

# "It's all about what happens on the ground": interpretations of intercultural education in Ireland.

**Greg Harris**

*Master of Education*

*National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)*

Greg Harris graduated from the University of East London with a PGCE in 2007. He spent 10 years teaching Religious Education and Sociology in diverse, inner-city schools in the United Kingdom. During this time, he developed an interest in intercultural education. After moving to Ireland, he completed a Masters in Education at NUI Galway (2018). This article discusses some of the findings from the dissertation completed as part of this programme.

**KEYWORDS:** Intercultural education, Post-Primary Education, Intercultural Education Strategy,

## INTRODUCTION

Ireland has historically been 'a country of emigration' (McGinnity and Kingston, 2017: 255). Since before the turn of the century, however, it has experienced considerable demographic change, driven by increased levels of immigration (ibid). Due to such changes, diversity has become 'a central question of contemporary societies' (Antonsich, 2015: 1). In response, the Irish government has adopted a policy of interculturalism.

Though the Irish government has promoted intercultural education, this is a contested term with multiple definitions. Both nationally and internationally, academics have criticised state-led approaches to intercultural education. This research was inspired by many of these critiques. However, it noted that in the Irish context, these often focused on macro-level processes, such as policy formation, and the way these influence classroom practice. As a dissertation, this research aimed to explore the conceptions of intercultural education held by teachers and school leaders and the way they implement these understandings. This article will discuss the following questions which formed part of this research:

- How do teachers and school leaders view intercultural education?
- Does intercultural policy influence the beliefs of teachers and school leaders?

This research was carried out in two schools in Ireland. These will be referred to as School A and School B.

## CONTEXT

The most recent iteration of the Irish government's approach to intercultural education is presented in the *Intercultural Education Strategy (IES)* (DES, 2010). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), a body which influenced the *IES*, states that Ireland has rejected multiculturalism where "different cultures live side by side without much interaction" (NCCA 2018: i) in favour of interculturalism where "people of different cultures...engage with each other and learn from each other" (NCCA, 2018: i-ii).

The *IES* instructs schools to "welcome diversity and appreciate the opportunities it affords" (ibid: 59) and to "promote intercultural education so that it becomes the norm" (ibid: 52). A number of actions are suggested to support this, such as requiring education providers to have specific rules on racism and stereotyping in their behaviour policies; making modules on intercultural education part of all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes; and providing professional development courses on intercultural education for existing teachers (ibid: 59-60).

Though the *IES*' focus on equality and inclusion (the words are used 42 and 28 times in the Strategy respectively) is laudable, the Irish approach to interculturalism has been subject to criticism. Bryan argues that intercultural education is an ineffectual add-on and that some teachers' attitudes are inimical to its proper practice (Bryan, 2010). Further, she argues that Irish intercultural policy "masks relationships of power in society" and prevents social justice (Bryan, 2009: 298) by focusing on tokenistic celebrations of diversity whilst keeping a serious discussion of white privilege and societal power structures out of the classroom. As such, it not only fails to address social justice but also "brilliantly disguises, power relations between majoritised and minoritised groups" (Bryan, 2010: 254).

---

The quoted document (*Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School* (NCCA, 2018)) is one of the policy documents which informed the *IES* (DES, 2010: 23-4).

This form of interculturalism, which focuses on the celebration of diversity rather than on social justice, is very close to what Fanning called 'weak multiculturalism' (Fanning, 2012: 223). For Bryan, "macro processes operating at the level of Irish state policy" (ibid) "constrain" (Bryan and

Bracken, 2011: 120), “frame” (Bryan, 2010: 262) and inform (Bryan, 2009: 300) school level approaches to diversity, inequality and racism.

Bryan’s critique of Irish policy mirrors much international criticism of common approaches to intercultural education. Current intercultural education practices have been criticised as being an “add on” in the USA (Sleeter, 2017: 158), UK (Bhopal and Rhamie, 2014: 309) and Australia (Mills and Ballantyne, 2010: 447). Further, Gorski argues that:

*any framework for intercultural education that does not have as its central and overriding premise a commitment to the establishment and maintenance of an equitable and just world can be seen as a tool, however well-intentioned, of an educational colonization in which inequity and injustice are reproduced under the guise of interculturalism (Gorski, 2008, 517)*

This criticism is reminiscent of Critical Race Theory, which argues that liberal approaches to social justice offer “no mechanism” (Ladson-Billings, 1998: 12) to overcome the systematic white privilege inherent in society. Concerns about intercultural education do not only reside in the area of policy. There is a wealth of international literature suggesting that teachers hold negative and/or limited attitudes towards intercultural education. Though it is difficult to summarise this research, some of the main themes arising from it are:

- Teachers may be hostile towards the goals of intercultural education (Sleeter, 2017; Solomona, Portelli, Daniel and Campbell, 2006) and see attempts to address injustice as an attack on their whiteness (Picower, 2009: 205)
- Teachers may have “simplistic views of diversity that highlights the celebratory rather than the critical or transformatory approaches” to intercultural education (Schoorman and Bogotch, 2010: 1042).

This research shares the concerns Bryan has raised about the type of intercultural education promulgated by the *IES* and believes that a more transformative approach is necessary to tackle inequality in society. Though Bryan’s work suggests intercultural policies affect classroom practice, this research wanted to explore the extent to which policy influenced teachers’ beliefs about intercultural education. Further, the existing literature often focuses on pre-service teachers, and this leaves a gap in the literature both nationally and internationally. This research aimed to explore the way teachers and school leaders shape the way intercultural education is understood, which in turn would affect the way national intercultural education policy was implemented.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As the study aimed to investigate the conceptualisations of intercultural education held by teachers and school leaders, a mixed methods research design was employed, consisting of a questionnaire (with teachers) and two in-depth semi-structured interviews (with school leaders). The questionnaire had both a qualitative and quantitative element. The quantitative element of the questionnaire was based upon Pohan and Aguilar's (2001: 178-80) personal and professional beliefs about diversity scales, which aim to measure teachers' beliefs about diversity in both a "personal sense" and "within a professional, educational context" (ibid: 161). Though the data from the scale will be touched on briefly, the main questions of interest to this article were two open-ended questions which asked respondents to describe what they felt intercultural education meant and how they implemented it in their lessons. Participants were not given examples of what intercultural pedagogy involves in the hope of gaining a sense of their understandings of what this might look like. As well as collecting demographic data from the participants, there were also two questions that asked respondents to rate their knowledge of intercultural policy and their comfort teaching interculturally, using a Likert scale.

Individual interviews were conducted with two post-primary school leaders, the Principal of School A and the Deputy Principal of School B. A semi-structured interview approach facilitated the treatment of the school leader interviewees as insightful collaborators (Marvasti and Freie, 2017: 625), which was important given their experience working in diverse schools. The semi-structured interview approach also allowed the interviewees to talk at length, in their own style, about the research topic (Bryman, 2012: 470). Both data collection instruments were piloted, resulting in some small changes to the order of the items in the interview schedule. No changes were made to the questionnaire. With the aim of maximising the response rate, all staff in both schools were invited to complete the questionnaire. 22 teachers (16 from School A, 6 from School B) responded to the survey, representing roughly a third of the target population.

For the interviews, purposive sampling was used. This is where particular individuals are invited to participate in the study. This was seen as appropriate because the school leaders selected were "knowledgeable people" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 156-157) regarding intercultural education in their schools. The two interviews were roughly 30 minutes in duration. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data from the questionnaire and the interviews were analysed using some grounded theory coding techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were three main findings of relevance to this article. These were:

1. Teachers who participated in this study were relatively open to diversity.
2. Most of these teachers spoke about intercultural education in terms of celebrating and recognising cultures. Some teachers conflated intercultural education with teaching a diverse student body.
3. The school leaders interviewed suggested that national intercultural policies have little effect on the way intercultural education is carried out in their schools.

The first of these will not be discussed in detail here. Despite this, it is important to note that from quantitative data gathered using Pohan and Aguilar's scale, teachers showed high levels of openness and acceptance in the majority of subcategories. The participants were, however, less open in professional than personal contexts, which could suggest some reluctance towards intercultural teaching practices.

In the qualitative data gathered, both teachers and school leaders mainly expressed views supporting the kind of 'weak multiculturalism' (Fanning, 2012: 223) found in the *IES*. When discussing the meaning of intercultural education, teachers highlighted the importance of respecting and acknowledging the importance of different cultures.

*For me, it means that in an educational setting... all different types of diversity and cultures are recognised and respected by all. (Questionnaire respondent 6, School A)*

For some, this was closely connected to beliefs about equality and integration:

*To me, it's teaching to the diverse audience that present from a vast array of cultures and beliefs in today's Irish classrooms, in an environment of equality. (Questionnaire respondent 1, School A).*

*It means acknowledging and integrating different cultures in the classroom (Questionnaire respondent 4, School A)*

Respect, recognition, acknowledgement and equality were identified as important parts of intercultural education and, therefore, some teachers saw their role as helping students to understand 'other' cultures.

The school leaders' understandings of intercultural education centred on celebrating and recognising difference with the aim of increasing students' mutual understanding. This was clear from the way they described what intercultural education is ("I suppose that all cultures are celebrated" (School A Principal)) and the intercultural activities they described. Describing their school's annual International Day, School B Deputy Principal said:

*... it's a really fantastic day here in school... On that day we also have our awards day for the year because we think that that fits in really well, do you know, it's a celebration of culture, diversity, food, clothing and then to end the day on a celebration of everything that went well throughout the year. (School B Deputy Principal)*

Further, the School B Deputy Principal reported that students loved representing where they came from, suggesting they appreciated this interpretation of intercultural education.

There were, however, some elements of transformative interculturalism in the school leaders' comments. This was particularly present in comments made by the School B Deputy Principal about the way certain groups interests (particularly the Travelling community) are not promoted by the education system. School B has also completed the Yellow Flag Program which is indicative of a transformative approach to intercultural education. Despite this, celebration and recognition were still dominant ways in which they talked about intercultural education.

Though most teachers' views on intercultural education focused on celebration and recognition, some teachers lacked a basic understanding of intercultural education. A number of teachers' questionnaire responses described intercultural education as "*teaching students from many cultures*" (Questionnaire respondent 11, School A), or similar.

These findings echo studies that suggest that where teachers are responsive to intercultural education, they adopt a celebratory rather than a transformative approach (Schoorman and Bogotch, 2010: 1042). This suggests that teachers' understandings of intercultural education are limited at best. They are unlikely to appreciate, and thus grapple with, the structural dimensions of inequality. In this context, Gorski (2008: 515) has argued that while teachers may have "*good intentions*" towards diversity, these "*are not enough*" to make significant improvements in society.

In focusing on recognition and celebration the participants' views did echo the kind of intercultural education found in the *IES*. It appears, however, that their views on intercultural education *aligned* with educational policy rather than being *influenced* by it. Table 1 presents

responses to questions about teachers’ familiarity with intercultural education policies and confidence delivering intercultural education.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have had the opportunity to become familiar with intercultural education policies that affect my work.	2.68	1.211
I feel confident delivering intercultural education as part of my lessons.	3.36	.953

Table 4.3: Table Showing the Means and Standard Deviations Related to Participants’ Familiarity and Confidence Regarding Intercultural Education

This suggests the teacher respondents felt slightly unfamiliar with policies related to intercultural education. There was a large, positive correlation between the two questions ( $r(20) = .60, p < .01$ ), suggesting that as familiarity with intercultural policy rose, so did confidence delivering intercultural content in lessons. Despite this, respondents reported greater confidence in delivering intercultural education than they did familiarity with relevant policy. This suggests some teachers may deliver intercultural education based on their own perceptions of the concept rather than based on government policy.

Both school leaders reported that they believed government policies had relatively “little impact” (School A Principal) on the way intercultural education was delivered in their schools. When asked about policy, neither mentioned documents that specifically focus on intercultural education (such as the *IES* or the NCCA’s guidelines on intercultural education (NCCA, 2006)) although both referenced other policies that affected their work, such as admissions policies. The School B Deputy Principal felt that intercultural education practice was very much driven by schools at local level:

*... it’s all about what happens on the ground ... for example, nobody told us to get involved in the Yellow Flag, nobody told us to have an International Day, nobody told us to take on restorative practice. That’s all self-directed, self-directed by the school, by management, by teachers, erm, so I would say it’s more driven at local level rather than at national level. It’s grand having policy documents but again*

*unless there's somebody constantly pushing that ... I think it's down to school level ultimately (School B Deputy Principal).*

For this school leader then, school staff, and specifically, having “somebody ... pushing that” (ibid) and acting as a champion of interculturalism, were key in determining the direction and extent of intercultural education practice on the ground. School B engaged in significant intercultural work, some of which is described in the quotation above. The Deputy Principal felt all of this was self-directed. Based on this school leader’s view, national policies themselves do little to ensure that schools prioritise intercultural education. Whilst they may promote intercultural education, they are insufficient to ensure intercultural practices are enacted.

Given the lack of influence of intercultural policy, this raises the question of where ideas about intercultural education come from. Mueller and O’Connor (2007: 842-3) suggest that student teachers start their programmes with “pre-instructional frames of reference” in relation to diversity and intercultural education, that is, relatively stable opinions and beliefs formed in advance that they bring to their ITE programme and change little as a result of their studies. Though there is not sufficient data in this research to support this claim, one of the school leaders, School B Deputy Principal, spoke at length about the factors that influenced their commitment to interculturalism. They spoke passionately about disliking injustice and racism, which, it was suggested, largely stemmed from their upbringing:

*... the household that I grew up in would have been very open - embrace everybody, nobody is different ... ‘cause I even remember [a] situation when I was in school and I never liked to see difference or people being treated differently for something like the amount of money you had or the clothes. And I really remember that, I remember that in primary school... I definitely think your schooling, your background, how your parents talk about difference, how your parents talk about poverty or people being rich or poor, I think all of that has a huge influence, erm, on your way of thinking (School B Deputy Principal).*

This ‘open’ upbringing was complemented by experiences at university, where School B Deputy Principal reported enjoying living with a diverse range of people. This understanding of diversity was further enhanced by working in a diverse school. Further, this Deputy Principal recognised that “some cultures find our education system limiting” due to its monocultural nature that some minority groups “might not feel included sometimes because their interests may not be included within the educational sphere”. This suggests some elements of a transformative approach

(Schoorman and Bogotch, 2010: 1042) to intercultural education in their thinking. For this particular school leader, therefore, their world view, shaped by their personal and professional experiences, seemed to be the driving factor behind a deep commitment to intercultural education.

## **CONCLUSION**

Prior to the publication of the *IES* research suggested Irish teachers felt inadequately trained to teach interculturally (Devine, 2005: 65; Keogh and Whyte, 2002: 51). This research suggests that despite the introduction of the *Strategy*, some teachers still do not understand the concept of intercultural education. Further, where intercultural education is happening this appears to be at the behest of individual schools and/or teachers. This is indicative of a general *laissez-faire* approach to integration in Ireland (Boucher, 2010: 1). The *IES*, which sets a number of goals for schools but provides little information on how these were to be monitored or measured, reflects this *laissez-faire* trend. This researcher would therefore welcome a review of current intercultural education policies with a focus on ensuring their relevance to the classroom. Without proper benchmarking (Watt, 2006: 156), intercultural education is unlikely to become anything more than an add on.

Ideally, a review of intercultural education policy would move intercultural policies in a more transformative direction, with a focus on addressing injustice and white privilege. Though the two leaders in this research largely conceptualised intercultural education in terms of celebration and recognition, activities of this kind could be important first steps in the development of high-quality intercultural education. Perhaps these celebratory starting points are necessary for more transformative conceptualisations and actions to subsequently come about, and this study did identify some elements transformative thinking in the interview with the School B Deputy Principal. This was evident in their discussion of the Yellow Flag Programme and the way schooling may not adequately cater for Traveller students. The majority of their responses, however, still focused on celebration and recognition.

This research does have significant limitations including a small sample. It also did not adequately address the extent to which school leaders can actually influence intercultural activity in their schools. Finally, given teachers' relative lack of familiarity with intercultural education, participants may have been able to give more informed responses if they had been presented with some examples of intercultural teaching. These could, for example, have focused around the approaches and methodologies found in the NCCA's *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary*

School. These focus on discussion, active learning, exploring multiple perspectives and promoting critical thinking in relation to diversity (NCCA, 2006: 80-87).

Despite these limitations, this research did gather some interesting data about school leaders' interpretations of intercultural education. School leaders have an important role to play in the way intercultural education is practised. Despite this, there is little research on school leaders and their responses to intercultural education. This research has highlighted how one school leader's personal worldview influenced their practice of intercultural education. This may provide an impetus for more research with these actors in the enactment of intercultural education.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Elain Keane, for her support and patience whilst helping me to complete this research. Her guidance was invaluable and helped my often-vague plans become reality. I would also like to thank the staff of NUIG's School of Education for their help throughout my course, particularly Dr Niamh Flynn and Dr Andrea Lynch who helped me with elements of this thesis. I am grateful to the teachers who gave up their time to take part in this research. In particular, I would like to thank the school leaders who did so much to enable my research to take place and made themselves available to be interviewed. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Laura, without whom none of this would have been possible!

## REFERENCES

- Antonsich, M (2016) 'Interculturalism versus multiculturalism – The Cattle-Modood debate'. *Ethnicities*, 16 (3), pp 470-493.
- Bhopal, K. and Rhamie, J. (2014) 'Initial teacher training: understanding 'race', diversity and inclusion'. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 17 (3), pp 304-325.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education*, 7th Edition. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Boucher, G. (2010) 'The Entrenchment of Ireland's Laissez-Faire Integration Policy'. *Translocations: Migration and Social Change*, 6 (2), pp 1-7.
- Bryan, A. (2009) 'The intersectionality of nationalism and multiculturalism in the Irish curriculum: teaching against racism?' *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 12 (3), pp 297-317.
- Bryan, A. (2010) 'Corporate multiculturalism, diversity management, and positive interculturalism in Irish schools and society'. *Irish Education Studies*, 29 (3), pp 253-269
- Bryan, A. and Bracken, M. (2011) 'They Think the Book is Right and I am Wrong': Intercultural Education and the Positioning of Ethnic Minority Students in the Formal and Informal Curriculum' published in *The Changing Faces of Ireland* edited by M Darmody, N Tyrrell and S Song . Rotterdam: Sense Publishers
- Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods* (4th edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd edition). London: Sage.

- Devine, D. (2005) 'Welcome to the Celtic Tiger? Teacher responses to immigrations and increasing ethnic diversity in Irish schools'. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 15 (1), pp 49-70.
- Department of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration (DES) (2010) *Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010-2015*. Available online at: [https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Intercultural-Education-Strategy/mig\\_intercultural\\_education\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Intercultural-Education-Strategy/mig_intercultural_education_strategy.pdf) (Accessed 21 January 2018).
- Fanning, B (2012) *Racism and social change in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. New York: Aldine.
- Gorski, P. (2008) 'Good intentions are not enough: a decolonizing intercultural education'. *Intercultural Education*, 19 (6), pp 515-525.
- Keogh, A. and Whyte, J. (2002) *Getting On: The experiences and aspirations of immigrant students in second level schools linked to the Trinity Access Programmes*. Dublin: The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998) 'Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?'. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11 (1), pp 7-24.
- Marvasti, A. and Freie, C. (2017) 'Research Interviews' published in *The BERA/SAGE Handbook of Educational Research* (Volume 2) edited by D Wyse, N Selwyn, E Smith and L Suter. London: SAGE Publications Limited.
- McGinnity, F. and Kingston, G. (2017) 'An Irish Welcome? Changing Irish Attitudes to Immigrants and Immigration: The Role of Recession and Immigration'. *The Economic and Social Review*, 48 (3), pp 253-279.
- Mills, C. and Ballantyne, J. (2010) 'Pre-service teachers' dispositions towards diversity: Arguing for a developmental hierarchy of change'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26 (3), pp 447-454.
- Mueller, J. and O'Connor, C. (2007) 'Telling and retelling about self and "others": How pre-service teachers (re)interpret privilege and disadvantage in one college classroom'. *Teacher and Teacher Education*, 27 (6), pp 840-856.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2006) *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School*. Dublin: NCCA. Available online at [http://www.sdpi.ie/NCCA\\_Materials/Intercultural%20Guidelines.pdf](http://www.sdpi.ie/NCCA_Materials/Intercultural%20Guidelines.pdf) (Accessed 3 January, 2018).
- Picower, B. (2009) 'The unexamined whiteness of teaching: How White teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies'. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 12(2), pp197-215
- Pohan, C. and Aguilar, T. (2001) 'Measuring Educators' Beliefs About Diversity in Personal and Professional Contexts'. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38 (1), pp 159-182.
- Schoorman, D. and Bogotch, I. (2010) 'Conceptualisations of multicultural education among teachers: Implications for practice in universities and schools'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, pp 1041-1048.
- Sleeter, C. (2017) 'Critical Race Theory and the Whiteness of Teacher Education', *Urban Education*, 52 (2), pp 155-169.
- Solomona, R., Portelli, J., Daniel, B. and Campbell, A. (2006) 'The discourse of denial: how white teacher candidates construct race, racism and 'white privilege''. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8 (2), pp 147-169.
- Watt, P. (2006) 'A Intercultural Approach to 'Integration''. *Translocations: Migration and Social Change*, 1 (1), pp 154-163.