

The Normalcy of Racism in the School Experience of Students of Colour: "The Times When It Hurts"

Jacquelyn-Marie Kennelly and Stella Mouroutsou
University of Stirling

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on racism in Scottish schools drawing on data from focus groups with secondary students of colour. The study explores racial inequity in schools through students' reflections on enactments of bias and privilege. Findings demonstrate that 1) students of colour experience racism but race is being ignored or deflected in their interactions in schools; 2) students feel discriminated against due to race; and 3) they do not feel that they are heard and supported by their school. Employing a Critical Race Theory perspective, the article argues for the necessity of race talk in schools and the need for student voice. The study concludes with implications for teachers, research, and education policy, and suggestions for more explicit focus on race in the classrooms, curriculum and policies.

KEYWORDS: Critical Race Theory, students of colour, racism, Scotland, White Privilege, race and education

INTRODUCTION

The paper examines racism in Scottish schools drawing on data from focus groups with students of colour. Students of colour who attend racially diverse mainstream schools with predominantly White students face several challenges in their learning environments (Chapman & Bhopal, 2018). According to research, racial conflicts include physical fighting and name-calling towards students of colour (Varma-Joshi *et al.*, 2004). Many racist incidents are reported in the press internationally (Song, 2018; McGowan, 2019) and various studies discuss the impact of racism on children's health and wellbeing (Trent *et al.*, 2019; Anderson *et al.*, 2020). Although the existing research and strategic documents such as the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950) aim to protect human rights, significant inequalities remain in the lives of students of colour in many countries including Scotland. Currently there is a lack of Scottish antiracism education in

schools which reflects a lack of clarity in the way Scotland addresses racial equity in education and little is known about the experiences of students of colour in schools.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the casual racism experienced by students of colour through their peer and school interactions. Although the term 'pupils' is used in the United Kingdom (UK) we use the term students echoing Biesta's (2010, p 545) point that those who are the subject of education are not unable to learn for themselves without the intervention of an educator but are "summoned to study." We argue that students of colour are not being supported or heard in schools regarding the language they hear surrounding race. To further explore the experiences of students of colour, we use Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT enables us to identify and address race-specific issues and is significant in that it acknowledges and exposes the undeniable racism present in the formation and operation of our social institutions (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Yet to the best of our knowledge, limited CRT education research has been formally conducted in Scotland although it has been considered valuable by Scottish antiracism educators (Arshad, 2018b; Valdelièvre & Ul-Hassan, 2020). Our study provides necessary CRT-based analysis of student perceptions of their school environment. This article also contributes to international debates around race talk in schools and more focused policies as race equity is a crucial aspect of social justice and democratic societies.

The paper begins with an outline of the Scottish educational context. The following two sections explore existing literature on colourblind racism and student voice. Next, we present the methodology used and the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings highlighting the normalcy of racism in the lives of students of colour and the lack of race talk, thereby indicating a need for addressing racism in the classroom.

SCOTTISH CONTEXT

The inequity that affects students of colour has been more thoroughly researched in the United States (US) than in the UK. Northern Ireland, Wales, and England make up the UK along with Scotland, and though these countries have different educational policies and priorities (West *et al.*, 1999), the UK as a whole was found to have clear disparities in achievement for students of colour in a 2017 government audit (Cabinet Office, 2017).

In Scotland the diversity of the student population is constantly increasing (Arshad, 2018a). This reflects student diversity in schools internationally due to globalisation and international migration patterns that have changed the cultural make-up of classrooms. The EU accessions that initiated major population movements to the UK since 2004 (Moskal, 2016), immigration from other parts of the UK and asylum seekers and refugees (Sim, 2015) have increased student diversity in Scotland. The recent population census, which is the annual census for schools (Scottish Government, 2019) recorded 697,989 students. Of those 89.7% were recorded as White (Scottish/other British/Gypsy/Traveller/other) and 8.3% were from a minority ethnic group (Mixed, Asian, Caribbean/Black, African, other) with those having Asian Pakistani background being the largest group (2%). Young people from minority ethnic groups are unevenly spread throughout the country with the higher percentage of minority ethnic students in Glasgow and Edinburgh city councils according to the 2018 population census. In contrast, teachers in Scotland are predominantly White and monolingual (Arshad, 2018a). In fact, only 1% of primary teachers and 1.7% of secondary teachers in Scotland come from an ethnic minority background (EIS, 2018). Research has shown that teachers in Scotland and elsewhere lack confidence in dealing with the needs of culturally heterogeneous classes (Hick *et al.*, 2011; Tikly *et al.*, 2004) and that the

avoidance of race language and race issues prevents teachers in the UK from meaningfully engaging in challenging racism in school (Song, 2018). Dennell and Logan (2015) identify that under-reporting of prejudice-based incidents in Scottish schools is a result of reluctance to engage in race-based issues and highlights the lack of teacher confidence in addressing these issues.

The term Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) is the most current term in Scottish education research (Arshad, 2018a); Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) is also used. However, in this article we use the term 'students of colour.' This does not imply that all people of colour are similar or their experiences and lack of privilege are the same or equal but identifies that these students are susceptible to immediate labelling by others due to the visibility of their race. The term does not reduce personhood to an acronym as does BME, and it is also more relevant to schools that experience higher numbers of students of colour who in their educational setting are not a minority. 'Person of colour' is the most recent preferred American Psychological Association (APA) term and is a widely used and accepted phrase both socially and academically (Bulmer & Solomos, 2018).

Important legislation in post-devolution Scotland that addresses racial discrimination includes the Equality Act 2010. However, for more than a decade there was a lack of clarity in the way Scotland addresses racial equity in education (Arshad, 2018a). *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), the national curriculum for Scottish schools, and *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) which is the Scottish Government's approach to supporting children and young people, promote equal opportunities for all. Other educational policies and legislation support inclusive education, but race is not covered substantially. Recently, more emphasis has been placed on acknowledging institutionalised racism inherent in school systems and the power dynamics at the root of this reality (Arshad, 2018a), and there have been conversations around race, ethnicity, and the school system in Scotland. Agencies like the Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland (CERES) and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) currently act to study and combat racism and ethnocentrism in education. Additionally, the Race Equality Framework (REF) (Scottish Government, 2016) presents a strategy for tackling racism reflecting Scotland's will to commit to race equality. REF states that "the Equality Act 2010, and the Public Sector Equality Duty it introduced, have re-energised equality work across Scotland: not only within the Scottish Government, but across Scotland's public institutions" (2016, p 7). The main contributing study cited was by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in Scotland, examining prejudice-based bullying and harassment in Scottish schools (Dennell & Logan, 2015). Harassment, however, is only the most overt form of discrimination and fails to identify other forms of inequity.

Young people of colour echoed in recent research the view that Scotland is friendly and diverse (Hopkins *et al.*, 2015). However, racism exists. Racial crime remains the most commonly reported hate crime, with 3,349 charges reported in 2016-17, and an increase in negative attitudes towards diversity with only 40% agreeing that "people from outside Britain who come to live in Scotland make the country a better place" (EIS 2018, p 3). There are also concerns about the media's discriminatory language regarding Muslims and refugees, or "hate speech" (Council of Europe, 2018). Additionally, the current socio-political climate, including Brexit, the Trump administration, and COVID 19, has brought racism and xenophobia into the mainstream and created an intolerant climate for many (Lau, 2020).

This climate affects students. A recent study in secondary schools called for anti-racist activism and suggests an under-reporting of racist incidents (Guyan, 2019). The study

showed that more than half of the young people who participated do not believe that their teachers are aware of challenges related to racism and discrimination. Almost half of them do not think that their schools would respond effectively to any concerns raised about racism or discrimination (Guyan, 2019). Furthermore, the achievement gap between White students and students of colour is not closing, notwithstanding research produced around the topic internationally, and a viable solution has not been formed (Modica, 2015). Consequently, there is a need for further examination of the effects of racism on the daily lives of Scottish students of colour and more emphasis on race talk and racial equity in education.

THE DAMAGING EFFECT OF COLOURBLIND TEACHING

Colourblind racism is defined as a form of prejudice that denies and deflects racial divides and ignores inequity (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). However, racial formation affects social formations and the incorrect perception that society is post-racial can be captured in the cliché that one does not 'see colour' (Warmington, 2009). Although this may seem a non-racist statement, it denies barriers and uses White privilege to omit, erase, and avoid differences that lead to discrimination and inequity. "Colorblindness¹ has helped to construe race as an 'impolite' or even morally suspect subject 'politically correct' Whites should avoid" (Tarca 2005, p 107).

The emerging idea of the school as a colourblind and therefore damaging environment has been researched mainly in the US (Chapman, 2013; Modica, 2015). Castagno (2008) notes when teachers ignore racist comments, they contribute to discrimination. Modica (2015) echoes this, arguing that teacher nervousness about race talk hinders discourse and can keep teachers from addressing racial inequity. Both Castagno and Modica noted that as dominant figures in the room, teachers who participated in their studies effectively ignored or discouraged race talk. This practice of being 'colormute'² (Pollock, 2004) leads to both teachers and students missing out on teachable moments and expressions of identity. Modica (2015) notes teachers' fear that talking about race and ethnicity will open them up to accusations of being racist and leads them to treat the topic as taboo. This is unfortunate and damaging to the identities and experiences of students of colour.

Further studies have been conducted on how well White people may understand the concept of colourblind racism and civility. Rudick and Golsan (2017) posit that this 'civility' may serve to negate ideas of race and difference, encouraging the fallacious idea of a post-racial society. Their study and others (Modica, 2015; Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017) show how this type of societal behaviour expectation furthers White power, thereby erasing racial and ethnic identity. The term 'colormute,' coined by Pollock (2004), addresses this need to speak about race from a context of understanding the challenges and biases experienced by people of colour. Students engaging in this discourse may better understand the effects of muting and marginalising race talk (Chapman 2013; Modica 2015).

This is not to say a teacher who claims colourblindness is 'a racist', "but it does suggest that in practice, the policies often proposed by such liberals perpetuate existing institutional racism" (Su 2007, p 535). Hence it is a privilege of being White that allows one

¹ We have preserved the American English in quotations from American studies that include the term 'colorblindness' and the word color.

² We have preserved the American English for the term 'colormute' as it was coined by Pollock (2004).

to ignore colour; Black and Brown people do not have that luxury. The terms 'Black' and 'Brown' are used to distinguish categories of racialisation. Black and Brown as descriptors are used widely and are the most current words identifying racial disparities in experience and access (Love, 2019). Furthermore, ignoring students' race means ignoring their unique barriers and challenges in school, in their social lives, and in the world. Delpit (2006) posits that children of colour can be made invisible by this ideology and can therefore lose their sense of worth.

MARGINALISED VOICES AND STUDENT-CENTRED RESEARCH

It is necessary and valid to use narratives, discussions, and student-centred data if we are to acknowledge the complexity of the school as an academic and social space (Riehl, 2001). This must be done in schools, with participation of the children and adults; otherwise our greatest research asset is ignored. The importance of students to have the opportunity to express their views has been highlighted (Fielding, 2001; Ainscow & Messiou, 2018) and the challenges of student voice research have been discussed by researchers (Lodge 2005; Cook-Sather, 2018). Oliha-Donaldson (2018 p 127) states "more needs to be done to unpack student understandings of diversity, their social interactions with each other, and the material and immaterial consequences of their talk."

To better understand how students of colour experience and perceive issues of race, we must give more attention to their views. In a rare study of student talk, Zinga and Gordon (2014, p 1088) noted that "...themes emerged from students' dialogues that pose several questions about what sort of racist atmosphere the members of this community are being exposed to on a daily basis." This starting point for future dialogue and classroom practice is in the form of the student-generated question. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNRC) refers to the value of 'the child's view' and 'voice' (l'Anson, 2018); however, what children say and what it means is often inferred by the adult, and what the adult perceives is not necessarily the same as what is actually being said. In terms of education, l'Anson (2018) notes that critical thinking allows children to eventually shape future society. As the child may be marginalised and the adult interpreting their voice may be privileged, the importance of students as participants in building their classroom discourse is clear. Achievement research should move towards a focus on students' perspectives rather than observing students as passive research subjects, in line with Wiggan (2007). It is on this premise that this student-voiced study was conceived, underpinned by the notion that the school environment experienced by students of colour related to their perceptions of bias or deflection of their identity in school (Dennell & Logan, 2015; Song, 2018) and that through their narratives a better understanding of the challenges and micro-oppressions faced by students of colour in the classroom may be constructed (Oliha-Donaldson, 2018).

More student voice, explicitly the voices of students of colour, is needed in educational research surrounding race, as much of the research on student marginalisation has internationally been told from a privileged perspective (Hylton, 2012). Important perspectives may be lost when the narrative is not student-centred, a view echoed by hooks (2003), Delpit (2006), and by the studies of Zinga and Gordon (2016), Rudick and Golsan (2017), and Oliha-Donaldson (2018). While the cited ethnographic studies are illuminating and thought provoking, there is a significant lack of student-centred, participatory, narrative output (Crichlow, 2015).

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

We acknowledge that the term race is not a scientific but a social construct based on society's identification of ancestry, appearance, and ethnicity: a societal process called "racial formation" (Lopez 1994, p 24). For this reason, some authors following Miles (1993) put race in inverted commas indicating falsely that it does not exist. While socially constructed, race exists, and is not unimportant or without social disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2013). The categorisation of people into race has been used to create hierarchy and White privilege, and Critical Race theorists acknowledge the power of the reality of socially constructed race groups and the subjugation attached to being categorised by White dominant culture as 'non-White' (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) research has largely been centered in the US for the last few decades, and although some researchers such as Gilborn (2006) are encouraging the framework in the UK as a necessary anti-racism approach, it has yet to establish the same level of acceptance of principles and agendas (Hylton, 2012). No formal CRT research conducted within schools in Scotland has been published to our knowledge although it has been considered as a framework by Arshad (2018b) and recommended by Valdelièvre of the Scotland Trade Union Council (STUC) Black Workers' Committee for future research in a recent General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS) article (Valdelièvre & Ul-Hassan, 2020). CRT assumes that society is inherently racist and that it is difficult to challenge since racism often is the common sense of society (Omi & Winant 1994). In the realm of education CRT seeks to connect the tenets of CRT to practice and activism (Parker & Lynn, 2002). It examines colourblind practices that serve to maintain racial inequalities institutionally (Su, 2007), identifies factors that perpetuate White dominance (Solomon *et al.*, 2003), and provides more voice and access for marginalised groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Founding CRT scholars like Bell (1979), Crenshaw (1988), and Delgado (1989) saw that laws are not race neutral, and therefore equal process cannot exist. Crenshaw (1988) notably expounded on the deleterious effects of liberal anti-discrimination legislation as too little and too celebrated, citing the civil rights movement in the US as a pacifying political measure that led people to think enough equality work had been done. Bell (1995) takes this concept further to develop a theory of interest convergence, noting that equality movements are only furthered when they align with White dominant interests. Modern CRT scholars such as Delgado & Stefancic (2012), Crichlow (2015), Chapman (2013), and Bonilla-Silva (2015) hold with this notion of interest convergence and concur that proactive research must include an element of White interests to be successful. Whiteness is treated as neutral as the dominating influence on our society, marginalising and other-ing other races (Tatum 2007).

CRT scholars are mindful of the centrality of race and masking of dominant interests and privilege that occurs when this fact is ignored (Manglitz *et al.*, 2006). Radically assessing our culture involves removing the camouflage in order to identify and examine everyday patterns of inequality and privilege (Su, 2007). CRT practice is therefore dynamic and proactive: first, by exposing the reality of race and dominance, and second, by engaging in social justice-based research (Tate, 1997). CRT incorporates ideals of action and social justice into research, as a means to acknowledge and fight inequity, and particularly to challenge the colourblind, race-neutral policies of institutions (Crichlow, 2015). CRT scholars believe that Whiteness is currently centralised while other perspectives are pushed to the margins: that the dominant White culture is oppressive through race-neutral practices and

failure to acknowledge its own privilege (Daniels 2006). A premise of the CRT research model is to empower the marginalised by acknowledging and challenging the social constructs of racism (Solorzano *et al.*, 2000).

A central tenet to the CRT ontology is the assertion that racism is normal and ordinary in current society. We live in a society where race and ethnicity matter, and bias based on skin colour is not the exception but the rule (Tatum, 2007). Because of this mindset, and the power of the dominant culture to perpetuate it, this social hierarchy becomes a natural and accepted ideology (Delgado, 1989). Access and opportunity are disproportionate while claims of a post-racial society are unfounded and fallacious (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Ignoring systemic racism and avoiding the truths of inequity by claiming 'colourblindness', are privileges of the dominant culture, whereas people of colour cannot ignore racism whenever they choose.

A second belief central to CRT is the need for the challenging of Whiteness as a dominant ideology that serves White privilege. What is part of the dominant culture is considered 'normal' and what is outside of the dominant culture is 'othered' (Wildman & Davis, 1995). To be categorised 'other' denotes implicit outsider status and holds White as the norm. It should be considered that people of colour are not intrinsically 'other' but have been historically and socially marginalised by the dominating culture (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Painter, 2017). This power dynamic leads to unequal opportunities disguised by the concept of meritocracy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The myth of meritocracy continues to be presented in arguments against systemic racism, but these arguments ignore the lack of equal access and reject the idea of privilege through class or other factors (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The belief that all have the same access to opportunities is pervasive; furthermore it is both false and damaging. The 'othered' are at a significant disadvantage that makes meritocracy currently impossible, and the ability to ignore this inequality of access is another result of White privilege.

A third tenet of CRT is a commitment to social justice and ending subjugation, which is key to engaging in CRT education research, specifically in an analysis of racism that leads to shifts in perspective and proactive strategies to promote equity (Sleeter, 2012). Creating a more equitable and more transparent system of education is the goal of CRT scholars, by identifying White privilege, by exposing the counter narrative, and by placing race and othered-ness at the centre of all social power dynamics (Tate, 1997). This commitment to social justice is not without roadblocks: most notably, Bell's theory of interest convergence identifies the prevalence of White interests in anti-discrimination and affirmative action legislation (1995). Ladson-Billings (2013) concurs that it is alignment with White interests and not altruism that drives racial justice reforms, and that CRT researchers are in the unenviable position of acknowledging the power of White people to ignore issues of colour that do not align with their interests.

Acknowledgment that experiential knowledge and the 'story of the oppressed' or counter-narrative is most valuable in conversations about oppression is the fourth CRT tenet. Delgado (1989) notes that the dominant culture controls the story society tells itself; these stock stories, or majoritarian narratives, construct reality in a way that benefits White-dominated society. Voices that have been marginalised, ignored, or othered do not have this kind of power to shape social values and beliefs, and are often invalidated (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Finally, CRT scholars utilise interdisciplinary methods, and acknowledge intersectionality to see a complete picture of oppression. CRT scholars take a transdisciplinary approach; history, law, women's studies, among other fields, offer more

insight into the centrality of race and the root of social-dominant norms (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Through understanding of the ideology and consciousness of race from a historical perspective, a glimpse of how privilege contributes to the shaping of society and the law emerges (Parker & Lynn, 2002). CRT challenges researchers to uncover privilege through contextualisation and the acknowledgment of human agency in maintaining systems of privilege and inequity.

CRT is therefore useful in furthering the understanding of inequity in Scottish schools as it relates to race, and in furthering the reach of CRT scholarship in Scotland as it allows for the pinpointing of racial stratification and the resulting hierarchy of privilege (Milner 2008), with a focus on marginalised voices and context in educational settings. This allows student voices to emerge as narrative and shape understanding through a nondominant perspective (Parker & Lynn 2002). The use of CRT to highlight the narrative for research “exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002 p 26).

CRT has been mainly used by researchers as a theoretical lens to analyse the experiences of racial minority students in mixed-race education environments (Chapman, 2013; Chapman & Bhopal, 2018) and White teachers’ experiences teaching students of colour (Barker 2019). A lack of CRT research in Scottish education should be addressed. The methods of CRT originate in the US and have been utilised for 30 years; in contrast the UK held its first CRT convention in 2011 and has yet to solidify CRT as an accepted theoretical framework (Hylton, 2012) while Scotland has produced less CRT-based research than England (Warrington, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative methodological approach as it deals with school culture and other intangible concepts, and quantitative measures are not likely to provide the depth needed to examine these (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The focus of participant discussion was on race, privilege and bias. Student discussion focused on student perceptions about dominance and privilege in school-based interactions to encourage student reflection on social processes and allow more depth of understanding in the way students construct their school environment together. Therefore, a qualitative approach was needed to provide context and to allow multiple individual voices to be involved in the research process, especially true when dealing with personal identity and student voice, which requires a more interpretive approach (Riehl, 2001). CRT acknowledges that a White dominant culture guides research methodology and critiques educational practice by exploring how it can oppress students (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017), making it an appropriate basis for this research.

The research was conducted in a large secondary school in urban Scotland with an overwhelmingly White population. Two focus group interviews took place with one group of five students of colour, three female and two male, aged 14 through 16, that we considered old enough and close enough in age to have meaningful conversations relating to a secondary school environment. People of Asian descent are also considered people of colour in terms of equity policy although they are often overlooked and disconnected from that community (Raymundo, 2020). The racial breakdown of the students included four students who identified as Brown (with Indian and Middle Eastern heritages) and one as Asian: two born in Scotland, two current English language learners, and one former English language learner now fluent. This grouping was to provide the most insight into a real

classroom setting by creating a comfortable space for marginalised students to open up to other marginalised students. Advice and guidance was requested of the headteacher and teacher/gatekeeper to target students who may be appropriate participants, due to race or ethnicity, age, and availability.

Discussion and student focus group interaction was chosen to provide depth and richness of experience to the research (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). In a focus group, participants interact with each other; therefore, the choice of focus group rather than more structured interviews is to allow the discourse to develop through student participant interaction (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). This method generated data appropriate to the research aims and allowed students to share personal, insightful reflections, allowing their views to emerge organically and minimising the effect of the researchers' unconscious bias (Parker & Lynn, 2002). In line with CRT framework views at the heart of this research, the participants of colour and their voices are the most important element of the project, offering a non-dominant narrative. There is a significant lack of student-voiced narrative output (Zinga & Gordon, 2016) and this study contributes to that with the students' participation in focus groups. While some may argue against the validity of narratives as data, Bell (1995, p 899) notes that "storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of law, and the unapologetic use of creativity" are integral components of CRT research; therefore the small size of the participant group was not a hindrance to the trustworthiness of the study. This research also satisfies Guba & Lincoln's (1989) four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability). In Scotland this focus group method has been used with students, as well as teachers and caregivers, by CERES to produce the Minority Ethnic Pupils' Experiences of School in Scotland (MEPESS) report for the Scottish government (Arshad *et al.*, 2005) wherein researchers found it helpful in identifying thematic threads of conversation as well as exploring multiple perspectives on bias effects in the classroom.

The ethics of power and marginalisation as White researchers were also considered (Castagno, 2008; Copland, 2018). Researchers' position as White women dictated that intrinsic bias and privileged assumptions based on experiences had to be examined throughout the study. Additionally, interactions with White educators and gatekeepers are examined. Frequent reflection and praxis on our part was necessary to attempt to counteract implicit bias, as students of colour may not have been truthful or comfortable with a White interviewer. For this reason, a more open and unstructured focus group discussion was implemented rather than one to one interviews, in an effort to limit the influence of a White interviewer on the student responses.

Talking points were introduced verbally and typed handouts were offered for differentiation including topics of privilege, meritocracy, peer interactions, and beliefs about race. Clear directives for engaging in discussion were introduced by the moderator beforehand, using the principles and practices of Accountable Talk (Resnick *et al.*, 2018) to ensure a comfortable and safe space in which students could share. The meetings lasted 45 minutes each and took place in a classroom without the supervision of a teacher. The second meeting took place four weeks later, to allow time to reflect on the first session. The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Given the sensitivity of the research, consent was informed, participation was voluntary, and no emotional or mental harm was allowed to come to the students involved (Copland, 2018). Pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity.

The study incorporated analysis through a lens of tenets of CRT to address the centrality of race, the existence of White privilege, interest convergence, counter-narrative,

and context (Gilborn, 2006; Kohli, 2009; Chapman, 2013). A thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used and constructed around student comments through the conceptual lens of CRT ontology. The main findings are categorised using topic and tone as well as theme (Cohen *et al.* 2011), with thematic categories centered on student perceptions surrounding race (Epstein & Lipschultz, 2012) and using CRT as an analytical framework (Yosso, 2002).

FINDINGS

Three main themes emerged as we analysed the data which represent three major tenets of CRT. The concepts of colourblindness, meritocracy, White privilege, interest convergence, and the normalcy of racism are used to explain how student experiences with peers and teachers can create a racially hostile environment for students of colour in White schools. The findings demonstrate that race is a major element of student experience (Arshad *et al.*, 2005). While many of the students shared similar experiences of being a person of colour, there were some significant differences in their experiences related to their diverse backgrounds. The importance of class and gender theories as they contribute to CRT should not be understated as race is simply a starting point for examining complex identities of those who have been marginalised (Hylton, 2012). All students were what would be considered in our social construction of race to be of colour; but that was not the only way in which they were othered.

Proactive Social Justice and Interest Convergence: “Who We Thought Would Speak”

The tendency of the privileged to stay silent became clear early in the research design process. One negative reply to the recruitment email, sent to twenty-nine schools, was received; 28 schools never replied after several emails. When engaging in email recruitment, authority figures in the school are more able to ignore the request; belonging to a privileged group allows for avoiding discomfort by opting out of struggles against oppression (Wildman & Davis, 1995).

Two schools were secured for focus groups through word of mouth and teacher networking. One of them dropped out of the study one day before the scheduled first focus group. The headteacher informed us that the students were not interested and had not handed in consent forms. When asked if addressing the students would be possible, the headteacher declined, citing student reluctance. As we had no control over which students were asked to volunteer, we also have no realistic idea of how they were approached or what the reason for student reluctance might have been, and we were not granted the opportunity at this school to assess this.

We were able to conduct two meetings at one city secondary school, though there was evidence of a colourblind mentality enacted in lack of access to all students. Although there were several Black students eligible for the focus group, no Black students were included. When asked for clarification about the method of selection, the gatekeeper, who was a White teacher and had been supportive in initiating the study at his school, replied that he and the headteacher noticed that the Black students eligible for the study were often reluctant to speak with adults in the school and therefore they only chose students “who we thought would speak.” In this instance, the gatekeeper had enacted his privilege without knowing it. His belief that all the Black students eligible would be reluctant to speak based on their perceived engagement in school led him to block their participation. This echoes Delgado’s (1989) notion that privilege seems natural to members of the dominant culture,

who do not see their actions as oppressive but simply neutral. As researchers we were reflexive in considering this may make us complicit in silencing these Black students; however, we felt it would be important to include the viewpoints of other students of colour and so continued with the focus groups.

The students all agreed that they thought White people would be uncomfortable having the conversations we were having in our group. Omar inferred that White people “don’t want to be seen as the bad guy,” highlighting one reason for the silence enabled by White privilege. It is a privilege held by White people to avoid the discomfort of discussing race, while people of colour cannot ignore or avoid the reality of race. Interestingly, students pinpointed the idea of interest convergence themselves as an obvious reason for lack of discussion about race and the meritocracy myth. The need for White self-interest as a motivator for these discussions (Bell, 1979; 1995) was acknowledged: if their teachers did not see the benefit of discussing race topics, those discussions would not happen.

Racism is Normalised: “It’s Not a Big Deal”

The most common phrase uttered by students was, “It’s not a big deal.” Other iterations were common: “It doesn’t really bother me”, “It doesn’t really matter”, “It’s just a joke.” The group was averse to taking things offensively. Two students acknowledged Islamophobia and racism in their friends’ daily comments about them, while at the same time minimising it by referring to comments as ‘just a joke.’

Dan: Like with friends, because you know it’s just a joke.

Omar: Except for the times when it hurts. [They all laugh] Still, a joke. Sometimes they’re funny and hurt at the same time.

There is a contradiction between the words the students chose to explain their feelings, and the underlying emotions they experienced. The students said that they did not experience bias but spoke of biased jokes. They acknowledged that the jokes represented ethnic and racial stereotyping yet looked for ways to excuse and remove that bias. This highlights the need for adults in these students’ lives to directly disapprove of biased comments in any context, as the students themselves did not believe these jokes were unacceptable.

Issues of race and bias jokes emerged throughout the meetings. The word ‘joke’ seemed to represent a shield to deflect the racism and bias they experienced in school. Rashida mentioned that her friends often called her a terrorist. Although she was affected by that “quite a lot,” she insisted she was not offended. She said she did not feel bias related to her religion very much, because “when people look at me they don’t see it, they don’t know it right away. Because I don’t wear the hijab, not everyone knows.” While acknowledging that she might experience more bias if people could identify her as Muslim on sight based on religious headwear, she could not identify Islamophobia as unacceptable. It is normal to her to expect jokes about being Muslim in her daily life. Other students commented:

Dan: I don’t really mind.

Omar: Well...

Rashida: It doesn’t bother me, just maybe it would be better if they never said it.

Omar: That means it bothers you.

Rashida: I mean it doesn’t bother me but... [silence].

This insistence on suppressing offense is a recurring event, not just for Rashida but the other students as well who characteristically replied that they “leave it”, they “let it go”. “Let it go” implies that they know there is something negative that could be addressed that they choose not to address. The experience is so common it is not worth the effort of addressing.

These students see themselves as ‘Other.’ It is not apparent to them that they are not ‘other’ but have rather been ‘othered’ by a dominating culture. In fact their perception of themselves is as an ‘other’ that should not “make a big deal” about the way things are. Their perception of themselves as ‘other’ leads them not only to ignore racism and bias but to feel that they do not have the right to be offended by it; they have absorbed the values they experience as part of the socialising impact of school (Tatum, 2007). An important finding of the study is that students are not explicitly aware of privilege and are unsure of how to talk about race inequity for this reason, mirroring the current bestselling nonfiction of Oluo (2019). Regarding how students viewed conversation about race and ethnicity occurring in a classroom, they were ultimately positive, believing it would help teachers understand them aligning with Arshad’s (2018a) suggestions. This is in opposition to the premise of colourblind teaching; students in this case desired recognition of their identities and the challenges that accompany those identities.

White Privilege: “Some People Have to Work Harder”

Students brought up the idea that some things were harder for them depending on the student’s background, echoing the work of CRT pioneer Bell (1995). Students worked from the definition of meritocracy as ‘an equal shot’ where equal ability and effort meant equal chances of success in society. They were asked if they would believe a teacher saying that the students have an equal chance to achieve what they want no matter their race or ethnicity.

Omar: No, I wouldn’t believe them. They’re probably just saying it to try to motivate us. It’s not true.

Rashida: Maybe it’s true, but maybe some people have to work harder because they start farther behind... Not equal.

Dan and Phueng: Not equal.

Haya: No! [vehemently].

The students presented awareness of the disadvantage of having to ‘work harder’ and connected this to unequal access to success. They all agreed that they do not live in a meritocracy, and that they do not believe teachers who tell them so: and teachers who do not want to talk about, or acknowledge, racial differences, who ‘don’t see color’ (Pollock, 2004) tend to fall back on meritocracy arguments (Delpit, 1996). Omar noted that his teachers probably are not aware of the inequity.

Omar: It’s not that they don’t care; it’s probably that they don’t know it’s happening. So they won’t know it, so they won’t do anything about it, so life will just carry on like this.

Omar disclosed his first-hand experience of the notion of ‘working harder’ and the disadvantages of being an English language learner. Frustratingly, after working to assimilate to the culture and becoming fluent in English, he was bullied for it by his peers,

called “the White boy” and accused of “trying to act White.” These White Scottish students acknowledged, and rejected, Omar’s attempt to acquire the values and privileges of the dominant culture. The other students in the group related to this.

Dan: Yeah. That’s so dumb.

Rashida: You get people saying ‘why you trying to act White’ or ‘why you trying to act Black’.

Dan: I think they are trying to indicate you should act your own ethnicity. I think they are trying to control the way we... I’m not sure... control the way we think about our own ethnicity.

Rashida: Like, ‘don’t try and act the way the people around you act’.

Dan’s interpretation that White students were trying to control his perception of his own ethnicity indicates his understanding of the dominant culture and his place outside of it. Rashida gives examples showing their difficulty when they try to conform, and the rejection they may experience.

The students brought up personal stories. Every student stated that they had experienced discrimination in some form. Omar related that he had been singled out and yelled at by a teacher for laughing although all students were laughing.

Omar: I felt it was targeted at me since I was the only Brown person in the class. I felt so left out. And she kept me outside the class in the hallway for the whole rest of the period. The head of teachers came and talked to me. I told him the whole story. And he wanted me to apologize to that teacher for saying a joke. I wouldn’t apologize. And it escalated so quickly... we had this thing called isolation. They put me in a room, closed the door on me, and I had to stay there alone for the whole day. That was the most depressing thing I’ve experienced in my life.

Researcher: Was there anything else that teacher had done that makes you think she targeted you because you were the only Brown person?

Omar: Oh yes, the whole year. I felt it. I would put my hand up to answer questions, and she would look at me, like so disgusted.

Omar’s story makes visible the bias that can exist in schools. Troubling about his narrative is the extreme disciplinary action to which he was exposed. Omar’s story could be used to introduce an examination of bias in educational settings; as Manglitz *et al.* (2006) note, counter stories help give insight to those in positions of privilege. Examining the prevalence of discipline bias and disproportionate school exclusions of students of colour is beyond the scope of this study; however, significant research exists to support the evidence of bias in school discipline (Skiba *et al.*, 2002).

What these students think they should say and how they think they should feel differs from their actual statements and feelings. Their desire to conform and feel ‘tied in’ could be affecting their choices in school interactions, reflecting a lack of access to social norms experienced by White students (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Their teachers promoted the meritocracy view of society, which stems from colourblind practice and is not a realistic portrayal of these students’ lives. The idea that everyone has an equal chance of success through hard work and ability is a fallacious concept that negates the roadblocks encountered by people of colour based solely on race (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Lack of equality in access to success leads students to further accept dominant White culture norms, highlighting that the only way to succeed is to acquire the culture of dominance (Delpit, 1996).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has focused on experiences of racism by students of colour in a secondary school in Scotland. The findings of this research unearthed the deplorable effects of racism and the colourblind mentality on students of colour at their school. The casual racism experienced through their peer and school interactions has been highlighted. Students internalised their experience of othering by their school environment, which is an important aspect of exclusion. The study offers evidence of everyday racism which is “reproduced in taken-for-granted, familiar and everyday routines... through language and behaviour” (Hällgren, 2005, p 322).

An important finding was that the students of colour do not feel that they are heard and supported by the authority figures in their school (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Oliha-Donaldson, 2018). When civility and discomfort by White people prevent race talk, the interests of students of colour are not met (Gaine, 2005). Acknowledging the privilege to ignore race can highlight instances of interest convergence as an actor and allow it to be dismantled to improve school experience for all. Wiggan (2007) notes student-based inquiry benefits schools and teachers, both in terms of instruction and school climate. The process of gathering student voices for this study was illuminating and overall was an empowering and positive experience for the students involved. In this study, sharing their own narratives allowed these students to be heard as well as to hear the stories of others; students then realised they were not alone (Solorzano *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, although students were talking about painful and difficult experiences, they unanimously vocalised positive feedback and engaged more with each other at the end of the study.

Students experienced very little direct language about race, ethnicity, and religion from teachers and other school adults, noting a tendency for teachers to at best ignore and at worst engage in biased language and actions (Delpit 2006). Most students pointed out the lack of teacher involvement in issues of race. Omar explicitly stated that teachers “won’t do anything about it, so life will just carry on like this” highlighting the futility of expecting change without teacher support. Indeed, teachers tend to avoid or superficially address anything in the classroom that may disrupt the lesson, and in the process may minimize, deflect, and ignore barriers faced by marginalised students (Sleeter, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Buchanan, 2015; Zinga & Gordon, 2016; Song, 2018) for fear of uncomfortable repercussions choosing to be ‘colormute’ (Pollock, 2004). However, the deflection of race topics and issues as well as treating racial topics as problematic or irrelevant leads to under-reporting of prejudice-based bullying (Dennell & Logan, 2015) and increases the likelihood of racism in schools (Pollock, 2004; López, 2011) and can negatively affect marginalised students’ experience (Arshad *et al.*, 2005). When teachers ignore racist comments, they contribute to discrimination (Castagno, 2008).

The findings of this study cannot be generalised as they refer to the experiences of five students of colour in one school. However, this study highlights the colourblind mentality and White privilege in blocking marginalised student voices, and it has important implications for teachers, educational policy, and research. This study suggests that it is more unethical, and indicative of abuse of privilege, to dictate what is and is not permissible regarding issues of race and ethnicity. Teachers have a moral responsibility to discuss race and equity topics with their students and promote more openness as a colourblind school environment can negatively impact students of colour, as demonstrated in the work of Castagno (2008), Modica (2015) and Bonilla-Silva (2015). Teachers should be able to talk about race and create space for conversations about race and racism explicitly in the classroom (Coles-

Ritchie & Smith, 2017). Based on student reflections, a recommendation of this study is that steps be taken to make educators aware of the damage inflicted by a colourblind mentality and the relevance of race equity topics in every classroom regardless of the racial demographics of the school (Pollock, 2004).

This research implicates that schools and students will benefit from a curriculum which explicitly includes race talk and counter narratives, in line with the research of Tatum (2007) and the curricular designs of Singleton (2015) and Gaine (2005). More explicit and direct conversation about race infused in the curriculum was suggested by the students as a way to limit bias and acknowledge privilege and is a recommendation of this study. According to Arshad *et al.* (2005) teachers and students were more open and able to address racism and race issues in schools that had embraced and proactively included race equity perspectives in the curriculum. Similar conclusions were suggested by the students in focus group discussion. Conversations with students about race can be a powerful tool used by teachers to analyse how students experience school, and to work towards equitable schools (Pollock, 2004; Chang & Conrad, 2008). Wildman and Davis (1995) encourage the making visible of power and privilege through discussion, not just about disadvantage and discrimination, but about the intrinsic benefits of Whiteness and the dominant culture. Pedagogies of a 'colour-blind' approach that 'do not see race' dishonouring racial identities should be replaced by inclusive pedagogical approaches that focus on designing the learning experience for everyone including those who are experiencing difficulties (Florian & Spratt, 2013), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

This study suggests that teachers need to have the knowledge and the confidence to discuss and analyse issues of race and difference in their classrooms (Singleton, 2013; Tatum, 2007). It has been argued that White teachers do not have the language and knowledge to discuss and educate students about race (Buchanan, 2015; Tikly *et al.*, 2004). Teacher education can play an important role in shaping teachers' beliefs and values that underpin their teaching practice and pedagogical approaches. The curriculum of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) should have a clear emphasis on race helping teachers understand what race is and how it is conceptualised from a critical perspective. This 'racial literacy' (Bolgatz, 2005) is needed on a personal level too. This study shows that teachers should reflect on their own and on their students' identity, and they should be willing to talk about race, listen to students of colour and engage with the literature on racism and race equity, being actively involved in their professional requirement to promote equity.

More teacher training needs to be mandated with a focus on acknowledging White privilege and the distortion of White as normal (King, 2001) and curricula should be developed and implemented on a large scale to guide classroom discourse surrounding race to disrupt this distortion (hooks, 2003). Further training for teachers and administrators in relation to the dangers of colourblind teaching and deflection of race talk should be part of an extended professional development journey agreeing with Lawrence & Tatum (2004) and Gaine (2005). In line with the REF (Scottish Government, 2016) as well as GIRFEC (Scottish Government, 2006), this could reasonably consist of government sponsorship of teacher training, professional development opportunities, and the addition of compulsory curriculum in schools relating to racism and privilege. The pedagogical work of Singleton (2015) and Coles-Ritchie and Smith (2017) are some examples of this. Sleeter (2004), Tatum (2007), and Chapman (2013) offer research to support the need for this type of teacher training particularly for White teachers. It is also recommended that teachers and students should work to acknowledge the bias they may knowingly or unknowingly bring

into their classrooms (Epstein & Lipschultz, 2012). The aforementioned suggestions would support all teachers, including Scottish teachers, to feel more confident in teaching students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

This research contributes to the international literature around race talk in schools. Apart from a significant contribution to the Scottish literature it also contributes to international literature on student-centred, participatory, narrative approaches on this topic. It is hoped that further CRT research with greater breadth and depth will be conducted on the way school policies, teacher practice, and student interactions can challenge White privilege and race inequity inspiring more guidance measures for teachers in avoiding colourblind practice. Also, it is hoped that this study will prompt the development of race equity policies taking into consideration the views of students of colour. There can be no neutrality when racism exists in school. We are either explicitly acting for antiracism, or we are supporting racism.

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