

Inclusion is not enough: a qualitative study of leadership, ethos, and policy in racially heterogeneous schools in NI

Caitlin Donnelly^a Clare McAuley^b and Lea Hubbard^c

^aSchool of Social Science Education and Social Work, QUB, Belfast, NI; ^bSchool of Education, Ulster University, Coleraine, NI; ^cDepartment of Leadership Studies, University San Diego, San Diego, USA

ABSTRACT

In Northern Ireland (NI), where the education system has historically been shaped by religious and cultural divisions, recent demographic shifts due to inward migration present both challenges and opportunities for educational leaders. While research reveals the crucial role of leaders in promoting inclusivity [Miller, P. 2019. "Race and Ethnicity in Educational Leadership." In *Principles of Educational Leadership and Management*, edited by T. Bush, L. Bell, and D. Middlewood, 223–238. SAGE Publications.], little is known about how leaders in different school types, particularly those with limited prior exposure to racial heterogeneity, interpret these changes. Drawing on debates in multicultural education (MCE), we examine how leaders in a Catholic and a State-Controlled post-primary school, alongside policy workers, respond to racial diversity. Findings from 12 qualitative interviews show that while leaders are supportive of minority ethnic students (MES), responses are often intuitive rather than evidence-based, reflecting gaps in professional development and systemic constraints. The paper highlights the role of school ethos in shaping leadership responses. An ethos that makes a rhetorical commitment to inclusion without meaningful implementation embeds systemic inequities. By situating leadership of schools with MES within a complex web of ethos and policy, this study moves beyond prescriptive leadership models, advocating for a nuanced, critically engaged, and contextually responsive approach to educational leadership in NI.

KEYWORDS

School leadership; ethos; migration; critical multiculturalism

Introduction

While literature attests to the pivotal role that leaders play in diverse schools, there is less qualitative research that examines their responses (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016). Increased immigration over the past 20 years (Coulter et al. 2021) has prompted demographic shifts and, although the numbers of minority ethnic

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communities in NI remain below those in other parts of the UK, the increase nonetheless changes the nature of schools (Russell 2025). In a society characterised by divisions between local Catholic, Nationalist and Protestant Unionist communities, how leaders interpret their roles holds significance as diversity policies are increasingly mired in political controversy (BBC 2024). This paper qualitatively explores how education leaders in NI are responding to racial heterogeneity. Drawing on MCE, it will be argued that leaders' response is largely driven by intuition than deliberate strategy and may lead to inconsistent, unpredictable approaches and the marginalisation of students. It argues for attention to be paid to school ethos and the broader socio-political context in which schools are situated when trying to understand school leadership and racial diversity. The paper begins with a discussion of the changing demography in NI.

NI's changing demography: implications for schools

In NI divisions around identity, culture, and religious affiliation have had a profound influence on the structure and culture of schooling to the extent that Catholics and Protestants are broadly educated apart in schools that reflect their particular religious and cultural traditions (nidirect n.d.). While policy affords spaces for contact between Catholic and Protestant pupils¹, racial diversity has not been a prominent focus of policy until recently. Demographic change in NI has prompted discussion about how schools should or could respond to greater heterogeneity. Whilst the level of racial diversity remains low, it is the pace of change that is important. 97% of the population in NI is white however the number of people in NI who were born outside the UK and Ireland has grown from 81,500 (4.5%) in 2011–124,300 (6.5%) in 2021 (NI Statistics Research Agency (NISRA) 2021). In schools 'the number of 'newcomer' pupils has increased from just over 1,000 in 2001/02 to over 19,000 in 2022/23, a rise of 1,306%' (IRE (Independent Review of Education) 2023:73). Newcomer pupils, defined as those who are not yet proficient in English to access the curriculum and do not share the language of the teacher, make up around 6% of the NI school age population (Russell 2025). We will employ the broader term 'minority ethnic student' to refer to first-generation migrants, 'newcomer' and students born in NI to parents from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Changes to education policy, law, and guidance have taken account of the changes. The Education (NI) Order 1998 and the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 provide the legal framework for promoting equality and race relations. More specific policy for education is provided by the Department of Education for NI (DE). Every School a Good School (2009) references the need to remove barriers to achievement caused by race and requires schools to identify and support newcomer pupils through tailored educational support, including English as an Additional Language (EAL) programme. Funding is also available to schools which educate newcomer pupils. The Intercultural Education Service

(IES), a division of the Education Authority (EA²), is dedicated to supporting MES by advising schools how to create inclusive multicultural environments. It provides professional development and assists schools in interpreting and translation services, as well as informing families of newcomer pupils about the school system. It offers a 'good practice' guide for teachers and leaders for newcomer and pupils seeking asylum (IES 2024).

The DE, EA and schools are also required to comply with several significant legal provisions that will shape their response to diverse groups: The 1997 Race Relations (NI) Order, makes it unlawful to engage in discriminatory practices whilst the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025, provides a framework to tackle racial discrimination. The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) of 2016, whilst not explicitly related to race, has implications for racially motivated bullying, as there is a requirement that leaders report bullying to the Board of Governors. The post-primary curriculum also has an inclusive orientation: Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) was introduced as a statutory subject in 2007, and it requires pupils to 'investigate how and why conflict, including prejudice, stereotyping, sectarianism and racism may arise in the community' (CCEA 2007). Furthermore, the flexible nature of the curriculum with its infused critical thinking skills framework and underpinning meta-themes of personal development and inclusivity, provide opportunities for teachers to respond to group difference. Additionally, guidance for Newcomers (IES 2024) specifically calls for schools to promote integration, representation and English language support, anti-racism and trauma-informed practices.

Taken together, these strategies and legal frameworks represent an important step towards meeting the needs of Minority Ethnic Students (MES). Yet, they may prove insufficient. A recent ruling (NI Court of Appeal 2024) highlighted shortcomings in the Religious Education curriculum, arguing that it is not conveyed in an 'objective, critical, and pluralist manner' and Loader et al. (2023) argue that educational reforms in NI have yet to bring about the change needed to tackle racial diversity. Yet the rapidly changing socio-political landscape in NI, where sectarian and racial divisions co-exist to the extent that the frequency of racially motivated hate crimes now regularly surpasses that of sectarian crimes (Russell 2025, 3), means that tackling the issues is critical. As key sites for social transformation, schools offer the potential to challenge racialised discourse and practice (Banks 2006) and leaders ultimately shape whether they disrupt or sustain exclusionary practices (Bonanno et al. 2023). Understanding how educational leaders in NI respond is clearly significant.

MCE: an evolving and dynamic debate

Whilst Multicultural Education (MCE) offers a roadmap for educationalists keen to respond equitably to MES (Banks 2006) the different ideological orientations embedded in the concept offer a sense of its dynamic and evolving nature. Early

iterations of MCE were limited and conservative; whilst equality was a key goal, it was framed as achievable through assimilation. Racial and cultural difference were acknowledged yet presented as ahistorical and universal – disconnected from their socio-economic roots (Alismail 2016). As the concept evolved it assumed more liberal interpretations: promoting inclusion and mutual understanding. The positive framing of diversity and ‘celebrating’ the visible markers of identity such as festivals, food, and language became its hallmarks. The purpose was to foster a sense of recognition, representation and belonging among Minority Ethnic Students (MES) (Banks 2006).

Liberal MCE represents a break with assimilative approaches to diversity which were critiqued for their tendency towards deficit framing, yet they have themselves been subject to challenge for their superficiality. It is reasoned that although a more positive disposition towards MES can create a conducive learning context, in practice liberal MCE simply descends into a ‘holidays and heroes’ approach to diversity where symbolic gestures distract from the systemic inequities that sustain discriminatory practice (Banks 2006). Critics like McCarthy (1994) and Gorski (2006) argue that liberal perspectives depoliticise the experiences of minority groups in school. Consequently, schools are infused with racism cloaked in a veil of positivity. Such concerns paved the way for more substantive understandings of diversity in education. Critical MCE attends explicitly to oppression and racial discrimination. Accepting that racism is not only a matter of prejudice reduction or representation, but the focus also shifts away from individuals and their personal development towards societal structures, systems, policies and pedagogy. Critical scholars contend that MCE must move beyond tokenistic gestures to interrogate and dismantle the systems of domination that sustain inequality (Ladson-Billings 2021; McLaren 1994). The leader is key in creating a school that exposes hidden biases in school policies (Jemal 2017). They can confront the power imbalances that lie at the core of racism in education (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Leadership and MCE: the importance of context

Constructions of leadership and critical Multicultural Education (MCE) are perhaps at their most contested when tensions between managerialist leadership, steeped in the idea of leadership tied to efficiency, marketisation and performance, collide with the demands for equity, reflection and systemic change. Zembylas and Iasonos (2010) have argued that leaders (in Cyprus) who practice transactional or managerial styles of leadership which prioritise order and performance are typically drawn to conservative or liberal approaches to MCE where the emphasis lies more in promoting harmony and flattening differences, than confronting systemic barriers to inclusion. In contrast leaders who have an adaptive style, a transformative and critical disposition and see their role in moral terms are more prepared to ‘disrupt[ing] and challenge [ing] norms and values to create equitable outcomes

for all students' (Shields 2010, 564). Freire's (1972) concepts of conscientisation and reflection assert themselves in Khalifa et al's (2016:22) work where culturally responsive school leaders (CRSL), are positioned as those who practice critical self-reflection, community engagement, guided by a 'moral responsibility' to counter systemic educational oppression.

Yet whilst instructive, establishing a link between leadership style and multi-cultural education (MCE) may restrict: creating a 'laundry list' of desirable traits risks oversimplifying complex realities of leading schools capable of challenging entrenched racism. A list of traits overlooks the contextual challenges that leaders encounter. As D'Hondt et al., (2021, 1253) argue, understanding MCE requires a deep engagement with the context which is relevant in NI not only because of the growing anti-immigrant sentiment, but also because Catholic and Controlled schools claim distinct educational experiences grounded in their context or 'ethos' (Catholic Education Partnership 2022; Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC). n.d.). Schools typically draw upon religious, political, and cultural traditions to define their ethos and, as a multilayered concept, ethos not only shapes behaviours but derives its power from the ways in which it is interpreted and enacted (Donnelly 2000). For schools enrolling diverse groups, understanding the ethos may help us better appreciate how leaders' aspirations toward inclusion and support are actualised (Donnelly 2004; Faas et al., 2018). This paper explores the intersection of leadership, ethos, and diversity, drawing on data from separate schools in NI.

Research design: a qualitative approach

The mid-twentieth century's 'interpretive turn' in social sciences acknowledged the value of meaning and interpretation in knowledge production (Mottier 2005). It was proposed that understandings of the social world, are not only garnered from large scale surveys or experiments but can also be drawn from the real-life experiences, meanings and interpretations that participants ascribe to their world (Flick 2022). This stance on knowledge has important implications for data collection in education as it orients researchers to how educators make sense of their reality (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). This study which explores the sensitivities and nuances of racial diversity in schools means that an interpretive approach and qualitative methods are most appropriate (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011).

Research design

A profile of the schools

Drawing on Suri's (2011) advice on purposive sampling we identified two schools which were likely to be 'information rich' in terms of the research aims. That is, they

were each drawn from the Catholic selective and Controlled³ non-selective sector and enrolled relatively high numbers of MES (selective schools in NI typically enroll fewer MES than nonselective schools). They were in the same urban area. In terms of ethos, *St Marylin's*⁴ status as a Catholic school featured heavily in documentation, yet its ethos was also defined in terms of 'celebrating difference'. Explicit references to rights and equality stood out in the school prospectus; perhaps to capture a commitment to the social justice values which Catholic schools are grounded in (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004). Reference to 'academic excellence' reflected its academically selective status. *Figtree* was nonselective and students were not required to take a test to gain a place. There was no explicit reference to religious values, although all schools in NI are legally Christian (Hughes 2011). The ethos was presented in less explicit terms than in *St Marylin's* and tied to generic concepts of inclusivity, working hard, resilience and being considerate. At *St Marylin's*, just over 10% of students were from minority ethnic backgrounds, with less than 10 different languages spoken. In contrast, at *Figtree*, approximately 21% of students came from ethnic minority groups, and just under 40 languages were spoken. For *Figtree's* vice-principal, the increase was 'exponential' and only a year earlier, the number of languages was 30. *Figtree* enrolled more newcomer students (almost 20%) compared to *St Marylin's* (under 2%) (DE 2024). Both schools had higher-than-average proportions of students entitled to Free School Meals (FSME) relative to their academic selective status. In terms of languages the schools reflected society where the most common languages were Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian, and Arabic. Most minority students in *St Marylin's* spoke Arabic, whilst a range of languages were spoken in *Figtree*. These differences have consequence; as when schools have 'disproportionately high numbers of pupils facing difficulties' it is adversarial for teaching and learning (IRE 2023, 161)

Participants and interviews

8 qualitative interviews were undertaken with leaders at both middle and senior tiers in each school (n=8) all of whom had supported MES either in their capacity as a principal, vice-principal or designated teacher / leader. As responsibility for the education of minority communities does not just reside at the school level, it was deemed important to interview those who develop and implement education policy. They are referred to below as 'policy workers' to preserve anonymity. Single interviews were undertaken with 3 agencies which oversee different school types: Catholic Council for Maintained schools (CCMS), the NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), the CSSC. One group interview was undertaken with two members of the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI). All 12 interviews were in a semi-structured format and lasted between 1–2 h. They took place February, – June 2024. Although participants were offered the choice of online or in-person interviews, most were conducted in person, apart from those with representatives of NICIE, CCMS and CSSC.

Whilst differences in in-person and online interviews have been recognised in prior research, beyond the obvious technical differences there was little variation in the themes and quality of data collected online compared to that generated from in-person interviews (Guest et al. 2023). Ethical approval was granted by the IRB before the data collection began.

Analysis

The data was analysed using a broadly thematic approach, allowing for the identification of patterns within the interview transcripts. As Terry et al. (2017) recommend, all transcripts from the participating schools were carefully read and coded inductively, ensuring that recurring ideas, concepts, and perspectives were captured. Initial codes were grouped into broader themes, reflecting key aspects of educational leadership, ethos, and multicultural Education (MCE). Theory should be employed as an interpretative lens in qualitative research (Leeming 2018); hence the themes we discerned were examined through the lens of multicultural education (MCE), leadership and school ethos. We sought to identify how school leaders interpreted their role in respect of minority ethnic students (MES) and probed concepts such as racism and ethos. We engaged in constant comparison (Glaser 1965) as we sought to capture the nuances of the data.

Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity is a core consideration in qualitative research where the researcher interacts closely with participants (Flick 2022). As such we remained acutely aware of our own biases, and how they acted as interpretive frames. Guided by Freire's (1972) concept of conscientisation we were particularly conscious of how our social reality shaped understandings of the data; our meetings prompted critical discussion of assumptions and interpretations (Bhattacharya 2017). All authors are white western Christian females, and we acknowledge that the research would have been strengthened with a racially diverse research team.

Limitations

Lack of generalisability of qualitative research is a frequently cited 'limitation', yet generalisability was not our aim. Malterud, Siresma, and Guassora (2016) propose the concept of information power to argue that the larger information power the sample holds, the lower number is needed. Our sample had information power, but we were limited in our attempts to acquire all of the information that we sought: although we interviewed a policy worker from the integrated sector, we were unable to gather data from leaders in integrated schools where the ethos is explicitly framed around inclusion and cultural representation (NICIE n.d.).

Diversity in schools: a new dawn for NI?

Despite the challenges that demographic change has presented, all participants expressed enthusiasm for immigration. They unanimously viewed it as a positive transformation; indicative of a more 'normal' society: one that had moved on from the sectarian violence (Coulter and Murray 2008). Their positivity was encapsulated in data from all policy workers whose knowledge of schools extends across NI.

I've had the privilege of visiting many schools who embraced and share many different languages, cultures and faiths ... everyone's accepted for who they are ... they are part of the community and very embraced ... many of the children have been born in NI and their mums and dads came here to settle and are part of the community, which is just lovely. (Policy worker, CSSC)

They come with great aspirations. They definitely come with great challenges, and if they were home, they probably would be doing a higher paid job and a higher status job. (Policy worker, CCMS)

I can honestly say that in all of the schools that I've been in, children are welcomed ... by the school, the staff. These children are a rich learning resource for the children and the families. (Policy worker, ETI)

Deficit framing is widely critiqued for its negative effect on student experience. That leaders interpret MES as sources of academic enrichment or frame them as aspirational is important because it suggests an inclination to recognise and attenuate the obstacles that students encounter – a sentiment that was also apparent as interviews progressed (Flessa 2009).

Ethos, leadership and critical MCE

In the documentation, the schools had clear ethos statements: St Marylin's emphasised Catholic religious teachings, celebrating difference, rights, equality and academic excellence while Figtree referenced inclusivity, working hard, good behaviour and respect. To capture how ethos was translated into their response to racial diversity, we discerned four themes: *emotional support, identity affirmation, curriculum and assessment, racism*. A final theme – *systemic inertia* – draws on data from policy workers:

Emotional and social support

Leaders in both schools were asked how they enacted their ethos with respect to minority ethnic students (MES) and they immediately referenced emotional and social support. The induction programme was deemed key. Both schools used buddy and mentoring, where a senior student, often, a MES, would mentor a new student. Each school had designated staff to respond to students' specific needs. In St Marylin's, this role was filled by a senior teacher, while in

Figtree, which had a higher number of MES and newcomer students, a senior teacher dealt with applications and student experience, whilst a recently appointed teaching assistant provided support for newcomer students. The trauma experienced by some pupils preyed heavily on the minds of school leaders, and reflecting the guidelines for newcomer students (IES 2024) leaders sought to alleviate anxiety and were conscious of reducing trauma. Empathy and care represented the practical expression of ethos.

Pastoral support is a huge part of my job, and our English as Second Language teachers. Not only are we teaching them English, ... it's to be inclusive ... you're often the key point of contact. ... and safeguarding is important and understanding them. Again, the trauma; trying to help them. (Senior Leader, Figtree)

It's about appreciating that they have different experiences than me and you ... You know, coming from Syria ... they have trauma ... and ... we haven't lived [*for example*] in Lebanon and don't know what it's like ... they have traumatic lives. I can't imagine that. It must have been pretty hard, you know. I ... my feeling is ... I am soft hearted, ... you should make special allowances. (Middle Leader, St Marylin's)

Teacher empathy has long been regarded as a feature of effective teaching, particularly in fostering inclusivity. Gay (2000) explains that culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership, grounded in care and empathy, affirms students' identities while cultivating a sense of belonging. However, as Hollan (2017) cautions, empathy is not a universal or culturally neutral construct; its meaning and enactment is shaped by context, and this can blur its boundaries with adjacent concepts like pity. Empathetic responses may devolve into patronising attitudes, particularly if the focus shifts from understanding the student's position to assuming a position of superiority, which can emerge in a teacher/student relationship. While our data did not reveal this dynamic, recognising it is important as it can heighten awareness of the limitations of empathy as a response to diverse groups (Eichbaum et al. 2023).

Identity affirmation

Leaders frequently referred to protecting identity differences as part of their response to diverse groups. In St Marylin's, a dedicated space for students to practise religion was established:

We've got a new designated prayer space for Muslim children to pray in school. We have an oratory, and then we provided a lovely room off the oratory. It's for those children who want a break. So, we've been very open about making sure they have their own spaces and that their own religious background is fully acknowledged. (Middle Leader, St Marylin's)

The emphasis placed on the expression of non-Catholic religious beliefs may be unexpected; not least because the religious character of schools in NI has been critiqued. Milliken asserts: 'Christianity pervades Northern Irish education, and

schools have been shown to have difficulty in accommodating those of other faiths' (2019, 6). Yet, the debate is perhaps more nuanced: data suggests that moral leadership *inspired* by their religious ethos, creates a particular sensitivity to ensuring young people have the opportunity to practice their religious beliefs:

Parents, particularly parents of Islamic students, prefer the [Catholic] faith-based school because they ... feel that that their faith will be respected here. And so it's a combination of the gender and the single sex school, but also the idea that faith is respected here. (Senior Leader, St Marylin's)

Providing a space for faith expression affords students the right to express religious identity and is a demonstration of the stated ethos of rights and equality. It also raises the esteem of MES and signals their value to the school community, something that was also apparent when leaders spoke of language and culture:

We don't use their languages here, but we [encourage] speaking [their] own language at home. [We tell them] it is important that you keep it going because you never know when you're going to need it. I think they need to know who they are. (Middle Leader, Figtree)

We want to encourage their own cultural background. They're doing so many things, [outside of school] and then there's the cultural sort of support and that positive representation in the school ... you know that children are seeing themselves celebrated, their traditions are celebrated. (Middle Leader, St Marylin's)

Encouraging students to maintain their own identity whilst adapting to the local culture speaks to schools' ethos of equality, rights and inclusion. MES are likely to feel accepted—something that improves the school experience and is conducive to achievement (Gay 2002; Ladson-Billings 1995). Yet such policies are inherently complex. In both schools there was concern that the school didn't lose *its* identity and values as they became more heterogenous. This was most pronounced in St Marylin's when leaders cited the tension between cultural and social mores in NI, and the values which prevailed in some of the societies from which the students migrated. Below, one Senior Leader reflects on how they traversed the tension:

I think it's important that we maintain our own identity in our school around Women's rights. Some children come from a background where women's rights aren't necessarily esteemed. I think we must make sure that our values are being held firm here. Role models are important. We're promoting [an] ethos. Opportunities, empowerment for young women and not to roll back on anything because of, you know, different culture ... and that's the type of school we have. And I think we need to make sure that we don't compromise our values. (St Marylin's)

This extract highlights the role which ethos plays in shaping leaders' responses to diversity. The leader's commitment to preserving the ethos of the school, particularly around women's rights, illustrates how ethos can serve as both an

anchor but also a barrier to inclusion. The school's ethos, linked to rights and equality, offers a sense of purpose when addressing issues such as empowering women, yet when it comes to integrating values that may not align with the ethos, leaders are challenged. The stance reflects elements of conservative multiculturalism, where respect for cultural difference is conditional on alignment with institutional values. While this preserves the school's identity, it also risks positioning the ethos as the 'common sense' perspective: requiring minority cultures to adapt without question. Ultimately, the extract reveals a complex tension for leaders in *any* school who are tasked with balancing their 'common sense' with cultural values that challenge. Pascale's argument that 'racialized inequalities come to rest in those things assumed to be so real that they are undeserving of thought' (2006, 27) seems pertinent: the 'common sense' around women's equality is non-negotiable because it is determined as the 'right way to think'. Yet opening dialogue around universal rights and cultural relativism may offer a path to building a shared perspective on equity and rights and allow the school to follow through on the ethos of celebrating difference (Feng et al. 2024).

Bottom of form

Curriculum and assessment

A key aspect of Critical MCE relates to the adjustment of teaching and curricular content to ensure that students are represented, and their perspectives are granted legitimacy (Gay 2002; Ladson-Billings 1995). Reflecting the underpinning curricular themes cited earlier, in St Marylin's particular attention was placed on sourcing books which referenced students' life experiences as a way of teaching *all* students about different cultural perspectives:

And I select the books and then ... each student gets the novel for like 4 weeks ... I buy books to represent the children in the literature that we're studying ... you know, I have a wee girl who said OK, she looks, acts like me, she said to her friend: she is actually Caribbean. (Senior Leader, St Marylin's)

There were also numerous examples of leaders in St Marylin's reporting that they or colleagues revised content or teaching methods to ensure that the voice and perspectives of minority students were rehearsed in the classroom. They suggested, echoing Ladson-Billings (1995) assertions, that attending to the needs of MES improved learning for all students. Both schools offered students opportunities to take public examinations in their own language for language-specific subjects.

And in fact, we are one of the very few schools in NI who offer Arabic classes to Arabic speaking children. So, we have Arabic teachers who come into school. They deliver the GCSE. (Leader, St Marylin's)

We have an inclusive ethos and we ... live that out ... so we also do GCSEs in home languages, for example, this year we're doing Mandarin, Russian and Italian, we also have done in the past Polish, Arabic. (Senior Leader, Figtree)

In a further demonstration of the self-reflection advocated by critical theorists, there was a general sense that the presence of students from non-western cultures had prompted teachers in St Marylin's to review and challenge the dominant historical narrative of social and political realities much in the way that Freire (1972/1974) argues can prompt transformations in how schools cultivate spaces that are truly responsive. The significance of their statement might also be understood within the context of the meta-themes of criticality and inclusivity underpinning the NI curriculum:

And in history ... , we're talking about sensitivities. To teach 9/11, ... I'm about to get stuck in the 9/11 and I have Muslim kids in the class, so it's a very Westernised view.. I mean our GCSE history textbook, which they'll have and they'll read, I mean I have to say to them, listen, there's a lot of naivety in this book they don't really get nuances. [Authors] are going to say things that are stereotypes ... and some of these kids maybe left Syria when they were not old enough to understand those things, but they certainly have their view represented. (Senior Leader, St Marylin's)

Aside from challenging the dominant perspective, the leaders in St Marylin's also mentioned assessment practices that allowed them to see which students required support. Recognising the powerful role which knowledge of student performance plays in attenuating systemic barriers (Datnow and Hubbard 2016), St Marylin's had an established tradition of collecting disaggregated data to identify patterns of underachievement. The emphasis on pastoral care was notable, given the potential consequences of MES being labelled 'underachievers':

We track within an inch of people's life; we are quite diagnostic ... we know the data of every single student and ... SLT [Senior Leadership Team] meetings are going through student by student to identify under achievement from year 8–14. It is very much part of our ethos and is pastoral. Every student who underachieves is mentored, so if somebody begins to fall, there's an intervention straight away. (Senior Leader, St Marylin's)

In contrast, leaders in Figtree reported difficulty in collecting such data and adjusting curricular content. Undoubtedly this was in part related to the 'exponential' rise in the number of students cited earlier – the sense of overwhelm was evident in interviews. Yet other factors were at play: the principal cited the curriculum's 'rigidity' and 'archaic' nature as challenges. The school *had* taken steps to support newly enrolled students in understanding and meeting academic expectations. The teaching assistant was tasked with helping students who were 'falling behind'. Leaders were keen that students would feel part of the school and could connect to a 'friendly face'. Their efforts were explained this way:

In the last 18 months ... we got a teaching assistant who goes into class to support students across all levels from year 8 right up to year 12/13. She also does her induction programme, so she will also meet the new students. She could be with them for two days. Could be five days to do an initiation programme around school and test them, and do some language learning as well so because on an initial interview you're not necessarily going to find out the ability of the young person, and quite often they're.. very shy, especially if there's an interpreter involved (Senior Leader, Figtree)

The intersection between the demography of the school, ethos, leadership, and multicultural education (MCE) is again discernible. In the case of St Marylin's, the ethos of academic excellence is realised through rigorous monitoring practices, resembling managerialist approaches to leadership which, as argued earlier, prioritise order and performance over relationships and values (Lynch 2014). Such practices are generally framed as antithetical to critical MCE, yet in this case they seem to enable the school to identify systemic barriers, ensuring that those falling behind are supported. Hence under certain conditions, the focus on academic achievement may advance equity by creating structures that support students on the margins. However, in schools like St Marylin's, the emphasis on academic excellence may also lead to students from minority groups being defined as 'needing support' thus potentially entrenching systemic disparities.

Complicating this further is the stated Catholic school ethos, which is tied to social justice, equality and rights. This also acts as both an enabler and a constraint. On the one hand, it provides a strong moral framework, which as cited earlier, may be a key value, impelling schools to remove systemic barriers. It also seems to encourage leaders to address inequities related to under-resourcing. Reflecting their social justice ethos, teachers actively sourced external funds to assist MES and some volunteered a small proportion of their salary to contribute to a school hardship fund for MES and those from lower income families (Senior Leader interview). It is evident in pastoral support and adjustments to the curriculum, where challenging the dominant Westernised historical narrative is accepted. Yet, as noted, it may also unquestioningly privilege specific interpretations of rights-marginalising alternative perspectives. It is also clear that the more balanced demography of the school means that teachers have time to devote to such issues (IRE,2024).

At Figtree, initiatives such as employing a teaching assistant to support newcomer students reflects the stated ethos of inclusivity by addressing practical barriers to integration. The provision of language-specific GCSEs highlights the importance attached to including students' linguistic and cultural identities. An adaptive leadership style is evident as leaders respond to constantly changing enrolment patterns. Yet, adaptability is bounded by the changing demography and the disposition of the senior leaders. The perception that the curriculum widely regarded as 'flexible' is 'too rigid' signals a reticence in challenging barriers or critically engaging with the needs of diverse groups. It also

raises questions about the claimed ethos of inclusivity. While references to an inclusive ethos seem to provide a general commitment to openness and support, its imprecision and lack of interrogation limits the capacity of leaders to fully realise its potential in enhancing the MES experience.

Racism

During the research we noted a lack of explicit reference to racism. Whilst evidence cited earlier feature racism as a problem in NI, it was not referenced in school documentation or raised spontaneously during interviews. Towards the end of the interviews, we prompted school leaders by asking how they dealt with racist incidents. Surprisingly no leader reported having experienced racism in their school:

At the moment, we would say strongly that the children are being very welcoming. They're tolerant. We get very little racism reported ... Toilet walls are always a very good indicator of the feeling of the school ... if we had racist commentary across our toilet walls, we would know there's tension, but we don't. (Senior Leader, Figtree)

In St Marylin's leaders were also adamant that racism was not a significant problem, even in the context of sporadic racist violence in the area. Their responses could, like those in Figtree, be seen as racially evasive and 'colour-blind,' downplaying or reframing racial tension.

So I can genuinely say there's plenty of issues come across my team, but there's never been racism, never discrimination of any type. So it's not something that that happens here; there's never been any evidence or about, ... em ... bullying of cultures or anything ... (Senior Leader, St Marylin's)

Racially evasive discourse can reinforce racialised power structures and institutional practices by leaving racist behaviours untouched (Bonilla-Silva 2006) and this point was perhaps best exemplified in Figtree when the explanation of hostility between local pupils and one from a different racial background was represented as 'routine pupil tensions,' despite the child's framing of their own experience as racist abuse:

We do have a child in school who is not a newcomer, but from an African family.. born and raised here. On the odd occasion, he would say he was racially abused at times, but we've come to realise that's more about poor personal interactions with some boys. (Senior Leader, Figtree)

This response, particularly in the context of the *Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act* (2016), which mandates the recording of bullying incidents, could be seen as expedient: it is a means of avoiding scrutiny by redefining incidents of racial bullying. However, the responses from both schools point to deeper challenges. First, the leaders' reluctance to acknowledge racism reflects a lack of critical understanding of its meaning and systemic manifestations. Interestingly, their comments have resonances with the avoidance culture surrounding

sectarianism in NI schools, where such discussions are routinely avoided in favour of maintaining harmonious relations (Donnelly and Burns 2021). Second, it reveals gaps in how each school's stated ethos is translated into practice and, importantly, the limited interrogation of ethos in the context of racism and anti-racist practice. Leaders believe they are enacting their ethos whilst overlooking racism and how it is embedded in everyday teaching /leadership practices. Finally, they point to the difficulty of disentangling what is happening in schools from the system of which they are part:

Systemic inertia: professional development and resource gaps

Professional learning that is informed by critical understandings of race has the potential to challenge systemic racism by raising leader's consciousness of what racism is and how it works (Miller 2019). Yet school leaders typically described their professional development experiences as one-off visits to other multicultural schools, sometimes in other countries; an ad-hoc approach critiqued for its lack of sustained engagement (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, and Gardner 2017). Furthermore, leaders explained that the content of the programmes that did exist usually focused on language rather than other aspects of MES experience, confining their ability to fully understand and address the systemic nature of racism.

In many ways teachers are just differentiating their material, they're learning from other colleagues. They are making contacts with others who have this experience ...

I mean, they need to really look at this aspect ... meeting the needs of children whose first language is not English and I think that's a massive gap in the teacher training programme. (Policy worker).

The lack of effective professional development appeared to reflect a sense of inertia at the policy level related to MES. For example, NI's funding model for minority communities, which ties financial support to 'newcomer' status, was highlighted as an impediment. Funding was perceived as insufficient and difficult to access, particularly for students arriving after the census date:

I suppose one of the things is people arrive at different times of the year If they arrive after the census, it means there's no funding ... so I think funding is a big challenge going forward to make sure that the appropriate level of funding is there to support schools. (Policy worker)

Despite also being highlighted by ETI (2020) and Loader et al. (2023), its persistence reveals the difficulty of dismantling barriers to MCE when the system seems indifferent to the calls for action. The challenge is further reflected in gaps in data on MES:

... . So, the quantitative data for last year ... there's a lot of blanks and they can't look at trends or anything. (Policy worker)

Our data, even in terms of the number of children coming in, was not clear cut. (Policy worker)

The only data that's available is [determined by] this term 'newcomer' ... it's ... it's not appropriate and it doesn't really give us any data about the needs of people in school. And you know, at what point do you stop becoming newcomer? And what about the second and third generation families that are in our schools? the data just does not exist; we don't have it. (Policy worker)

The persistence in data gaps is not just an administrative inconvenience but they are also tied to power and social justice (Datnow and Hubbard 2016) because they obstruct the ability to identify trends or adequately address the needs of MES. Braun and Hummel (2022) argue that incomplete data contributes to the marginalisation of groups by rendering their needs invisible and inhibiting equitable resource allocation. Indeed, the Racial Equality Strategy (2015), recognises that without comprehensive ethnic monitoring, 'Government departments and agencies will find it difficult to identify gaps and monitor whether racial equality work is having any impact' (7.4). The policy incoherence and inertia around MES therefore can 'bake in' disadvantages that schools are unable to overcome regardless of leadership or ethos (DiAngelo 2022, 31).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore education leaders' responses to MES in NI. Through qualitative interviews with 8 leaders in two schools and 5 policy-workers from various sectors, the study revealed that while the number of minority ethnic students (MES) in these schools remains low, the rapid growth of the minority ethnic population since 2000 presents NI schools with challenges. While leaders had a positive orientation toward diversity, there were systemic, contextual and practical barriers which limited the realisation of the stated ethos of inclusivity. The instances of critical engagement with diversity, however, belie the reality that currently, NI leaders' approach to more heterogeneous schools is shaped by intuition and constrained by systemic inertia. This not only limits strategic action but also means that biases, such as racism disguised as bullying, go unnoticed and unchallenged.

The paper has implications for policy. It has revealed the persistence of systemic barriers to the education of MES in NI. Limited availability or inadequacy of professional learning opportunities, gaps in data collection, and insufficient classification and resourcing of newcomer students collectively contribute to a system that seems unresponsive to the holistic needs of MES. Although the data pointed to limited instances of overt racism, insights from critical MCE reveal the entrenched and invisible systemic nature of racism. The inertia within the education system in NI may reflect this entrenchment, emphasising the need for systemic reform particularly of professional development which might explicitly focus on constructions of racism; racially evasive discourse,

and how implicitly racist practices are manifested (Miller 2019). Whilst further research is required, academic selection may also contribute to systemic entrenchment: the different social mix of the schools means that the non-selective school typically enrolls students with a range of difficulties, potentially restricting their response to MES (IRE 2023).

Secondly, the paper contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating the role of school ethos as a conceptual lens for understanding how leadership responses to diverse groups are developed. Extending prior research (Faas et al., 2018) it argues that although ethos can provide a framework within which leadership approaches to racial diversity are developed: the ability of ethos to support a holistic response to diversity rests on how deeply it is understood, critically examined, and translated to practice. Without intentional reflection and a willingness to question its underlying assumptions, ethos risks being a rhetorical device: aspirational but devoid of meaning (Donnelly 2000). Yet a critical interrogation of ethos has the potential to transform. Making explicit and deep connections between ethos and racial diversity can prompt critical reflection on how schools develop strategies and systems that move beyond abstract statements. Actively interrogating both the claimed and lived ethos, will inevitably prompt schools to reflect on their 'common sense' understandings of diversity; what is taught, how it is taught and the role of subjects like citizenship and history in fostering critical consciousness. It is in these reflexive spaces that opportunities to challenge systemic bias arise (Donnelly 2004). Significantly, revised accountability frameworks are now creating an impetus for such deliberation. Hence the ETI induces schools to articulate their ethos as part of evaluation (ETI 2024). Whilst such frameworks are reasonably framed as antithetical to critical leadership practice (Gillborn 2013) prompting reflection on ethos hypothetically drives the type of leadership practice that can lead to transformative action in tackling racism. Its potential relies on the authenticity of such reflection.

Finally, the data have implications for leadership practice. The qualitative methods employed in this study highlight the complex and situated nature of educational leadership, demonstrating how leaders' practice is shaped by a web of demography, ethos, policy imperatives, political and civil discourse. Understanding these contextual influences provides deeper insight into how leaders respond to diversity and moves us beyond prescriptive, formulaic constructions of educational leadership, fostering an understanding of leadership that is nuanced, pragmatic, and contextually appropriate (Niesche and Gowlett 2014). As the Overton window shifts, global debates on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies are ever more polarised. Understanding school leaders, as active gatekeepers of racial discourse through curriculum decisions, language, and school ethos, places them at the centre of critical conversations about race that are increasingly difficult to avoid.

Notes

1. Integrated education and shared education offer spaces for pupils from different community backgrounds to interact
2. The EA offers administrative support to schools in terms of funding, staffing, and maintenance, while delivering services such as special educational needs support, transport, and youth programs.
3. Controlled schools in Northern Ireland are mainly attended and staffed by Protestants.
4. School names are pseudonyms to protect their identity

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Notes on contributors

Caitlin Donnelly is a Reader in the School of Social Science Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

Clare McAuley is a Lecturer in Education in the School of Education Ulster University, Coleraine.

Lea Hubbard is a Professor in Education Leadership Department of Leadership Studies University of San Diego.

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