



## **‘There actually aren’t enough hours in the week’: a constructivist grounded theory of defending inaction on the implementation of intercultural education in Irish schools**

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# 'There actually aren't enough hours in the week': a constructivist grounded theory of defending inaction on the implementation of intercultural education in Irish schools

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## ABSTRACT

In policy terms, intercultural education is seen as an important response to increased diversity in Ireland. Despite this, existing research is critical of Irish intercultural policy and suggests teachers are unable to implement interculturalism effectively. Given this, it is important to excavate teachers' understandings of intercultural education. This study adopted a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology *via* semi-structured interviews with thirty-one post-primary teachers over three rounds of data collection. Data were collected and analysed iteratively using CGT procedures including coding, categorising, and memoing. This study found that teachers held superficial, celebratory views of intercultural education. Most importantly, it also found that teachers defended the lack of intercultural education in their schools. This article will explore these defences in light of literature concerning resistance to change and teachers' professional identities.

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## 1. Introduction

In Ireland, intercultural education is seen as 'one of the key [policy] responses to the changing shape of Irish society' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2006, 11).<sup>1</sup> There has, however, been considerable criticism of Irish approaches to intercultural education (c.f. O'Toole, 2008; Bryan, 2010) and research has found 'little or no engagement' with current intercultural guidelines (Kavanagh and Dupont, 2021, 565).

Irish policy documents often construct intercultural education as important in the context of Ireland's rapid diversification. Increased migration in recent decades has led to a considerable increase in 'ethnic and national diversity' (McGinnity et al. 2018, 1). Between 2011 and 2022, the percentage of people who classify themselves as 'White Irish' fell from 84% to 76.5% (Central Statistics Office, 2016, 2022). Despite these changes, a 'diversity gap'

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exists in Irish education, with a ‘homogenous population’ of mainly white and middle-class teachers, teaching ‘a heterogenous population of students’ (Quirke-Bolt & Purcell, 2021, 493). However, intercultural education is not only important due to this increased diversity. Intercultural education is crucial for socially just education, regardless of demographic changes. This is especially important in Ireland, where there has been a concerning rise in explicit racism (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2024; Kitching, 2025, 2) and there is evidence of ethnic hierarchies that advantage White ethnic groups (Joseph, 2018).

Despite the importance placed on intercultural education in Irish policy documents, the *Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010–2015 (IE Strategy)*, was published over 15 years ago (Department of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration (DES), 2010). Whilst it set out ‘high level goals’ (DES, 2010, 63), there was no detail of how these should be benchmarked. Kitching (2014, 56) notes that intercultural policy commitments did not have accompanying funding and were, in fact, announced shortly before funding cuts were made to areas related to intercultural education, such as support for Traveller students (Kitching 2014, 89). The Irish government’s approach to intercultural education has, like its approach to intercultural policy generally, been ‘*laissez-faire*’ (McGarry, 2021), with intercultural actions being left to the discretion of individual teachers and schools.

Research suggests that teachers are ‘pivotal’ (Moore, Klaassen and Veugelers 2008, 61) to the implementation of intercultural education. This is especially true in Ireland, given the *laissez-faire* nature of intercultural policies. Despite this, there is a dearth of research into the factors that influence teachers’ understandings of intercultural education. This research therefore set out to investigate the understandings of intercultural education held by Irish post-primary teachers and the factors that influenced them. As this was an under-researched and under-theorised area concerned with the way teachers construct their understandings of a complex area of education, a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014) methodology was adopted. In the course of data collection and analysis, participants repeatedly stressed the importance of intercultural education, yet defended the lack of it in their schools. This led to the construction of a CGT of ‘defending inaction in the implementation of intercultural education’ and accompanying sub-categories. This article provides an explanation of this CGT.

The following section reviews Irish and international research regarding intercultural education. This literature review focuses on the criticisms made of Irish approaches to interculturalism and research on the barriers to implementing intercultural education presented by teachers’ thinking about it. Section 3 explains how a CGT methodology was implemented in this research, whilst section 4 discusses our findings. Section 5 considers these findings in the light of research concerning teachers’ professional identity.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Irish intercultural education and its critics

Shim asserts that there are two conflicting understandings of intercultural education (Shim, 2012, 209). The first of these, which she criticises as ‘romantic’ (Shim, 2012), focuses ‘on differences, diversity, and learning about others’ (Shim, 2012, 210) whilst ignoring the wider societal context. The second, which she calls ‘*anti oppressive* intercultural education’, aims

to ‘work against inequality and inhumanity linked to the system of domination and to foreground social justice’ (Shim, 2012, original emphasis).

The *IE Strategy* states that intercultural learning environments should be ‘the norm’ in Irish schools (DES, 2010, 4). Just under half of Irish post-primary students attend multi- or inter-denominational schools. 47.6% of students attend Catholic schools, with under 4% enrolled in schools with a Church of Ireland or other ethos (Department of Education, 2024a). Denominational schools are largely voluntary schools under the private ownership and patronage of a religious community (Department of Education and Youth, 2019). Schools not under religious patronage are mainly governed by statutory Education and Training Boards (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2025) or Educate Together (2025), an educational charity committed to equal, inclusive education ‘irrespective of... [students’] social, cultural or religious background’. In 2024/25, 7.3% of boys and 5.7% of girls attended fee-paying schools (Department of Education and Youth, 2025, 18–23). Around 25% of all Irish students attend DEIS<sup>2</sup> schools (Central Statistics Office, 2024), which receive additional funding to combat educational disadvantage. In the academic year 2023–24, 10% of post-primary schools were Irish-medium<sup>3</sup> schools, with 3.8% of students attending them (Gaeloideachas, 2025).

Intercultural education in Ireland largely falls within what Shim termed the ‘romantic’ camp. O’Toole (2008, 15) argues that Irish interculturalism is a weak form of multiculturalism that celebrates:

... non-contentious or superficial elements of culture, such as dress and dance or food and drink... [but] neglects the incorporation of an analytic dimension, engaging people in a critique of contemporary societal inequalities in Ireland.

Similarly, Kitching (2011, 294) describes government policy as ‘weak blend of “preventing racist attitudes” and “celebrating diversity”’. The *IE Strategy* defines intercultural education as ‘education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life’ (DES, 2010, 1). Whilst the celebration and recognition of minoritized groups are important facets of intercultural education, the *IE Strategy* lacks a focus on social justice. The NCCA, a statutory body which publishes support material for Irish teachers, has published resources to support the delivery of intercultural education in Irish schools. Whilst its *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School* does have more social justice orientated content (NCCA, 2006, 38–39; 58–59), these ‘guidelines are not enforceable; nor has their distribution been accompanied by any meaningful effort to provide in-service training in interculturalism’ (Bryan, 2010, 266). This again exemplifies the *laissez-faire* implementation of intercultural education in Ireland.

Ireland’s ‘romantic’ and *laissez-faire* approach to intercultural education has been subject to criticism, most notably in the work of Audrey Bryan (Bryan, 2009; 2010; Bryan & Bracken, 2011), who makes two main criticisms of it. Firstly, she argues that Irish intercultural education is an ineffectual ‘add-on’ that makes it appear that ‘something is being done’ but in reality does not alter ‘the existing curriculum to any significant extent’ (Bryan, 2010, 266). Effective intercultural education needs to be embedded into all aspects of school life and, as such, an ‘add-on’ approach is unlikely to have more than a token impact on students.

Bryan’s second critique is that intercultural arrangements mask ‘relationships of power in society’ and prevent social justice (Bryan, 2009, 298). Her argument begins with a discussion of policy discourses around immigration and diversity in Ireland, which she sees

as being dominated by a form of ‘corporate multiculturalism’ (Bryan, 2010, 257). This welcomes minorities and migrants where they offer ‘benefits... to the dominant group’ (Bryan, 2010, 256), which consists of White Irish people. Migrants and minorities are excluded from this group by ethnocentric conceptions of ‘Irishness’ (Bryan and Bracken, 2011, 107), which associate ‘being Irish’ with being ‘white, heterosexual, Irish-born, settled [and] Catholic’ (Bryan, 2010, 255). Those belonging to the dominant cultural group enjoy more power than ‘others’ who are subject to racism and disadvantage.

Bryan argues intercultural education supports the continued power of dominant groups. It does this by being a form symbolic violence (Bryan, 2009, 298). Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2001) describes how symbolic violence justifies unequal power relations between social classes (Lane, 2000, 126) by legitimising unequal social arrangements and promoting them as fair. Effective symbolic violence causes the dominated to misrecognise their own oppression (Jenkins, 1992, 104). Irish intercultural education fulfils this role by focusing on celebration and avoiding discussion of White privilege and societal power structures. It thus ‘brilliantly disguises, power relations between majoritised and minoritised groups’ (Bryan, 2010, 254). At the same time, it serves to placate Irish people who may care about issues like racism. It does this through a slogan system of buzzwords with imprecise meanings (for example, ‘inclusion’ or ‘equality’) which ‘may suggest curricular reform’ is happening, whilst in reality little meaningful intercultural education is taking place (Bryan, 2010, 256).

Irish intercultural education policy, therefore, is both focused on the celebratory aspects of interculturalism and has been implemented in a *laissez-faire* manner. There are profound concerns about its ability to work for, if not hinder, social justice. However, policy is not the only barrier to effective intercultural education. The following section will consider the way teachers’ attitudes can also impede the implementation of effective intercultural education.

## **2.2. Teacher attitudes as barriers to intercultural education**

Irish and international research suggests there are a number of ways in which teachers’ beliefs, attitudes and understandings may act as barriers to effective intercultural education. This section will look at three such barriers.

The first and most simple of these barriers concerns teachers’ lack of understanding of intercultural education. Agostinnetto and Bugno (2020, 56) describe intercultural education as ‘ambiguous, vague and somewhat undefined’. International research suggests that teachers find it hard to define intercultural education and thus struggle to explain how it can be put into practice. Whilst teachers may recognise the importance of intercultural education (Roiha and Sommier, 2021, 456), they often show a ‘level of incoherence when... directly asked to explain their intercultural aims and objectives’ (Agostinnetto and Bugno, 2020, 62). Research in Czechia (Moore et al. 2008, 67) and Sweden (Anderstaf, Lecusay and Nilsson, 2021, 297) has similarly shown teachers to be uncertain how to define or enact intercultural approaches. Irish research suggests ‘teachers lack confidence in implementing a fully inclusive pedagogy’ (Brennan and Canny, 2023, 2) and that many ‘are insufficiently trained in intercultural education’ (Adebayo and Heinz, 2024, 4). Hannigan, Faas and Darmody’s (2022, 7) research with pre-service primary teachers in one Irish higher education institution found a ‘lack of preparedness to teach pupils from a range of backgrounds’ amongst participants. They note that only a small part of their participants’ ITE programmes was

dedicated to intercultural education and argue this ‘may result in surface-level engagement from pre-service teachers’ with interculturalism (Hannigan, Faas and Darmody, 2022).

A second way in which teachers’ attitudes to intercultural education may serve as a barrier to its effective implementation is through a misunderstanding of its role or purpose. As noted in section 2.1, Bryan’s work suggests Irish intercultural education is an ‘add on’ to the regular curriculum and, as such, has little impact. Research in countries such as America (Mueller and O’Connor, 2007, 852), Australia (Mills and Ballantyne, 2010, 447) and the United Kingdom (Bhopal and Rhamie, 2014, 309) suggests intercultural education is often seen as an ‘add on’. Sleeter (2017, 158) has suggested that this perception may come from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses which separate ‘diversity work’ from other elements of teaching. Brennan and Canny (2023, 7) have found some evidence of this in Irish ITE courses.

Misunderstandings regarding the purpose of intercultural education may also be rooted in simplistic understandings of culture. Roiah and Sommier (2021, 449) found that teachers’ ideas of culture are ‘essentialist’ and that they ‘rely on and perpetuate representations of homogenous national cultures’ (Roiah and Sommier 2021, 454) in their approaches to intercultural education. Further, research has found that teachers ‘often have ‘simplistic views of diversity that highlights the celebratory’ (Schoorman and Bogotch, 2010, 1043) aspects of interculturalism. Intercultural education is thus reduced to what Troyna (1993, 26) referred to as ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’. Well-meaning celebratory activities that aim to promote ‘mutual understanding,’ instead ‘run the risk of strengthening already existing stereotypes’ (Agostinetti and Bugno, 2020, 62).

A final barrier to effective implementation comes from teachers holding attitudes that are hostile to intercultural education. Such attitudes range from meritocratic understandings of society to holding racist views and deficit thinking.

In a review of existing literature, Castro (2010, 206) described millennial pre-service teachers as ‘naïve egalitarians’ who held ‘deeply entrenched’ beliefs in meritocracy. Similarly, Mueller and O’Connor (2007, 842) found that, despite attempts to address them during ITE courses, American preservice teachers clung to ‘notions of personal merit and individual responsibility to explain social inequalities’. Leavy found that Irish pre-service teachers ‘minimized the reality of racism and perceived schools as inherently fair institutions’ (Leavy, 2005, 173). The belief that society is fair and that people’s achievements are based on their own effort can prevent teachers from examining their own privilege (Allard and Santoro, 2006, 117) or understanding structural inequalities (Castro, 2010, 206). There is also evidence that some preservice teachers actively reject attempts to teach them about issues like White privilege and inequalities (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel and Campbell, 2005, 157; c.f. Sleeter, 2017; Gorski, 2008). Engagement with these issues is key to enacting intercultural education that addresses social justice issues. Further, an assumption that society is meritocratic, and that those who fail to succeed in some way deserve it, can lead to deficit thinking.

Deficit thinking about minoritised groups has been a common theme in Irish research on race and education in the last two decades. In the early 2000s, research by Devine (2005, 62–4) found that certain minoritised or immigrant groups were regularly spoken about by teachers in deficit terms. Contemporary research suggests ‘deficit racialised constructions of minority ethnic students in schools are common... in Ireland’ (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2021, 5; c.f. McGinley and Keane, 2021). International research finds deficit thinking to be a feature of many European and North American education systems (Childs and Wooten, 2023; Kollender,

2024; McKenzie and Scheurich, 2008). This sometimes involves the ‘pathologizing... [of] minority families’ (Solomona et al. 2005, 161) and the assumption that failures in these families, or their broader culture, hinders their children’s education.

Deficit thinking is not the only form of racism minoritised students may experience from teachers in Ireland. Research into the perspectives of minoritised students and their parents suggests that teachers may be less receptive towards them than their White counterparts, more likely to speak to them aggressively (Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2021, 14) and even, in some cases, pick on them (Adebayo and Heinz, 2024, 3133–3134). Traveller students particularly suffer racism in the education system and report being discriminated against by teachers (Kavanagh and Dupont, 2021, 558; c.f. McGinley, 2024).

Racist attitudes from teachers, including deficit thinking, present a considerable challenge to the implementation of intercultural education, which requires not just the promotion of social justice and anti-racism but also the recognition and celebration of minoritised groups. It is difficult to see how teachers who hold deficit views could do any of these things fairly or effectively.

Both in Ireland and internationally, teacher attitudes present considerable barriers to the effective implementation of intercultural education. In Ireland, these problems are compounded by a *laissez-faire* approach to intercultural education, which also focuses on the celebratory elements of interculturalism and largely ignores its anti-oppressive, social justice focused components. Section 5 will return to the literature presented here when discussing the findings of this research.

### 3. Methodology

This research set out to investigate teachers’ understandings of intercultural education and influencing factors. This is an under-researched and under-theorised area. As this concerned teachers’ beliefs about a complex area of education, it was best suited to investigation *via* interpretative research using qualitative methods. This research was also motivated by a concern about the adequacy of intercultural arrangements in Irish post-primary schools and the importance of improving these in the interests of social justice. These factors led to the adoption of a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology.

CGT repositions the original Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2014) developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). GT made considerable contributions to research methodology, creating a basis for ‘systematic *qualitative* research’ (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, 33) through the development of specific processes for data collection and analysis. However, GT was out of step with the epistemology of the social sciences of the 1960s (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, 38), holding the objectivist view that ‘reality can be discovered’ (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, 34) through the application of GT procedures. Whilst CGT retains core GT procedures, it jettisons ‘notions of a neutral observer’ (Charmaz 2014, 13). In doing so, it accepts that the influence of researcher positionality is inescapable and argues ‘data is constructed, not discovered’ (Charmaz, 2017a, 2). Repositioning GT’s epistemology in this way has led CGT researchers to stress the importance of critical reflexivity and to engage participants in the research process (Keane, 2015, 2022). This makes CGT particularly suited to social justice-oriented research (Charmaz, 2017b).

Like all forms of GT, CGT believes that theory must emerge from, and be fully supported by, data gathered in the field. To do this, CGT adopts the processes developed by Glaser and Strauss (cf. Charmaz, 2014; Keane & Thornberg, 2025). These include:

- Iterative data collection and analysis.
- Initial and focused coding.
- The constant comparative method.
- Memoing.
- Theoretical sampling (returning to the field to collect ‘pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories’ (Charmaz, 2014, 192)).

During this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 Irish post-primary teachers between 2021 and 2023. Participants were mainly recruited through social media, professional networks and direct contact with schools. Ethical approval was given by the University of Galway and all teachers who participated in the study gave informed consent. Like most qualitative research, CGT studies do not aim to be representative (Charmaz, 2014). However, participants were based across Ireland and taught in different types of schools described in [section 2.1](#), including voluntary Catholic ethos schools, ETB schools and fee-paying schools.

In line with CGT procedures, three ‘batches’ of interviews were conducted. 4 interviews were conducted and analysed in the first round of data collection, followed by 11 interviews in the second round, and then 16 in the final round. As the interviews touched on range of sensitive topics (such as racism), participants were given a stimulus material prior to their interview. This consisted of a YouTube clip about privilege and an extract from the *IE Strategy* (DES, 2010). Participants were asked to comment on this material during the interview, allowing potentially controversial topics to be addressed in a ‘less personally threatening’ way (Lee, 1993, 81).

Informal analysis began shortly after the recording of the interviews. The lead researcher repeatedly listened to the interviews during transcription, thus becoming immersed in the data and writing memos (analytic notes) to record his thoughts about it during and after transcription. Analysis then progressed to initial (line-by-line) and focused coding leading to the development of provisional categories. The gaps within and between these categories informed subsequent data collection through theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). Memoing and diagramming occurred throughout the analysis process. Our emerging findings were shared with participants after the second and third rounds of data collection. Their opinions were sought on these findings to involve them in theory construction in line with constructivist principles (Keane and Thornberg, 2025; see also Harris and Keane, 2025).

Given the importance of critical reflexivity to CGT, significant consideration was given to the lead researcher’s positionality, particularly his insider status as a White male teacher, researching fellow teachers. Reflective memoing focused on the extent to which participants addressed their understandings of intercultural education to a teacher-researcher who they may have perceived as sympathetic or to whom they may have felt the need to justify themselves (cf. Harris, 2024).

The data analysis process led to the development of a CGT of ‘defending inaction in the implementation of intercultural education in Irish post-primary schooling’ (cf. Author, 2024) and accompanying sub-categories.

## 4. Findings

This section presents three major findings of this research. These are:

- 1) Seeing intercultural education as valuable in the Irish context
- 2) Conceiving of intercultural education in superficial and sloganised terms
- 3) Pointing to and defending the lack of intercultural education.

These findings are aspects of the overall CGT and its sub-categories relevant to teachers' understandings of, and defences of the lack of, intercultural education, the focus of this paper.

### ***4.1. Seeing intercultural education as valuable in the Irish context***

Participants valued intercultural education and saw it as an important part of education. Much of the value they placed on it appeared to derive from their perceptions of Irish society. Firstly, participants were aware of increased ethnic and cultural diversity in Ireland and for many of them this had changed the demographic composition of their schools. Participants expressed positive views about increased diversity in their schools. Shane, for example, proudly noted that his school's 'most recent total of 56 different nationalities' was 'great' (Shane). Diversity was seen as beneficial as it meant students could 'learn from each other' (Linda), broaden their 'knowledge and broaden people's points of view' (Matthew).

However, participants also noted that the increased diversity in schools and society in Ireland had increased the importance of intercultural education. James, for example, noted that classes at his school could have '20 countries represented', which meant intercultural education was crucial so students could 'understand the people in front of them' (James). Another participant, who was interviewed shortly after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, noted that intercultural education was 'very relevant' (Maria) given the expected arrival of Ukrainian students in her school at the time. Some participants also noted the need for intercultural education if students were to succeed economically after leaving school. Therese noted that 'Google is down the road for me here... And that's where students are going to be working with... people from different countries and different cultures'. Modern, globalised Ireland was thus seen by participants as a diverse country where intercultural education was a necessity.

Participants were also concerned about what they perceived as a rising problem of racism in Irish society. Participants universally condemned racism, which was seen as 'ugly' (Maria) and rooted in 'Stone Age attitudes' (Aoibhe). They felt racism was increasing in Ireland and many were particularly concerned about the rise of online racism and far-right political groups. Most participants, however, regarded racism as a personal flaw. Few showed any awareness of the structural dimensions of racism. The perceived rise in racist incidents and sentiment meant intercultural education was

... important in this day and age, more important now than ever. Again, you see the online stuff, you see the, the video, the far-right videos, the protests... Intercultural education and appreciation of our culture is vital. (Dylan)

Intercultural education was thus seen to be of instrumental benefit to Ireland and Irish students. Participants saw it as important for cohesion in an increasingly diverse society; as teaching key skills for future employment; and as a way to combat racism.

#### **4.2. Conceiving of intercultural education in sloganised and celebratory terms**

When asked to define intercultural education, participants showed a lack of knowledge and confidence. As one noted, intercultural education was ‘really hard to kind of really quantify’ (Mary). Others admitted being unsure what it was and one even admitted having no idea what it meant and having to Google it before the interview. Participants largely used similar words or phrases, such as ‘respect’, ‘being aware’, ‘celebrating’ and ‘being inclusive’, to explain their understandings of the term.

To explain the similarities between participants’ explanations of intercultural education, the concept of slogan systems from Bryan’s work (see [section 2.1](#)) was brought into our consideration of our findings. Extant concepts can be used in GT analysis, as long as they ‘earn their way’ (Thornberg, 2012, 253) through comparison with data from the field. Like Bryan’s description of Irish intercultural education, participants’ understandings of intercultural education relied on a slogan system of ‘buzzwords whose meanings are often permeable and imprecise’ (Bryan, 2010, 255).

These slogans, whilst not incorrect, were vague and participants rarely elaborated upon them, suggesting their understandings of intercultural education were also relatively superficial.

When describing the ways intercultural education was, or could be, implemented in their schools, participants largely focused on celebratory activities. These often took the form of an intercultural day or week similar to that described by Frances:

But we do the awareness days... we did a huge event last year, which was really nice in school and it was fantastic, you know, all the kids bought into it... We had... different subjects involved. So, like obviously Home Economics, we do all the foods ... So then, you know, we had all the different cultures identified within our school community. You know, we had the food for it... we have the languages... the teacher from South Korea brought in her... dress and things like that. And the kids were really excited to see things like that... I remember one of them got to dress up in her wedding dress, which they thought was so cool.... So, celebration is important. (Frances)

Celebratory intercultural activities were valued by participants, who saw them as ‘vital ... hugely, hugely important’ (Shane). This importance seemed to stem from participants’ perceptions of diversity and racism in Irish society described in [section 4.1](#). Celebratory activities were valued for helping students ‘get on with each other’ (James), being a way to ‘normalize’ diversity (John) and reducing problems with racism (Shane). Síofra, a principal, described the value of her school’s celebratory activities:

... when we do those things ... I know it’s so cliched, but it does help break down barriers because if you’re out having fun with someone, celebrating their dish, learning their story, seeing their dress, it’s very hard then to come back in and pick a fight with them a week later. (Síofra)

Despite the value they saw in celebratory intercultural activities, many participants noted that there was something ‘tokenistic’ about having one-off intercultural events. There were also a few examples of, or calls for, transformative, anti-oppressive intercultural practice given by participants. Generally, however, participants expressed superficial, sloganised and celebratory understandings of intercultural education. This likely, in part, resulted from their understandings of racism as a personal flaw as previously described. As participants failed to understand the structural dimensions of racism, celebrating different cultures was seen as a sufficient way to prevent racism, as described by Síofra above.

### 4.3. Pointing to and defending the lack of intercultural education

Whilst the previous section described the participants’ celebratory understandings and, in some cases, actions regarding intercultural education, the lack of intercultural education occurring in participants’ schools was notable. One participant, for example, noted that her school did ‘nothing at all [regarding intercultural education]... It doesn’t exist’ (Caoimhe). As noted in section 4.2, even in schools where there were intercultural activities, these were largely limited to a single day or week-long event each year.

Participants explained the value and importance of intercultural education yet noted the lack of it either in their own practice or their schools. This led them to defend inaction regarding intercultural education. Figure 1 shows the three defences for the lack of intercultural education provided by participants. Though relatively pedestrian and simplistic, these arose repeatedly throughout our interviews. Further, when we shared our emerging findings with participants, those who responded doubled down on these defences and reiterated them as valid reasons for the lack of intercultural education.

The first defence given by participants was that teachers were ‘overworked’ (Paul) and that there ‘aren’t enough hours in the week’ (Ciara) for intercultural education. Some participants linked their lack of time to the curricular demands of their subjects, noting that there was ‘barely enough time ... to go through the syllabus never mind ... intercultural or multiculturalism’ (James). Others felt there was ‘initiative overload’ (Eoin) in Irish schools.

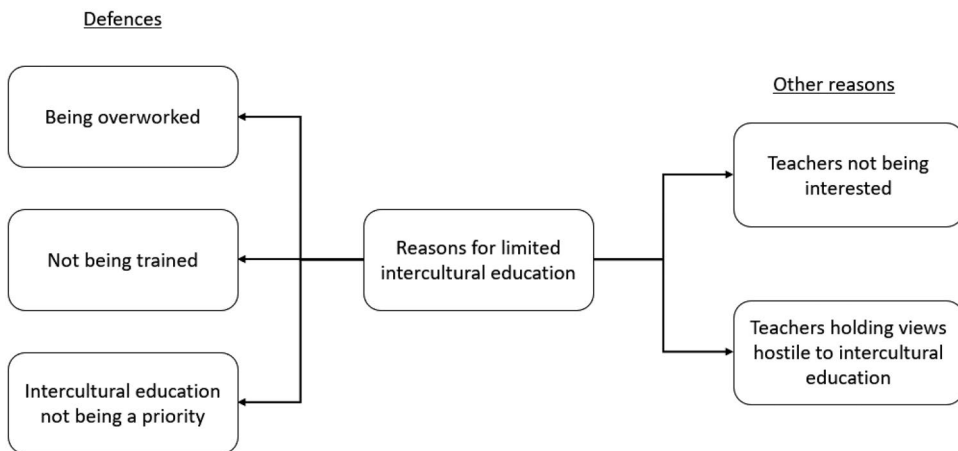


Figure 1. Reasons participants gave for limited intercultural education in their schools.

Caoimhe described this and the way it would discourage teachers from engaging in intercultural education:

There's never a conversation about 'Let's take away something from teachers.' It's usually, 'Let's give them more work' ... So, I suppose my thing would be, I can understand how if this was brought to teachers, you know, 'We need to have a conversation about intercultural education.' They'd go 'For God's sake... Something else on my plate.' (Caoimhe)

Implicit in this defence was the idea that intercultural education is an 'add on' and distinct from the regular curriculum.

Secondly, some participants argued the limited intercultural education in their schools was due to a lack of training. They noted that they had not had, or could not remember hearing about, intercultural training:

I don't recall ever there being CPD<sup>4</sup> either internally in my school or offered externally that maybe I noticed on Twitter that promotes intercultural education. And that's not to say it isn't there but just on my own experience I haven't come across it. (Sorcha)

Finally, some participants noted that intercultural education was not a priority in their schools. Reasons for this included the lack of 'funding and resources' (Alex) for intercultural education or greater weight being given to other initiatives, such as Wellbeing (Therese). A few participants felt the Department of Education was partially responsible for the low priority of intercultural education, as they were 'literally leaving it to individual schools' (Nicola).

Figure 1 also shows some of the other reasons participants felt intercultural education may not have been happening in their schools. These did not feature as frequently or significantly in the data as the defences noted above. The first of these was that teachers were disinterested in intercultural education and could not 'be bothered' (Katie) getting involved with celebratory events. Secondly, some participants reported other teachers being hostile to intercultural education. There were a range of reasons given for this. Some participants reported colleagues thinking it was a waste of time, whilst others said they knew teachers who felt it was not part of their jobs:

I think people feel, 'Well, I'm here to teach English,' or 'I'm here to teach Geography and it's not my responsibility to solve the problems of the world, and I just want to get on with it.' (Fiadh)

Other participants reported some of their colleagues not being particularly inclusive or thinking the best way to deal with diversity was to ignore it. Participants distanced themselves from these views and did not see them as valid reasons for not engaging with intercultural education. Further, they did not see them as particularly widespread:

The reasons for not participating in [intercultural education training] would not be a lack of interest or lack of care for the students. It would be the overwhelming workloads. (Sorcha)

## 5. Discussion

The preceding section presented three main areas of our findings that will be discussed here. Whilst participants valued intercultural education, they struggled to define it and, when they were able to do so, described it in superficial, sloganised, and celebratory ways.

Participants noted that there was, at best, limited intercultural education in their schools. However, participants defended this lack of intercultural education by arguing that they lacked the time or training to deliver it effectively or that it was not a priority in their schools.

The first of these findings, regarding participants' understandings of intercultural education, is very much in line with existing Irish and international research. As described in [section 2](#), international research suggests teachers may recognise the importance of intercultural education (Roiha and Sommier, 2021, 456) but struggle to explain it or how to enact it (Agostinetto and Bugno, 2020, 62; Anderstaf, Lecusay and Nilsson, 2021, 297; Moore et al. 2008, 67). Irish research, meanwhile, suggests teachers lack the training and confidence in this area (Adebayo and Heinz, 2024, 4; Brennan and Canny, 2023, 2). Similarly, relatively simplistic, celebratory approaches to intercultural education are commonly found in existing literature (Schoorman and Bogotch, 2010, 1043; Troyna, 1993, 26). In Ireland, the work of Bryan and others has highlighted the way Irish interculturalism has focused on the celebratory aspects at the expense of those that may address social justice issues (Bryan, 2010; Kitching, 2011; O'Toole, 2008). The understandings of intercultural education held by teachers in this study are thus unsurprising.

Where this research offers new insight is in the defences participants gave for the lack of intercultural education in their schools. Whilst relatively pedestrian, these defences re-occurred frequently in our data and participants reiterated them when discussing our emerging findings with us in the later stages of the research. This suggests these defences were entrenched in participants' thinking.

To understand these defences, we first considered them as a form of resistance to change. Given the lack of intercultural education participants noted, implementing it fully would require changes to teachers' practices. Change can, in any organisation, be regarded as a 'threat' (Kuzhda, 2016, 52) to those required to change and, as such, be resisted. Agócs (1997, 918) defines resistance as 'a process of refusal by decision makers to be influenced or affected by the views, concerns or evidence presented to them by those who advocate change'. Teachers may give a number of reasons for resisting educational change, such as saying they lack the time to make changes; arguing that the responsibility for problems lies with others; and suggesting that reforms are not applicable in practice (Terhart, 2013, 494–495). There was some evidence of teachers in this study deploying 'logical and rational resistance' (Kuzhda, 2016, 52) to change by arguing that they lack the time to implement the changes required for intercultural education. Some participants also externalised blame for the lack of intercultural education, arguing that their school or the Department of Education had failed to prioritise or allocate resources to it. Gitlin and Margonis (1995, 393–394) have noted that resistance can constitute a 'form of good sense' expressing those resisting a change's 'well-founded understanding of their institutional circumstances'. Given then *laissez-faire* nature of intercultural education in Ireland, there is certainly some credence to participants' claim to lack the training to implement it effectively.

Despite this, our participants' defences for the lack of intercultural education in their schools cannot fully be understood as a form of resistance. Agócs (1997, 920) provides a 'typology of forms of institutionalized resistance to change' which includes factors such as the 'denial of the need for change', a 'refusal to implement change' and 'action to dismantle change' once it has begun. Participants in this study did not deny the need for change, with many highlighting the inadequacy of current intercultural arrangements. Some participants even appeared ashamed about their own failure to engage in intercultural work. Finally,

none of our participants suggested they would refuse to engage in, or attempt to dismantle, intercultural practice.

A more fruitful understanding of our participants' defences for the lack of intercultural education in their schools can be found by considering literature on teachers' professional identity. Teacher professional identity concerns 'how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others' (Lasky, 2005, 901). Teachers 'invest heavily' (Van Veen and Slegers, 2006, 89) in these identities, which are 'interlaced with their beliefs about the right ways to be a teacher, and the purposes of schooling' (Lasky, 2005, 913).

As a teacher's professional identity encompasses what it means to be a good teacher, changes to teachers' pedagogy may affect their professional identity. Effective implementation of intercultural education would require changes for teachers in this study, given their current lack of involvement in intercultural work. Such change may represent a threat to these teachers' identities. Nias (1998, 1258) suggests people try to maintain a 'stable sense of personal and professional identity'.

The teachers in this study acknowledged that intercultural education was important but nonetheless failed to implement it. Such incongruence represents a potential threat to one's professional identity and one's notion of being a good teacher. Accepting that one does little for what is recognised as an important aspect of education threatens the stability of one's professional identity. The defences given by participants, however, serve to resolve this threat and relieve pressure on their professional identities. One can retain one's understanding of oneself as a good teacher if one is prevented from fully engaging with intercultural education by a lack of time or an absence of training. Placing blame for current intercultural arrangements on external agents (such as their school or the Department of Education) similarly relieves the individual teacher of responsibility. That these defences may be rooted in good sense only adds to their power.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has constructed important findings regarding teachers' understandings of intercultural education and their defences for the failure to implement it. In line with existing literature, participants expressed superficial, sloganised and celebratory understandings of intercultural education. This research adds to our understanding of intercultural education in the Irish context by excavating the ways teachers defended their failure to implement intercultural education. These defences have been explored through a consideration of literature on teachers' professional identities, suggesting that protecting this identity necessitates these defences given the value participants placed on intercultural education.

This exploration of these defences not only constitutes new knowledge in the Irish context but also offers potential paths to improve the quality of intercultural education in Ireland. Given the laissez-faire nature of intercultural education policy in Ireland, participants' defences of inaction seem to be at least partly rooted in 'good sense' (Gitlin and Margonis, 1995, 393). As participants noted, there has been little training offered for intercultural education, especially for experienced teachers. This research would thus support O'Toole, Joseph and Nyaluke's (2020, 185–191) suggestion that policymakers should facilitate the implementation of the Yellow Flag programme in all Irish schools. This 'innovative intercultural education programme... pioneered... by the Irish Traveller Movement' supports schools to implement intercultural education and leads to a 'high-profile award for the

school' (Yellow Flag Programme, 2023, 187). It encompasses professional development for teachers (Yellow Flag Programme, 2023), providing 'extremely valuable insights into how to challenge prejudice and discrimination, and, promote inclusion' (Kavanagh and Dupont, 2021, 563).

Watkins and Noble's work on multicultural teaching in Australia offers potential guidance for Irish policymakers seeking to address the way teachers think about intercultural education. Like this study, their research found that schools engaged in 'lazy multiculturalism', such as celebratory diversity days, which ignored the 'complex nature of culture' (Watkins and Noble, 2021, 105). They note that 'theoretical engagement' is often ignored in favour of 'pragmatic' teaching concerns (Watkins and Noble, 2016, 45). To address this, they conducted professional learning with their participants focused on using 'cultural theory as a mode of inquiry that encouraged teachers to think complexly and reflexively about... 'culture'' (Watkins and Noble, 2022, 672). Participants then engaged in multicultural education action research projects. Such a model would offer Irish teachers the opportunity to engage deeply with interculturalism and develop 'theoretically informed practice' (Watkins and Noble, 2022, 673).

Importantly, given that participants in this research expressed concern that they lacked the time to engage in intercultural work, any model of training should stress that intercultural education is not an 'add on' that involves extra work but a change to their pedagogy so it not only recognises and celebrates minoritised groups but also opposes racism, seeks to challenge inequalities, and promote social justice.

Training alone, however, is unlikely to prevent inaction regarding the implementation of intercultural education. We would also suggest, therefore that intercultural education be considered for a place in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process in Ireland, which schools are required to engage in and informs external evaluations conducted during school inspections (Department of Education, 2024b, 5–6). Making intercultural education a strand within SSE would make it a priority for schools and teachers. This, and the aforementioned training, would likely ameliorate the problematic *laissez-faire* approach to intercultural education in Ireland.

## Notes

1. Irish intercultural education is seen as a rejection of multiculturalism where "different cultures live side by side without much interaction" in favour of an approach where "different cultures...engage with each other" (NCCA, 2006: i-ii). Portera (2020: 402) notes that most "experts in Europe adopt the intercultural paradigm while many scholars, notably in the US... use the concept of multicultural education". Whilst Portera (2011: 41) prefers the term 'intercultural education', she notes that some scholars consider 'multicultural education' to include "exchange and dialogue (which form the basic foundation of an intercultural approach)". This study drew on existing research on intercultural and multicultural education due to their considerable overlap and the similar pedagogies they promote.
2. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme (cf. Department of Education and Skills, 2005).
3. In Irish-medium schools, educational provision is solely through the medium of the Irish language (Gaeilge).
4. Continuous Professional Development.

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