

VINCIT QUI SE VINCIT: DISRUPTING HETEROSEXUAL WHITE MALENESS AS A TOOL FOR CULTIVATING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Brian Vassallo

B.Psy (gen), Dip Fac Inc Ed, MBEMAS(uk), MNAME(USA), MSc(uk), Head of School- Mariam Albatool School, Visiting Lecturer - University of Malta, Program Development Expert- Institute for Education, Visiting Lecturer - Institute for Education, Micro-placement Visitor - Institute for Education, Internal Verifier - Institute for Education Dissertation Supervisor - Institute for Education, Malta Europe
brianvassallo7671@gmail.com

Abstract

The main aim of this study is to explore how school leaders might use disruptive leadership to improve educational opportunities and foster a climate of respect, equity and justice in educational institutions. The paper focused on four post-secondary schools and delineates the extent to which 4 Maltese school leaders were disruptive in creating organisational change and improving student outcomes. As a White male school leader, the researcher delved critically into school leaders' perceptions of how leadership processes are being challenged to embrace the reality of multiculturalism in our Maltese schools. The research is innovative in the way it proposes the disruption of heterosexual White maleness as a tool for cultivating cultural responsiveness in daily leadership praxis, decision making and agentic dispositions. The research also instils a sense of urgency among school leaders to further hone and promote culturally responsive leadership skills.

Culturally responsive leadership, masculinity, Whiteness, students of colour.

Introduction

There is currently renewed interest across disciplines and educational institutions towards “decolonising curriculum and pedagogy” (Shahjahan et al. 2022, 3). There are many aspects to this, from reviewing reading lists to challenging racist underpinnings of assumptions, from deconstructing historical events to more equitable employment policies (Schucan and Pitman 2020). The purpose of the paper is to examine the impact of Whiteness and masculinity on the school leader's enactment of culturally responsive school leadership and seeks to establish how these two factors can contribute towards more equitable schools.

A fundamental principle of ‘deconstructing the curriculum’ is to acknowledge and disrupt power imbalances in the classroom, and this includes talking about hegemonic male whiteness. Various researchers (Atal 2021; Lopez 2014; Applebaum 2011; Lund and Carr 2015; Lund and Carr 2010), argued that whiteness is a universal political project that defends and enforces the racialised social order of white supremacy. In the educational milieu, whiteness is enshrined in invisible social practices that define the social order, and is characterised by collective and deliberate ignorance that fails to acknowledge the conditions for the reproduction of race (Medina 2013). Hence the whiteness of the teaching staff supports the whiteness that pervades curricula, which works in tandem to reinforce the association between whiteness and intellect. This further strengthens the conditions that make racism possible in the educational sector.

Literature Review

The Maltese National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education 1999) places emphasis on the rights of all people to be treated fairly and without any discrimination, irrespective of racial identity, gender, country of origin, political and religious views, skin colour, age and physical or mental ability. It also recognised the concept of identity as being constantly negotiated and renegotiated within a flux of increasingly complex social interactions. This view depicts students as builders of their own identity as it is constantly being shaped in an ambience of acceptance, discussion, critical evaluation and respect. Thirteen years later the Maltese National Curriculum Framework (MEDE 2012) further affirms that all students can learn, grow and experience success by a) respecting diversity in all its forms, b) promoting an inclusive environment and c) ensuring the development of policies and practices that address the individual and specific needs of learners and the learning community. Moreover, it stresses that every student is entitled to a quality educational experience and assisted in developing their potential and achieving personal excellence, thus ensuring a holistic education relevant to life. The framework also insists on the need to develop networks of communication within multilingual contexts, extending beyond school walls, thereby supporting families and the wider community. Eventually, this would stir the need to develop policies and practices that support the specific needs of the learners and their community. These processes can only be effective if educational leaders stir collaborative processes that unite the talents and forces of teachers, students and parents to improve the quality of education.

Khalifa et al. (2016, 1285) determined four components that frame culturally responsive school leadership behaviours. These include 1) critical self-reflection on leadership behaviours, 2) developing culturally responsive educators, 3) developing a culturally responsive school environment and 4) engagement of students, parents, and the community. The first component emphasises culturally responsive school leaders as critical and self-reflective agents that aim to "unearth their personal biases, assumptions, and values that stem from their cultural backgrounds". The second component focuses on developing culturally responsive school leaders that shared a vision for serving diverse students using culturally responsive instruction, and assessment strategies that target the needs of culturally diverse students. The third component emphasises school climate that values the unique contributions of each student. In such environments, diverse students do not see themselves as outcasts in a dominant culture, but rather as community members whose contributions are valued. The fourth component of Culturally Responsive School Leadership bridges the gap between home and school, thereby creating "authentic overlapping school-community spaces" (Khalifa et al. 2016, 1291).

School leaders, shaped by their various experiences, roles, and expertise, are at different points in terms of their racial literacy. Some take it in their stride to work through the incumbencies that dictate their behaviour and actions in executing their noble role. Others are perhaps more observant and take their time, sometimes seemingly *ad infinitum*, to improve confidence and equip themselves with the necessary skills to function effectively in multicultural setups. Similarly, students are also on different points along the racist continuum. For some, male whiteness may come as a surprise since they never experienced racial discrimination or prejudices. They might realise that racism is present along the invisible echelons of their surrounding environments and becomes institutionalised without even noticing (Sue 2013).

Discussions about racism are not uncommon in post-secondary classrooms. Students share experiences while on their work placements that develop into extended discussions about racism and link these experiences to classroom topics. There is, however, a predominant tendency to locate racism 'elsewhere' and it's never "here". However, micro-aggressions do happen in classrooms, in their various forms and faces. Small, seemingly insignificant remarks are fertile ground for heightened racist feelings and experiences which are often challenging to deal with in a classroom. However, such moments can be an opportunity for transformative learning to happen (Fakunle 2021). It, therefore, becomes vital to primarily prevent such incidences from happening by being able to create spaces for learning and discussion.

White students are quick at expressing their wish not to be reproached if they 'accidentally said something racist' and it is exactly during such instances that opportunity knocks for sensible talk about white privilege and white fragility (Di Angelo 2018), and how not to get derailed by a feeling of guilt, shame, and fear. As a white male lecturer in multiethnic setups, I hold what Bondi et al. (2005) call "institutional power" i.e. the 'bestowed authority' of assessing students' work, thus influencing students' module results. This institutional power is further enhanced and enacted through my social identities as a white, straight and middle-class man. To speak about whiteness from the vantage point of a white male perpetuates entrenched power relations (Castagno 2008; Oliver 2021). Hence the study sets up to investigate the following research questions:

- 1) How do White male school leaders engage in critical self-reflection to ensure equitable learning experiences for students of colour?
- 2) What actions do White male school leaders initiate to develop and promote culturally responsive teaching for students of colour?
- 3) In what ways do White and Masculine self-identities influence culturally responsive school leadership for students of colour?

In this research, the term students of colour (SoC) is intended to mean non-white groups, emphasizing common experiences of racism. It includes students who identify as Black or African-American, Asian, and African racial identities.

Methodology

Phenomenological study

A Phenomenological Study is ideal for investigating the experiences of White male school leaders. The study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to research which offers an explicit, theoretically based approach that allows a total method for research, and not one just focused on data analysis.

The researcher aims to interpret lived experiences through the lens of the four participants wherein meaning is interpreted through the participants' perspective. Lived experiences shape a person's inner world before s/he has deliberately been reflected upon. These experiences offer a high dose of interpretative characteristics that precede deep reflections (Larkin, Eatough and Osborn 2011). In this study, the phenomena are the lived experiences of

White male school leaders, which also provide the context of the study. The researcher began the study with an open mind, keeping preconceived ideas to a minimum. He relied heavily on dialogic rather than observational interpretations and engaged the four participants in meaningful, respectful, thought-provoking discussions. The qualitative enquiry revealed a number of themes, each associated with the enactment of culturally responsive school leadership (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Bendassolli 2013)..

Participant and setting criteria

The author purposefully chose 4 post-secondary schools which contained a significant number of SoC. The participants were allowed to participate in the study as long as they met the criteria of a) identifying themselves as a White heterosexual male, b) leading a school which hosts SoC, (c) have been holding their current leadership position for the past two years, and (d) acknowledge the importance of culturally responsive school leadership. The author received a positive response for participation from the 4 identified school leaders who voluntarily participated in the study. This aligns well with the recommendation put forward by Creswell and Creswell (2018) who suggested a number between 3-10 for a feasible phenomenological study. The participants signed the required consent forms and were assured that their anonymity would be respected at all times during the research process. They were also assured that their responses to the semi-structured interview would remain highly confidential and that data will be destroyed immediately after the research process.

Paul, Jacob, Colin and Clarence* were interviewed during Summer 2021. All four are White male heterosexual school leaders in a higher educational institution in Malta. All four participants had formal training in Multicultural school leadership designed and conducted by the researcher himself. It must be stated that the interviews reveal participants' self-reported activities as is the evaluation of their activities. Evidence of classroom pedagogical processes is limited to self-reporting and what is detailed in the school development plan document. Khalifa et al.'s (2019) descriptors provided the lens through which the researcher interpreted and discussed each participant's output during the interview. In this research study, a school leader is culturally responsive when he affirms the cultural and academic identities of SoC and takes actions that are conducive to the welfare of students of colour without any detriment to their cultural identities.

Paul identifies himself as a White Maltese male heterosexual serving in a school of approximately 370 students whose ages vary from 16 to 18. Paul revealed that 92% of the students are White while 6% are SoC. Paul describes his school community as a community undergoing a fast demographic shift in population due to the arrival of students from war-torn countries, environmental catastrophes and Malta's economic and social progress in the past 10 years. Jacob carried more than 10 years of leadership experience in an independent postsecondary school. Jacob identifies himself as a middle-class White heterosexual male who serves a post-secondary school of more than 200 students. Jacob says 90% of the students at his school are White, 4% being SoC. All of Jacob's educators are White except for one teacher who is of Arab origin. Colin's experience tallied 6 continuous years of leadership experience in an international postsecondary school. He identifies himself as a middle-class White heterosexual male who serves a population of more than 100 students, 91% of whom are White and 8% being SoC. Clarence was in his 8th year as a leader in an international language school in the academic year 2019-2020. Clarence identifies himself as a middle-class White male, leading a predominantly White school of approximately 150 students at post-secondary level (16+). Only few are SoC. In Clemence's school, all educators are white.

Critical self-reflection and reflexivity

Educational systems around the world are raced, classed, and gendered (Coretta 2010; Cheng 2011; Bozalek 2010). The researcher concurs with this statement and has, for the past 24 years, viewed educational policies, practices, and decision-making with a critical race theory perspective. This culminated into an internal struggle, which led to an inherent understanding of his preconceptions, biases and privileges. The researcher believes that the privilege of being a White male heterosexual school leader working in an independent school spurred his career opportunities and paved the way for increased professional learning opportunities. He affirms that these varied social and professional encounters have expanded his network, and further honed his skills across the different roles as expected from a respected school leader within his community. The researcher also became increasingly conscious that fellow community members perceived him as a school administrator whose professional judgment needs to be accepted without contestation. This unearned heterosexual White male privilege was the subject of deep-seated introspective self-analysis that culminated in an urge to examine through the eyes of school leaders, the long-rooted assumptions that pervade our role as educators, skewing us to enact one decision and not another.

Epistemology of the study

Khalifa (2018, 11) believes that epistemology "is concerned with anything that informs or influences us in how we learn and understand what we believe is real". What the researcher believed to be real was marred by biases

and blindspots. Before embarking on this study, the researcher adopted a schoolcentric epistemology, whereby he asserted "the power to normalize schoolcentric and educator epistemologies in schools, [thus] devalue(ing) and ignore(ing) community-based and Indigenous epistemologies" (Khalifa 2018, 11). The researcher was oblivious to the need of creating classroom space that builds on the cultural baggage of the students and surrounding community and instead opted for a 'one size fits all' lesson on textbook approach. This ingrained attitude was then reflected in lesson planning, lesson delivery, assessment procedures and educational experiences of the students under his care. The researcher observed that student identities were becoming more and more invisible both within pedagogical planning and cross-curricular activities, the reason being that a White schoolcentric epistemology was pervading the cultural makeup of the students. During the interviews, the researcher exercised 'prudence' when elaborating on statements that reinforce White heterosexual male privilege.

Data collection

Data collection involved the use of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. An ethics form and interview protocol were set up and constructed conjointly with the research participants. The researcher adopted a phenomenological approach to interviewing and applied questions based on themes of the phenomenon and its clarification. This method of questioning employed descriptive and semi-structural questioning as well as novel use of imaginative variation to recount experiences. Due to Covid restrictions, participants were interviewed virtually. School development plans of the school together with guidance books were analysed using the critical race theory (CRT).

Critical race theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) centres racism in deeply embedded roots in organisational systems and policies. Hence it counters discourse that situates discrimination and inequalities within the realm of individual behaviours but believes it to be a deliberate, institutionalized, and degrading way of being (Brown and Jackson 2013). CRT argues that racism immobilizes minoritized groups, and consequently provides an unwavering advantage to white people.

Review of school development planning documents consisted mainly of school organisation, school climate and curricular planning, teaching & learning processes, behaviour policies, professional development opportunities, deployment of resources, and culturally responsive pedagogical methods. Through the use of contextual positioning, the researcher positioned the data in a way that identified the key elements relevant to the study, mirroring its scope, positioning it in time, and situating it in the appropriate context. This enhanced the reliability, validity and cogency of data. The interview protocol was piloted with four other school leaders before the actual interviews, allowing for minor adjustments. Findings were also shared back with each participant for feedback, thus enhancing accuracy.

Findings

All four participants acknowledged the power that White privilege exerts on the surrounding school environment. They gave accounts of racial encounters with people of colour and the role these experiences had in shaping their professional lives. They were adamant in their quest to infuse discussions during staff meetings that have equity and fairness as their core theme. Paul, Colin, and Clarence said their staff members have attended social justice training as part of their training portfolio. They also said that few of their educators were implementing curricular changes using a critical lens.

All four participants shared their personal view of how a culturally responsive school should function. Paul, Jacob and Clarence gave tangible evidence of how they challenged inadequate school practices that inadvertently led to exclusionary practices. Paul amended his school dress code using the students' suggestions to enhance inclusivity. The four school leaders actively engage SoC using a school-based epistemology. Paul uses a single method of communication to engage all families at his school while Clarence adopts a mix of email, mobile calls, and short message services to enhance communication with all families. Colin, on the other hand, deliberately schedules individual educational plans (IEP) meetings during evenings, allowing parents increased flexibility to attend. Jacob was the only participant who deliberately included SoC in student representative groups to suggest ideas for school development directly to the school senior management. Clarence says he purposefully includes SoC in group fora, thereby diversifying his communicative network during school evaluation (auditing) processes.

When participants were asked how Whiteness and masculinity influence their ability to support SoC, the words 'privilege' and 'responsibility' came out most often. Paul was eloquent when he spoke of "undeserved credibility" because SoC automatically assume that a White male leader should lead the school. Jacob's White racial self-awareness helped him to become increasingly cognizant and insightful about the relationships between his school's

homogeneous White lecturing staff towards prospective SoC. Colin and Clarence feel obliged to utilise their White heterosexual male privilege to act in favour of SoC.

Paul did not give any details as to how he used White heterosexual male privilege to implement inclusive school policies. Clarence states that he feels obliged to use the power associated with being a White male to assist minoritised students' identities. He sees his whiteness as a barrier to forging meaningful relationships with students of colour and their families so he feels inhibited at providing leadership actions that affirm students of colour. Jacob did not express any intention to nurture personal relationships with SoC but admits that his racial self-awareness was crucial towards enabling effective communication. Jacob says he never enrolled in professional development sessions on culturally responsive education, social justice or multicultural pedagogies, although he did participate in conference sessions on educational management. Colin communicated that he was raised as a White male in a family of a poor low socio-economic status and that he uses this privilege to engage effortlessly with minoritized students.

Paul, Colin and Clarence provided circumstantial accounts of how personal life experiences induced them to self-interrogation of White privilege. They realised that white supremacy is real and not the construction of people of colour. None of the participants interviewed specified how White heterosexual male privilege influenced leadership actions to create a humanising school environment for SoC.

The language used in Colin's school guidebook includes subjective language describing how students should show respect, responsibility, and positive behaviour. Colin showed that SoC are represented on the school's hallway displays. However, Colin hesitates to use engagement strategies specifically tailored for SoC as in his own words 'one student does not represent all students or the whole culture'.

None of the participant's handbooks include systematic policies or practices to create equitable learning experiences for SoC. Instead, the handbooks include statements that support hegemonic strategies that support all students as one hegemonic body. All four participants were in favour of restorative approaches that replace exclusions (Crichlow 2015; Cremin et al., 2013). Clarence also argued that SoC are more likely to receive disciplinary referrals than White middle-class students and therefore the use of restorative practices had a positive impact on all students particularly on SoC.

Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on developing themes generated from qualitative data and discussing them within the context of the conceptual framework. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Document reviews (School development plans and handbooks) were intertwined with interview data as corroborating or disputing evidence to deepen emerging themes.

Research Question 1: How do White Male School Leaders engage in critical self-reflection to ensure equitable learning experiences for Students of Colour?

Critical Self-reflection on Leadership Behaviours

Paul verbalised his interview on a personal critical self-reflection manner focusing on prejudice and White heterosexual male privilege. He wants to build an inclusive space for all students stressing his belief in "oneness" much "like a family, community, caring and supporting our youngsters, and fostering social, academic, and emotional progress". The school handbook now contains inclusive dress codes with carefully studied revisions of female dress outfits. Paul critically reflected on textbook content and made strong suggestions in favour of diverse texts so students can identify with non-dominant perspectives.

Jacob created a student multicultural group to give more 'voice' in school decision-making. He deliberately included students of colour in the school's multiethnic (mosaic) group after a student focus group conducted a few months back revealed that SoC frequently feel disconnected at his school. The student multiethnic group proposed important school handbook changes for publication in the year 2021-2022 and suggested that discriminatory language based on race, gender, and sexual orientation is specifically termed as "derogatory and divisive".

Colin shared personal critical reflection when he recognised the negative impact of daily microaggressions experienced by students of colour. To help combat this, he initiated a student advisory group so that students have more impact on school decision-making. He gave priority to minoritized student voice by deliberately including SoC in the student's advisory group after student focus group discussions revealed that SoC are feeling disengaged. The students' advisory group proposed to specifically write that discriminatory language based on race, gender, and sexual orientation is prohibited in the school.

Clarence also shared a personal critical reflection on the effect of privilege on his school experiences and how the participation in two social justice courses was an eye-opener towards ensuring that students feel "appreciated, taken care of, and feeling safe". Clarence displayed content critical reflection by convincingly conveying the importance of a) training educators in social justice issues, b) upon consent from educators, conducting classroom visits and evaluating pedagogical objectives using a social justice lens, c) setting up hallway displays featuring people of colour as heroes and d) advocates for racially diverse texts in the classroom and school libraries. Clarence did not deliberately seek the input of SoC to improve the academic performance of the school. Instead, he insists on a collective effort that sustains a proactive image of a diverse high functioning school.

Research Question 2: What actions do White male school leaders initiate to develop and promote culturally responsive teaching for Students of Colour?

Developing Culturally Responsive Teachers

Six of Paul's teaching staff have attended one or more social justice professional development courses. During classroom observations, Paul looks for pedagogical practices that included project-based learning and erected posters of these projects in the school hall and on social media. His initiatives extended beyond his academic staff and included support and ancillary staff.

During the scholastic year 2019-20, Jacob focused on professional development sessions that targeted social-emotional learning. While doing classroom visits, he identifies aspects of critical and creative thinking, and mutual collaboration amongst students. He wants educators to differentiate instruction, and provide students with opportunities to verbalise their learning and adopt a variety of learning tasks. Jacob's staff is revisiting diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development in the 2019-2020 school year.

Colin wants all of his educators to attend modules on social justice training and, in fact, around 40% of Colin's educators have already attended such courses. He also invites educators to select textbooks and online media that feature diverse characters.

Clarence says that his management team is informally discussing the school dress code. He says "We have been sensitive to race and also gender issues and discovered certain patterns that pertain to students of colour, especially during particular times of the year such as festivities etc". He did not elaborate on this but stressed the need for students to identify with a group, particularly if they are a student of colour. He also acknowledges that SoC perform academically lower at his school so he informally appointed one of his assistant heads to serve as a liaison person for these students. Clarence does not solicit the input of SoC to improve his school but seeks to be personally responsible for being approachable and accessible. Clarence says that he immersed himself in a deep understanding of Whiteness and racism by reading authors of colour and engaging in class discussions. He exclaims:

Vincit qui se vincit! [He conquers who conquers himself] - there needs to be a lot more work to understand the concept of White privilege and what it means to have a White heterosexual male in a position of leadership.

This phrase in Latin struck me as it showed humility coupled with a strong desire towards improvement in multiethnic awareness both for himself and for the students he and his colleagues serve. At the time of writing this research study, Clarence was composing a draft of the new code of conduct for students with a set of expected student behaviours inextricably linked with human rights, politeness, cooperation and collaboration, the development of self and social identity and the maintenance of a physical and psychologically safe environment. It also included consequences for showing disrespect to fellow students, verbal and sexual harassment, bullying, and physical and racial abuse. The school dress code contained examples of inappropriate dress and provided school administrators with the tools to effectively address inappropriate attire. In order to raise racial self-awareness, he makes numerous attempts to initiate discussions on the intersections between race and class. Clarence said there are only a few educators in his school who have participated in inset courses with justice and equity as the core theme.

A Culturally Responsive School Environment

Paul and Jacob challenged exclusionary school policies by including remedial practices in the school's code of behaviour, reviewing the mobile phone policy, lateness, and dress code policies. The guidebook now includes both direct exclusionary practices (eg. for serious disciplinary transgressions) and recognition of achievements (eg. a certificate for kindness). He also gave prominence to a student-made class mural on a hallway wall.

Colin portrays himself as a model for inclusiveness by creating school environments where SoC can flourish. He gave particular importance to multicultural books in the library, posters in corridors, and more equitable student placement practices. His school has a foyer display that displayed past and contemporary minoritized populations.

Engaging students of colour

Paul adopts a school-centric epistemology and uses the same communication methods to engage all students. SoC participate in at-risk school intervention programs but does not solicit their advice on school improvement. Paul posts images of students on social media, showing school activities, student achievements, and sports activities. His social media posts show links between the school and the outside community.

Using students' voice, Jacob stepped up efforts to further enhance the inclusion of SoC in his school's student advisory group in response to feedback emanating from students participation in focus group discussions. Feedback showed that SoC feel isolated and not connected at his school. Jacob believes that the student diversity group needs to be empowered to take decisions and propose changes in the discriminatory language section in the school guidance book for the upcoming year.

Focus on internal school communication

Clarence uses a variety of communication methods such as emails, phone calls and text messages—to ensure all families are up-to-date school information. The school guidebook provides space for parents to complete a volunteer form prior to volunteering at the school. Clarence includes SoC in diverse student focus groups.

Research Question 3:

In what ways do White and Masculine self-identities influence culturally responsive school leadership for students of colour?

The influence that Whiteness and masculinity exert on culturally responsive school leadership is examined by how participants perceive White heterosexual male privilege as supportive of the promotion of inclusive school environments for students of colour and students. Therefore, leadership practices that create inclusive school environments respect minoritized students' academic and cultural identities.

Paul believes that he enjoys *unearned credibility*. He suspects that families of colour assume to see a White male leader at the helm of the school and this does not help him support SoC. Instead, he believes that the way he presents himself, his demeanour and speech adaptations are instrumental towards forging excellent connections with students of low socioeconomic status.

Jacob believes that his whiteness helps him to connect with families of colour visiting his school. He verbalised that working in a school where staff is predominantly White, actually hinders his quest of being culturally responsive to SoC as this limits his interaction with them. Jacob sees no difference in how being a White male influence his ability to support SoC. He explains that it has always been a personal mission to educate students at risk.

Clarence and Colin said that it is a moral obligation to support SoC by using their influence as a White males. They believe that fostering relationships with SoC would have been much easier if they were themselves SoC. To make up for this, they built particular relationships with SoC by sharing his personal data. They both found this method to be particularly successful at strengthening rapport between students and overcoming possible negative perceptions associated with the, being White male school leaders.

Discussion

Participant History and Epistemological Bias

Participants clearly showed what influenced their epistemological bias by explaining the privileges earned from being White heterosexual males. Jacob displayed critical consciousness by engaging with families of colour and speaking about the cultural deficiencies of largely homogeneous White school populations. Paul and Colin showed deep personal reflections by identifying bias and participating in training courses incorporating justice and equity components.

Colin held discussions with families of colour and their community leaders to help him gain insight into how to advocate for minoritised students. In his own words, we need to be constantly vigilant on what our families of colour are telling us, through conversations, media, expressive arts ... in other words real and factual inclusion. Given that inherent power and privilege pervades White male school leadership processes, deep critical reflection opportunities are needed to assist leaders in restoring student identities, thus mitigating against sociocultural barriers. Smiley and Helfenbein (2011) caution us of the "messiah mentality" and the "White Saviour complex"

ie the proclivity of wanting to help others without accepting guidance from those that need help. These complexes fossilise racist school leadership practices by devaluing minoritized students' background, interests and their social and cultural capital.

Participants enacted changes in the curriculum and sought intentional grouping so that students of colour identify with people like themselves in the school environment. The displays on the school hall's noticeboard are an act of decolonization as they enliven the narratives and experiences of SoC. Colin intentionally groups SoC with other SoC, also citing the students' own words "I love it when somebody looks like me in my classroom". Colin's response suggests some students of colour request to be placed in classrooms where there are others like them. Honouring SoC's request affirms the self-efficacy of the school leader to cause meaningful change along the student's journey. Moreover, placing SoC in classrooms with other SoC is an act of humanisation and facilitates the development of peer networks.

Personal Growth

Knowing about culturally responsive school leadership behaviours in action is not identical to putting those behaviours into action. After completing the study, I feel more confident in the understanding of my White male identity and how it influenced and is still influencing my behaviour.

The four participants in the study were skilled at developing welcoming and inclusive schools, yet enacted traditional, outdated, colonising, exclusionary, and repressive leadership practices. The leadership actions described in the study are but few attempts from a range of culturally responsive repertoire that maintain White sociocultural norms and fall short of the required actions to humanise SoC.

There was clear evidence of culturally responsive school leadership behaviour, but participants' attempts to be culturally responsive (e.g., diverse texts in classroom libraries, and hallway displays) are essentially superficial inclusive practices. Depicting Whiteness as the norm in an attempt to help teachers serve SoC is counterproductive. Centring Whiteness dehumanises minoritised student identities. The culturally responsive school leadership actions described in the study were inadequate and insufficient. Participants acknowledged White privilege in self-reflection but fell short of challenging White epistemology.

Two participants felt morally compelled to use their privilege to protect SoC and economically disadvantaged students' identities. This sense of moral duty seemed to have superseded the Messiah mentality (Green and Dantley, 2013). Culturally responsive school leaders are sensitive to the cultural capital of minoritized students and seek to celebrate and view it as a treasure that makes the school environment more complete. None of the participants planned beforehand to celebrate SoC or economically disadvantaged students' cultural capital. Moreover, one participant reported that his school staff tended to have low expectations, devalued and dehumanised, economically disadvantaged students.

The study disturbs White male school leaders' engagement with SoC, in homogenous, White postsecondary settings. One participant provided SoC with a powerful voice that shaped school policy and inclusionary practices among different student groups. He provided disadvantaged student groups with means of direct contact with the school administration. Participants opted for school-based methods to engage families of colour. However, they fell short of adopting intentional structures for families of colour that raise their voices to shape ensuing school practices and policies. None of the participants was able to tap into historical knowledge, oral history, ancestral knowledge and ancient wisdom of families of colour to develop culturally responsive school environments. Consequently, none of the participants was effective in truly engaging families of colour, towards becoming a functional group of individuals free from oppression, and skilful enough to forge their own living, thus fulfilling their aspirations and dreams. Participants were reluctant towards implementing deliberate engagement opportunities for minoritized families. Fear of tokenizing should not prevent school leaders from planning intentional engagement.

Participants did share sporadic instances of students' acts of racism. However, they were hesitant to acknowledge biased and racist school practices and policies. They showed no evidence of placing race at the core of their leadership processes and in personal critical reflection. School leaders need to disrupt racism by intentionally including SoC students when reviewing their school policies. They also need to use equity audits that exercise scrutiny on practices with a critical race and social class lens.

There was some evidence of school leaders making attempts to push against oppression, but their attempts were short of being systematic, institutionalized, and sustained actions that are needed to dismantle domineering school practices. Educational leadership programs should train school administrators to interrupt racism, resist White

supremacy, and disrupt colonising school practices. The relationship between White male privilege and the messiah mentality needs to be constantly under the critical lens (Green and Dantley 2013) and must be constantly studied and discussed in national and international fora. Participants recognised that White male privilege could be used as a tool for identifying blind spots and recognising biases. However, they fell short of explaining how this can be enacted. Trainers in educational leadership programs need to direct White male students from simply acknowledging White privilege, to understanding how their roles contribute to perpetuating White supremacist educational practices.

Educational leadership trainers need to shift their focus from an educational system geared at achieving academic results to one that places students and their community at the very core of leadership and management activities. Participants were unable to see how their epistemological lynchpins guided their leadership style and the effect of Whiteness and masculinity on their neglect of community-based epistemologies. Educational leadership mentors must assist aspiring school leaders in the investigation, appreciation, and integration of community-based epistemologies in leadership decision-making. The study is innovative in that it infuses critical race theory with culturally responsive school leadership theory in a conceptual framework. The use of Critical Race Theory and culturally responsive school leadership theory were instrumental towards evaluating school guidebook policies, identifying discriminating school policies, and scrutinising school leadership practices.

Conclusions, recommendations, and implications for future research

The study shows that culturally responsive leadership is an effective strategy against racism. Racism can be disrupted in school settings when school principals deliberately enact culturally responsive school leadership and reject traditional school leadership practices. The research informs the pedagogical choices of practising White male school leaders in the mission to enact culturally responsive school leadership. The participants' explanation of white male identity was devoid of any real introspective examination of oneself. Instead, they constructed their own versions of inclusive schools whilst broadly enacting traditional, exclusionary, and oppressive leadership practices that fall short of a culturally responsive repertoire

Participants maintained White sociocultural norms, thus falling short of the necessary actions that humanize SoC and other marginalised student groups. Attempts towards culturally responsive inclusive practices were limited to the introduction of diverse texts in classroom libraries and foyer displays. Centring Whiteness dehumanizes minoritized student identities. Participants recognised White privilege as shaping their actions as school leaders, however, they were unable to criticise White epistemology. None of the participants recognised that his actions maintained White supremacy. However, two participants felt obliged to use their White privilege to protect SoC and minoritized students thus yielding more towards the messiah mentality.

It is a moral duty for culturally responsive school leaders to recognize, include and celebrate include minoritized students' cultural capital in the school environment. One participant took bold steps towards providing SoC students and economically disadvantaged students a powerful voice in determining school policy by including student groups with direct access to school administration. All four participants were not aware of community-based knowledge of SoC and economically disadvantaged families in developing culturally responsive school practices and consequently were not in a position to recraft and relive their own position. Fear of tokenising SoC should not prevent school leaders from intentional engagement.

Evidence suggests that participants made attempts to push against oppression but fell short of being systematic, institutionalized, and sustained actions that aim to dismantle oppressive school practices. Participants were not able to explain how White heterosexual male privilege influenced leadership practices. Educational leadership programs need to expose aspiring school leaders to epistemologies based on community frameworks so that they experience first-hand the wealth that ancestral knowledge brings to leadership praxis. School leaders need to be equipped to resist school-centric epistemologies and create novel approaches by linking critical race theory with culturally responsive school leadership theory. These two connected together, provide the lens through which one can examine interview responses, school handbook policies and other media. Counter story-telling can also be used as a tool for formulating school policies and practices.

Future research could delve into the motivational aspects to prompt specific leadership actions, epistemologies, and discussions on racial identity development. Equity audits using student and community voice are vital towards revealing how school policies and practices are culturally responsive. No participant explicitly reported that SoC were over-represented in disciplinary referrals. Hence quantitative data detailing student discipline, and the impact of specific culturally responsive school leadership practices would need to be researched. The study limited investigation to White male leadership practices for SoC and did not include other minoritized populations. Moreover, participants were exclusively White males, so the analysis was limited to a group of individuals sharing

more or less the same level of privileges. Other studies could include other intersectionalities such as White female school leaders being privileged by race, but not gender.

Limitations of the study

The results are restricted to White heterosexual male school leaders and therefore cannot be extended to other viewpoints or situations. Being a heterosexual White male researcher contributed to building a strong rapport with the school leaders. This, however, might have conditioned the participants to respond the researcher wished they would respond. Moreover, the fact that participants identified themselves as White heterosexual males might have channelled them to use language to describe culturally responsive school leadership actions.

* Not their real names

References

- Applebaum, B. (2011). *Being white, being good: White complicity, white moral responsibility, and social justice pedagogy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Atal, M. R. (2021). Measuring the Wages of Whiteness: A Project for Political Economists. *Global Perspectives*, 2(1), 22154. <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2021.22154>.
- Bendassolli, P. F. (2013). Theory Building in Qualitative Research: Reconsidering the Problem of Induction. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 14(1), <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1301258>.
- Bondi, L., Davidson, J., & Smith, M. (2005). Introduction: geography's 'emotional turn'. In J. Davidson, L. Bondi, L. & Smith, M. (eds). *Emotional geographies*. Hampshire: Ashgate (pp. 1–18). [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)
- Bozalek, V. (2010). The Effect of Institutional Racism on Student Family Circumstances: A Human Capabilities Perspective." *South African Journal of Psychology*, 40(4), 487–494. doi:10.1177/008124631004000409. S2CID 143467232.
- Brown, K., & Jackson, D. D. (2013). The history and conceptual elements of critical race theory. In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (pp. 9–22). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Castagno, A. E. (2008). "I Don't Want to Hear That!": Legitimizing Whiteness through Silence in Schools. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 39(3), 314-333.
- Cheng, Y. (2011). From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism. *The China Quarterly*, 207, 561–579. doi:10.1017/S0305741011100065
- Coretta, P. (2010). Institutional Racism and Ethnic Inequalities: An Expanded Multilevel Framework. *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(1), 173-192. doi:10.1017/s0047279410000565.
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publishers, Inc
- Crichlow, W. (2015). Critical race theory: A strategy for framing discussions around social justice and democratic education. *Higher Education in Transformation Conference*, Dublin, Ireland, pp.187-201.
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). White Fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3, 54-70.
- Evatt-Young, D. & Bryson, B. S. (2021). White Higher Education Leaders on the Complexities of Whiteness and Anti-Racist Leadership. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCSCORE)*, 7(1), 47–82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48645361>
- Fakunle, O. (2021). Developing a framework for international students' rationales for studying abroad, beyond economic factors. *Policy Futures in Education*. 19(6), 671-690. doi:10.1177/1478210320965066
- Green, T. L., & Dantley, M. E (2013). The Great White Hope? Examining the White Privilege and Epistemology of an Urban High School Principal. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 16(2): 82–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458913487038>
- Khalifa, M. 2018. *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A. & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272-1311. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316630383>
- Khalifa, M. A., Khalil, D., Marsh, T. E. & Halloran. C. (2019). Toward an Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership: A Literature Review. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55(4), 571–614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18809348>
- Larkin, M., Eatough, V. & Osborn. M. (2011). Interpretative phenomenological analysis and embodied, active, situated cognition. *Theory Psychology*, 21, 318-337.
- Lopez, I. H. (2014). *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lund, D. E. & Carr, P.R. (Eds.). (2015). *Revisiting the great white north? Reframing whiteness, privilege and identity in education* (2nd ed.). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

- Lund, D. E. & Carr, P.R. (2010). Exposing privilege and racism in the great white north: Tackling whiteness and identity issues in Canadian education. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 12(4), 229-234.
- Marsh, V. L. (2017). Restorative practice: History, successes, challenges & recommendations. Research brief, Center for Urban Education Success. Retrieved December 3, 2019, from <http://www.urbues.org>
- Medina, J. (2013). Color Blindness, Meta-Ignorance, and the Racial Imagination. *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 1(1), 38–67. <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.1.1.0038>
- Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) (2012). *A National Curriculum Framework For All*. Floriana: MEDE
- Ministry of Education (1999). *Creating the Future Together: National Minimum Curriculum*. Malta: Ministry of Education.
- Oliver, M. (2021). James Baldwin and the “Lie of Whiteness”: Toward an Ethic of Culpability, Complicity, and Confession”, *Religions*, 12(6), 447.
- Patton Davis, L. (2019). “What Is Deficit Thinking? An Analysis of Conceptualizations of Deficit Thinking and Implications for Scholarly Research.” *Currents* 1(1), 8. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/currents/17387731.0001.110?view=text;rgn=main>
- Payne, A. A., & Welch. K. (2013). Restorative justice in schools: The influence of race on restorative discipline. *Youth & Society*. 0044118X12473125.
- Schiff, M. (2018) *Institutionalizing restorative justice: Paradoxes of power, restoration, and Rights*. In Gavrielides, T. & Artinopoulou, V. (Eds.) *Reconstructing the restorative justice philosophy: Greek philosophy & human rights* (pp. 153–178). London: Ashgate Publishers.
- Schucan Bird, K. & Pitman. L. (2020). How diverse is your reading list? Exploring issues of representation and decolonisation in the UK. *Higher Education*, (79), 903-920.
- Shahjahan, R.A., Estera, AL, Surla, K.L., Edwards, K. T. (2022). “Decolonizing” Curriculum and Pedagogy: A Comparative Review Across Disciplines and Global Higher Education Contexts. *Review of Educational Research*, 92(1), 73-113. doi:10.3102/00346543211042423
- Smiley, A. & Helfenbein, R. (2011). *Becoming Teachers: The Payne Effect*. *Multicultural Perspectives*. 13, 5-15. 10.1080/15210960.2011.548177.
- Steketee, A., Williams, M. T., Valencia, B. T., Printz, D. & Hooper, L. M. (2021). Racial and Language Microaggressions in the School Ecology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(5), 1075–1098. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691621995740>
- Sue, D. W. (2013). Race talk: The psychology of racial dialogues. *American Psychologist*, 68, 663–672. doi:10.1037/a0033681
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L. & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the US*. Washington, DC: Learning Policy Institute.
- Wang, R. (2022). The Impact of Suspension Reforms on Discipline Outcomes: Evidence From California High Schools. *AERA Open*. doi:10.1177/23328584211068067