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# 'I have normalised being treated differently'. Analysis of the experiences of foreign students in Physical Education

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The aim of the study is to analyse the experiences of 7 students (4 girls and 3 boys) from different continents (Africa, Asia and South America) in Physical Education, in order to know to what extent, they have perceived racism. Their guardians also participated. All the students have experienced their compulsory schooling in Spain.

**Methods:** The research is framed under the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. A qualitative approach is used in which three categories of analysis are established: (a) Perception of social discrimination; (b) Effect on self-esteem and emotional implications; (c) Learning limitations in Physical Education. Interviews with students and focus groups with guardians, where the data collection techniques are/were used.

**Findings & conclusions:** The results show how students have suffered covert racism in the classroom, specifically in Physical Education, observed in a diversity of behaviours and actions linked to the colour of their skin, their accent, their physical features and even their body odour. This, despite their subliminal acceptance of it, has generated frustration, powerlessness and diminished self-esteem, as well as a bad relationship with the subject. Guardians recognize the experience of these forms of discrimination and emphasize that racism still exists in society and in schools, and that there is a lack of mechanisms and procedures to eradicate it. It is essential to continue researching how to approach a teaching of Physical Education that moves away from any type of discrimination, but this article is already a first step in giving a voice to those who suffer from it.

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Racism; Physical Education; discrimination; multiculturalism; integration

## Introduction

Multiculturalism is a reality in today's western society, as migratory flows are increasingly common. The volatility and internationalisation of jobs, territorial conflicts, and/or the economic needs of families have favoured the coexistence of people of different nationalities, ethnicities, races, and cultures (Halse 2022). This implies that citizenship should be governed by basic principles of solidarity, understanding, empathy and inclusion (Museus, Espiritu, and Caitlin 2021). If any of these aspects are absent, behavioural fissures are created among citizens that impede real progress towards equity.

In some cases, there is acknowledged and direct discrimination. In this line, the concept of race and/or ethnicity is used with clearly negative meanings to defend the superiority of different

physical, social and/or cultural aspects over others. However, in many other cases, discriminatory behavior is subconscious; masked by certain types of actions that justify it. From this point of view, there is often a rejection of the concept of race and ethnicity as a meaningful category of social analysis, which trivializes or justifies racist attitudes (Çetin-Ayşe 2024). Although in some contexts it may seem as though racism has already been overcome, this is not the case, and it is still a very common scourge that must be intentionally combated (Burns 2020). Discrimination solely for being born elsewhere and having different physical or cultural characteristics, still manifests itself both in a variety of comments and in situations of everyday life, at work or in terms of access to services (Rai et al. 2023). Therefore, it is necessary that we continue to speak without fear of racism, in order to combat it and extirpate it from our society.

Racist actions are framed within political and ideological structures, which generate tendencies of hatred towards people who are considered different (Sayyid 2017). The models of radical thinking built by certain political parties, legally structured and publicly funded, are increasingly supported by young people, which is highly alarming (Wainwright and Larkins 2020). Their actions permeate all spheres and levels of society and undermine the most basic principles of social equity and equality. This is the social and political situation we are currently facing in much of Europe and, specifically, in Spain, where this research is contextualized (Gemignani and Jiménez-Carrasco 2023).

Schools, as essential parts of society, reflect all this, and students might act according to what they experience in their families and closest environments (Garcés-Prettel, Santoya-Montes, and Jiménez-Orsorio 2020). In this sense, discrimination is reproduced and manifested in a variety of realities, many of which are exemplified in Physical Education (PE). This subject can be a strong support to enhance inclusive behaviours or, on the contrary, become a subject where fears, insecurities and mistrust towards peers prevail (Coudevylle et al. 2021). PE is a subject in which there is constant bodily exposure of the student, which means that he/she has to show him/herself as he/she is. This leads to the need to explore the social, cognitive, affective and motor domains implicit in the teaching process, approaching the subject from an inclusive and clearly emancipatory perspective (Caldeborg 2022). To this end, it is essential to eradicate any behaviour linked to racism, an issue addressed in this research. To do this, it is necessary to pay attention to how these students perceive and construct knowledge. This requires promoting that marginalized learners can adopt critical and reflective perspectives to understand their reality and challenge hegemonic narratives (Bjørke, Førland, and Mordal 2023).

That is why from PE it is essential to promote social relationships with others as an inherent part of the practice in the subject, and thus encourage students to respect and self-knowledge towards bodily and cultural diversity. If there is no respect for ethnic and racial identity among students in PE, any goal intended to be achieved is meaningless (Thorjussen and Sisjord 2018). It has been shown that there is often hidden discrimination in PE classes, often supported by a false normality that does not grant the same rights and learning opportunities to students of other races (Caldeborg 2022). This, among other factors, is due to the fact that, subliminally, racism is still present at a structural and social level, something that children, from an early age, reproduce in classrooms. In this sense, studies such as those by Thorjussen and Sisjord (2018) show how, in multi-ethnic contexts in PE, students carry with them a strong ethnic and racial identity, which creates tensions based on the search for power relations and limits relationships that promote equality. Furthermore, the loss of this individual identity in culturally diverse students is also reinforced by the feeling of incompetence that the use of institutionalized pedagogical practices in PE built on the foundation of the white student body (Aasland and Engelsrud 2021). This causes problems with sports, body, clothing and motor stereotypes, even if the teacher thinks that he treats all students equally (Flintoff and Dowling 2019). This is why, although there is literature that addresses racism in PE from the cultural norms of whites (Blackshear 2022), the educational curriculum (Dowling and Flintoff 2018), ethnic minorities (Thorjussen and Sisjord 2018) and the sports approach (Hylton 2015), there is no evidence that integrates racism in PE from a culturally diverse approach that

promotes the educational success of the student based on their cultural diversity. In this sense, a recent systematic review (Abel et al. 2024) revealed that although there is literature linked to racism and PE, no research was found focused on analysing the experiences of students who have suffered discrimination to promote specific actions against racism. In the Spanish context, there is research in PE related to the promotion of inclusive and equitable values in relation to immigrant students (Lleixá and Nivea 2020; Marconnot et al. 2021; Nieva and Lleixa 2021). However, these works very rarely directly address the issue of racism and problematize the aspects of discrimination encountered by the students who suffer it, as analyzed in this paper. Other studies such as that of Rodríguez-Fernández, Ramos-Vizcaíno, and Gigirey-Vilar (2021), contextualized in the primary education stage, highlight the lack of specific training for PE teachers in matters of diversity. Others such as Lamonedá, Carter-Thuillier, and López-Pastor (2020), after applying a program based on the service-learning strategy on the development of prosocial attitudes towards immigration in secondary school, showed a significant improvement in prosocial attitudes, but not in attitudes towards immigration. Therefore, it can be seen that much more research is still needed in the Spanish context regarding racism and PE.

The aim of the study is to analyse the experiences of 7 foreign pupils (from three continents other than Europe) and their guardians on perceived racial discrimination attitudes and practices in their lives and their relationship in PE classes. Starting from this objective, the different research questions arise; (a) What kind of social discrimination do foreign pupils suffer? (b) What are the emotional implications of this discrimination? (c) How does this discrimination affect PE classes? (d) How do guardians experience this discrimination suffered by their children?

In view of the aim of the research and the different questions that derive from it, the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy is used as the theoretical axis on which the research is based. In this way, the racial discrimination that foreign students may suffer in PE is connected to the necessary promotion of the social, personal and academic success of culturally diverse students. This is a clear contribution to previous literature, as there is no research that uses this theory in the context of racism in schools, and even less so in PE classes. In addition, family narratives are included, which is essential in order to assess the students' experiences from a more global perspective.

### **The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. A pedagogical approach based on multiculturalism**

The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy arose with the purpose of demonstrating that students from culturally diverse backgrounds can be successfully included (Ladson-Billings 1995). To achieve this purpose, Professor Ladson-Billings, a forerunner of this theory, demonstrated the importance of teachers being reflective, inspiring, critical, and challenging, but also the need for them to be connected to students, their families, their communities, and their daily lives (1994). In this way, we can see how culturally relevant pedagogy is a theory that is influenced by the theories that build critical pedagogy (Freire 1998; Giroux 1984), equity pedagogy (Banks and Banks 1995) and multicultural education (Banks and Banks 2010; Sleeter 2008), treating teaching as a social aspect to which everyone should have the right, without losing their identity.

Pedagogical theory and practice can and should operate in a symbiotic relationship, however, it is necessary that the theoretical underpinnings are meaningful and not confused (Ladson-Billings 2014). Along these lines, the practice of culturally relevant pedagogical theory is to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically through the use of their cultural references in teaching (Ladson-Billings 1995). Two are the substantive principles of this theory; (1) the idea that students' individuality is deeply intertwined with their ethnic identity and cultural socialisation (Gay 2018); and (2) learners can only become better people and learners if teachers take their cultural references into account in teaching. Thus, teaching should not only address the academic dimension, but also the emotional and psychological dimension; to this end, culturally relevant pedagogy relies on a three-phase cycle of cultural relevance (Flory and McCaughtry 2011), which

consists of (a) knowing community dynamics, (b) knowing how community dynamics influence educational processes, and (c) implementing strategies that reflect cultural knowledge of the community. The first two actions require research on the part of the teacher, both on the reality of their students, as well as other studies on cultural relevance that can help them understand, reflect and improve their teaching philosophy and practice around the theory of multiculturalism (Ladson-Billings 2014). The aim is to increase the educational success of culturally diverse students through the promotion of social justice and equality (Dover 2013). To this end, as Richards, Brown, and Forde (2007) state, this type of pedagogies concerned with cultural aspects must combine three interacting strands; (a) institutional; (b) personal; and (c) educational. It is impossible for meaningful learning to exist apart from a specific cultural context. From a Vygotskian perspective, this theory addresses two fundamental aspects. On the one hand, that students learn spontaneously about their informal experiences, and, on the other hand, to analyse the use that teachers make of students' cultural heritage to construct new learning. The aim is for the student not to be a passive individual in the face of the dominant culture, but an active subject, with his or her own identity, with the right to contribute to the construction of democratic societies. It is about accepting difference as a constituent part of democracy, empowering social and cultural groups that have been historically undervalued.

Therefore, the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy aligns with students who have received racial discrimination, allowing us to understand their experiences, since this theory recognizes their cultural identities, as well as the expression of feelings by all students. It also allows the involvement of families in order to create a broader support network that strengthens their cultural identity.

## Material and methods

### *Design and procedure*

The research is phenomenological in nature, following a retrospective design (Stolz 2023). It is structured on the basis of the analysis of the educational experiences of the participants, giving them a voice through their discourses (Mertens 2005). The term discourse refers to the way in which participants express their personal experiences, which are used as the primary source of the data obtained. The expression giving voice has a number of ontological and epistemological foundations that relate to the nature of being and knowledge. Each person has his or her experiences, and by allowing them to be expressed, their validation is achieved, thus being part of the existential dialogue. Furthermore, attending to them favours the active participation of each individual in the social fabric, listening to different perspectives that broaden the horizon of understanding about a fact.

The study was structured in 4 time phases:

Phase (1) Analysis of the research contribution and establishment of the intervention schedule; Phase (2) Conducting the interviews with the students; Phase (3) Conducting the focus group with guardians; Phase (4) Analysis of the totality of data by the researchers.

The researchers, being in contact with a diversity of PE teachers in the school, reflected on the relevance of conducting this study. Several meetings were held, through a seminar on innovation in PE, in which it was agreed to implement the research through the mediation of three PE teachers. The contexts in which they taught were analysed, showing feasibility, as all three teachers had a diversity of immigrant students in their classes. Although it is not intervention research, all of teachers were trained on culturally relevant education, establishing the fundamental principles that make up this theory, as well as the key elements to be able to apply it in the classroom. This allowed for greater coherence in the process and methodological design used. Students who might be interested were contacted and had to meet the following requirements/criteria: (a) be born in a country other than Spain, preferably in a non-European continent; (b) have suffered discrimination in PE; (c) be willing to participate in the research.

Once these three requirements had been met, the guardians were contacted, the aims of the research were explained, and they were inquired about their consent/willingness to participate in it. It was made clear that the main purpose of the research was to make the possible perceived racism in the school visible. All the guardians agreed, with a high degree of willingness, to take part in the research. They were guaranteed both anonymity and confidentiality of responses. It was made clear that all results would be shared with the participants. Permission to start the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the principal investigator's university.

## Participants

There were 7 PE students (4 girls and 3 boys) ranging in age from 13 to 15 years old. All of them were from Africa, Asia and South America, having been born in these continents. Specifically, they came from the countries of: Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Thailand, China, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Of the 7 students, 4 had been adopted by Spanish families, while the other 3 came with their families to Spain at a young age. When the research was conducted and data were analysed, all the students had lived their compulsory schooling in Spain. Their experiences in the last year of compulsory secondary education were collected, which ensured two things: (1) knowledge of the Spanish social culture and educational system, since the students had been living in Spain for several years and studying in Spanish schools. (2) extensive experience as PE students. They all attended public secondary schools in three different cities in the north of Spain.

The guardians of the 7 students agreed to participate in the research. All students were represented by either their father, their mother or both. The participating tutors came from the following countries: Spain, Tunisia, Thailand, Bolivia and Ecuador. All the families had a medium socio-economic level and were perfectly adapted to the Spanish culture and educational system. Both students and families were informed of the aims of the research, showing their agreement and positive predisposition to participate in it.

## Methods for data production

Two different techniques were used for data production: (1) interviews with students; (2) focus group discussions with guardians. The questions asked in each of the two techniques are related to each other, maintaining a linearity with the objectives of the study and the theory used (culturally relevant pedagogy), something that favours a global understanding of the subject matter of the study (Scott 2015).

Interviews with students: An individual interview was conducted with each of the 7 students. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in the answers and seeking more in-depth responses (Table 1). An attempt was made to formulate and present the questions in the most open way possible, in order not to bias the students' responses. They were conducted at the end of the school year, in order to obtain as much information as possible about their experiences in PE classes. Specifically, these interviews were conducted in the last week of class, when the grades for the subjects were already posted. These interviews made it possible to check the extent to which these immigrant pupils had experienced racist attitudes and situations in class. All interviews were conducted online, over three days, using the Microsoft Teams platform. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and were recorded for later analysis by the researchers.

**Table 1.** Script used for the semi-structured interview with students.

- (1) Have you ever felt discriminated against by society just because you are from another country? Can you give an example?
- (2) Have you also suffered this discrimination in class? How?
- (3) Has this discrimination caused you to lose self-esteem? Why?
- (4) In what way have you been affected emotionally by this discrimination?
- (5) Have you suffered discrimination in Physical Education? What were the reasons for this? Can you give an example?
- (6) Has this discrimination limited your learning in the subject? Could you give an example?



Focus groups guardians: Focus group discussion was held with the 10 family members after the interviews were completed. They took place one week after the end of classes. All participated in the same focus group. The questions posed were in line with the questions asked in the interviews, but in this case with the aim of analysing the external experiences of the guardians (Table 2). Each question was asked in order, encouraging participation through the creation of a climate of trust. Each parent could intervene when he or she considered it appropriate, always respecting the turns to speak. The researcher moderated the interventions, making sure not to move on to the next question until all guardians had participated in the previous one (Del Rio-Roberts 2014). Like the interviews, they were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, lasted 90 minutes and were recorded for later analysis.

### Analysis used

A qualitative approach was used to give voice to students who had experienced discrimination in PE, as well as their guardians. This requires an analysis that addresses a personal, cultural, social and familial aspect (Halquist and Musanti 2010). For this purpose, interpretative models that are aligned with the objectives of the study (Boadu 2021). The data obtained from the different data collection techniques used (interviews and focus groups) were triangulated, which gives greater rigour and transferability to the research dimension (Oliver-Hoyo and Allen 2014).

All the results were coded in an axial, open and selective way, according to different thematic axes, using cross-patterns (Saldaña 2012). For this purpose, the most significant text extracts were grouped together. This promotes the reliability and credibility of the results.

### Category generation and categorisation

All the data collected from each of the techniques were thoroughly reviewed by the researchers and then analysed using the WEFT QDA software. This made it possible to group the coinciding ideas and saturate the information through the generation of three categories: (a) Perception of social discrimination; (b) Effect on self-esteem and emotional implications; (c) Learning limitations in PE. These three categories emerge from the responses obtained in the interviews and discussion groups, maintaining the relationship with the objective, the research questions and the theory used. This respects the criteria of specificity and coherence that all qualitative research must have (Trainor and Graue 2014).

- Perception of social discrimination: information on the discrimination suffered as a result of being an immigrant, both at social and school level.
- Effect on self-esteem and emotional implications: this includes information related to the effect that the discrimination suffered has had on the self-esteem of the participants.
- Learning limitations in PE: data related to specific discrimination in PE are included, as well as the learning limitations in the subject that this has entailed.

### Coding of data collection techniques

Different acronyms are used to identify the text extracts with the data collection instrument they come from. In relation to the interviews with the students, EE is used, adding the subsequent

**Table 2.** Script used for the focus group discussion with families.

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(1) Do you think that your child has been socially discriminated against because he/she is from another country? How?
(2) Do you think that this has also happened at school? Could you specify?
(3) Has the discrimination they have suffered affected them emotionally, and can you give some examples?
(4) How have you experienced this situation in your family, how have you felt and how have you acted?
(5) Have you also suffered this discrimination in Physical Education classes? Can you give some examples?
(6) What feelings and experiences has your child transmitted to you in Physical Education? How have you tried to help him/her?

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number for each of the 7 participants (EE1, EE2, EE3 ... EE7). For the focus groups with guardians, the acronym DGT is used.

## Results

Below we present the results of the research across the three study categories described above. By means of cross-pattern analysis (Saldaña 2012) of all the resulting text extracts in each of the categories, we show, in a guided manner, those that are most significant.

### *Perception of social discrimination*

The students recognise that they have felt discriminated against by society in everyday life. They say that they have experienced very difficult situations, but that they have finally accepted them as normal:

‘There are many situations in my life where I have perceived racism [...]. Finally, you end up understanding that there will always be people who look at you and treat you differently because you are not the same as them’ (EE2). ‘If you don’t have the same features or skin colour as most Spaniards, you know that you have to be careful in certain places’ (EE7).

This causes them a lot of powerlessness, commenting on various examples where they have experienced racism. The vast majority are about social relationships, including with peers:

‘It has happened to me on many occasions that people on public transport prefer to sit with someone else, or even stand up, rather than sit next to me’ (EE6). ‘I got used to receiving looks of contempt and many racist comments towards me and other people from my country’ (EE3).

These experiences of racist discrimination, which affect their way of being, have also occurred in the school environment::

‘Not being accepted is really hard [...] I have experienced this for a long time, for example, at recess, feeling displaced at many times’ (EE3). ‘For example, on excursions, the whole class gets organised and groups together without telling you anything.’ (EE1). ‘It also happens a lot when the teacher asks for groups, where you are often left alone’ (EE6).

On the other hand, guardians reaffirm that there is subliminal racial discrimination in society, which they have experienced since they arrived in Spain, and which now seems to be gaining strength through some political proposals:

‘We have been discriminated against in many areas since we arrived in Spain, from renting a house to finding a job [...] With the passing of time, and looking at our children, this discrimination is less explicit, although it still exists. Racism is increasing in recent years [...]. You only have to listen to certain politicians, who clearly say that they want to expel us from the country’ (DGT).

And like their children, guardians recognise that this discrimination also extends to school, although in this context they perceive a greater awareness in recent years, but only with very specific and shallow actions:

‘My son has been discriminated against in class, this is a reality [...]. Although it is true that every year there is a greater awareness of racism and inclusion. It is common for schools to organise activities related to the day of peace, zero tolerance towards racism, but there is still a lot to be done’ (DGT).

They express their hope that true respect and tolerance would go beyond specific acts:

‘It is all very well for the school to organize special days, but it is necessary to go deeper in the day to day, because otherwise behaviours will not change’ (DGT)

### *Effect on self-esteem and emotional implications*

The students say that the discrimination they have received has directly affected their emotions, causing them a great deal of negative feelings and a sense of self-blame:



‘Ultimately, you end up believing that the problem is yours, that if others don’t accept you it’s your fault’ (EE5). ‘I have gone from an initial feeling of anger to one of frustration, in which you end up accepting that it will have to be like that, and you accept it as normal’ (EE7).

This discrimination, in addition to limiting their day-to-day enjoyment, has directly affected their personality, their way of coping with problems and relating to others.. Students have ended up denying the ethnic characteristics that make up their identity in order to be socially accepted:

‘In the end you become a different person from the one you really are [...] You act the way they want you to act’ (EE2). ‘On many occasions I have stopped saying things I wanted to just to avoid bad words, gestures or looks’ (EE6).

They acknowledge doing things they don’t like in order to please others:

‘You have a hard time until you get into a group of friends [...]. It is the hardest thing, to see that on many occasions you are isolated, just because your origins are not in Spain. Trying to be liked by others no matter what, even if you don’t really like doing things you don’t like very much. (EE1).

This emotional disturbance, leading to behavioural changes, has led students to believe that they do not have the same rights as others. Despite adapting as much as possible to the established culture, they report that they are still victims of prejudice:

‘At last, you end up believing that you don’t have the same rights as the rest [...]. You know that, faced with the same objective, the difficulties are greater’ (EE3). ‘There is a lot of impotence when you see that you try to adapt as best you can, but it is not enough’ (EE7).

These prejudices lead them to feel different from others, having to work harder:

‘Prejudices about the colour of your skin, your origins, your facial features ... always generate prejudice. You feel you have to try harder than everyone else. (EE1).

Guardians say that seeing a child suffer is one of the hardest things that can happen to them, especially because of the powerlessness that comes from not being able to solve the problem:

‘It’s very hard to see your child suffer and not be able to do anything about it. You talk to him, you try to encourage him, but in the end it’s not up to you whether he suffers discrimination [...]. You feel very helpless because you can’t help him’ (DGT).

Guardians say that sometimes they have not found all the answers they expected. They say that in the current education system it is necessary to work from the political bases and not to place all the responsibilities on the teacher alone:

‘They talk to you about associations, about integration at school, but sometimes you have a problem of this kind and you don’t know who to turn to [...] Nobody seems to be responsible’ ‘I’ve been very lucky, sometimes, with teachers who have been concerned about the situation, while in other cases they haven’t wanted to know anything. I think there should be more structured protocols for dealing with cases of racism’ (DGT).

### *Learning limitations in PE*

Looking specifically at PE, students say that, especially at the beginning, they suffered a lot. They say that the suffering is greater than in any other subject because of the bodily exposure:

‘My first days in PE were especially hard [...]. You are constantly being watched by other people, by what they say about you when you run, catch a ball [...]’ (EE6). ‘Because you are exercising and moving all the time, the pressure you are under is greater than in any other subject’ (EE2).

This feeling also occurs during group changes, something that causes them discomfort:

‘It always happens when you change groups, being from a foreign background, it is more difficult to be accepted. You constantly have the pressure of having to be liked by others. (EE4).

Students report a variety of examples in the subject where they have experienced such discrimination:

‘When the teacher asks for teams, it is one of the worst moments, because you feel the pressure that you are going to be alone because the rest are going to be together’ (EE5). ‘Sometimes, when we have had to share material, I have seen how some classmates go elsewhere so as not to share it with you’ (EE7).

This perceived discrimination prevents them from enjoying PE:

‘I have even avoided running very fast so as not to sweat and to avoid getting my clothes wet. These are constant acts that have not allowed me to enjoy Physical Education on many occasions. (EE1).

Students say that this has been a constraint on their learning, both in the more social and curricular aspects. Going unnoticed or focusing on fitting in to be accepted has taken their attention away from the classes and what was being taught in them:

‘To try to avoid mockery from classmates you choose not to answer the teacher [...] You end up staying in the background’ (EE5). ‘When you are in the first years you are not so conscious, but now you think about it and the truth is that you stop being you [...] They act the way they want you to act in order to feel accepted’ (EE4).

They state that these bad experiences make them demotivated towards the subject:

‘I have always liked the PE, but there have been some moments when you have a bad time [...] You stop paying attention to the class and it ends up demotivating you’ (EE1).

Tutors claim that many of these bad experiences come from PE classes, where they are most exposed and where the most negative and disruptive behaviours of pupils emerge. This leads to a loss of identity for their children:

‘At first I couldn’t believe that my son had a bad time in PE [...]. He has always loved sport. You see them playing and you think they are enjoying it. Behind that play and movement there are many things: insecurities, fears, scorn, discrimination [...] that my son has been telling me over time’ (DGT).

Guardians highlight how they have tried to help their children on a variety of occasions, without trying to interfere too much in their relationship with their friends. They emphasise that PE teachers have good intentions but that it is difficult to combat those deep-rooted stereotypes that exist in society and that students have ingrained in them:

‘Obviously, you try to help your child when you see that they are having a bad time, but you also don’t want to get too involved in their group of friends [...]. I have spoken to PE teachers several times, and in most cases, they have helped me. PE teachers want to help, and I have been told that they use inclusive methodologies, but, of course, it is difficult to control everything that happens in the classroom.

The tutors indicate that students often reproduce what they experience, especially in the field of sports, which has an impact on discrimination:

‘It is true that many students reproduce in class what they experience in their families, in society [...] and this is very difficult to control’. ‘This is even more acute in sports, where violence and racism are all too common, something that students reproduce’. (DGT).

## Discussion

The aim of the study was to analyse the experiences of 7 foreign pupils (from three continents other than Europe) and their guardians on perceived racial discrimination attitudes and practices in their lives and their relationship in PE classes. The whole theoretical framework of the research, as well as the results obtained, have been framed under the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, based on the fundamental premise that society and school must welcome, with integrity, students with culturally diverse backgrounds, and, as a consequence, know and attend to their emotional and psychological dimension.

Within the first category of analysis, the results have shown how the students have experienced a variety of situations linked to racism, inside and outside the school, which they have ended up assuming as normal. In this sense, Burns (2020) establishes that racism, although society claims

to be against it, is still very present in everyday gestures of daily life, harming those who come from another context or country of origin. The students' families say that they are perceiving an increase in these discriminatory actions and that, as Alves, Segatto, and Pineda (2021) indicate, certain current political and ideological postulates, linked to the extreme right, are promoting direct exclusion against foreign people, something that affects the most basic principles of ethics. Moreover, this leads to comments, which were previously made in privacy, or thoughts, which were not externalised, now being made as a matter of course without any modesty (Atteberry-Ash, Nicotera, and Gonzales 2021).

Moreover, in this study, the participants have shown how this racial discrimination suffered in his daily life, is also transferred to the school and the relationships he lives within it. The students reflect how the lack of involvement of teachers and schools in the establishment of social relations, leads them to experience discriminatory situations within the school environment as well as those they suffer outside it. In this sense, the school must become, above all, a place where respect, inclusion and acceptance of others prevail (Arellanes and Hendricks 2022). On the other hand, despite the current situation in many countries and specifically in Spain, families perceive a greater involvement of schools in inclusion issues. However, these actions seem punctual and fail to address the social implications of long-established or normalized pedagogical practices that create spaces of discomfort for racially and ethnically diverse students. This requires structured programmes that allow for true inclusion and specifically prevent possible problems that may occur, something that unfortunately does not always exist (Benítez-Sillero et al. 2021). In view of the results, pedagogical approaches such as culturally relevant pedagogy still seem far from being able to overcome hegemonic positions established in daily educational practices that are unconsciously reproduced. However, the level of awareness and reflection required for the correct application approaches remain the only possibilities to deeply review all pedagogical practices that occur in schools in relation to social reproduction and racial and ethnic discriminations, and to successfully include students with culturally diverse backgrounds (Gay 2018).

In relation to the second category of analysis, the results reflected how the discrimination received by the students affected them directly on an emotional level, causing them to have to change their behaviour and personality in order to be accepted. This feeling of guilt is common in those who suffer from racism, as the prejudices established at a social and cultural level make the discriminated person end up thinking that they do not have the same rights as other citizens (Russell 2022). This 'hidden' discrimination is always experienced by pupils with fewer social and economic resources, especially if they are of a different ethnicity, race and culture (Alemanji 2021). Therefore, in many cases, this process of cultural acceptance ends up becoming a cultural imposition, forcing a standardised way of thinking and acting in order to be truly integrated (Denissova et al. 2022). Contexts such as schools should not yield to this cultural imposition and should become spaces where students find the possibility of building their own ethnic identity through cultural socialization (Gay 2018). In this sense, the students' families highlight how hard it has been for them to see how their children have suffered this unfair discrimination, feeling powerless for not being able to improve the situation and feeling helpless for not obtaining solutions. It is common for racism and discrimination to be masked by silent suffering, in which those affected, and their families, do not obtain the help they are legally entitled to (Constante et al. 2021). For this reason, it is necessary to combine political, administrative, economic and socio-cultural factors in order to decisively address the eradication of racism and discrimination, which is a complex web that often lacks the necessary transparency and ethics. Inside the school, and as the results show, social relations, educational practices or curricula must be critically reviewed to adapt to cultural diversity, rather than provoking feelings of incompetence or emotional discomfort in those who do not adapt to the cultural majority. This requires that equity is no longer just a buzzword, and that we move from the 'talk' of equity to the 'walk' of equity (McNair 2021).

Regarding the third category of analysis, specifically focused on PE, students have stated how they suffered, much more than in other classes, due to the constant bodily exposure that exists.

It should be borne in mind that PE is a subject with unquestionable learning potential. However, if not approached from its most pedagogical and inclusive version, it can have precisely the opposite effect, especially when variables such as gender, social class, ethnicity and race come into play (Thorjussen 2021). Students highlight grouping, the use of shared material or performing tasks in front of others as main examples of discrimination, which are also seen as limitations to their learning. Along these lines, research continues to highlight that current practice in PE often reaffirms rather than challenges established inequities, and this is why PE must actively work on a profound change that encourages and enables teachers to challenge and respond to established inequitable practices in schools (Penney et al. 2018). This becomes even more relevant when attending to a multi-ethnic perspective, where, in PE, cultural differences cause tensions among students, largely due to power relations rooted in ethnic identities (Thorjussen and Sisjord 2018). These abusive relationships can be seen in the students' responses, who state that in PE they are constantly exposed to others and therefore have to hide aspects of their ethnic identity or limit themselves physically because, for example, their bodies do not conform to the prevailing cultural forms (Tijoux and Barrios 2019). For this reason, it is essential for initial teacher training to include intercultural spaces in order to generate inclusive resources that future teachers can integrate into their professional practices (Anttila, Siljamäki, and Rowe 2018). For their part, families corroborate the discrimination suffered by their children in PE, expressing existing disruption, and showing awareness that the social environment and the school are closely linked; which for their sons and daughters is a continuation of the racial discrimination experienced on a daily basis behaviour, despite the good inclusive intentions of PE teachers. What is clear is that if profound changes are sought through PE, the paradigm from which this subject and teachers understand inclusion must be changed (Penney et al. 2018). In this regard, research such as Barker's (2017) indicates that PE in Western countries does not provide equitable experiences for non-white students, largely because teachers lack sufficient cultural competence. From the perspective of critical race theory, this author reflects how teachers, in many cases unconsciously, resort to the racial discourse of whiteness, thus generating racial disadvantage. This is why it is essential to apply methodologies based on open and participatory approaches, connected to service learning and dialogue with families, which favour the breaking down of social stereotypes that have been created and to accommodate a wide diversity of ethnic identities through culturally relevant pedagogy (Flory and McCaughtry 2011).

## Conclusions

The results of the research have shown how the participating students have perceived racism, both in society and at school, and specifically in PE. This discrimination has had a direct impact on their socio-emotional environment, generating feelings of powerlessness, frustration and incompetence in front of others. This has caused them little enjoyment and learning in PE, feeling in many cases displaced and unaccepted by others. Guardians highlight their suffering in dealing with these situations, feeling helpless and not knowing where to turn. In addition, it is reflected how discriminatory community attitudes influence the educational processes, which implies developing strategies that address the cultural knowledge of the community. For this reason, it is essential to attend to inclusive approaches, and that both in school and in PE students from different social, economic and/or cultural contexts are welcomed, guaranteeing their affective, social and psycho-evolutionary development. Initial and ongoing training are key elements for this.

The results obtained in the present study represent a substantial contribution to the existing literature on the subject, since there is no previous research that uses the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy in the context of racism in schools, and even less in the Spanish context, that analyses the racism perceived by PE students of different nationalities, complemented by the experiences of their guardians. However, there are several limitations to the research. Firstly, it does not address the implementation of the content developed in PE, nor does it give a voice to its teachers. Secondly, the socio-economic level of families is not contrasted. For future lines of research, it would be of

interest to determine what type of content can generate more discrimination, to analyse how the social and economic level of the students influences racism, analysing possible links between economic capital and perceived racial discrimination, and to verify the perceptions and approaches applied by PE teachers, thus enabling the verification of a direct relationship with community dynamics and cultural knowledge of the community, as exposed by the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. We consider this research to be of particular interest to all policy makers, educational legislators, families and PE teachers, as inclusion legislation, and above all its enforcement, must be guaranteed for any society that seeks to move forward. Additionally, giving students a voice can be an important element in breaking down contradictions between political discourse and educational practices. To this end, PE is a subject with endless possibilities, as long as motor skills are approached in a clearly pedagogical way.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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