

White Pre-Service Principals' Perceptions of White Privilege as a Barrier to Cultural Proficiency

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if white pre-service principals recognize white privilege as a barrier to cultural proficiency in their schools. Six white pre-service principals were asked to determine the extent to which they observed white privilege in their schools. The findings showed all that six pre-service principals experienced white privilege in their schools. Their descriptions were conceptualized in accordance to Allan Johnson's concept of white privilege.

Keywords: whiteness, privilege, principals, leadership, culture, proficiency

Schools continue to become filled with students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Banks, 1999, 2008; Baron, 2007; Hernandez & Marshall, 2009; Howard, 2007; Young, Madsen, & Young, 2010). As such, one of the key factors in accommodating the needs of these students is cultural proficiency. Cultural Proficiency is defined as "culturally diverse school environments that are aware of the most culturally responsive approaches to interact with students in culturally affirming ways" (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 3). According to Lindsey et al. (2009), principals play a huge role in setting the tone for implementing cultural proficiency into schools. As such, pre-service principals must be aware of the need to be culturally proficient school leaders.

A key factor in developing into culturally proficient school leaders is the ability to address the barriers of cultural proficiency. Lindsey et al. (2009) argued that there are three main barriers to cultural proficiency within an organization. The three most influential barriers are resistance to change, oppression, and privilege. A description of these factors is as follows:

1. Resistance to Change--Refusing or failing to acknowledge the importance of adjusting to the cultural differences that are presented by students from culturally diverse backgrounds. (p. 71)
2. Systems of Oppression--Engaging in specific actions that deny the humanity and development of students because of their cultural backgrounds and characteristics. (p. 75)

3. A Sense of Privilege--Privilege often shapes our inability to see how we achieve certain opportunities and positions due to group membership. (p. 75)

The purpose of this study is to focus on the influence of privilege in terms of white privilege. Specifically, this research provides white pre-service principals' perspectives on the extent to which white privilege is a barrier to cultural proficiency.

Research Question

The research question for this article is as follows:

1. To what extent do white pre-service principals perceive white privilege as a barrier to cultural proficiency?

Significance of Study

The significance of this study is that schools and school leadership are not neutral--they are instead based on norms of white culture (Banks, 1998; 2008). The reason is like the teaching populations, a majority of the school principals in public schools are white. These outcomes are rooted in whiteness with whiteness as the structural and historical validation of white people as being the standard example of normality. A key component of whiteness is white privilege. Specifically, white people are often privileged to rarely, if ever, have negative racialized experiences that adversely impact their lives. White principals will be the key leaders of schools with diverse schools. Therefore, they must recognize how white privilege impacts the experiences of their non-white students. This level of understanding must be developed during white principals' tenure as pre-service principals.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research is Allan Johnson's (2013) description of white privilege from the perspective of being a system of privilege. Johnson denotes privilege exists when one group has some of the values that are denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do. He continued that white people enact with privilege because of a system of factors that gives them unearned, socially conferred rights and advantages in society. This system is built on dominance, identification, and centeredness.

A system of white privilege is white-dominated, which means the default is for white people to occupy positions of power (Johnson, 2013). White-dominance doesn't mean that all white people are powerful; only that the powerful tend almost always to be white. An exception to the rule is when a person of color occupies a position of power.

White-identification means that the culture defines 'white' people as the standard for human beings in general (Johnson, 2013). People of color, for example, are routinely identified as 'nonwhite,' a term that doesn't tell us what they are, but what they are *not*.

When a category of people is named the standard for human beings in general, the path of least resistance is to see them as superior, there being no other reason to make them the standard. . . . they are simply ‘human’ or ‘normal,’ and giving more credibility to their views than to the views of ‘others,’ in this case people of color. (Johnson, 2013, p. 1)

White-identification also encourages whites to be unaware of themselves *as* white and privileged, as if they didn’t have a race and advantage. White-centeredness is the tendency to put white people and what they do at the center of attention—the front page of the newspaper or magazine, the main character in the movie (Johnson, 2013).

When you organize a society in this way, the result will be patterns of unearned advantage that are available to whites simply because they are socially identified as ‘white.’ Drawing from this framework, this study examined the extent to which dominance, identification, and centeredness were a part of the dynamics of white privilege in schools.

Methodology

This study consisted of six white pre-service principals who were enrolled in an online course entitled “Cultural Proficiency.” The population consisted of three males and three females. The purpose of the course was to develop the pre-service principals’ understanding of how to demonstrate culturally proficient school leadership.

One of the final course events was a session entitled “White Privilege in Schools.” The session provided an in-depth overview of white privilege. In this session, pre-service principals discussed Allan Johnson’s (2013) article, “What is System of Privilege?” The discussion was partly based on Allan Johnson’s (2005) book, *Power, Privilege, and Difference*. Through the article discussions, students gained insight on Johnson’s perspectives on the dominance, identification, and centeredness aspects that form white privilege.

At the end of the session, students were given the following writing prompt:

Your assignment for the next two weeks is as follows:

1. Take the first week to visit every part of your school.
2. Take the second week to talk with teachers and students about their perspectives of school.
3. Then answer the following question: “To what extent do I see the dominant, identity, or centered aspects of White privilege in my school?” Your answer should be one-half to one page in length.

The pre-service principals completed these steps and returned their responses to me.

Data Analysis

I followed Creswell’s (2012) design for qualitative analysis to analyze the responses of the pre-service principals. First, I read and re-read the data to become familiar with key details in

the information. I then looked for specific occurrences of patterns in the data. Next, I reread the patterns to determine if parts or all of the pre-service principals' descriptions were aligned with the Johnson's themes of dominance, identification, and centeredness. Specifically, I determined if and which pre-service principal responses matched the dominance, identification, and centeredness aspects (2013).

I next conducted a member check (Creswell, 2012). Here, I provided the pre-service principals with my description of their narratives. I then asked them to verify my descriptions of their narratives with the original narratives that were submitted to me. Finally, I wrote the findings in ways to show how the pre-service principals' responses matched the dominant, identified, and centered aspects of white privilege (Johnson, 2013).

Findings

The findings to the research question showed that all pre-service principals observed white privilege in their schools. The remainder of this section provides specific descriptions, by the pre-service principals, of how white privilege plays out in their schools. Their words have not been changed in any way.

Dominance

Pre-service principal one. I mostly see Johnson's description of white privilege in my school. The reason I say this is because of Johnson's first descriptions when referring to the system of white privilege. Johnson states, "A system of white privilege, for example, is white-dominated, which means the default is for white people to occupy positions of power." At my school the head principal, the dean of instruction, and the head counselor are all white. These three people, aside from the athletic coordinator, make up the most influential and powerful people on my campus. Why is this significant? It is significant because the student population at my campus is made up of 98% Hispanics with only 1% White. African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans make up the remaining 1%. The "exception to the rule," at my campus is the athletic coordinator, who is Hispanic.

I believe the fact that three of the four most influential people on our campus are white boosts the idea that whites are somehow more deserving of positions of power. I am not saying that these three individuals are bad at their jobs; they are actually pretty good at them. However, if this is what our students see, it is bound to give them the sense of inferiority to whites. I think this is a part of what Johnson is trying to express when he explains that there is a system of white privilege.

Pre-service principal two. My school is very white-dominated and white people occupy positions of power. I teach at a school that is very extreme in its socioeconomic makeup. It is in a wealthy neighborhood but also has several low-income apartment complexes that are included in the attendance zone. It is a 4A high school with around 2,000 students. Of the four high schools in our district, my school has the highest African American population but white students are the majority. Out of the six principals and five counselors, one is African American, one is Asian, and the remaining are white. Our faculty and staff are predominantly white and

only about five members are African American. Yes, we have other cultural groups in both our student population and staff, but the biggest misrepresentation in positions of authority is with our African American students. My school is white-dominated in the administration and faculty as well as most of the student groups that are considered the “popular” groups... i.e. cheerleaders, student counsel, dance team, homecoming court, etc... they are primarily composed of white students. Johnson says “...and when a person of color occupies a position of power, that will be noted as an exception to the rule (as when Barack Obama is routinely identified as a black president and not just ‘the President’).” I see that exception to the rule all too often in our student groups; the one black male on the homecoming court, the one Asian girl on the dance team. So the white students are raised in the system of white privilege and white-centeredness, and the cycle continues. At the same time, other ethnic groups struggle to receive a meaningful education. The combination of white privilege and affluence is detrimental for developing a culturally proficient environment and school.

The posing of the question this week has made me want to do more research on the ethnicity percentages of both students and teachers and see if the two are proportional. Unfortunately, I assume that the numbers will strengthen my description of white privilege at my school. On a positive personal note, this reflection on my school has increased my understanding of white privilege and its impact on students.

Identification

Pre-service principal three. I worked in a predominantly minority school and white privilege was not a factor in the everyday campus life. The school was largely African American and Hispanic; both the student and staff population. Celebrating cultural characteristics was ingrained in the instructional program. There was a “problem” with the students putting more credibility into what the white teachers taught versus the minority teachers. The white teachers were never questioned or challenged by students or parents. However, the minority teachers were always questioned or challenged about discipline issues and grading. Almost every incident that had a negative impact on a student led back to “what did the minority teacher do wrong?” I tend to believe that those types of problems stemmed from systemic racism that minorities have been subjected to throughout the years.

Pre-service principal four. According to Johnson, “White-identification means that the culture defines ‘white’ people as the standard for human beings in general. People of color, for example, are routinely identified as ‘nonwhite,’ a term that doesn’t tell us what they are, but what they are not.” I have noticed on this campus that when teachers are discussing students of color, they are referred to as “non-white.” The discussion of race or ethnicity is avoided. For some reason many people think they are using proper etiquette when they sidestep the topic of race. It almost seems like they do not know how to acknowledge or address race for fear of offending someone. Last week a new student from China enrolled in 2nd grade. When I walked into the classroom, the children in that class excitedly told me that they had a new student. They whispered to me that he was “Chinese.” I asked them why they were whispering that to me. Their answer was that they didn’t want to embarrass him. I explained to them that telling me that he was Chinese would not embarrass him. I immediately wondered how children that young would think that saying the race of a child was inappropriate. I have noticed that when teachers

are discussing the behavior of a student, many times the first question is, “Was he white?” Johnson also goes on to say that “When a category of people is named the standard for human beings in general, the path of least resistance is to see them as superior, there being no other reason to make them the standard. Several things follow from this, including seeing the way they do things as simply ‘human’ or ‘normal,’ and giving more credibility to their views than to the views of ‘others,’ in this case people of color.” After reading this statement, I immediately thought of an incident that happened just this week. I’m not sure that this is what Johnson was talking about, but it is what came to my mind. The African-American children at this campus ride the bus from the same apartment complex each day. While walking them to the bus one afternoon, a very young white teacher made the comment, “When these kids are in the classroom with just one or two of their friends, they are actually pretty good; but when they are all together in this bus line, they are horrible.” My comment to her was, “But isn’t that the way it is with all kids?” By making the statement that the African American children were rowdy when they were all together, not recognizing that white children are also rowdy in groups, indicated to me that she felt that white children were superior to those of color.

Pre-service principal five. In regards to “white privilege” at my campus, unfortunately, my campus and the district where I work is 99% Hispanic; and there are about 4 total individuals of the faculty that are not Hispanic at SBHS. My interpretation of white privilege at my campus is a little different. The best scenario that I can provide for the “white privilege” is when our school’s teams go to our neighboring city’s schools and participate in extracurricular events. Our neighbor school has a makeup of 7% Hispanic and the rest mainly Caucasian. The teacher makeup is 60/40 in regards to Hispanic and Caucasian. However, the presence of Caucasians has a direct impact on the mentality towards our district. I was coaching a basketball game against our neighboring town and we happened to defeat them. One of their school board members came to me and said, “Wow, coach, you’ve done wonders with those kids.” He then asked me, “Why don’t you come over and coach these boys... with a coach like you, these boys can take you further!!!” Insane huh? Well, I’m not the only person that sees this wall. My student athletes definitely see the barriers and the racial thoughts. I do tell my student athletes that it is up to us to write our future. To answer the question, my campus does witness both types of white privilege challenges. I’d like to think with every success of our campus, the “white privilege” theory will diminish.

Centeredness

Pre-service principal one. The difference in the teachers' attitudes and views toward our diverse population can be seen in our hallways, on our student news channel, and in the classroom. Our hallways are covered in bulletin boards created by a white faculty about white issues. There has not been a board that I have seen all year that would come close to reflecting the thoughts, feelings, or beliefs of the minority students. Our students walk the halls and are constantly reminded of their inferiority to the majority white population. Our student news channel has no students of ethnic backgrounds represented. Only white children report the news. How must it feel to not be represented on a school channel? Finally, I constantly hear teachers complaining about the lack of motivation of their minority students. They classify them as lazy or disrespectful. I always ask why. Why are the students not responding to their instruction?

Why do they think their actions are targeted as disrespect toward the teacher and not something that is acceptable in the student's home or culture? Most of the time, it's the lack of understanding on the part of the teacher to the student's cultural needs that comes across as disrespect or lazy. If they can make a connection, then the student becomes engaged and the issue is solved. However, that takes self-reflection and change on the teacher's part. Both of which are hard!

Pre-service principal six. At my school, the student population is composed of 95% Hispanic; however, the Hispanic staff population is only 20%. Furthermore, the white staff population is 61%. The disproportion between the student and staff demographic makeup has led to a silent and sometimes vocal promotion of white privilege. In my first year teaching, for example, I was approached by a group of students, which were very representative of the whole student population that wanted to form an after school performing band. The band dedicated their time to practicing and learning traditional Mexican instruments and music. The student population was excited to have such an organization on campus; after all, most of the students can identify with this music in some way. The Hispanic staff was excited as well, even went in and participated sometimes. Most white staff members (not all) did not understand the importance of the music and others even called it a disturbance. It was evident that the staff did not understand the culture and the importance of culture to our student population. Some staff members even called these students mariachis; this too showed their ignorance. After two years of trying to get recognized by the school staff, the students became discouraged. They wondered why the staff promoted the marching band and other "American" organizations to represent the school in pep rallies, parent events, and other school activities, and these students always felt ignored by the staff. After learning the material from this class, I realize these students were ignored. The white staff promoted the white traditions through other student organizations, and suppressed the culture of the Hispanic students by ignoring it. If the white staff members would have taken time to do some research, they would have found out that music is a very important part of the Hispanic culture. Even now, four years later, the student's culture is ignored. The song that is played on the intercom is the "Happy Song" which our students don't relate to culturally. Ultimately, I believe the underlying issue is one of fear--fear to lose traditions established by whites that are no longer relevant to the current student population.

Discussion

The findings from the pre-service principals' responses revealed they recognize the prevalence of white privilege in their schools. The following section provides discussion points in accordance to the conceptual framework.

Dominance

Johnson (2013) argued white privilege is white-dominated because by default, whites occupy positions of power. This systematic aspect of white privilege was seen in pre-service principal one's views of the all white leadership of the school. This pre-service principal also indicated they are the most influential and powerful people on my campus. According to this pre-

service principal, another significant perspective of this dominance is that the student population is 98% Hispanic. The pre-service principal also added that this dominant, default perspective impacted his campus by purporting the idea that whites naturally deserve to occupy positions of power. As indicated by the pre-service principal, “If this is what our students see, it is bound to give them the sense of inferiority to whites.”

These sentiments were also expressed by pre-service principal two. Consistently with Johnson’s (2013) dynamic of dominance and white privilege, the pre-service principal’s school is comprised primarily of white people who are in power. Although the school is socioeconomically diverse, there is no diversity in the power structure. As captured by the pre-service principal, “My school is white-dominated in the administration and faculty as well as most of the student groups that are considered the ‘popular’ groups,’ i.e. cheerleaders, student counsel, dance team, homecoming court, etc... they are primarily composed of white students.” The pre-service principal further denoted that the dominance allows one non-white inclusion. At the pre-service principal’s school, there was one black male on the homecoming court and one Asian girl on the dance team. The *one* is an abnormality because of not being the norm for power on the campus. This finding is consistent with Johnson’s indication of how people of color in power are denoted as the exception to the rule.

Identification

Johnson’s (2013) perspective on white privilege as identification centers on standardization. That is, white people as the standard for human beings in general. This perspective was described in a several pre-service principals’ ideas of how white privilege influences their schools. According to pre-service principal three, his school is comprised mostly of African American students and Hispanic students, as well as teachers from the same racial groups. Yet, the students still seem to place more value in the ideas and perspectives of the white teachers on the campus. As documented by the pre-service principal, the role of the minority teacher was questioned in almost every incident that had a negative impact on a student. This finding may emanate from the notion of how, like whiteness, the white teachers on this campus are considered to add standardization and credibility to situations.

Pre-service principal four’s description of identification supports Johnson’s (2013) indication of how,

When a category of people is named the standard for human beings in general, the path of least resistance is to see them as superior, there being no other reason to make them the standard. Several things follow from this, including seeing the way they do things as simply ‘human’ or ‘normal,’ and giving more credibility to their views than to the views of ‘others,’ in this case people of color. (p. 1)

This pre-service principal extended Johnson’s supposition with a story about a white teacher’s description of a group of black children’s behavior at their school. As indicated, the teacher’s commentary was as follows: “When these kids are in the classroom with just one or two of their friends, they are actually pretty good, but when they are all together in this bus line they are horrible.” The pre-service principal gave the following response to the teacher: “But isn’t that the way it is with all kids?” Drawing from Johnson’s identification theory, the pre-service

principal further explained that like white children, African American children were rowdy. But unlike white children, African American children's rowdiness is not normalized as a part of kid behavior. Instead it is bad black behavior in school.

Along those same lines, pre-service principal five provided a significant perspective on the identification impact of white privilege. In essence, this pre-service principal's school environment does not consist of white people. However, the proximity to whites in position of power still impacts the dynamics of his relationships with students. In my opinion, evidence to this effect can be seen in how a white school board member from another school district still possessed the privilege and attitude to make a statement about the pre-service principal's skills and potential. In this context, the white school board member held deficit views of the players from his school district and players from the pre-service principal's school district. Believing that the pre-service principal had the ability to reach this type of students ("these boys"), he suggested that the pre-service principal should join his school district. I believe that the basis of the invitation was the school board member's views of the pre-service principal as savior of less fortunate students instead of person who could represent cultural identification for both groups of students. Thus, because of being white, the school board member appeared to believe that his ideas would be the standard for how to work with non-white students, especially athletes.

Centeredness

Johnson (2013) explained there is a continual tendency to put white people and their culture at the center of attention. A few pre-service principals saw this centeredness as being a key part of their schools. Pre-service principal one said, "The difference in the teachers' attitudes and views toward our diverse population can be seen in our hallways, on our student news channel, and in the classroom." The pre-service principal added that all bulletin boards are created by white teachers and focus solely on white issues. Evidence to this fact can be seen in the following statement: "There has not been a board that I have seen all year that would come close to reflecting the thoughts, feelings, or beliefs of the minority student." She further extended this belief by highlighting the lack of racial diversity in the school news channel. Only white children report the news. Her final summation regarding this issue was, "How must it feel to not be represented on a school channel?" This pre-service principal also indicated that this centeredness of whiteness had an adverse effect on the non-white students of the school. She stated that the impact is the constant reminder that they are inferior to the majority white population.

Pre-service principal six approached the centeredness of whiteness from the perspective of the differences between the majority white staff and a racially diverse student population. At the center of the school in terms of culture and climate were the white staff's attitudes and beliefs. As indicated, the student population, as well as Hispanic staff, was excited about the idea of having a marching band that performed Mexican music with Mexican instruments. However, because of the centeredness of whiteness, most of the white teachers disagreed and disapproved of the idea.

Thus, this centeredness prevented a group of students from achieving their goal of sustaining the development of a school performing band. The refusal to endorse the idea of the band was not based on the idea of having a performing band. The refusal emanated from the idea of the band's desire to perform traditional Mexican instruments and music. Translation:

the performance of Mexican instruments was seen as racial and cultural intrusion on the white centeredness of the school.

This outcome explains the pre-service principal's indication of how the white staff used recognition to promote white traditions and ignorance to suppress the culture of the Hispanic students. Through this situation, the pre-service principal realized the ingrained silent and sometimes vocal promotion of white privilege.

Implications

The findings show that white pre-service principals are indeed capable of identifying concrete, real-world ways in which white privilege impacts schools (Johnson, 2013). The real implication is for these pre-service principals to determine if, as principals, they are willing to address the privilege on a school campus. I believe that by virtue of being white, these pre-service principals will need to consciously and intentionally consider the following reflective questions:

1. As I prepare for becoming a principal, am I ready to address the white privilege that defines many schools?

If the answer is yes, then these pre-service principals must consider the following questions:

2. Will I address white privilege in ways that reveal the underlying dominance of whiteness?
3. Will I address white privilege in ways that reveal the underlying identification of whiteness?
4. Will I address white privilege in ways that reveal the underlying centeredness of whiteness?

If the answer is yes, the willingness and readiness must be seen in approaches to white privilege that create true racial integration on their campuses. In this context, racial integration means that teachers, students, counselors, and principals are able to achieve racial responsiveness in accordance through Racial Competence, Racial Reflection, Racial Assertiveness, and Racial Responsiveness. The following section provides a description of each term.

1. **Racial Competence**—Pre-service principals understand the need to foster a school culture and climate that pursues a clear and compelling understanding of how race works in society and schools and on their particular campuses. This pursuit is also used to reveal the role that white privilege plays in the structure of race on their campuses.

2. **Racial Reflection**—Pre-service principals understand the need to foster a school culture and climate that allows for spaces within race reflections and between race reflections of what “being racial” means. This means that faculty, staff, administration, and students from all racial groups find a spot to make sense of what it means to be a member of their racial groups both within racial and between racial situations on their campuses. Throughout the space identification process, white privilege is continually examined from the extent of determining how this phenomenon impacts the ability to identify and secure this space in healthy ways.
3. **Racial Assertiveness**—Pre-service principals understand the need to foster a school culture and climate where faculty, staff, administration and students can openly and honestly assert their feelings about race in general and race in the school. There are specific approaches to be taken to address the stress that comes with developing the assertiveness to process and negotiate race. In addition, white privilege is analyzed in terms of its impact on the ability for all school stakeholders to share their racial concerns, views, and feelings.
4. **Racial Responsiveness**—Pre-service principals understand the need to foster a school culture and climate where faculty, staff, administration and students are able to respond to race as a concept to be explored instead of an issue to be ignored within the school. This perspective is balanced against the backdrop of determining the extent to which responding to race is influenced by white privilege.

By enacting this type of environment, pre-service principals can move beyond only recognizing white privilege as a barrier to cultural proficiency. They will be able to move to creating racially safe school environments that effectively determine how to best address any signs of dominance, identification, and centeredness that describes white privilege.

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