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Traveller students being and relating to an/‘other’: identity, belonging, and inter-ethnic peer relationships in a highly diverse post-primary school

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ABSTRACT

Irish Travellers have long endured racism in Ireland. In education, they have experienced significantly lower participation and academic achievement rates relative to the settled community. This paper draws on a study examining how an intercultural approach to education was implemented in one urban DEIS post-primary school with a highly diverse student population. Informed by Critical Race Theory, an in-depth qualitative case study design was implemented. Data collection involved twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with staff, Traveller students, ‘other’ minority ethnic students, and White settled Irish students. Data analysis involved several coding stages, and the development of categories.

This paper examines one category focusing on issues of identity, belonging, and relationships amongst minority ethnic groups in the school, with a particular focus on the Traveller participants. Participants’ constructions of ‘normality’ are considered with regard to how people ‘look’ and behave as well as their perceptions of student peer relationships and the lack of engagement between student groups. The findings are interrogated in the context of Critical Race, feminist, and class theories, and the prevailing discourse about educational disadvantage. The recommendations for policy, practice, and future research provided emphasise the need for critical engagement with and sensitive implementation of intercultural education in post-primary schools.

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1. Introduction

Irish Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority who make up less than 1 percent of Ireland’s population. The Equal Status Act 2000 (Section 2 (1)) defines Travellers as ‘a community of people ... with a shared history, culture, and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland’. The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (Department of Justice and Equality 2017) observes that ‘Travellers and Roma are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in Ireland’ (ibid., p. 2).

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The participation of Travellers in education has been low since the formation of the Irish State. While participation in primary schools is generally good and there is a high transfer rate of Travellers to post-primary education, attendance and retention rates remain poor. Data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2017) show that Travellers cease their education on average 4.7 years earlier than the general population and that only 167 Travellers had completed higher education by 2016. Travellers were identified as a target group for higher education progression for the first time in the National Access Plan (2015-2019) (HEA 2015). While there is a lack of data on achievement by ethnicity in Ireland, research has found that Traveller students have very low scores in English, Reading, and Mathematics standardised tests compared to the general population and 'other' minority ethnic groups (Kavanagh, Weir, and Moran 2017). Research also highlights that while Travellers value education, they feel like they do not belong in the school system, they feel disconnected from their non-Traveller peers, and they report being treated unfairly by their teachers and finding the current curriculum irrelevant (Lynch and Lodge 2002; Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2008; Boyle, Hanafin, and Flynn 2018; Quinlan 2021; Dupont 2022). Following the Irish State's formal recognition of the Traveller community as a distinct ethnic group in March 2017 (Houses of the Oireachtas 2017), the *Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018* was introduced in the Seanad. The Bill aims to provide for the inclusion of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum in State schools. In July 2021, the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, expressed that the government would be supporting an amended Bill, located with the existing *1998 Education Act*, and it has now been put forward to the Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for further consideration.

This paper draws on some of the findings of a doctoral study (Mc Ginley 2020) concerned with how an intercultural approach to education was conceptualised and implemented, with particular reference to Travellers, in an urban DEIS¹ post-primary school ('St. Greg's') in the West of Ireland with a highly diverse student population. There are five sections in this paper. Following this introduction, the literature review examines the nature of marginalisation experienced by Traveller and other minority ethnic students, with a specific focus on schooling. In section three, the methodological approach adopted in the study is outlined and information on the research participants is provided. Section four presents key findings relating to issues of identity, belonging, and relationships amongst minority ethnic groups in the school, with a particular focus on the Traveller participants. Finally, in Section five, the findings are discussed in the context of previous research and the paper concludes by emphasising the need for critical engagement with intercultural education in post-primary schools.

2. Literature review

While there is a relative dearth of research about the experiences of Travellers in school in Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2019), a number of key studies inform the context (cf. Lynch and Lodge 2002; Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2008; Hourigan and Campbell 2010) particularly in recent years (cf. Boyle, Hanafin,

and Flynn 2018; Mc Ginley and Keane 2021; Quinlan 2021; Dupont 2022). In Ireland, while it is often assumed that Travellers do not value education, studies have found that Traveller parents and students are very receptive to it (cf. Boyle, Flynn, and Hanafin 2020; Quinlan 2021; Dupont 2022). While Traveller students engage well at primary level and report having positive experiences therein, they often find the transition to post-primary difficult because of the lack of support available (Quinlan 2021). In terms of their school experiences, Traveller children and young people commonly report feeling a lack of belonging in school, and of being ‘unwanted’ and unsafe (ibid.), and, particularly as teenagers, perceive significant cultural differences between themselves and their settled peers (Hourigan and Campbell 2010). In a government study into the effectiveness of anti-bullying procedures, Dupont (2022) researched the views and experiences of 71 Traveller and Roma pupils, as well as parents and teachers. While most of the students reported that they liked school, 15 percent reported being bullied in the past year by their peers or by their teachers, ‘with name calling, racist name calling, exclusion, and bullying by teachers’ (ibid., p. 54), along with low expectations, most frequently cited. Dupont also reports ‘ample evidence’ of multiple forms of discrimination, particularly in relation to the Traveller pupils, and notes that these experiences played a key role in their attendance and decision to leave school early. In a study about the enactment of intercultural education in a highly diverse DEIS school with a high concentration of disadvantage, Mc Ginley and Keane (2021) noted the cognisance of the Traveller and non-Traveller minority ethnic students of the reason for their school’s poor and ‘tough’ reputation as it was regarded as ‘the school for the Travellers and the Blacks’. Travellers’ negative experiences of schooling are unsurprising given the negative attitudes toward minority ethnic groups which are prevalent among the Irish public, most especially towards Travellers (Mac Gréil 2010). For example, Tormey and Gleeson (2012) found that 42 percent of the almost 5,000 post-primary school students in their study reported high or very high levels of ‘social distance’ from Travellers (see also Lynch and Lodge 2002). Such attitudes extend to the school environment and play a significant role in Travellers’ disengagement from schooling. While teachers are often empathetic towards Travellers, they tend to adopt a cultural deficit lens and to blame Travellers for the inequalities that they experience (Quinlan 2021; Mc Ginley and Keane 2021; Mc Ginley 2020; Kavanagh 2013).

Much of the international research about Travellers in education has been conducted in the UK where studies often include members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT), communities together, making it difficult to know which findings pertain specifically to members of the Irish Traveller community. In the UK, GRT students have been identified as ‘the group most deprived of formal education in the country’ (Kiddle 2000, 265). Bhopal and Myers (2008) point to the notable increases in the participation of GRT students since the 1960s. Nevertheless, school attendance and progression remain poor. Bhopal (2011) argues that this trend of poor participation in education needs to be understood within the context of the long history of racism experienced by GRT communities. Research in the UK usually examines the high level of early school leaving in the Travelling community on various ‘push’ and/or ‘pull’ factors (Derrington 2007). Push factors identified include experiencing racism, exclusion, and racially motivated bullying (by peers and teachers), as well as the lack of representation in the curriculum and low teacher expectations (Bhopal and Myers 2008; Bhopal 2011). Pull factors usually

reference ‘cultural norms’, such as the tendency to marry young, nomadism (Cudworth 2018) and the lure of the Traveller economy (Donahue, McVeigh, and Ward 2005). While some of the reasons Travellers leave school early may be linked to pull factors, research has found that it is more likely due to push factors (Derrington and Kendall 2008). Teachers do not always believe GRT students when they report racist bullying (Lloyd and Stead 2001), and Traveller parents’ concerns in this regard often underpin their reasons for not sending their children to school (Derrington 2007). Teachers frequently view Traveller students as unruly and disruptive (Bhopal 2011) but this needs to be understood in the context of Traveller students relying ‘on maladaptive coping strategies to deal with psychosocial stress associated with cultural dissonance and social exclusion’ (Derrington 2007, 357), including fight (physical and verbal retaliation), flight (leaving school), and ‘playing white’ (hiding identity) (ibid.). Hiding their ethnic identity, or wearing ‘white masks’ (Helms 1995) is a common approach employed by minority ethnic children in trying to deal with racism.

The experiences of ‘other’ minority ethnic students in education are also relevant in understanding Traveller students’ experiences. Research from the international context shows that teachers often view students from marginalised and minority groups through a ‘deficit lens’ often perceiving them to be weaker students (cf. Chapman and Bhopal 2019; Castro 2010; Troyna 1992) and ‘undesirable’ learners in terms of their general behaviour and academic ability (Bhopal and Myers 2008). Low expectations amongst teachers based upon their racist assumptions of Black inferiority are commonplace (Chapman and Bhopal 2019). Deficit racialised constructions of ‘other’ (non-Traveller) minority ethnic students are also commonly reported in Ireland (cf. Ní Dhuinn and Keane 2021; Darmody et al. 2012; Kitching 2011). Devine (2005) found that teachers’ held particularly negative views of Roma and African students’ behaviour and academic ability (see also Fine-Davis and Faas 2014). Such negative constructions of minority ethnic students’ ability are often related to perceptions of English language proficiency and (perceived) related language support needs (Darmody Byrne, and McGinnity 2014; Nowlan 2008). For example, Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2021) reported that (migrant) minority ethnic participants’ academic ability was constructed by their teachers in deficit terms, based on often incorrect assumptions about their English language competency.

Studies show that minority ethnic students experience problematic peer relationships which can be seen in the lack of meaningful mixing between groups (Tatum 2017; Rhamie, Bhopal, and Bhatti 2012) as well as in forms of inter-ethnic conflict (Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2008; McGinley 2020). Students from the majority group often hold deficit views of their minority peers’ academic ability (Chapman and Bhopal 2019) and view them as ‘undesirable’ learners, similar to their teachers (Devine 2011; Kitching 2011; Tormey and Gleeson 2012). Students of migrant origin often have their ‘Irishness’ questioned (cf. Ní Laoire et al. 2009; Kitching 2011; Ní Dhuinn and Keane 2021). Indeed, Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2021) emphasised White Irish students’ exclusionary constructions of Irishness, reporting that their migrant minority ethnic participants were specifically positioned by their White Irish peers as *not* Irish, particularly where their skin colour was other than White. However, harassment, discrimination and racism in peer interactions is often downplayed by teachers and more generally by schools (Raby 2004).

3. Methodology

In this paper, we draw on data gathered as part of a wider in-depth qualitative study (Mc Ginley 2020), which employed a case study approach in an urban, DEIS post-primary school in the west of Ireland ('St. Greg's'), with a high concentration of disadvantage amongst its very diverse student population (Mc Ginley and Keane 2021). The study aimed to examine the implementation of an intercultural approach to education in such a school context. While the study had a particular focus on Traveller students and their experiences, students from 'other' minority as well as 'majority' ethnic groups were deliberately included in order to situate and contextualise the 'intercultural' student experience in general in this highly diverse school environ.

The study was located in the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises participants' understandings and meanings, and the socially constructed nature of 'reality' and people's subjective experiences. This paradigmatic positioning also emphasises the importance of critical reflexivity with respect to the role of the researcher in the study, and their interactions with the participants and data (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Criticisms of research located in this paradigm include not going far enough with regard to necessary change in people's lives. Hence, the study also drew significantly on Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell 1980) given its central and critical interrogation of the role of racism in education (Ladson-Billings 2005).

CRT has a number of key tenets including: the positioning of racism as a central unit of analysis; the understanding that racism is (unfortunately) 'normal' (rather than aberrational) in society; that Whites only work for racial justice when it is of benefit to them (cf. Bell's (1980) theory of interest convergence); that White privilege plays a key role in maintaining structural systems of superiority and subordination, and that counter storytelling, which foregrounds the voices and perspectives of minority ethnic groups, has the power to disrupt hegemonic assumptions (ibid; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Gillborn 2006; Bhopal 2018). These tenets underpinned the design and implementation of the current study, particularly through the prioritisation of the perspectives of minority students from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the lead researcher employed techniques of critical autobiography and reflexive journaling as a form of counter-storytelling, to examine and interrogate researcher identity and positionality, and their impact on the research process and data, and these were key foci throughout the research (Mc Ginley 2020).

Access to the school as a research site was negotiated by the Traveller researcher through several meetings with the school Principal and teaching staff. Student participants were recruited by the Traveller researcher visiting classes to explain the study and invite participation, and information about the study was also relayed to Traveller parents through researcher contacts in the Traveller Movement and Primary Health Care in the community. The children whose parents returned signed consent forms were included in the study. Data collection involved 28 semi-structured interviews, nine with staff participants (SPs), including the principal, deputy principal, and seven teachers; and 19 with student participants, including nine Traveller student participants (TSPs), six non-Traveller minority student participants (MSPs), and four White Irish student participants (WISPs). Further information on the student participants (only²) is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Student Participants

	Pseudonym	Sex	Student Participant Group	Year of Study
1	Jennifer	Female	Traveller Student	5th Year
2	Connie	Male	Traveller Student	5th Year
3	Mickey	Male	Traveller Student	2nd Year
4	Richard	Male	Traveller Student	2nd Year
5	Celine	Female	Traveller Student	3rd Year
6	Rosa	Female	Traveller Student	2nd Year
7	Serena	Female	Traveller Student	3rd Year
8	Paddy	Male	Traveller Student	1st Year
9	Theresa	Female	Traveller Student	5th Year
10	Johnathan	Male	White Irish Settled Student	6th Year
11	Hayden	Male	White Irish Settled Student	5th Year
12	Jason	Male	White Irish Settled Student	2nd Year
13	Connor	Male	White Irish Settled Student	3rd Year
14	Victoria	Female	(Non-Traveller) Minority Ethnic Student: Russian	5th Year
15	Josef	Male	(Non-Traveller) Minority Ethnic Student: Nigerian	5th Year
16	Christiano	Male	(Non-Traveller) Minority Ethnic Student: Brazilian	6th Year
17	Marian	Female	(Non-Traveller) Minority Ethnic Student: Roma from Romania	3rd Year
18	Fiona	Female	(Non-Traveller) Minority Ethnic Student: Roma from Romania	2nd Year
19	Holly	Female	(Non-Traveller) Minority Ethnic Student: Mixed Heritage (Spanish and British)	5th Year

Full ethical approval was provided by the Research Ethics Committee at the National University of Ireland, Galway. The student interviews were at most 45 minutes in duration, while staff interviews lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis comprised a number of steps, including immersion in the data by re-listening to the audio-recordings and re-reading transcripts. The transcripts were then coded line by line, using Charmaz's (2014) 'open coding' approach, before progressing to more focused coding which involved reviewing all the initial codes and bringing forward the most significant and/or frequent ones (*ibid.*). Provisional categories were then developed by grouping together similar codes, and subsequently refined through mapping exercises and elements of thematic analysis. In the context of CRT, particular attention was paid to the intersectionality of class and gender with 'race'/ethnicity, whilst maintaining the key focus on 'race'/ethnicity, as well as on the impact of racism on the experiences of Traveller students. Given the positionality of the Traveller researcher, continued attention was paid to issues of researcher identity throughout the data analysis process. Reflexive journaling continued, which assisted the Traveller researcher to critically interrogate her reactions to issues coming up in the data that were personally challenging to encounter. Additionally, large sections of the data were coded, and ongoing data interpretation discussed, with her supervisor, a process which facilitated both insider and outsider critical analysis.

Four major categories were developed (Mc Ginley 2020), and this paper focuses upon the category interrogating issues of identity, belonging, and relationships, with a particular focus on Traveller and non-Traveller minority ethnic students. Here we consider participants' constructions of 'normality' with regard to how people 'look' and behave. We also explore participants' perceptions of student peer relationships and the lack of meaningful engagement between certain student groups, with certain student groups 'sticking to their own' and blaming the 'other' for a lack of mixing.

4. Findings: constructions of 'normality', and a lack of inter-ethnic mixing

4.1 Participants' constructions of 'normality' with regard to how people 'look' and behave

The issue of what constituted 'normal' came up in the student narratives. All of the student participants expressed different views on what it meant to be 'normal' in their schools. While Holly (MSP) was not sure there was a 'normal', stating that 'I don't think there is a normal because there are so many different people', it was clear from the other student participants' comments that there was a 'normal' stereotype. Issues of appearance, and of 'blending in' or at least 'not standing out' in this regard, were highlighted. For Victoria (MSP), 'normal' was 'not to stand out too much ... It could be by your appearance or something ... Maybe talking in a specific manner'. Several of the WISPs viewed themselves as 'normal', and associated this 'normality' with their appearance, 'blending in', not looking 'scruffy', and being popular:

It is kind of weird, but it is a bit like me ... normal people are just people who have swag ... instead of looking just scruffy ... Like me, Johnathan and Jason, we are kind of termed 'normal'. (Hayden, WISP).

To be normal? Just, like, to just blend in with everyone ... Like me, Hayden and Jason are popular to a certain extent ... (Johnathan, WISP).

The two Roma student participants were certain that they were not in the 'normal' group but felt that their 'plain white' (Marian, MSP) Irish friends would be. They emphasised that being 'normal' meant *not* being Traveller, Gypsy or Roma:

... I guess it's not to be a Traveller or a Gypsy or Roma ... just not to be a Traveller or a Gypsy or Roma. And I am not normal but my friend Victoria ... would be counted as normal. She is from Ireland. (Natalia, MSP)

No. She is like plain. Plain is like she is plain white [Irish], she is not a Traveller ... Normal would be non-Traveller or non-Gypsy, and I think non-Roma. (Marian, MSP)

The student participants' comments with regard to Travellers and being 'normal' first centred on issues of behaviour. Johnathan (WISP) argued that Travellers were not considered 'normal' to anyone other than other Travellers '... because they are trouble starters. Nobody likes trouble starters'. Josef (WISP) reported that they 'act[ed] differently' and 'talk[ed] with a funny accent', while Anastacia (MSP) felt that 'Travellers are more loud'. Some of the Traveller student participants also commented on differences between Traveller and non-Traveller students. Serena (TSP) observed differences in terminology for common words, but also felt that Travellers were 'rough' and 'dirtier' compared to non-Travellers who were 'like all clean':

... like they [buffers] have their dinner at six ... they would have tea, supper ... we don't say tea, we say tae. We don't say buggie, we say pram ... We are rough to them ... We are like more dirtier to them, they are like all clean (Serena, TSP).

Martin (TSP) felt that while 'buffers'³ fit in. They fit perfectly in [school], 'we don't fit in there at all' while Rosa (TSP) believed that Travellers were viewed '... always in trouble, always drinking, robbing, stealing, dressed naked, wearing a lot less clothes like, and mean to people ...' (Rosa, TSP).

All of the student participants talked about ‘the Traveller look’ (Josef, MSP), suggesting that you could ‘spot’ (Marian, MSP) a Traveller by how they dressed or wore their hair, and that this look was different and not ‘normal’. Both Brian (WISP) and Josef (MSP) commented that Traveller boys had a specific way of dressing that was different to the settled population, and yet they admitted sometimes non-Travellers also dressed in that way:

... to be honest, how they dress ... some people say they tuck their pants in their socks ... they have like a V haircut ... they say ‘oh yeah, that is the Traveller look ...’ well, a buffer could just do that ... you can never really tell. (Josef, MSP)

Travellers have a dress code like ... they would wear different clothes than everyone else would wear ... It is like it is their outfit if you get me ... you would always know them if you saw because like most Travellers have pants tucked in to the socks. Like I do it myself. (Brian, WISP)

Traveller girls were described as girls who ‘have really long hair’ and ‘always like to show a bit of flesh’ (Brian, WISP), were ‘really tanned’ (Victoria, MSP). Holly (MSP) felt you could identify a Traveller girl by the ‘length of their hair ... tonnes of bling on ... a lot of them wear hooped earrings’. Some of the Traveller participants agreed, and interestingly, both Serena (TSP) and Theresa (TSP) used the third person when describing what Traveller girls wore:

... the Travellers like they believe in bra tops and skirts and all these kind of things ... I see them ... Ballinasloe fair, we go there every year. (Serena, TSP)

... they dress different ... they would wear jeans and a fitted top whereas the other people would probably just wear jeans and a big hoody like ... or you know [Travellers] by their hair, because their hair will be up in the clip. (Theresa, TSP)

In contrast, Rosa (TSP) explained how she dressed as a Traveller girl and compared this to how ‘buffers’ dressed. She also felt that Travellers girls were judged as ‘sluts’ and ‘strange people’ rather than ‘humans’ as a result of what they wore:

If I walked in there and I had pale make-up and ... like this funny kind of t-shirt, wide-like jeans, pair of runners ... [they] think I am a buffer? ... But we don’t dress like that. We would walk in with skinny-like jeans on, boots or rips on our jeans, a body top ... when people think of Travellers, they think they are sluts ... because they wear these clothe ... they don’t think of us as humans, they think of us as like strange people ... they judge us by our clothes ... You don’t learn that, you just know that, like. The way people look at you, like (Rosa, TSP).

4.2 Relating to the ‘other’: inter-group mixing

Most of the staff and student participants reported that they observed a lack of mixing between students from different ethnic groups. Maire, a staff participant, explained that the Polish, Traveller, and Black students were ‘at odds’ with each other (Maire, SP). The student participants generally concurred, with Johnathan (WISP) stating that the Polish, Blacks and Travellers all ‘hated’ each other and got into fights:

No. Travellers and Polish hate each other ... Polish and Black hate each other, and Travellers and Black hate each other ... In town and stuff, all the time, you always see people fighting. And it is mostly Travellers with Blacks. (Johnathan, WISP)

They don't get along ... The African people [and Travellers]. Not at all. It is just they get all up chests together and try to fight with each other. In the middle of class and everything. They just don't get along ... I never actually seen them talk civilised together. Ever. They don't mix. They stick to each other. (Jennifer, TSP)

Josef (MSP) was the only Black student to take part in the study. While he claimed to 'never really get into a fight' with Travellers, he qualified that by following up with, 'not much really' and emphasised that 'everyone just stays within their own group'.

My experiences. Well, I never really get in a fight or anything [with Travellers], never really get in an argument. Not much really ... everyone just stays with their own group ... (Josef, MSP)

Some of the Traveller student participants described students from diverse backgrounds as 'nice people' (Celine, TSP) and reported that 'most of them get on with Travellers' (Rosa, TSP), and they felt that it was good to 'have people from different countries' (Mickey, TSP) in their school. Celine (TSP) observed that 'we treat them like a normal person. Because like, they get treated the same way as us ... But we don't judge people by their colour ...' (Celine, TSP). However, some of the TSPs openly claimed that they 'wouldn't mix' (Rosa, TSP) with the Polish students because of their behaviour:

I wouldn't mix with them [the Polish students]. Because most of them are on drugs. (Rosa, TSP)

All the Polish people hang out in the back, and they play this kind of rap music, and they all smoke ... A good few of those Polish people is ignorant, very ignorant. (Celine, TSP)

There was also evidence of tension between the White, Irish settled students, and the Polish and Traveller students. Hayden (WISP) and Johnathan (WISP) commented on their Polish peers being 'kind of gang people', and of groups sticking to themselves more generally.

... most of them [the Polish students] go off in big gangs and just hang out, so I don't really tend to hang out with them. (Hayden, WISP)

I have a good few Black friends, I just only don't hang out with Polish, because they are more kind of gang people ... Polish stick with Polish, Travellers stick with Travellers. Black people don't like to be discriminated against by White people, so that is why they hang out with White people, and stuff. But Polish and Travellers don't really give a damn about anybody but themselves. (Johnathan, WISP)

None of the non-Traveller participants had any Travellers as 'real' friends. All of the MSPs claimed to get along with Travellers to varying degrees, but none of them had Travellers as 'close friends' (Christiano, MSP) or friendships seemed to be superficial. For example, Josef (MSP) explained that he had a friend who was a Traveller but reported that he had only discovered his friend's ethnicity after two years of friendship, which would suggest that the friendship was not very deep. While the WISPs had Travellers as neighbours and had attended the same primary schools as them, there was no evidence of meaningful relationships. Several of the male WISPs were explicit that they were not and would not be friends with Travellers as they felt they would 'bring trouble to your door' (Hayden, WISP):

... Just not my type of people ... We don't fight ... but some of them are like, pure bad ... They would start a fight over literally anything ... If you are a nice person ... you wouldn't like hanging around with Travellers (Johnathan, WISP)

... I don't think I am friends with any Traveller kids. I don't mind them but I wouldn't be friends with them. Because when it comes down to it, they just turn on you ... They always start trouble. They bring trouble to your door. (Hayden, WISP)

Mickey (TSP) was the only Traveller that said he spent time with non-Travellers outside of school and he seemed to make a great effort 'to get along with other people'.

Like in around town, and like we ring each other and say - 'do you want to go into the cinema?' or whatever ... I get on very well with them now. ... I will just keep trying until it works ... I just try and get along with other people. (Mickey, TSP)

Some of the male Traveller participants reported that they mixed with non-Travellers when playing sport, but more generally they admitted that they mostly mixed only with each other. Explaining this, Celine (TSP) noted that she 'wouldn't have a problem' with non-Travellers but was closer to her own group of (Traveller) friends as she had known most of them since she was a small child:

Yeah, I'd still talk to them and that, I wouldn't have a problem with them ... but like I have my own friends that I am closer to ... There is one or two that I just met when I came into the school, but then the rest of them I knew like since I was small ... when I go to see the rest of my friends just not like in the school, and you're talking to them constantly and like you are always on the phone to them, so you find better friendship. (Celine, TSP)

Most of the non-Traveller participants tended to blame Travellers for the lack of mixing and suggested that Traveller culture was problematic when it came to integration, in particular for Traveller girls. For example, Victoria (MSP) felt that Travellers tended to 'stay in their group' and recalled being told by a Traveller girl that if they married outside of their ethnic group that 'they wouldn't really be accepted' (Victoria, MSP).

I am not sure, because they stay in their group, like all Travellers, maybe they would like to mix, because I have heard from girls that if they married say a non-Traveller, then they wouldn't really be accepted. And I think that is really not fair ... And I think boy Travellers mix with different groups more than girls do. (Victoria, MSP)

Traveller culture and related gender issues were identified as a reason for not mixing in class and in school more generally by the staff participants.

... I don't know sometimes if it [culture] is used as an excuse that ... because I do a lot of group work, mixed up kids, all that kind of sort of thing ... but sometimes kids won't do that, and particularly the kids from the Traveller population tend to, sometimes, not all ... but might not want to or won't sit beside a boy ... (Maire, SP)

... if you watch them and observe them just for one lunch time ... All the Traveller girls stick together and there are certain reasons behind that. Traveller boys stick together ... They are more comfortable. And regarding Traveller culture - girls cannot be seen on their own. There is a stigma to that ... (John, SP)

Some of the staff participants suggested that Travellers needed to stop hanging around in 'big gangs' (Padraic, SP) if they were going to 'do themselves any favours' (Caroline, SP). The non-Traveller student participants also thought that it would be a good thing for

Travellers if they started to mix more as people might change their perceptions of them if they got a chance to know them.

Well I think Travellers need to start mixing more. You know start hanging around with other people. Not other Travellers. You know 'cause when Travellers hang around with other Travellers the fear around them is never going to go away. But do you know if they are seen hanging out with other people like ... it probably would not exist after a while. (Brian, WISP)

While the staff participants noted a lack of mixing between the different student groups, Sean (SP) blamed students from other cultures being 'a little bit cliquy' and suggested that 'the Irish kids' were 'very accepting':

... I think the Irish kids mix very well, because they are a little bit more culturally laid back, and I think because they are so socially adept ... I think there is a little bit of an issue, a little bit of fear from other cultures that when they come to Ireland, that they can be a little bit cliquy because they don't know what to expect ... I think Irish kids ... they are very accepting ... But I think that for those who are from a culturally diverse background, for them, the challenge can be them. (Sean, SP)

While some of the staff participants accepted and indeed normalised the lack of mixing between groups, explaining that it 'is just the way it is' (John, SP), other staff participants expressed concern and felt that the Department of Education had not 'planned well enough for schools' (Padraic, SP) like St. Greg's. Padraic (SP) did not think that integration was possible when there were too many students from 'any particular grouping':

I am not really sure that we planned, that the Department or whoever, planned well enough for schools like ours, because you can't just put everyone in together and hope for the best ... I said, 'there are too many', and this is how we feel, if there are too many of any particular grouping, then there is no integration. (Padraic, SP)

5. Discussion and conclusion

As we have shown, both staff and student participants in this study reported problematic relationships and a lack of mixing between different student groups in St. Greg's. In this context, it was also suggested that the Traveller 'look' and behaviour were not 'normal'. From a CRT perspective, the participants' narratives, especially those of the students, demonstrate the ongoing significant impact of what Delgado (1995) termed the everyday 'business-as-usual-racism'.

5.1 Constructing the 'other': Travellers' behaviour and look

Like some of the student participants in the current research, some of the primary school participants in Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela's (2008) study referred to Travellers as 'troublemakers' (Hayden, WISP). Children's perceptions are shaped by the environment in which they live (Bryan, 2010) and in Ireland Travellers are relentlessly stereotyped as lazy, violent troublemakers via the media and dominant discourses (Drummond 2006; Leahy 2014). The media not only influences how we see others but it shapes how we see ourselves and subsequently affects our behaviour (Kabachnik 2009). Drawing on Nemeth (1991), Kabachnik (2009) contends that many Traveller and/or Gypsy men

find the violent stereotype preferable to the victim stereotype because they would rather be associated with some sort of power, even if it is negative, as it allows them to command some form of respect and/or makes people leave them alone. This allows Irish Travellers to avoid, what Fanon (1968, 81) describes as, the 'internalization of inferiority'. Kabachnik (2009) argues that the internalisation and the performance of stereotypical roles reinforces and fulfils the expectations of non-Travellers. Young Travellers need to be engaged in conversations regarding how Traveller identity is being constructed, shaped and influenced by outside forces so that they can understand and deconstruct the stereotypes ascribed to them.

The non-Traveller student participants also identified Traveller-specific ways of speaking, physical appearance, and dress. While in a study on Irish Travellers living in the UK, Griffin (2002) concluded that, unlike Gypsies, Irish Travellers did not see clothing as important, in the current study, clothing appeared to be an important marker of Traveller identity for both Traveller and non-Traveller students alike. Most of the commentary here was about Traveller girls' physical appearance and style of dressing, which marked them as 'other' and somehow not 'normal'. Okely (2014, 209) suggests that 'Gypsy and Traveller identity can be said to be constructed through opposition to outside society by favouring an alternative taste to that followed by the majority'. The use of clothing styles as a way of advertising group identity in opposition to a dominant group has been noted in the literature (Skeggs 2004; Lawler 2005). Aspects of appearance, including clothing, are also frequently used as markers of class and ethnic identities (Skeggs 2004; Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007) and of boundaries therein, and Travellers inhabit a specific location at the intersection of class and ethnicity. From a CRT perspective, this intersectional identity location is significant, given that 'overlapping identities' can result in the experience of multiple systems of subordination (Crenshaw 1989) and this was certainly evident in the highly classed, as well as raced, experiences of the Traveller students in the study. The comments describing Travellers – especially the girls – are similar to the ways in which working class 'chavs'⁴, who have 'vulgar' and excessive taste (Hayward and Yar 2006, 14), have been talked about. 'Chavs' are described as showing too much flesh, being too tanned, wearing too much make-up and the wrong kind of jewellery (Lawler 2005), as being troublesome, having strong accents and inarticulate speech, and as having bad taste in clothing (Skeggs 2004). Lawler (2005, 432) suggests that the image of the working class 'chav' is constructed in such a way as to invite an understanding 'that certain kinds of clothing, location and bodily appearance indicate a deeper, underlying pathology'. The non-Traveller student participants appeared to be explicitly distinguishing themselves from the Traveller students, through what Keane (2011) has conceptualised as a type of 'status maintaining/raising distancing' (145). Skeggs (2004) contends that maintaining distance from the 'other' requires diligent work because the difference between the self and the 'other' is not fixed or static, thus, people must carefully project what is considered distasteful onto the bodies of the 'other'. It was evident from the student participants that they thought that Travellers dressed distastefully. As Keane (2011) has argued, matters of 'taste' form part of class-based 'distinction'. For Bourdieu (1984, 394), aspects of appearance, such as clothing, are 'concerned with the symbolization of social position'. Choosing to appear and/or dress in a certain way is indicative of one's 'taste', which is firmly related to one 'given position in social space' (466), that is, it is class-related.

Indeed, also drawing on Bourdieu, Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall (2007, 234) argue that 'style' can be thought of as a form of 'taste', a 'classed performance' which operates to distinguish between social groups. Similarly, Skeggs (2004, 101) stresses the importance of aspects of physical appearance (including dress and hairstyle) as 'condensed class signifiers'. As part of being judged as dressing distastefully, the student participants expressed that Travellers dressed in 'slutty' ways. It is interesting to see how the image of the 'slut' that has been used to shame women has been projected onto young Travellers; as on one hand Traveller women are represented as oppressed victims of the Traveller patriarchy (Jensen and Ringrose 2014) while on the other they are portrayed as women 'that like to show a bit of flesh' (Brian, WISP). Within 'post-feminist' moralistic discourse, young women are positioned as 'sluts' or 'virgins', the 'Madonna' or the 'whore', and 'slut' is commonly associated with working class girls (Walkerdine, 1997). 'Othering' girls who expose 'a bit of flesh' as sluts enables a comfortable distancing from associations of working class disrespectability (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). The impact of the media including 'mockumentaries' such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*⁵ also requires attention in terms of the 'fixation', amongst the non-Traveller public, with the ways in which young Traveller women dress, and the invitation to viewers to ridicule Travellers for their 'tasteless' fashion sense (Jensen and Ringrose 2014). By mocking the 'Traveller look' (Josef, MSP), particularly of Traveller girls, through television programmes such as these, society indirectly dictates to (all) young women what is considered an acceptable form of fashion and bodily presentation in a (supposedly) post-feminist society (Jensen and Ringrose 2014). In this sense, Travellers as the 'other' still serve a purpose at macro level in terms of promoting the 'ideal' female.

5.2 Lack of mixing between student groups and inter-ethnic conflict

The student participants tended to 'stick to their own' (Keane 2011) specific group within the school environment and rarely had friendships with students outside of their own cultural group. A lack of meaningful inter-ethnic mixing has also been reported in research in Ireland (Ní Dhuinn and Keane 2021; Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2008) and internationally (Tatum 2017; Rhamie, Bhopal, and Bhatti 2012). In the current study, there was, in particular, very little evidence of mixing between Travellers and students from other groups and, indeed, some of the WISPs and MSPs explicitly stated that they would *not* 'hang out' with Travellers. Such views are not uncommon. Research has highlighted that racist attitudes are prevalent towards Traveller students at both primary (O'Keeffe and O'Connor 2001) and post-primary levels (Tormey and Gleeson 2012; Boyle, Hanafin, and Flynn 2018) and white settled Irish students tend to report a high level of social distance from Travellers in particular (ibid.; Mc Ginley and Keane 2021; Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2008; Lynch and Lodge 2002). While previous research has demonstrated how Travellers are positioned as an 'out-group' in schools, the current study has shown how 'other' minority ethnic students also distance themselves from Travellers within the post-primary school environment.

It is not unusual for students to stick with people from their own ethnic group in schools (Tatum 2017). Research points to a sense of comfort and connection as a key reason why those from similar backgrounds tend to prefer to 'stick together' (cf. Keane 2011), given the homophilous nature of human beings (Keane 2011; Mouw

2006). Further, given the level of social distance from Travellers that is evident in Irish society (Mac Gréil 2010; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Tormey and Gleeson 2012), the evidence of 'White racism' (Bhopal 2011) experienced by Gypsy and Traveller groups, and racist bullying and poor peer relationships that they report (cf. Derrington and Kendall 2008; Deuchar and Bhopal 2013), it is unsurprising that the Traveller participants did not report more 'real' friendships with 'other' students. While the lack of mixing between Travellers and the settled community is often presented as Travellers not wanting to dilute their culture (cf. Lloyd and Stead 2001; Cudworth 2018), the same argument is rarely employed to explain the lack of mixing on the part of the dominant group in relation to minority groups. The need for members of the dominant group to integrate with 'others' is rarely remarked upon in dominant discourses. It is not surprising, therefore, that the staff and the student participants from the different groups rarely referred to the fact that the White settled Irish students tended not to mix much outside of their own ethnic group. Similarly, Sean (SP) suggested that racism is something that minorities have 'brought with them' to school as opposed to something that exists within the White settled Irish community. Indeed, Ní Laoire et al. (2009) found that migrant families and their children are made responsible for 'belonging'. Devine (2013, 288) points out that in cases where 'belonging' does not occur, this is attributed to 'deficits' within the migrant community itself.

The current study also found evidence of inter-ethnic conflict between different student groups. While the staff participants suggested that it was only a problem between the different minority ethnic groups, most notably the Polish, Travellers and 'the Blacks' (John, SP), the student participants also reported tensions between the White settled students and 'other' student groups. Some of the White Irish settled and Traveller student participants reported that they did not make an effort to integrate. As the Polish are predominantly White, settled, and Catholic, and thus socially and culturally similar to the Irish, it was thought that they and other Eastern Europeans would require minimal integration (Bryan, 2010; Kitching 2011). However, the Polish community generally maintains strong ties with their home country, with many Polish children attending Polish weekend schools where there is a great emphasis on keeping their mother tongue alive (O'Brien and Long 2012). It has been suggested that this approach may hinder the integration of Polish students into the Irish school community (ibid.).

While Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela (2008) found evidence of inter-ethnic conflict between primary school students, it was mostly in the form of racist name-calling and the exclusion of students (see also Kitching (2011) at post-primary level). The current study found that conflict had escalated into physical forms between certain groups, particularly between Traveller and Black students, and Polish and Black students. Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela (2008) warned that 'what teachers may see taking place in the yard or school classroom is often the 'tip of the iceberg' of the incidence of racism in children's lives' (p. 370). Inter-ethnic conflict is a symptom of something much larger at play at the macro level and is one of the many by-products of living in a racialised society (Varma-Joshi, Baker, and Tanaka 2004). While inter-ethnic conflict and lack of mixing between student groups is not unusual, research suggests that that it may be worse in a segregated setting (Vigil 1988; Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2008), particularly one with 'concentrated' levels of disadvantage (Smyth, McCoy, and Kingston 2015; McGinley and Keane 2021). Minority groups in segregated settings are often pitted

against each other and feel they need to compete for resources (Vigil 1988) which can lead to tension among groups. Hence, it was no surprise to see these tensions being played out in a school like St. Greg's, a very diverse school characterised by a high concentration of disadvantage. Research in Ireland has demonstrated an over-concentration of diversity in some schools, particularly DEIS schools (Byrne et al. 2010; Darmody et al. 2012) and this was especially true for St. Greg's (see also Mc Ginley and Keane 2021). While proponents of 'contact theory' believe that inter-ethnic contact reduces racial prejudice (Husnu and Crisp 2010), the findings of the current study demonstrate the necessity of taking into account the complexity of in-group and out-group dynamics (Manevska, Achterberg, and Houtman 2018). The ways in which children form friendships have been found to be influenced by gender, social class and ethnicity, and children engage in processes of exclusion and inclusion with those labelled as 'other' often being excluded (Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2008). While contact alone does not foster meaningful relationships between groups, inter-ethnic *friendship* is strongly related to positive thinking about ethnic minorities because friendship is a more intimate form of contact (Pettigrew et al. 2011). McLaren (2003, 913) contends that 'if a contact situation provides an opportunity to see that beliefs are actually similar, prejudice should be reduced'. In the Irish context, Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela (2008) found that in schools where meaningful opportunities were created for students to mix, students from different backgrounds had better relationships with each other. This points to the need for appropriate and effective intercultural education in all schools, but most especially in schools with high levels of diversity and/or 'concentrations' of disadvantage. While, in theory, an intercultural approach to education has been adopted as a means of catering for the increasing diversity in Irish schools (Kitching and Curtin 2012), as the staff participants in the current study pointed out, Ireland's policy and implementation response to a diverse schooling population has been poor. The staff participants argued that it was not enough to put students from diverse backgrounds into a classroom with the expectation that they would all get on, and suggested that better planning was needed on the part of the Department of Education in relation to the socio-demographic composition of school populations. In this regard, CRT's emphasis on 'racial realism', that is, putting issues of race and racism at the centre (Chapman and Bhopal 2019; Gillborn 2006) of discussions about, for example, inter-ethnic peer relationships (and conflict) at school, is key, as it is more often denied; indeed, as Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2021) argue, this denial is evident in the frequent categorisation of racist bullying in schools as 'just bullying'.

5.3 Conclusion

Within a CRT framework, while it is accepted that racism is, unfortunately, 'normal' rather than being 'aberrant' (Delgado 1995), Milner (2008) argues that its exposure as a first step, followed by targeted action, may result its reduction. Certainly, in CRT in education, a central concern is to change rather than just understand and 'expose' racism in schooling and other educational settings, and, as such, 'radical solutions' (Ladson-Billings 1988, 22) are required. While 'radical' solutions may be some way off, the findings reported in this paper highlight the importance of the socio-relational realm when exploring the experiences of minority and marginalised groups in schooling,

and demonstrate the challenges and complexities involved in considering appropriate responses. Given the importance of peer relationships for students' general experiences of schooling, especially during adolescence, further research is needed to understand and support inter-ethnic relationships in the context of Ireland's continually diversifying society. This study has highlighted strained relationships, a lack of inter-ethnic mixing, and some physical conflict between different student groups in St. Greg's, a highly diverse, urban DEIS school with a high concentration of disadvantage. In this context, it was also suggested that the Traveller 'look' and behaviour were not 'normal'. This situation suggests a failure of intercultural education policy (NCCA 2006) which emphasises the importance of peer integration and positive relationships between groups. As noted by the staff participants, interculturalism is not achieved by putting large numbers of young people from diverse backgrounds together and hoping for the best. Especially when a large proportion of a school's diverse population is from lower socio-economic groups, patterns of inequality and disadvantage are exacerbated (Perry and McConney 2003; Smyth, McCoy, and Kingston 2015; Sofroniou, Archer, and Weir 2004). As we have previously argued (Mc Ginley and Keane 2021), the segregation amongst schools in relation to more concentrated levels of disadvantage requires us to actively question the extent to which DEIS as a programme is perpetuating or even exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, educational disadvantage in Ireland. The impact of the socio-demographic composition of a school on the day-to-day experiences of students (and staff) is significant, with schools with high concentrations of disadvantage encountering significant ongoing additional demands in terms of student care, protection, and support, learning and behavioural challenges, and staff turnover (cf. Thrupp 1998; Lupton 2005; Fleming 2020). Indeed, Fleming and Harford (2021, 1) argue that not only are resources to address educational disadvantage through the DEIS programme inadequate, but also that 'mechanisms are in place in the state's funding of post-primary schools to ensure the perpetuation of educational disadvantage'. As Fleming (2020, 21) argues, DEIS schools experience 'grades of disadvantage' and the policy response needs to reflect this. For policy-makers, understanding all of this, and acting on this understanding, constitutes an important basis for the possibility of the development of the 'radical solutions' necessary to address race inequity in education in Ireland.

Further, within the current DEIS system, in schools like St. Greg's, an informed and active approach to intercultural education is needed, in which appropriately trained and supported staff are enabled to effectively support student integration. From a CRT perspective, the lack of recognition of the primacy of race and ethnicity in structuring and mediating peer relationships and student integration is highly problematic. This lack of recognition is evident through the non-implementation of the *Intercultural Education Guidelines for Post-primary Schools* (NCCA 2006), of which many teachers are unaware and the vast majority do not use, in spite of their significant use with student teachers in initial teacher education in many higher education institutions. Given the imminent introduction of Traveller history and culture into school curricula, questions must be asked about the readiness of the system to effectively and appropriately teach and support all students in the context of the introduction of this important content. The impact on Traveller students, and inter-ethnic relationships more generally, of this addition to the curriculum will need to be carefully managed and monitored, especially given the challenges associated with 'additive' curricular amendments (Kavanagh and

Dupont 2021). While curriculum development has been recognised by teachers as an important strategy to promote inclusion and respect for diversity (Dupont 2022), careful and critical continuous professional development for teachers will be required to ensure that Traveller culture and history are taught in an appropriate and sensitive manner (Mc Ginley 2020). While it is true that ‘education cannot compensate for society’ (Bernstein 1970) and that educational disadvantage is rooted in wider structural inequalities of poverty, racism, and oppression, schools are critically important sites given their potential role in contributing to societal cohesion. In this regard, much further attention is needed to the socio-relational realm (Keane 2011) of schooling, particularly with regard to inter-ethnic peer relationships.

Notes

1. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) forms part of the Department of Education and Skills’ social inclusion strategy to support children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage in Ireland. Schools included in the DEIS programme receive additional supports in recognition of the proportion of their students from marginalised backgrounds (cf. DES 2005).
2. For a Table presenting information on all study participants, see Mc Ginley and Keane (2021).
3. Irish Travellers have their own language commonly known as Cant. The Cant word for settled person is ‘buffer’.
4. Slang, derogatory, term for the White working class, that originated in England.
5. A British television documentary series, broadcast on Channel 4, which claimed to explore the lives and traditions of several GRT families as family members prepared to get married. The series was heavily criticised by Traveller and other groups as reinforcing racist stereotypes in relation to the Travelling community.

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