

What We Glean from the Silver Screen: Inaccurate Messages About Educational Leaders as Perpetuated by School Movies

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Abstract

School films depict educational leaders as lone miracle workers. Students of colour and/or from low socio-economic backgrounds are shown as victims in need of a saviour, who appears in the form of a (usually White) teacher who lacks the qualifications and experience to work with students living in poverty. Freedom Writers, Music of the Heart, and Dangerous Minds teach moviegoers (the public) that these students require only underqualified, inexperienced, caring, Caucasian teachers, even though the research shows otherwise.



Popular school movies such as *Freedom Writers* (2007), *Music of the Heart* (1999), and *Dangerous Minds* (1995) are heralded as inspirational school films that tug at the heart strings, but these films send erroneous messages to the public about educational leadership and teachers. In each film, the White, inexperienced and/or underqualified teacher successfully changes the lives of her students for the better, and ultimately “saves” them from themselves, their families, and their impoverished communities. The teacher becomes a lone, White Saviour who receives very little support from her colleagues and/or the community. The overarching purpose of this article is to debunk the inaccurate representations of educational leaders as portrayed in these movies. The article also analyses the characters and plot lines of three school movies that perpetuate colonialist attitudes and beliefs, racial stereotypes, and the “us versus them” mentality among social classes.

Freedom Writers, *Music of the Heart*, and *Dangerous Minds* paint children and communities affected by poverty with a wide, stereotypical brush. Most of the students are of African-American and/or Latino descent; generally speaking, they are not White. Additionally, they are portrayed as low-achieving, troubled youth who do not seem to value education. They and their communities are characterized by chronic cycles of poverty, which include gang activity, drugs, crime, broken families, inadequate housing, and a general sense of despair – a group in desperate need of a saviour. The movies highlight the accomplishments of the teacher, making the students, their families, and the community into obstacles to be overcome. This article challenges the stereotypical “silver screen” characterizations of children and communities affected by poverty.

The General Storyline of Popular School Movies

The school movies’ storylines are very similar. Each protagonist is a White female teacher who is either underqualified, like Louanne Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer) in *Dangerous Minds*, or inexperienced, like Roberta Guaspari (Meryl Streep) in *Music of the Heart* and Erin Gruell (Hilary Swank) in *Freedom Writers*. Despite her lack of experience, each teacher works effectively with challenging students of colour who come from impoverished neighbourhoods. In each film, the inexperienced but well-meaning Caucasian teacher beats the odds, and almost single-handedly creates positive change in the lives of her students, even though many other experienced teachers before her have tried and failed. Many movies, school-based and otherwise, follow this all-too-familiar storyline; they are known as “White Saviour Films.”

Common Elements of the White Saviour Film

In White Saviour Films, inferior persons or groups of marginalized people overcome the obstacles in their lives and realize their full potential, but only with the help of a lone, White Saviour (Cammarota, 2011). In the school movies *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Dangerous Minds*, the following White Saviour messages are woven into the storyline:

- The teacher, the White Saviour, is the catalyst for positive change.
- The students of colour, the inferiors, are in need of saving, but they do not even realize it. They are depicted as helpless, unknowing victims who lack the desire, motivation, and ability to recognize and/or reach their full potential.
- The teacher reinforces the belief that anyone can have a better life through hard work, good choices, and perseverance.
- The success of the students is credited to the teacher.
- Success/positive change is limited to a small, select group (the students). The school, the teachers, the education system, and the larger community remain unchanged.
- The teacher's efforts and accomplishments (saving the students) are the main focus.
- By the end of each film, the students are "better off," thanks to the teacher, and the teacher is even better than she was at the beginning of the story.

A Common Setting Sets the Stage

Each school film's setting is an important element, because it enhances and reinforces the idea that the students of colour are indeed inferior, out of control, and in need of saving. Each story takes place in a large urban American centre. In *Dangerous Minds*, the schoolyard resembles a prison yard complete with chain link fencing, graffiti, drug deals, violence, racial segregation, and rap music, and the moviegoer has good reason to suspect gang activity among the students. Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise" plays during the opening credits; this is a song that one would not generally associate with students or a school setting, but it serves to remind the viewer that these are not regular students and this is no regular school.

Freedom Writers has a similar school setting. The students appear disrespectful and threatening, indifferent about education, and resistant to authority figures of any kind. As in *Dangerous Minds*, the opening scene evokes a sense of fear, but the fear is created differently. *Freedom Writers* begins with television news reports of the 1992 riots that ensued after Rodney King was severely beaten by members of the Los Angeles Police Department. The news reports heard during the opening scene, as well as the text that is flashed across the screen, remind viewers that there had been "over 120 murders in Long Beach following the Rodney King riots" and that "gang violence and racial tension are at an all-time high." It is interesting to note that movie producers used news coverage clips from 1992, even though the *Freedom Writers* movie was not released until 2007. Later, we learn that Erin Gruell decided to become a teacher when she saw news coverage of the Rodney King riots. However, the opening scenes of *Freedom Writers* effectively create fear in the minds of the viewers before the movie even begins.

Music of the Heart is set in an elementary school. While there are no overt signs of gang activity among the students themselves (presumably due to their young age), viewers learn very quickly that the school is located in an impoverished neighborhood. Similar to the schoolyard setting in *Dangerous Minds*, the East Harlem neighborhood is characterized by poverty, graffiti, gang activity, and low-income housing, which leads viewers to view the community as no place for children. Similar to both *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, most of the students and community members are of African-American and/or Latino descent. The age of the students in *Music of the Heart* is important. Because these students are much younger than the high school students depicted in *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, moviegoers may believe that they stand a better chance of being saved. Whether the feelings created at the beginning of these three

school films come from a place of fear or from a place of pity, the stage is set for the White Saviour to swoop in and save the day.

When the White Saviour (the teacher) arrives on the scene, she is taken aback by what she sees. The viewer is aware that she is entering a world that is foreign to her. In addition to being out of her element as she enters the schoolyard, she appears to be afraid and threatened, and to a lesser degree saddened by what she sees. Again, the teachers' responses to the students support the ideas that the students are either out of control and in need of civilizing, or helpless and pitiful and in need of saving – either way, they are characterized as needy.

One final, but important, commonality in White Saviour Films is that the positive changes made by the inferior group are not necessarily significant in the big scheme of things. The students in *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Dangerous Minds* simply take on the values, mannerisms, and behaviours of their White Saviour teacher. They experience success in school, but are still required to return to their homes where White values, mannerisms, and behaviours are presumably irrelevant. The systemic barriers brought about by historical, racially motivated events remain intact and fully operational. Where did the idea of a "saviour," particularly a "White Saviour," come from?

Origins of the White Saviour

Hughey (2014) traced the origin of the concept of the White Saviour, which dates back to the late 1600s. The idea of otherness (non-White others) was born when European explorers encountered Indigenous peoples during colonizing missions in newly-discovered lands. The term "noble savage" first appeared in John Dryden's 1672 play, *The Conquest of Granada*. The terms "nature's gentleman" and "exotic savage" have also been used to describe non-White others who were often characterized as moral and courageous, in touch with the natural environment, unmotivated by materialism, and simplistic in nature (Hughey, 2014, p. 8). These early terms and descriptions bring to mind adjectives such as primitive, animalistic, and unsophisticated, and generate images of sub-human creatures as opposed to fully-developed human beings who embrace a different way of life.

By 1845, the term "manifest destiny" was coined in the United States. This term gave racial and religious responsibility for the non-White others to the White Americans. By this time, White Americans had characterized themselves as heroic, virtuous, and divinely inspired saviours, destined and obligated to spread their inherent goodness to non-White others (Hughey, 2014). At the same time, similar sentiments and actions that aligned with the concept of manifest destiny were occurring in Canada. Beginning in the early 1800s, the Canadian government passed laws that called for the removal of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children from their parents, homes, and communities. Aboriginal children were placed in federally funded, church-run boarding schools that were most often located far from their homes and communities. Many of the children remained at these schools for years, and it was expected that education and Christianity would civilize and save Aboriginal people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2014). Gone were the days of discovering and observing the Indigenous and/or non-White others; the White people took it upon themselves to save the others through forced assimilation, under the guise of paternalism (Hughey, 2014).

The idea of the White Saviour continued through the 19th century. Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden" spoke of the White person's responsibility and/or obligation to rule over the non-White others for their own good. Originally written for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the poem was later referenced when the U.S. usurped the Philippines from Spain during the Spanish-American War (Hughey, 2014). Until the end of the 19th century, White dominance and paternalism – and the idea of the White Saviour – seemed to be implanted and largely accepted in North America, at least by White people. By the turn of the century, however, the non-White others were not so accepting of notions of White superiority, and this created fear and discomfort in the hearts and minds of the so-called superior group.

Human rights movements in the U.S., and calls for decolonization by nations under U.S. and European control, began in the early 1900s. These movements threatened to upset the social situation that White people had become accustomed to dominating. The term “Great White Hope” emerged and lasted through the 20th century and became the symbol of racial anxiety among White Americans (Hughey, 2014, p. 10). Interestingly, the term “Great White Hope” emerged in the sports and entertainment world when Jack Johnson became the first black US heavyweight boxing champion. Johnson held the title from 1908 to 1915, which did not sit well with White Americans. As White contenders came forward to try to take the heavyweight boxing title from Johnson, White boxing fans referred to each new opponent as the Great White Hope. According to Hughey (2014), White Americans wanted a White boxing champion, because some believed that Johnson’s winning streak threatened the concept of White superiority and encouraged the human rights activists to continue their fight for social equality.

As blatantly racist as this example sounds, the term “Great White Hope” did not end in the early 1900s. In the 1930s, Joe “the Brown Bomber” Louis was another seemingly unbeatable black boxing champion. When Nazi boxer Max Schmeling finally defeated Joe Louis, even Adolf Hitler chimed in, stating that Schmeling’s win was evidence of Aryan supremacy. In the 1980s, Larry “the Hitman” Holmes, a black boxing champ, was set to defend his title against Gerry Cooney. Racial tensions among boxing fans increased, and White supremacist groups and black activist groups alike vowed to attend this racially charged boxing match. The Great White Hope in these examples is indeed a White Saviour, but for a different group of people and for different reasons. According to Hughey (2014), White Americans needed a White Saviour to restore and reinforce a social situation wherein White people would have authority, dominance, and control over non-White others, even in the boxing ring, and especially during a time of social unrest when the non-White others were beginning to demand equal rights.

Hughey (2014) outlined American film themes as they appeared throughout the 20th century. The saviour in each film changed from decade to decade, depending on what was going on in the U.S. at the time. Generally, however, whether the White Saviour was the hero in the sense of White versus non-White others, or was upholding White American interests, the saviour was used to reassure White Americans of their inherent dominance during times of political and/or social unrest.

- Human rights movements began in the early 1900s. According to Dr. Lawrence Reddick, curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature of the New York City Public Library, 75% of the films produced and distributed from the early 1900s until the 1940s were anti-Negro in nature (Hughey, 2014, p. 13).
- Films produced during the 1950s were anti-Communist in nature, due to the Cold War.
- During the 1960s, race-based films adapted from literature were produced and distributed, and the first White Saviour Film, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), was shown in theatres.
- The *Blaxploitation* genre emerged in the 1970s. This genre featured strong, black characters who were unwilling to give in to anyone, especially White people. This genre served to demonstrate social discontent in response to racial inequalities.
- During the 1980s, the White Saviour Film genre exploded onto the silver screen with movies such as *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *A Dry White Season* (1989), and *Glory* (1989). Hughey (2014) suggested that the White Saviour Film trend of the 1980s may have been in response to the Blaxploitation trend of the 1970s.
- Since the 1980s, several race relations-based and White Saviour Films have been produced and distributed in theatres. These include the school films *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Music of the Heart* (1999), and *Freedom Writers* (2007), examined in this article.

In this general synopsis of the origin of the White Saviour, one can see how the idea has emerged and evolved from the days of exploration and colonization to Hollywood’s present-day silver screen interpretations. Throughout the 20th century, specific film genres featuring a White Saviour have been produced in an apparent effort to reassure the White population of its superior

social standing, depending on the political and/or societal events taking place at the time. Although movies are generally perceived as entertainment, White Saviour Films such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Freedom Writers* serve to cultivate and maintain colonialist attitudes and beliefs, stereotypes around issues of race and poverty, and the hierarchy among the social classes. Is this a coincidence, or are movie producers and other media moguls attempting to educate the public in order to maintain an unspoken White agenda?

Simply Entertainment, Right?

Not unlike our American neighbors to the south, Canadians flock to the movie theatres or tune into Netflix as a source of entertainment, but does the entertainment we consume impact the way we conceptualize the world in which we live? If so, what are the implications with regard to how we think about issues around race, social class, and poverty? While this article focuses on White Saviour school movies, it is worth mentioning that television programming in the U.S. is controlled by five transnational corporations: Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, General Electric, and Viacom. These massive American corporations own and operate networks or channels with names that are familiar to Canadian consumers – CNN, HBO, ABC, A&E Biography, Fox, National Geographic Channel, NBC, MTV, Nickelodeon, etc. (Leistyna & Alper, 2009, p. 501). Leistyna and Alper (2009) suggested that television shows controlled, produced, and distributed by these corporations are used to educate the public by reinforcing the complex levels of social class, which are the essential components of any capitalist society. This form of education, however, is referred to and/or disguised as entertainment, and it reminds consumers (citizens) about who fits where within the class hierarchy of the capitalist society.

Leistyna and Alper (2009) provided a detailed history of the evolution of television programming in relation to social class, upward mobility, race relations, and gender roles, and at the same time stressed the importance of viewers' critically examining the ways in which messages embedded in various television shows may affect the way they view the world in which they live. Leistyna and Alper (2009) stressed the importance of critical media literacy, but others may argue that television programming is indeed harmless entertainment, and nothing more. Some might go so far as to say that some television shows, black situation comedies in particular, have attempted to depict people of colour in a positive and hopeful light, albeit through a humorous lens. While many situation comedies feature successful American people of colour, television shows, not unlike White Saviour Films, lead viewers to believe that the success of these television characters is dependent on meritocracy.

Meritocracy is the belief that anyone can be successful through work hard, good choices, and persistence. The rewards for adopting such values and behaviours are many – employment opportunities, wealth, a comfortable lifestyle, and material goods. According to meritocracy, the race to the top is a fair competition that is accessible to anyone who is motivated to go for it; in other words, success is a choice. Meritocracy does not, however, take historical injustices, race relations, social class inequities, and/or poverty into consideration. One could argue that the concept of meritocracy is fair only to those with firmly established, class-based advantages; to the White Saviour, meritocracy is simply common sense (Howe, 2015).

Black situation comedies, like the White Saviour School films mentioned in this article, present the concept of meritocracy as factual and accessible to all, regardless of race or its associated social inequities. For example, in *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), George was the owner of a dry cleaning business. Through hard work and determination, George became a successful, self-made, African-American businessman who was finally able to move his family to the good side of town. With grit, motivation, and a strong work ethic, George experienced social mobility (Leistyna & Alper, 2009). The teachers in the White Saviour school films *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Dangerous Minds* shared a very similar message with their students of colour – if you work hard enough, you can have a better life.

The Cosby Show (1984-1992) told the story of a loving, affluent African-American family that was living the American dream. *The Cosby Show* was different from *The Jeffersons* in that the

Huxtables were depicted as educated, wealthy, and stable from the very beginning. On one hand, *The Cosby Show* cast African-Americans in a very positive light. On the other hand, the sitcom made it seem like racism and poverty were problems of the past (Leistyna & Alper, 2009). In fact, there was no real acknowledgement of how slavery, racism, and poverty might have made it difficult for people of colour to gain access to the American dream as readily as the Huxtables did. Similarly, the students in the White Saviour school films *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Dangerous Minds* were presented “as is” with no explanation of how the dark parts of U.S. history (colonialism, slavery, racism) contributed to the students’ present-day situations. Without any knowledge of the historical context, one who lacks critical media literacy skills could assume that the Huxtables and the students in the White Saviour school films simply chose their lots in life.

The *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996) told the story of Wil, an African-American teenager who was getting into trouble on the streets of West Philadelphia where he resided with his single mother. The solution in this black sitcom was easy: Wil moved to Bel Air to live with his wealthy, successful relatives. Wil achieved social mobility by leaving his community, his friends, and even his mother behind, and he did so with little to no social-emotional repercussions (Leistyna & Alper, 2009). Instead of a White Saviour to give him a chance at a better life, Wil’s well-to-do African-American relatives (not unlike the Huxtables) took him in. While living in Bel Air, Wil was taught the behaviours, mannerisms, and values that would prepare him for success in the affluent Los Angeles neighbourhood, which was far removed from his former home and lifestyle in the West Philadelphia ghetto. Similar to the students in the White Saviour school films, Wil was rescued by people who belonged to a higher socio-economic class. Wil’s relatives came to love and accept him, but viewers were constantly reminded that Uncle Phil and Aunt Vivian, not unlike the teachers in the White Saviour school films, were indeed the benevolent heroes, and that without their intervention Wil would not have experienced the good life.

These black situation comedies featured characters and families who were depicted as successful, humorous, and loveable, but a viewer with a critical eye for media could argue that the messages embedded in these television shows, similar to those embedded in White Saviour Films, reflected meritocracy. Black sitcoms and White Saviour films alike serve to perpetuate the idea that success is a choice, and is therefore accessible to anyone who wants it. However, meritocracy ignores historical, socio-economic, political, and/or racial issues as credible barriers to achieving success. Meritocracy is thus very closely related to White privilege, which, as the name suggests, favours White people over non-White others.

Meritocracy and White Privilege

Many scholars claim that race is a socially constructed concept, created by identifying and dividing people on the basis of skin colour. In North America, this identification and division relies on two broad categories: White and non-White (Hughey, 2014). While most people do not want to be labelled as “racist,” many would admit, either out loud or silently (depending on which category one belongs to), that the White category of people has historically been touted as the superior group, or the superior race. “White privilege” refers to the advantages and opportunities afforded to White people, almost automatically, based solely on the colour of their skin, and can therefore only occur in a society that is racially compartmentalized. White privilege is essentially an expression of societal, institutional, and political power that, according to Torino (2015) is not readily or routinely analysed, acknowledged, or recognized by White people.

Exploring the realities of White privilege could result in positive societal outcomes such as renewed respect, understanding, acceptance, and empathy among people belonging to different racial groups. While many would agree that such an endeavor could bring about positive outcomes, others would deem the outcomes as consequences for White people. Exploring White privilege would mean identifying and confronting one’s own biases about non-White others, learning about history from the viewpoints of the so-called inferiors, and acknowledging that White people have not been successful in life due to innate goodness, hard work, and perseverance, but rather through

historical forms of racism (colonialism) as well as present-day practices and policies that keep people of colour at a disadvantage (Torino, 2015).

White Saviour school movies reinforce the ideas of meritocracy, but fail to acknowledge the realities of White privilege. In each film, a White teacher tells her students of colour that they can be anything they want to be through hard work, better life choices, and sustained effort. The teacher's enthusiasm and commitment to the students convinces viewers that with the help of the White Saviour, the non-White students in the school films could succeed in life, if only they would try. While the concept of meritocracy is not necessarily a bad thing, it is definitely more challenging for individuals who are faced with obstacles linked to racism and poverty. For individuals who are already in positions of power (White privilege), meritocracy is more accessible, more relevant, and presumably more promising.

In *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Dangerous Minds*, Hollywood teaches the movie-going public about the White Saviour, race relations, racial stereotypes, and poverty. Hollywood also endorses meritocracy ideals without acknowledging White privilege, thus reinforcing the idea that one group (White) is innately better and more capable than the other group (people of colour). Finally, Hollywood frames each racially charged White Saviour story in a softer, humanitarian, feel-good fashion, and at the same time positions the White Saviour as the ultimate hero in the White versus non-White story. Although the film industry is most often associated with entertainment, one can argue that the media we consume has the ability to impact the way North Americans make sense of the world in which we live. If this is true, then what are the implications for school leaders, teachers, students, and communities who must live and work together in the real world?

Real Life Poverty in Manitoba, Canada

Educational leaders who know the members of their school communities know that poverty affects students and families in different ways. The schools here in Manitoba do not often look like the opening scene from *Dangerous Minds* (1995). All schools are different, and while some are located in wealthier areas of a town or city, one can be sure that the effects of poverty touch all schools in one way or another. Campaign 2000 reported the following statistics as part of the 2014 Manitoba Child and Family Poverty Report Card:

- 20% of all children in Canada and 40% of Aboriginal children residing off reserve live in poverty.
- Winnipeg food banks feed approximately 20,000 children each month.
- Over 60,000 Manitobans rely on food banks each month.
- Nearly 84,000 Manitoba children are affected by poverty.
- Manitoba children whose families are new to Canada, Aboriginal, and from single-parent households are even more profoundly affected by poverty.

While these statistics are concerning, they do not take into account children and families living on First Nations reserves; therefore, the numbers are likely much higher. In many cases, safe drinking water, adequate housing, job opportunities, child care, and equal educational opportunities are lacking in First Nations communities. Families in these communities are still struggling to heal from the impacts of Canada's Indian Residential School system and, as a result, there are more Aboriginal children in foster care as compared to non-Aboriginal children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). In addition, First Nations schools receive approximately \$3500 less per year, per student, than provincially-funded public schools. This is because funding for First Nations schools is determined by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), which is part of the Federal government. These are just two examples of historical events and political control that continue to negatively impact Aboriginal people in Canada today. As a nation, we are only beginning to talk honestly about these issues.

Families new to Canada are also more profoundly affected by poverty because many are starting their lives over. Language barriers, cultural differences, affordable housing, job

opportunities, and transportation are just a few obstacles that newcomer families must navigate through when they arrive in Canada. In the school setting, language barriers and cultural differences pose challenges for school administrators, teachers and, of course, families and students new to Canada. As school leaders work to communicate with newcomer families in an effort to help them get into the school routine, the implications and realities of moving one's family to a foreign country and culture are often forgotten. Many newcomers to Canada have left family members, familiar cultures, community supports, and their *homes* behind; school leaders and teachers need to be ever cognizant of these very difficult and personal realities that add to the poverty-related stresses of moving to Canada.

The realities of poverty and its effects on non-White Canadians closely parallel the challenges faced by students in the *White Saviour* school films. Informed and empathetic educational leaders, however, need to understand that compelling speeches based on the tenets of meritocracy will do very little to create any kind of lasting change in the lives of the students and families affected by poverty. Educational leaders also need to know that well-meaning, inexperienced teachers, like those depicted in the *White Saviour* school films, can not realistically "save" anyone, nor are such heroic services invited or necessarily appreciated by non-White Canadians. Furthermore, while the school films discussed in this article depict the *White Saviour* teacher as caring, enthusiastic, and capable, the storylines also imply that, even with years of experience, all other teachers are essentially incapable in comparison. In the real world, it is more likely that educational leaders and teachers would benefit from explicit and ongoing learning opportunities that would apprise all stakeholders of the historical events, as well as current systems and policies, that make it extremely difficult for fellow Canadians, perceived as "others," to realize their full potential. Only then can real change happen.

Recommendations for School Leaders Dealing With Issues of Race and Socio-economics

Leading others to understand race relations and socio-economic differences is not easy, but it is an important responsibility for educational leaders who seek to provide all students with fair, equitable, and relevant learning experiences and skills that will be applicable in real-world situations. Effective school leaders need to walk the talk; they need to demonstrate, guide, and provide continued support in order to enact real change. A good first step is self-examination.

Torino (2015), who works with *White* counselling trainees, advocates examining personal biases and exploring ideas around privilege as a way to recognize and acknowledge one's feelings and beliefs about non-White others. *White* pre-service teachers would also benefit from introspection of this nature, because *White* teachers will inevitably come into contact with non-*White* students, families, and colleagues on the very first day of school. While most people keep their biases about perceived "others" to themselves, these hidden beliefs are revealed in other ways. The reactions of the teachers in *White Saviour* Films demonstrate this point very clearly. While no words are spoken, it is immediately obvious that the *White Saviour* teachers feel fear and/or pity for the students they encounter on the very first day of school. These feelings can negatively affect how school leaders and teachers interact with students whom they perceive to be threatening or disadvantaged (lowered expectations for academic achievement, a heavy focus on behaviour management, less of a focus on relationship building, etc.). For these reasons, school leaders and teachers alike need to recognize and acknowledge their personal biases and beliefs about individuals perceived as others. The next step for school leaders and teachers is to understand when and why biases about perceived others came into being.

Once school leaders and teachers have identified and acknowledged their biases about perceived others, it is time to learn. Some will need to learn about Canadian history in order to understand the current conditions challenging our Aboriginal population. Others will need to learn about conditions in other countries in order to understand why so many people choose to immigrate to Canada. *White* privilege and the concept of meritocracy must also be explored and revisited as school leaders and teachers learn about themselves in relation to perceived others. It is important to note that these learning experiences may be difficult and emotionally draining.

School leaders can also expect to meet resistance; exploring one's personal biases around race-relations and White privilege can threaten and/or criticize everything that an individual has come to know and believe. For these reasons, school leaders hoping to enact systemic change must stay the course and revisit these topics often. Equally important is the school leaders' involvement in the process. Conversations about personal biases, race relations, privilege, and power are difficult conversations that can take place only in a safe environment.

Self-examination and courageous conversations are only the starting points on the road to understanding, respect, empathy, and acceptance among all people. School leaders and teachers are in an advantageous position for enacting systemic change. While it is unrealistic to believe that all school leaders and teachers will jump on board in the name of social justice, it is reasonable to assume that many will. When this happens, school leaders and teachers who are truly committed to social justice for all may start to question and challenge age-old instructional methods, curricular content, and the traditionally disconnected, distant relationship between the school and the parents and families of the children who attend. If school leaders, teachers, and students seek to learn about our nation's history, as well as historical events that continue to oppress certain groups, the potential for enacting systemic change becomes a real possibility. After examining their own biases and beliefs, educators may choose to teach their students to do the same, thus opening the door to emergent and meaningful learning opportunities that have the potential to end racism. This approach is only a starting point for school leaders, but it is far more promising, equitable, and genuine than that taken by the lone White Saviour.

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About the Presenter

Sherry Baker is completing her M.Ed. in educational administration. In her 2011-12 Project of Heart, grades 7 and 8 students learned about the history and legacy of Canada's residential school system through art. The tiles that pay tribute to the children who did not survive the residential school system have been on display in the Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg.