological entity but rather constructed through racial categories that society creates and shapes, which can vary across time and space (Omi and Winant, 2015; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

There are several core assumptions of CRT (Russell et al, 2010). The first is that race matters and is a central structure in society. Second, CRT assumes that contemporary racial inequalities have historical roots, for example, discourses around race and education as an institution that reproduces inequalities can be traced to colonial and post-colonial narratives. Finally, the voices of the oppressed are vital in breaking down dominant narratives around race. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe this idea as the 'unique voice of colour argument', which proposes that due to the history of oppression, minority group members have information and perspectives that white people are unlikely to know. Within the field of education, a central focus of CRT is the 'myth of meritocracy'. Meritocracy is the idea that universal education creates a level playing field and equal opportunities, and that those who fail do so because of a lack of hard work or other individual issues. CRT implies that by placing responsibilities on individuals, the actions of schools are less interested in challenging structural forms of inequality. In the context of the needs of BME students, this serves to make white self-interest invisible, while also supporting the idea that racism is no longer an issue (Zamudio et al, 2011).

Racialisation, essentialism and intersectionality

In schools, racialisation can be seen in the way students can be assigned to cultural categories based on the assumption that there are homogenised ethnic groups. This, in effect, denies their individuality (Vaught and Castagno, 2008). Omi and Winant (2015) assert that a person's own racial identity can differ from how others perceive them, and they may try to resist racialisation by performing race in a different way than is expected.

The concept of intersectionality is important in these contexts. While essentialism focuses on the distinct origins of racial groups and ignores the overlaps or differences between people in the same and different racial groups, perspectives on intersectionality help reveal how multiple forms of disadvantage combine to create differing levels of marginalisation for racial minority groups (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). In addition, viewing oppression and discrimination through the single lens of race does not consider individual differences and how multiple forms of 'otherness' impact the dynamics of oppression. Intersectionality should be understood to be dynamic – it changes through time and space – allowing for a more nuanced view of how oppression affects people in different ways (Bhopal and Preston, 2012). Intersectionality therefore helps to avoid creating a homogeneous group based on race and instead recognises that different people within the same racial group have different experiences based on their class, gender, age, sexuality, disability or other difference (Bhopal, 2018).

Methodology

It has been argued that the greatest learning takes place through experience, and this philosophy is central to social work education (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013; Sharland and Teater, 2016; Joubert et al, 2017). The Dialogue Approach (Flanagan and Wilson, 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2021; 2022; Flanagan et al, 2021) utilises the strengths of participatory research and experiential learning, combined with learning from the expertise of practitioners. The authors have applied this approach to teaching research across a range of institutions and student groups, though this was the first time it was used with second-level education students. The Dialogue Approach employs four components: (1) a topic of research that is meaningful to the student researchers; (2) collaborative experiential learning; (3) engagement in dialogue with practitioners, respondents and key stakeholders; and (4) output that is ultimately published (see Figure 1).

Study context

The site of the study was a co-educational second-level school with a student population of 978, catering for students aged from 11 to 19 years of age. The school has both boarding and day students, and approximately 7 per cent are international students or of minority ethnic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, the school engaged two academics to work with students to explore the understanding and beliefs about racism of students, staff and parents. A total of 20 self-selected students, aged 15–16 years, took part in seven workshops. The workshops were facilitated by two programme developers, an academic and a teacher-facilitator.

Research approach

The Dialogue Approach uses experiential learning and participative-research approaches, where the students are cast as both research learners and research partners with the academic team members. The experiential learner approach has long been recognised by research educators as encouraging students to learn by experience and develop a level of competency in concrete tasks, with the academic team providing support and facilitation (Rubin et al, 2010; MacIntyre and Paul, 2013; Joubert et al, 2017). The participative nature of the Dialogue Approach ensures that collaborative knowledge production is central and highlights the importance of all co-researchers in the production of outputs (Flanagan, 2020). The Dialogue Approach is committed to research being done 'with' or 'by' the students through active involvement in the research process, rather than 'to', 'about' or 'for' them as research subjects (Involve, 2012). As such, the research is pitched as a dialogue between the student researchers and members of the school community, and, crucially, the research outputs are seen not as an endpoint but as the start of a dialogue. Finally, in order to achieve the engagement of student-researchers, a meaningful topic must form the basis of the research project.

The overarching aim of the project was to gain an understanding of how the school community (students, staff and parents/guardians) view and experience racism in general, and specifically within the school, using an e-survey designed by the research team. Findings from the data would then inform planning development and further dialogue within the school for the coming academic year and future years.

A total of seven workshops were held with the students, academic team members and the teacher–facilitator. The purpose of the first workshop was to introduce the project and the rationale behind it, and to gain an understanding of the students' conceptualisation of racism, diversity and inclusion. The workshop was led by the academic team members, with students initially sitting in a large circle. Ice-breaking exercises were used to help the team to get to know each other. Each of the academic team gave a brief overview of their discipline (social work or social policy) and discussed what they felt they brought to the project. The concept of 'taking a voice' was one of the key themes of the workshops, asking students to think about situations where they can 'take a voice' and give their opinion, and other situations where they are prevented from 'taking a voice' and what is preventing them from doing so. Students engaged enthusiastically in a hypothetical 'school government' exercise, with each student assigned a ministerial portfolio and invited to come up with a 30-second pitch that they would make to the school principal about something they wanted to change or implement within the school under their assigned brief. While there were many fun suggestions, issues were clearly of significance to the students and generated a lot of discussion. Between the first and second workshops, the students were asked to watch a television documentary about a school in the UK that was trying to address racism: 'The school that tried to end racism'. Students were then asked to post comments on the documentary on an online Padlet wall. Arrangements were made to moderate the Padlet wall before release to the students, but this was ultimately not necessary.

The second workshop further explored concepts of racism, equality and privilege. In three sub-teams, students drew on the Padlet comments and participated in small group discussions about the documentary, with such guiding questions as 'What worked well?', 'What didn't work well', 'What was familiar to you?', 'What surprised you?', 'What did you disagree with?' and 'Would this work in your school?' These discussions helped the groups to identify issues that they considered important for inclusion in the survey instrument. Each group identified and agreed three key comments to share with the wider forum. The academic team lead a discussion that built a bridge from the 'issues' identified in students' comments to viable research themes for the project. The resulting themes were attitudes to racism, experiences of racism and responses to racism, respectively. Students returned to the three groups, with each group assigned one of the themes, and collated a range of sub-themes that they wanted included in the e-survey. Students were prompted to identify as many sub-themes as possible initially, with group agreement on 'gold star', 'silver star' and 'bronze star' sub-themes for a 'league table of themes' to be discussed with the wider forum. Between the second and third workshops, the students were asked to read a literature review on racism that had been researched by a social work research assistant and subsequently adapted for accessibility by an older teenager from outside the school.

The third workshop focused on the development of questions for the e-survey. Starting with a discussion about the literature review, the group reviewed the 'league table of themes', splitting and splicing the themes to provide a framework for survey questions. Shifting focus to good practice in survey development, students were invited to complete a survey, which, unbeknown to the students, incorporated many survey design errors and bad practice. On completion, students were invited to critique the survey and devise a set of guidelines for good survey design. This exercise segued into a brief introduction to research ethics as relevant to the e-survey. Given the specificity

of ethics applications, the academic team completed and submitted applications to both participating universities.

Although it was originally intended that the students would design the survey questions, as was done in university-level dialogue projects (Flanagan and Wilson, 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2021; 2022; Flanagan et al, 2021), abstracting questions from the literature appeared to be too big a leap for second-level students. Therefore, in order to provide a foundation for the development of the instrument, while still allowing the students to determine content, questions from a collection of survey instruments addressing similar topics were printed on cards, grouped into the three themes and distributed in a jumble to the subgroups. Students discussed which questions they wanted to include in their subgroups, adapting them as appropriate. The chosen questions from each subgroup were then posted on large sheets and the whole group reviewed them and voted on which ones should be included in the instrument. From this, the academic team formulated a first draft of the survey.

The fourth workshop was led by the teacher-facilitator, without the academics. This allowed the students the opportunity to review progress internally and, working on large flip-chart sheets, offer suggestions for changes to the draft survey. These were integrated into a subsequent draft.

In the fifth workshop, students administered the revised survey to each other in 'pilot interviews' to identify any residual issues, with the student-researchers identifying problems with the wording of questions, the language used and the sequence of questions, and excluding some questions that no longer seemed relevant. At this point, the students appeared to take ownership of the project. Up until this point, the academic team and the teacher had initiated discussions and provided materials for the students to work on, but in the fifth workshop, the students took the initiative and led the session. The workshop concluded with discussion about how the survey could be promoted to potential participants in the school community.

Following the fifth workshop, there was an extended break in the workshop series, where the academic team took the draft e-survey away and edited it to accommodate the suggestions made by the students. The survey was then distributed to the school community by the school administration. The student-researchers undertook the task of promoting the e-survey to the school community, which they did by speaking at the school assembly and speaking to individual classes.

The sixth workshop, carried out approximately two months later, involved the whole team looking at the data that emerged from the e-survey. In advance of the sixth workshop, the academic team prepared univariate frequency tables or graphs of all results, and assembled the data into 'data packs' for two-person paired-analysis work. Students were given an input on how to interpret the tables and, working in pairs, were supported to interpret the findings in their data pack. All tables/charts were then presented in a PowerPoint presentation on screen, and individual students spoke to each one, allowing the wider forum to become familiar with the full data set. Finally, the students identified what they felt were the most important points to share with the school principal and disseminate to the entire school. The commentary offered by students in this workshop was incorporated into the PowerPoint presentation as the basis of the presentation to the 2022 European Social Work Research Conference. The seventh, and final, workshop, led by the teacher facilitator, without the academics, involved the development and rehearsal of the 15-minute, 11-voice presentation for the 2022 European Social Work Research Conference in Amsterdam.

Figure 1: Diagram of the Dialogue Approach
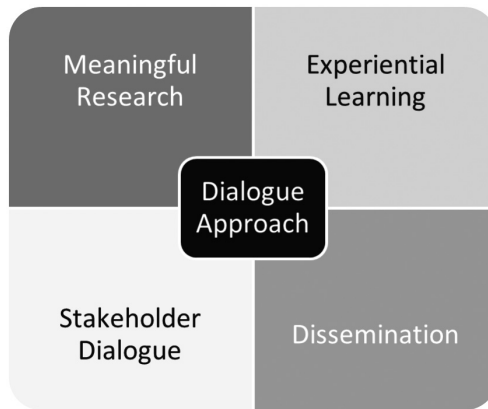
Sample

Due to the students' promotion work, in addition to encouragement and facilitation from the school, there was a sizeable response (*n* = 772). The high level of response to the survey was indicative of an interest in the topic across the school community, a key tenet of the Dialogue Approach. Most responses were from students (*n* = 649; 84 per cent), representing two thirds of the school's student population (*n* = 648; 66 per cent). Dedicated class time was allocated to allow students to answer the survey should they wish to do so. The response rate from staff (*n* = 26; 33 per cent) was lower than hoped, but the timing of the e-survey in the run-up to the end of term and during a COVID-19 surge was not helpful. It is more difficult to estimate the parental response rate, as the school did not divulge the number of parents who consent to have their contact details on the mailing list. However, the response rate is estimated to be between 5 per cent and 10 per cent (*n* = 95) of parents.

Our respondents reflected the general Irish population in terms of ethnicity (see Figure 2). Census data indicate that 92 per cent of the Irish population identify as White and 8 per cent as other. Within the school setting, this overarching profile was similar, with 90 per cent of respondents indicating that they were white. A total of 6 per cent identified as Asian – notably higher than among the Irish population – with 1 per cent each identifying as Hispanic/Latino, African/Black, mixed or other

Ethical considerations

Many ethical issues were pertinent to this project. The two biggest issues were the fact that the students, both respondents and researchers, were predominantly under the age of 18 and therefore potentially vulnerable, and the second issue was the topic of racism, which is an emotive one. The academic team have a strong background in third-level teaching and are accustomed to teaching sensitive and emotive topics. The teacher-facilitator had an in-depth knowledge of the students and, importantly, had an excellent relationship with them. She was central to the planning and execution of the workshops, in addition to guiding and coordinating the administration of the e-survey. Ethical approval was received from both academics' institutional research ethics committees.

Figure 2: Pie diagram of the racial profile of the sample
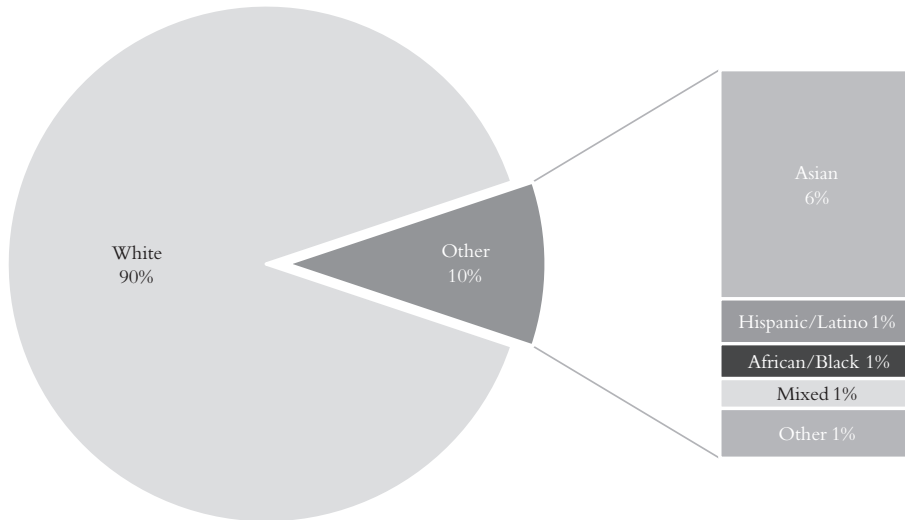
A link to the e-survey was emailed, by the school, to all staff and parents/guardians in December 2021. For reasons of confidentiality, the academic researchers did not have access to this mailing list. To participate in the e-survey, both parental/guardian consent and student assent was required. Students could only access the assent form if their parents signed the consent form and gave them access to the survey link.

Members of the school teaching staff, such as the school chaplain, made themselves available for support should one of the students, researchers or respondents become distressed by the subject matter being addressed. Links to local and school support services for anyone affected by the issues covered in the e-survey were included on the project information leaflet distributed with the link to the e-survey. The e-survey was also designed so that participants could skip sections if they wished to do so.

Data collection and analysis

As outlined earlier, a link to the e-survey was emailed to all staff, parents and guardians. The single e-survey was common to all groups. There was a two-week window within which to respond to the survey and share the link with students, should they assent. As outlined earlier, the response was significant ($n = 772$) and student-researchers were provided with data packs of univariate frequency tables/graphs relevant to their theme – attitudes to racism, experiences of racism and responses to racism – and were assisted by the academic team to analyse the data and draw out the key findings. Findings were then presented to, and discussed by, the wider forum. The students, in collaboration with the teacher-facilitator, prepared and delivered a presentation for the 2022 European Social Work Research Conference. This presentation, along with the students' preliminary data analysis, formed the basis of this research article.

Study limitations

Given the time frame within which the study was undertaken, it was not possible to integrate a greater qualitative element that would facilitate more in-depth exploration of the issue. Representation of BME students among the student-researchers was also lower than might have been hoped. While Ledwith (2017) notes that BME students are over-represented in larger disadvantaged urban schools, this study was undertaken in a non-disadvantaged school and may not therefore capture the experiences of students in disadvantaged schools.

Findings

As mentioned earlier, the student-researchers formed three thematic subgroups, and the findings relating to the school setting are presented in this framework.

Attitudes to racism

The e-survey sought to elicit responses from the school community in relation to perceptions of racism in Ireland and beyond, as well as specifically exploring perceptions of racism within the school setting. Overall, there was a positive response from the school community, who considered the school and Irish society to be welcoming and inclusive. Racism was believed to be a bigger issue in other countries than in Ireland, and the school was seen to be more welcoming and inclusive than Irish society, with 59 per cent stating that Ireland is welcoming and inclusive, whereas 86 per cent thought the school was welcoming and inclusive. However, there was variation when this was broken down by ethnicity, with 87 per cent of white respondents being positive about the inclusive and welcoming nature of the school, as opposed to 74 per cent of minority ethnic respondents.

Experiences of racism

The students identified in the workshops that it would be important to examine people's individual experiences of racism, both within the school and outside the school setting. Students also recognised that it was important to explore whether people had experience of racist abuse directed against them and/or witnessed the racist abuse of others.

A total of 60 per cent ($n = 460$) indicated that they had never witnessed racism in the school, with 40 per cent ($n = 304$) saying that they had. When this was broken down by ethnicity, a noticeable difference emerged, with 38 per cent ($n = 253$) of white and 64 per cent ($n = 49$) of minority ethnic respondents saying that they had witnessed racism. The types of racism reported included physical attack, exclusion by other students, being told 'you don't belong', derogatory comments, microaggressions and racist jokes. Overwhelmingly, the biggest issue reported in the survey was racist jokes, which, the student-researchers noted, requires a culture change among students themselves. Of particular concern were the 81 people (11 per cent) who said that they had experienced racism directed at them in school.

Respondents reported that they would feel comfortable talking about racism to friends and parents (79 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively), while other students

in the school were cited by 58 per cent and teachers were cited by 45 per cent. Again, of most concern were those who had experienced racism directed at them in school, 39 (48 per cent) of this group said that they had never spoken to anyone about it.

When summarising the findings about experiences of racism, the students noted that although the school is welcoming and inclusive, their peers, particularly their minority ethnic peers, are experiencing racism. Added to this, many more people (40 per cent) are witnessing racism; therefore, it is more present in the school community than it might appear at first glance.

Responses to racism

The final part of the e-survey asked respondents to consider what might be done to stop racism within the school and ensure that is a wholly inclusive and welcoming environment for all. The 289 narrative responses to this question fell into two categories: first, 'What can the school do?'; and, secondly, 'What can students do?'

What can the school do?

Suggestions regarding school actions to address racism clustered into three broad themes:

- Issues of communication: respondents were strong in their wish for racism to be addressed explicitly in class, in assembly and in posters around the school. There was a strong desire for the school to have an anti-racism policy that is publicly displayed and available to all members of the school community. There was also an acknowledgement that students need to be given guidance on what to do if they witness racism.
- Teacher training: many respondents felt that there is a lack of knowledge in general, though also among teachers, as to what constitutes microaggression. Therefore, training for teachers on how to address racism within their classroom and in the school in general was suggested.
- Sanctions: there was a strong call from respondents for sanctions to be applied to perpetrators of racism. A consensus emerged that the school needs to be seen to not tolerate racism. Aligned to this was the suggestion that there should be a forum or system where people who experience racism can report it and be supported.

What can students do?

When asked what students can do, the themes were very similar to the those identified as school actions:

- Communication emerged as the strongest theme, with the suggestion that there should be more explicit focus on racism, using structures, for example, the current project, where racism can be discussed and strategies to manage it formulated. This aligned with suggestions that there needs to be more education for students on racism, particularly subtle forms of racism.
- As many as 75 respondents called for students to 'stop being racist', indicating that students need to be accountable for their actions. One of the respondents noted that the school needs to have "a telling climate", whereby students and

staff are encouraged to call out racism when they witness it. They suggest not only that the climate should encourage individuals to call out racism but also that individuals who call out racism should be supported in doing so and not regarded as 'snitches' or 'tell tales'.

- It was proposed that the students facilitate an anti-racist week. Since the school has several different weeks, such as anti-bullying week, pride week and health awareness week, it was felt that this could easily be accommodated by the school.

Other suggestions included such ideas as ensuring that correct names, particularly those from minority ethnic cultures, are used and pronounced properly, rather than using an Irish/English version of the name. Use of language is key, indicating that more education is required to ensure that everyone knows what language is appropriate and inappropriate. It was also indicated that the School's Board of Management and the School's Board of Governors should ensure that there is representation of minority ethnic groups on them.

Discussion

The social work Dialogue Approach (Flanagan and Wilson, 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2021) has proven to be an effective method for engaging students in topics. In this particular project, it was interesting that although the school instigated the involvement of the academic researchers, it was the students who ran the project. The topic of racism and inclusion was one that they considered important and was therefore meaningful to them. Knowing that the results they reported on encapsulated the voices of themselves and their peers brought the enormity of what they were reporting to the fore. Racism was no longer an abstract concept, perpetrated by and on other members of society; rather, it was something experienced by the people who sat beside them in class and something seen by many others in the same room. There was, however, a perception among some of the students that racism only existed in the context of black people. An interesting discussion about racism occurring in other situations, such as against the Traveller community, brought to the fore how other minority ethnic students, such as members of the Asian community, also experienced racism. It was interesting to tease out this issue with the student-researchers and realise that although they easily identified individual instances of racism, they did not equate these with the existence of systemic racism.

Students identified steps that they felt needed to be taken to address issues of racism within the school. The steps, such as ensuring clearer communication within the school community about what is meant by racism, as well as the importance of recognising and addressing microaggressions when they occur, have also been identified in other studies (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2021; Adebayo and Heinz, 2022). Students' identification of the importance of teachers having more training on how to address racism in the classroom echoed other research indicating that teachers and school leaders need to ensure that they are educated on such issues as privilege and the impact of socio-demographic positionality on experiences and outcomes (Keane, 2009; Doyle and Keane, 2019). Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2021) also note that there is a need for educators to be trained in critical identity work regarding white privilege. One of the enduring issues in Ireland is the ethnic homogeneity of the teaching population, with between 98 and 99 per cent of entrants to third-level

educational training programmes being White Irish (Keane and Heinz, 2015; 2016; Heinz and Keane, 2018).

A focal point in the study was the presentation of preliminary findings at the 2022 European Social Work Research Conference in Amsterdam. Not unexpectedly, this was a significant experience for second-level students. The students devised and presented a polished 11-voice oral presentation in-person to an audience of international practitioners and academics, competently taking questions afterwards. The engagement of senior academic attendees at the conference with the students and their study reinforced the importance of the work they had undertaken.

One issue that did arise was the fact that the students self-selected for the project, and despite encouragement from the teacher involved, there was limited ethnic diversity among the students involved, with 10 per cent being from a minority ethnic group. While this is reflective of the ethnic divide in the school, given the topic, a higher participation rate among minority ethnic students was anticipated. However, this is the first time the school has run a project like this, and there may have been an element of uneasiness about what it would be like to participate and what work might be involved for students. On conclusion of the project, there was keen interest among the students involved to continue to promote dialogue on this topic within the school. There was a clear and tangible sense that the students saw this project as the start of an important dialogue and that there was more to be done. Students identified that they would like more of their peers involved, particularly peers who may have experienced racism. The student–researcher's endorsement of the project to their peers will be invaluable in the continuity of dialogue within the school. In line with the philosophy of the Dialogue Approach, the outputs from the project are intended to underpin further dialogue and action about racism in the school.

Conclusions

Literature shows that racism towards young people is a significant problem, even within the confines of schools. While there is a lack of research on racism within Irish secondary schools, the research that has been completed highlights racism as an everyday occurrence for BME students. This dialogue project demonstrated similar experiences of racism among a school population that was otherwise privileged. Students reported verbal abuse (particularly name calling), some physical violence, teasing about cultural differences and stereotyping. Although not yet analysed in this data set, the intersectionality of age, gender and special educational needs also impacts how young people experience racism within educational settings. The complexity of young people's interactions with each other means that understanding the process of racism in schools is also complex and multifaceted. This study clearly demonstrated to student-researchers, respondents and readers alike that students can also be seen to reject the presence of racism, often while also describing racism within their schools. It is argued that racism is relocated to other places, people and times, or is reclassified as teasing or a joke. This highlights the prominence of white privilege, where majority students can remain largely unaware of the presence of systemic racism. While anti-racism policies and education are undoubtedly required in schools, this will not be successful until racism is acknowledged and students and teachers are prepared to confront their own biases and roles in reproducing unequal structures.

The purpose of this project was to start a conversation, or open a dialogue, about racism in one school setting. There is no doubt that this was achieved with cross-school engagement in the topic. The students involved in the project presented the findings not only to the principal and to their individual year group but also to the entire school at the assembly and through posters distributed throughout the school, as well as to wider academic society at the European Social Work Research Conference in Amsterdam in 2022. The project demonstrated to the whole school community that there is an issue to be addressed and there is a commitment within the school to address it, be that through policy development and revisions and disseminations, or by means to promote and spark conversation about racism in school. This project was the catalyst for a dialogue that needs to continue.

Notes

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[2] Department of Education (Ireland) figures on ethnic origin are only available for 42 per cent of students, making the data unreliable (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2021: 23).

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Conflict of interest
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