

**MIDWEST BLACK, INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE OF COLOR LEADERS
SERVING IN WHITE SPACES**

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Abstract

The narrative inquiry correlates to the Leadership in a Time of Change theme by examining the stories of 10 Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) school leaders serving in White suburban schools. The research study explores the experiences of eight Black and two Latinx school leaders that serve in K-12 school districts after the racial reckoning of 2020 when elevated racial tensions were significant. Limited research has been explored related to BIPOC school leaders' experiences in predominately White school institutions where they are underrepresented among educational stakeholder groups. The inquiry analyzes the data through the Critical Race Theory from Delgado and Stefancic (2017). The stories of the 10 BIPOC school leaders revealed three themes: racism, microaggressions, and pressure plus. The study is relevant to predominately White school district leaders attempting to hire and retain diverse school leaders.

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Introduction

In some areas of the United States, "suburban education has become regarded as the ideal and urban education as the cautionary tale" (Lewis-McCoy, 2018, p. 146). When one imagines a suburban school setting, one pictures a modern facility surrounded by single-family homes with pristine fenced-in yards and newer vehicles parked in the driveways. The (mostly White) children from these families make up the majority of students attending the local suburban school. Nevertheless, in the last three decades, suburban America has seen a demographic change among the student population in suburban schools, where the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) student population has increased in White suburbia (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2019).

As the demographics change among the student population, not much has changed in the recruitment and retention of BIPOC educational leaders serving in suburban public schools. School leadership at the building and central office levels continues to be monopolized by White educators. As of 2017-2018, 78 % of public school administrators were White, 10 percent were Black, 8.6 percent were Latinx, and 54% of that population was female (Diamond & Posey, 2019). Most BIPOC school administrators serve in public schools where most students identify as BIPOC. Schaeffer (2021) found that 37.5% of BIPOC school administrators are employed in urban schools, and 75 % of urban school students identify as BIPOC and qualify for free-reduced breakfast and lunch. While most BIPOC school administrators lead schools where most students are BIPOC themselves, few studies have examined the experiences of BIPOC school leaders serving in predominately White suburban public schools. The central theme of this journal is Leadership in a Time of Change. This study investigation is warranted based on the lack of research regarding the experiences of BIPOC educational leaders serving predominantly White school districts. Limited narratives describe the opportunities and challenge BIPOC school leaders endure when working in a predominantly White school setting.

In addition, educators serving in school leadership roles are under immense pressure. Job stress has escalated due to increased expectations, public scrutiny, and resolving stakeholder conflicts (Mahfouz, 2018). Scholars have argued that principals of color have additional job stress due to being school leaders of color (Steiner et al., 2022). Steiner et al. (2022) concluded by examining survey results from 1540 U.S. educators that participated in the State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal research study (Doan et al., 2022). The scholars invited 3022 principals from all racial backgrounds to participate in the study. As a result, 1,540 U.S. school leaders responded to the survey. Among the 1,540 school leaders in the study, 32.3 percent identified as non-White (Doan et al., 2022). The scholars asked the sample questions about job stress, working conditions, political events, experience with racism, etc. (Doan et al., 2022). Steiner et al. and her team of researchers used the data from the American Teacher and State of the American Principal research study. They found that BIPOC school personnel are held to higher standards than their White counterparts in predominately White schools and that these educators experienced racial discrimination in their schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has captured the attention of the mass media, public and private institutions, and politicians. CRT is an academic and legal theory claiming systemic racism is the norm in society. More recently, CRT has ignited contentious school board meetings among parents, administrators, and community members resulting in executive orders from President Trump banning the implementation of CRT in public institutions (Adams, 2021). In

addition, CRT has recently been under attack in public schools. For example, Governor Ron DeSantis formulated new legislation, “the Stop Woke Act,” in Florida (Alfonseca, 2022). The intent of enacting “the Stop Woke Act” was to eliminate the integration of CRT into the school curriculum. The narrative inquiry investigation needs to examine the stories of BIPOC school leaders in predominately White school districts to understand their experiences during another historical time of racial unrest.

CRT scholars posit that stories of BIPOC educators are essential in understanding how normalized racism exists in White spaces where educators and administrators may claim not to see the color of individuals in their school community (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT informed the investigation described in this article. Investigators applied the five basic tenets of CRT to the analysis and interpretation of findings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Race and racism are central in society. CRT challenges dominant ideology, as its interdisciplinary knowledge from experience is at the center and focused on social justice.

Theoretical Framework

The CRT framework was selected for this study because it was essential to examine the stories of BIPOC school leaders from their perspectives in predominantly White schools where race and racism may “implicitly and explicitly affect social structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2006, p. 168). Exploring the stories through the vehicle of one-on-one interviews with BIPOC leaders connected to the tenets of the CRT framework. CRT scholars Delgado and Stefancic (2017) presented five fundamental tenets of racism. First, the scholars claim that racism in the U.S. is normal, fundamental, and ordinary to the BIPOC experience within the framework of White culture. Second, these CRT scholars claim that racism “advances the interests of both White elites and workings class,” otherwise described as “interest convergence” (p. 9). White elites are willing to assist BIPOC individuals as long as Whites benefit materially or physically in some capacity. Another third tenet of racism, as defined through CRT, is that categorizing racial groups is a “social construction” (p. 9). Finally, CRT claims that an individual's race is not based on biological or genetic realities, intellect, personal conduct, or temperament. Rather, race is a ‘social construct’ created and interjected by those in power (i.e., Whites) to manipulate and control. A fourth tenet of CRT pertains to “differential racialization and its consequences” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9).

CRT scholars have observed over time that members of the White society will leverage different racial groups during different periods based on needs in the “labor market” and what racial group can most aptly fill that market need at the time. For example, at certain times in history, Black workers were less needed than Mexican or Japanese agricultural workers. Society cultivates certain groups of color for certain needs at the time.

Furthermore, the fourth CRT tenet argues that racial identification is not as simplistic as checking a single racial box on a survey. CRT scholars claim that BIPOC individuals often possess “conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties and allegiances” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 11). Just because someone identifies as Latinx does not mean they speak Spanish and practice Catholicism. Racial identification and backgrounds are complex and intersect with culture, sexual orientation, and religion. The fifth tenet among CRT scholars is that BIPOC

individuals possess a "unique voice" aligned to history and experiences with racism that uninformed White individuals lack adequate knowledge to discuss and understand appropriately.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) examined the use of Critical race methodology. Critical race methodology has been utilized to conduct qualitative research that investigates the experiences of BIPOC educators and students. Solorzano and Yosso also tie gender, social class, and race to the tenets of CRT. Also, Solorzano and Yosso claim that CRT has five overall themes. First, the scholars evaluate the power dynamic in the school structure, specifically whether one racial group has an advantage over another based on current practices. Second, the researchers claim that the influence of power in a school setting is comparable to that in the larger society. Third, the scholars focus on social justice and empowering oppressed racial groups by eliminating racism and sexism. Fourth, Solorzano and Yosso state that the BIPOC educator's expertise through personal experiences has value. Fifth, the scholars believe using an interdisciplinary perspective is an optimal way to evaluate racism through the BIPOC educators' educational experiences. Thus, BIPOC educators are the sole experts in telling their stories about racism.

Research Questions

This qualitative study examines the experiences of BIPOC educational leaders serving in predominantly White suburban schools in the Midwest. A CRT framework (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) may assist with examining BIPOC school leaders' experiences by exploring their Leadership in a predominantly White educational environment. The research study used a narrative inquiry design and semi-structured interviews with 10 Midwest BIPOC school administrators to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of BIPOC school leaders serving in a predominantly White School district?
2. What are the perceptions of BIPOC school leaders of their relationships with predominantly White teachers, parents, students, and central office staff?
3. What are the perceptions of BIPOC school leaders of their challenges and obstacles in serving in predominantly White school districts?

Methods

This qualitative research study used a narrative inquiry design. Scholars claim that narrative scholarship is useful for capturing the lived experiences of educators through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007; Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry through a CRT lens provides a vehicle for the researcher and participants to engage in true dialogue in a space (school) that has been defined as "colorblind" by the "dominant culture" (Kim, 2006, p. 44). The researcher received approval to interview the participants from his university's Institutional Review Board Office. In addition, all participants agreed to participate and approved the interview to be recorded on Zoom and were assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. The researcher utilized snowball sampling (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008), recruiting BIPOC school leaders serving predominantly White K-12 school districts in the Midwest who self-identified as Black, Latinx, multiracial, or other; for this study, participants were invited from the Midwest Region of the United States (Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Kentucky). The Latinx participants both identified as having parents that were born in Latin American countries, as well as claimed that English was their second language when they were under the age of 18. When the researcher was

conducting the first two interviews, he asked participants if they had any current BIPOC school leaders serving in predominantly White schools that may be interested in participating in the study. The scholar established credibility with each participant by disclosing his background, racial identification, and previous school administrator experiences and expertise.

The researcher's personal and professional experiences influenced the data collection and analysis. The researcher is a current BIPOC male assistant professor in Educational Administration with experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal at the elementary and middle school levels. Also, the BIPOC researcher has six years of experience serving as an educational leader or teacher in White suburban schools in the Midwest and was consistently the only school leader of color in the school and one of a handful in the school district. Also, the researcher has 14 years of experience serving as a principal in a school district where nearly 80 percent of the 13,000 students were categorized as BIPOC, and less than ten percent of the 90 total districts and school administrators were of color. The researcher provides this background information to acknowledge his positionality, which may enhance his understanding of the “potential bias, assumptions, and point of development, but also the potential contribution to the field” of educational Leadership (Holmes, 2020, p. 2).

Worldview guided the data collection process as the researcher was seeking to provide a vehicle to capture the voices of current BIPOC school leaders that were serving in White suburban schools after the death of George Floyd, followed by the period of racial reckoning in many suburban Midwest areas (Dueweke, 2022). Furthermore, the school districts where the participants served during the study all encountered protests, demonstrations, and heated discussions at school board meetings from community members who opposed the integration of the CRT curriculum (Jones, 2021). To mitigate any researcher bias and ensure validity, the researcher used "member checking" and maintained a "reflexive journal" to mitigate his bias and bracketed himself during the recorded participant interviews (Rocco, 2010). Furthermore, the researcher informed all 10 BIPOC school administrators that a transcription of their interview would be electronically sent to them if requested. However, none of the 10 BIPOC school administrators requested to view their transcripts.

Data Sources and Evidence

Data for this study were gathered from a brief demographic survey from 10 semi-structured interviews (45-60 minutes each) using Zoom Video Communication for recording, research notes, and clarification from follow-up questions from all ten semi-structured interviews. Member checking was used for validity purposes, where the researcher repeated the school leaders' statements to ensure their stories were accurate. Creswell and Miller (2000) claimed that member checking might be useful in qualitative research to increase validity. The first participant was interviewed in the fall of 2021, and the last school leader was interviewed in the fall of 2022.

The BIPOC school leaders were emailed a Qualtrics Link. They assigned a three-digit code asking questions about the participants' racial background and school demographic data. The Qualtrics link also asked participants to consent to the research study. Then, the researcher scheduled a date and time to conduct the semi-structured interviews using Zoom Video Communication and asked each BIPOC school leader five open-ended interview questions (see Appendix) focusing on their experiences and relationships with mostly White students, teachers, parents, and central office administrators. Finally, the researcher coded the interview

transcriptions in DeDoose, a research coding software that supported coding and organizing the data. Inductive coding methods were applied to create three themes, including first and second cycles, narrative, and focus coding (Saldana, 2016).

Results

This research study examined BIPOC school administrators' perceptions of serving in White school districts and their understanding of the connection between race, Leadership, and suburban education as a marginalized group member. The researcher interviewed 10 BIPOC school administrators from various racial backgrounds and district demographics. *Table 1* provides information pertinent information about the 10 BIPOC school administrators as well as demographic information about the predominantly White school districts in which they serve. The researcher used thematic coding to identify three themes to address the essential research questions: (1) racism, (2) microaggressions, and (3) pressure. *Figure 1* depicts the findings illustrating the results from the data. The following *narrative texts* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) are professional and personal stories shared by the 10 BIPOC school leaders during the semi-structured interviews. All the names of the participants have been altered to ensure anonymity. The narrative texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) describe participants' experiences that were "shared in conversation" (Rigaud et al., 2022, p. 10) with the investigator. All participants were issued pseudonyms throughout the manuscript.

Table 1

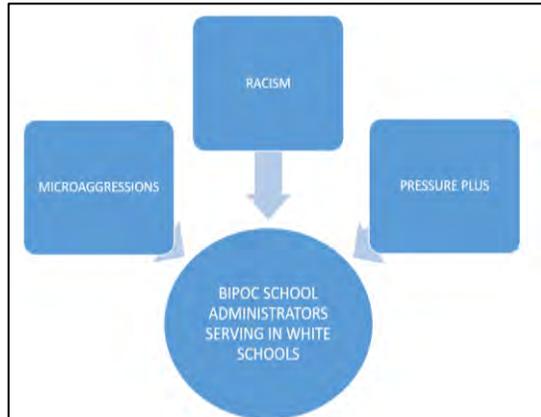
BIPOC School Administrators and School District Demographics

Participant	Yolanda	Ricardo	Gerald	Janice	Traci	Michael	Thomas	Tiffany	Humberto	Vanessa
Gender	F	M	M	F	F	M	M	F	M	F
Racial Background	B	L	B	B	B	B	B	B	L	B
Education Level	M	D	M'	D	M	M	D	M	M	M
Role	AP	P	P	Dir	Oth	Dir	P	P	P	Dir
School Level	MS	HS	EIS	HS	K-12	HS	HS	EIS	EIS	K-12
% of students identify as White	51-75	76-100	76-100	51-75	51-75	51-75	51-75	76-100	76-100	76-100
% of faculty identify as White	76-100	76-100	76-100	76-100	76-100	76-100	76-100	76-100	76-100	76-100
School Location	Sub	Sub	Sub	Sub	Sub	Sub	Sub	Sub	Sub	Sub
Range of total certified teachers	51-75	75 +	75+	75+	75+	75+	75+	51-75	0-25	75+
How many years have you served as a school leader?	0-5	0-5	0-5	0-5	0-5	11-15	0-5	6-10	0-5	0-5

Note: N = 10 were school leaders in the Midwest Region of the United States

Figure 1

BIPOC School Administrators Study Findings



Note: Three major themes from BIPOC interviews

Theme One: Racism

The theme of *racism* explains BIPOC school administrators' perspectives in identifying the racist experiences these leaders encountered in White school districts. Eighty percent of BIPOC participants expressed that they experienced racism from one of the three educational stakeholder groups: students, parents, and or teachers. In addition, the participants provided explicit narratives that explained the true reality of leading in predominantly White school districts as a BIPOC school administrator.

Traci, a Black female, shared that when she was hired in the school district as a leader, she was one of two Black educators that year out of 30 and one of three Black educators out of 200 plus teachers and administrators. In this narrative, Traci describes how she chaperoned a field trip on a windy day where the teachers and students visited a farm in the area. Traci stated that after the field trip ended, while sitting on the bus to return to school, one of the White female teachers on the field trip looked at her and said aloud, "Traci, did you forget to brush your hair today?" After the comment from the teacher, the students, bus driver, and other teachers that heard the comment began to laugh. Traci shared how shocked she was to hear such a degrading, insensitive comment from one of her staff members. Subsequently, Traci met with the White teacher in her office to educate her on Black female hair. Traci shared with the researcher that:

However, I felt like she [White teacher] would never fully understand what her words meant and how hurtful her words were to me... I got more questions about my hair even after that experience from students, teachers, and even a parent.

Another BIPOC administrator, Gerald, experienced racism as a Black male elementary school principal. When the interview was conducted, he was in his second year in a building with mostly White students enrolled. When asked about his experiences of leading as a BIPOC school leader, he stated:

It is challenging, and there are things that I've had some conversations with colleagues about how and why I do certain things. Just before this interview, I had a conversation with a teacher about how I must leave the building before it is dark outside because

seeing a Black man in this neighborhood after dark concerns me based on what I have learned about this community. When I do leave work [school] in the early evening, I walk to my car with my hands in my pocket. When I shared this story with the teacher, she commented, 'You always make everything about being Black.'

Gerald's story is powerful because he was a building principal in a predominantly White community but felt unsafe walking to his car after work. Gerald attempts to explain to a White staff member why he feels compelled to leave the building at a certain time. She immediately dismisses his reason when he explains this to the White female staff member. One may argue that the traditional barrier of institutional racism within this particular school and community fostered a lack of empathy with the racism Gerald encountered. Although the level of racist experiences among the BIPOC participants in this research was disheartening, it does not compare to the microaggressions they encountered and expressed during the interviews.

Theme Two: Microaggressions

The second theme, *microaggressions*, was identified based on the volume of statements. All 10 participants experienced microaggressions during their tenure as BIPOC school leaders serving in predominantly White school districts. Five unique stories are provided below as a sample of what they experienced. The narratives from the BIPOC school leaders exemplify the almost daily discrimination these educators endured in Predominantly White school districts.

Thomas shared his microaggression experiences as the first Black male high school principal in a school of 3,000 students and 230 staff members. When asked about his experiences as a BIPOC school leader serving in a White suburban high school, he shared a professional but personal story about his first month on the job. Thomas shared:

My first month [July] as the new principal of this school, I had teachers come in and introduce themselves to me. It was only usually the secretary in the office and me because other administrators were on vacation in July since their contract is 11 months. So, anyway, I had a White male veteran teacher teaching at the high school for 30 years during my second week as the principal. The teacher said something along the lines. 'I can't believe you are our principal. You are young, on top of being Black. Ha.. You're a Black boy running a large high school. Man, isn't that somethin'?

During the interview, Thomas stated that he was taken aback by what the teacher said and was unsure how to interpret the message. Thomas's first inclination was that the teacher was racist and believed this individual would have to be placed on notice. However, Thomas shared that he has created a positive relationship with this teacher during his tenure as principal and would classify this conversation as a microaggression. In the conversation later, the teacher shared with the principal that he knew Thomas was Black or African American but not aware that the principal was in his mid-30s. Thomas stated that these previous microaggressions still anger him when he thinks about these experiences, but forgiving is also important.

Another BIPOC school leader, Yolanda, a second-year assistant principal, discussed her experience with microaggressions when encountering a 20-year experienced White female teacher. During the interview, Yolanda shared that 87 percent of her current school is White, female, and mostly upper to middle class. Yolanda claimed that many of the teachers in her school are unfamiliar with culturally responsive practices and are challenged to relate to the small percentage of Black and Latinx students that attend her school. Yolanda has many

important professional responsibilities as an assistant principal. Still, she claimed during the interview that conducting teacher evaluations are the most important. Yolanda informed the researcher that her superintendent of schools intentionally recruited her to the school district to help the district implement culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). Yolanda shared during the interview that she conducted professional development on culturally responsive pedagogy in her school but across the district. Also, Yolanda claimed that the school superintendent has her conduct bi-monthly professional development training on CRP throughout the district for teachers. As a result, teachers are provided CRP strategies recommended to integrate into their instruction. Yolanda said that she discusses CRP during the formal evaluation process with teachers during pre-conference and post-conference meetings in her building. Yolanda describes a post-conference meeting with a resistant teacher that did not feel CRP was necessary to integrate because she does not see color [teacher]. Yolanda retold the conversation with the teacher. Yolanda shared:

She [the teacher] told me that kids are kids and that making everything about racial differences undermines the positive classroom environment she has created for her students. Then, she [teacher] tells me the reason some of her Black and Latinx students do not perform well in her class is that they [students] are unmotivated and don't care. She [teacher] said I teach all kids the same regardless of their race, and if the district would quit jamming this diversity and equity nonsense [referring to CRP] on teachers, things will be fine like they used to be.

Yolanda's story demonstrated that this particular teacher had stereotyped all Black and Latinx underperforming students as lazy and unmotivated. Educational leaders who experience high microaggressions in a school setting arguably have additional pressure to perform their job responsibilities.

Michael, a district-level director in a predominantly White school district, shared one microaggression conversation with a school board member during Black History Month last year. Michael shared a story about wearing a Civil Rights Black Power t-shirt with his sport coat to a meeting he scheduled with a principal in his school district. When Michael entered the school for his Meeting with the principal, a Board of Education member was leaving the school as Michael was entering. Michael knew all of the Board members since he attended the bi-monthly meetings Board of Education meetings. When Michael said "hello" to the Board member, the Board member responded with a "hello" in return and said "nice shirt" to Michael, shook his head, and walked to his car. Michael shared the next part of the story, a conversation with the superintendent. Michael stated,

When I walked into D.O. [district office] for a 9:00 a.m. meeting with the superintendent and cabinet, the superintendent stepped out of his office and asked if he could speak with me before our Meeting. The superintendent told me he received an email last night from a Board member that told him I was not professionally dressed yesterday for hours. I explained to the superintendent that I wore a Civil Rights Black Power t-shirt under my sport coat in honor of Black History Month. I told the superintendent I knew something was up because the Board member said a backhanded comment to me along the lines of "nice shirt." The superintendent told me not to worry about it and that he would speak with the Board members. I doubt anything comes of it because it's just the way it is around this school district.

Another school administrator, Janice, shared an experience where she received a microaggression on the second day of her new administration position in a predominantly White high school. Janice described her experience walking into classrooms and introducing herself to students and faculty. Janice shared,

I walked into this teacher's classroom to welcome the students back to school and introduce myself since I was a new administrator at the high school. When I entered the classroom, she [the teacher] abruptly greeted me and snapped her fingers to get the attention of the students. When the students were attentive I welcomed them back to school and introduced myself, and told them a little about me. The students were great during my short visit, but as I was walking out, the teacher walked with me to the door and quietly said, Well, I guess it was time for us to hire someone like you in our school. Immediately, I looked at her with my mouth open, and she could tell I was in shock. The teacher then stated I'm sorry I hope I didn't offend you. I meant to say that I knew they were going to hire a minority as the other administrators are White, and besides, I'm sure you're qualified. Then, she smiled at me, turned away, and went back to the students.

Janice expanded on the event and explained to the researcher that she felt that the teacher directly implied that she only got the new administrator job because she was Black. Janice later shared that this particular teacher applied for Janice's administration position but did not make it to the second round.

Tiffany, another BIPOC administrator that served as the first Black female elementary principal in a predominantly White school, claimed that she experienced microaggressions from parents. Tiffany stated,

When I meet parents in person, usually sometime after a phone conversation. When they meet me in person and see who I am, they usually seem confused [White parents assume I am White]. Parents have said things to my face, not to be malicious or anything but still inappropriate; they make comments such as you speak intelligently, you know you speak very well, and I didn't realize you were Black on the phone.

Tiffany's powerful narrative demonstrated that their parents assume she is White because of the way she communicates with her stakeholders. The parents of Tiffany's students appear to have some preconceived notion of how a person of color may communicate.

Thomas, Yolanda, Michael, Janice, and Tiffany's powerful stories provided insight into the microaggressions BIPOC administrators in predominantly White schools encounter as leaders.

Theme 3: Pressure Plus

The third theme, *pressure plus*, was identified based on the number of statements that were aligned with BIPOC school leaders' feeling that their race added excessive pressure to perform not only for themselves but their entire race. Hence, the term pressure plus is applied to this theme. The stories from the BIPOC school leaders serving in White schools demonstrate the unique pressures these leaders endure consistently. Vanessa claims,

I feel the pressure to perform. I have to do everything at a higher level because I feel like I'm going to be judged differently, and I have to prove my value and worth in this school district. Also, I feel pressure to protect my Black and brown students from systemic racism, but it's hard...because I feel the pressure of being expected to speak for an entire race of people at times, and it's too much.

Another BIPOC administrator, named Humberto, shared a story about the additional pressure he feels as the first-ever Latinx school principal of this traditional White elementary school:

There's pressure for certain. First, my family moved into this school district, and my own kids are in the dual language program here. The superintendent and leadership team were receiving community pressure about hiring diverse educators, and that is a good pressure and change. It shows that we [the school district] are trying to reach families that historically are on the fringe. However, when I look around the room [referring to principal meetings], I'm um the only Hispanic male, not a lot like me in the room. That was very eye-opening for me when I was presented at the board [of education] Meeting. I realized I'm in a different world. I came from a diverse district, so the pressure for me now is how much do I stretch myself to help out other buildings when I know that I have some learning to do in this new role, sure that pressure is always there, right?"

Ricardo, another BIPOC administrator who served as the school's first Latinx high school principal in a predominantly White school, claimed he feels constant pressure to perform and exceed the superintendent and central office expectations. Ricardo states,

Being the first Latinx principal of this high school is stressful and has taken an emotional toll on me as well as my family. I sacrifice hours on top of hours away from my family as I try to attend all student events and activities. I realize that all principals work very hard, but I feel like I have to take the position to another level. If I fail, I think other potential school leaders of color may not get a shot. I'm lucky in that my family is in the area, and they help pick up my kids from school or events since I am gone a lot, and my wife travels for work. What's that saying? Heavy is the head that wears the crown.

Vanessa, Humberto, and Ricardo shared powerful stories that provided insight into the additional pressure BIPOC administrators in predominantly White schools encounter as leaders.

Discussion

The individual narratives garnered from 10 different interviews with BIPOC school administrators serving in predominantly White school districts were presented in the findings and results section. All ten BIPOC school administrator voices were integrated into one of three themes. The stories of the 10 BIPOC school leaders revealed three overarching themes: racism, microaggressions, and pressure plus.

Racism

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) define racism as "any program or practice of discrimination, segregation, persecution, or mistreatment based on membership in a race or ethnic group" (p. 183). Eighty percent of the participants claimed they experienced racism from various stakeholders in their predominantly White school district. Two examples provided explicit narratives that shared the reality of leading in predominantly White school districts where they were a visible minority (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In the U.S. educational system, 80 percent of 90,000 school leaders identify as White (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2012). In addition, less than 25 percent of the total 20 percent of BIPOC school leaders serve in suburban or rural public school districts, meaning that most suburban and rural predominantly

White school districts are serviced by White school administrators (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2012). One may argue that BIPOC school leaders experiencing racism in predominantly White suburban school districts is not surprising but coincides with the historical racist housing practices in the suburban Midwest. Omi and Winant (1994) stated that the concept of suburban America was founded on a White supremacist racial ideology. White residents elected to self-segregate and created institutions such as schools under the guise of whiteness (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2017). Suppose the foundation of predominantly White schools was predicated on whiteness and white supremacy. In that case, it seems logical that BIPOC school leaders would experience racism and microaggressions (Diamond, 2018).

When predominantly White school districts elect to hire a BIPOC school leader, they may have good intentions and believe that hiring a person of color demonstrates that the school community is not racist and that racism is extinct. However, school district leaders and board of education members that promote diversity and recruit BIPOC school leaders may not realize that racism is “endemic, institutional, and systematic” in predominantly White schools and simply hiring people of color does not absolve the school district from its responsibility to create an environment that is inclusive and absent from racism (Sleeter, 2017, p. 157). The real work of eliminating racism in predominantly White schools perhaps legitimizes the need for school district leaders and board of education members to engage with CRT and create culturally responsive professional development opportunities for educational stakeholders.

Microaggressions

The 10 BIPOC school administrators serving in predominantly White schools experienced numerous microaggressions. The findings section of this manuscript provided the personal stories from five BIPOC school administrators to provide insight into the different forms of microaggressions that the BIPOC school leaders experienced. Microaggressions are defined as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). The challenges that people of color experience from microaggressions is that they are not as discernible as blatant racism, and at times microaggressive comments may even be “dismissed as harmless” (Williams et al., 2020). Microaggressions experienced by the BIPOC school administrators pertain to CRT. One of the foundational aspects of CRT that connects to microaggressions is that microaggressions are subtle malevolent comments that cause harm to BIPOC individuals within institutions. One of the BIPOC school leaders in the findings section claimed that White parents usually inform her that she “speaks so intelligently” that White parents may perceive their comment as a nice gesture and not denigrate the BIPOC school principal. When applying a CRT lens to the “speaks so intelligently” comment directed at the BIPOC school principal, one may argue that this microaggression is harmful because it conveys to the principal that White parents are biased and do not necessarily think BIPOC individuals speak intelligently. Furthermore, microaggression is normalized in predominantly White institutions. For example, Anderson et al. (2022) conducted a study that surveyed 759 medical students from different racial and gender backgrounds. The researchers’ survey was adapted from the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ). The questions asked the medical students if they had experienced any of the 16 microaggression statements in medical school. The results from the survey determined that 61% of the medical students experienced at least one weekly microaggression. Racial microaggression comments were ranked at the top of the list. (Anderson et al., 2022). Also, the same study revealed that individuals that experience weekly microaggressions may suffer from mental health trauma.

BIPOC school administrators that experience racism and microaggressions while serving in predominantly White school districts may feel additional leadership pressure.

Pressure Plus

The BIPOC administrators in this study overcame “intentional or consequential racism in hiring and promotion.” They felt the impact of additional “pressures to the same degree as school administrator peers from the dominant, White racial groups” (Smith, 2016. P. 126). Based on the stories of the BIPOC school leaders, the pressure they encountered was predominantly “internalized pressure” resulting from being in a position of authority but also due to being one of the only BIPOC school leaders within the building and school district (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Smith, 2016). Recently, educational leaders serving in public schools experienced various job-related pressures due to Covid-19 and the national media attention around teaching CRT in schools (DeMatthews & Clarida, 2021). However, the pressure level among BIPOC school leaders was elevated due to the “increased attention to systemic racism brought about by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement likely provoked race-related cognitive dissonance” (Coleman et al., 2022, p.84).

Based on the stories from the BIPOC school administrators, one may deduce that their racial background and the level of stress tied to the position of BIPOC leaders have significant challenges (Lunenberg & Irby, 2023). Scholars claim that school leaders encounter pressure from various job stressors, and “challenge and hindrance” are common (Podsakoff et al., 2007). The researchers define “challenge” stressors as tasks that align with a high volume of work with hard deadlines (Podsakoff et al., 2007). In addition, “hindrance.” Stressors are defined as political responsibilities and ambiguous tasks not defined by central office administrators (Podsakoff et al., 2007). The stories of BIPOC school administrators in this study faced “hindrance” stressors that created additional pressures that their White counterparts may not experience since they belong to the racial group in power. Even though researchers (Steiner et al., 2022) from a recent study discovered that BIPOC teachers and principals described comparable job stressors to their White contemporaries, approximately 50 percent of BIPOC school leaders reported “racial discrimination” from staff and family members of students in their school environments. Therefore, school districts and board of education members must discuss solutions to address the racial bias prevalent in White suburban schools. Based on the sample in this study, efforts are being made to increase diversity among the faculty, including school leadership; however, additional efforts are needed to create an environment that supports BIPOC school leaders and mitigate the level of racism and microaggressions these educators experience in White suburban schools.

Recommendations and Implications

Based on the narratives from the 10 BIPOC educational leaders, many of their challenges were connected to serving in White school environments where they were sometimes the sole person of color in their school district. The 10 BIPOC educational leaders shared compelling stories about their personal and professional experiences, resulting in three primary themes: racism, microaggressions, and pressure. The personal narratives of the 10 BIPOC school leaders demonstrated that racism is alive and thriving in White suburban America. Equally important, suburban school districts commonly reflect community values and norms about race and racial prejudice among BIPOC stakeholders. As this study explored the

unique experiences of 10 BIPOC educational leaders, the findings reflected the existing challenges in university teacher education and educational leadership programs across the United States with recruiting potential teachers and school leaders of color. Teaching candidates in universities and colleges in the U.S. are predominantly White students, and 78% of the faculty teaching the teacher preparation candidates are White (Goldring et al., 2013; Rucinski, 2023). Predominantly White teacher candidates and faculty at the university may lack exposure to BIPOC university teacher candidates, reducing the opportunity for both groups to engage and learn about cultural differences and similarities. The same logic is transferrable to the challenges graduate programs in Educational Leadership are confronted with when attempting to increase BIPOC school administrators. Superville (2021) discovered that 80% of all current school principals are White. The current shortage of BIPOC school administrators has triggered school districts and universities to create alliances and identify BIPOC teachers in their districts with leadership potential (Superville, 2021). The researcher contends that university teacher education programs, professional development opportunities related to culturally responsive pedagogy, and affinity groups in White school districts may mitigate racism, microaggressions, and the pressure BIPOC administrators experience in their positions.

University Teacher Preparation Programs

To mitigate racism and micro-aggressions that BIPOC educators encounter in predominantly White schools, it is paramount that university teacher preparation programs confront the *colorblind* lens commonly used by White educators to dismiss racism (Singleton, 2006). Even though White educators may honestly believe that they do not see color (Singleton, 2006) and view their interactions and micro-aggressive comments to BIPOC school leaders as harmless, the stories from the 10 BIPOC administrators illustrate otherwise. This study demonstrated that participants experienced microaggressions serving as BIPOC school leaders in predominantly White school districts. Another study also discovered similar results among BIPOC school leaders. Steiner et al. (2022) found that “48 %” of BIPOC school leaders experienced at least one racial discrimination incident at school when 50 percent of the teaching staff was defined as White (p. 10). As the teaching workforce continues to be predominantly White, perhaps the time to “disrupt Whiteness in teacher education” (Picower, 2021, p. 85) is now. White teacher preparation students may only be transformed if they are educated by university professors committed to integrating social justice and culturally responsive pedagogy (Schauer, 2022).

Professional Development for Educators

As the teaching field remains a predominantly White employee group (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023), school district leaders may want to consider increasing professional development opportunities aligned with Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). The advantage of school district leaders facilitating workshops for teachers aligned to CWS is that critical professional development (CPD) “frames teachers as politically aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society” (Picower, 2021, p. 141). Therefore, a recommendation for new and experienced teachers serving in predominately White schools is to explore the benefits CWS may have with helping “people of all races think critically about how race functions systematically and often subconsciously to privilege people with certain perceived skin traits” (Beech, 2020, p. 3). One may argue that most White educators state that they are not racist as they define “racism as an overt behavior committed by an individual or group of individuals” (Williams, 2022, p. 74). For example, Yolanda, BIPOC Assistant Principal, in this

study shared her story about her conversation with a White female teacher in her school that claimed, “Kids are kids, and making everything about racial differences undermines the positive classroom environment she has created for her students.” To evaluate the teacher’s statement above, she [teacher] truly believes that she does not see racial differences and therefore does not sanction racism. Therefore, if White educators truly believe that they are not racist, perhaps creating and facilitating an in-service workshop using Critical Whiteness Professional Development may help well-intentioned White educators with “unpacking and exposing...racial stereotypes, bigotry, and forms of oppressive thinking” (Beech, 2020, p. 7). Educating the hard-working and well-intentioned White educators will help ‘confront the racial inequity” (Kendi, 2019, p. 9) for not only the students that they [teachers] serve but the BIPOC school leaders that serve them.

Affinity Groups

The BIPOC educational leaders in this study demonstrated that they experienced additional pressure from serving as one of the few educational leaders of color. The BIPOC leaders shared their experiences with racism and micro-aggressive encounters from educators in their school community. As predominantly White school districts recruit BIPOC school leaders, it is paramount that systems exist to provide these courageous leaders with spaces to gather and feel supported. Educational organizations have started exploring and organizing racial affinity groups for educators of color to retain and support their colleagues of color (Great Schools Partnership, 2021). The vehicle educational organizations have determined that they may support BIPOC educators by creating racial affinity groups. Affinity groups are defined as a “group of people sharing a common race who gather intending to find connection, support, and inspiration” (Great Schools Partnership, 2021). School districts that create and support racial affinity groups should deem these systems not only as a support network for BIPOC school leaders but also as a form of professional learning which may increase social capital among BIPOC educational leaders. Firestone and Riehl (2005) stated that an “essential characteristic of social capital is the fact that it resides in the relationships among individuals within a social organization” (p. 69). Racial affinity groups for BIPOC school leaders serving in White schools may foster stronger relationships among the BIPOC educational peer group and serve as a form of learning among contemporaries.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had some limitations. The research study explores the experiences through the narrative of 10 BIPOC school administrators serving in predominately White school districts. One limitation of the research study was that the interviewer depended on the participants to candidly reveal their stories as they experienced racism and microaggressions in predominantly White school settings. In addition, all 10 BIPOC school administrators have high-pressure and time-consuming careers and personal family commitments. As most of the interviews with the participants ranged from 45-60 minutes, it was challenging to coordinate a time and date without interruptions from their busy schedules. Another limitation of the research study is potential researcher bias. The researcher, as previously mentioned, was a BIPOC school administrator that encountered racism, microaggressions, as well as a sense of additional pressure to perform as a school leader. However, the stories of the BIPOC school administrators did cause the researcher to pause and reflect on his own experiences throughout his tenure as a leader. Even though mitigating action steps were taken to reduce bias, it remains a limitation. In addition, the number

of participants as well as the location of the study should be considered limitations as well. Future research should consider increasing the number of participants to elevate the generalizability of the study. Furthermore, the research study could benefit from being conducted in other geographic locations in the United States, such as the Southwest, northwest, southeast, and Northeast.

Future research examining the experiences of BIPOC school leaders serving in White schools is needed. As awareness of racism has increased in the U.S. and school districts attempt to increase diversity among their teachers and administrators, the education system must understand the plight of BIPOC school administrators (Carter, 2020). Scholars have discovered that it is quite common for BIPOC educators to experience “racial battle fatigue” in predominantly White school districts (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Racial battle fatigue (RBF) is described as the exhaustion and negative impact “racism” has on BIPOC educators “who work in a predominately White profession” (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Hiring BIPOC teachers and administrators to serve in majority White schools is not sufficient in mitigating the systemic racism that has been in existence since the inception of the United States. Central offices and boards of education must support BIPOC administrators through mentoring, affinity groups, and racial justice professional development to eliminate racism and microaggressions (Carter, 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Conclusion

This study has looked into the experiences of 10 BIPOC school administrators serving in predominantly White school districts. The central theme of this journal, *Leadership in a Time of Change*, was essential in examining the experiences of BIPOC educational leaders serving in predominantly White school districts. As suburban, predominantly White school districts attempt to recruit and retain BIPOC educational leaders, school board members, and superintendents must be aware of the unique challenges BIPOC administrators will encounter. Creating systemic change in the hiring practices within predominantly White school districts is no small task, especially as adversaries of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) groups seek to adopt legislation to ban teaching about CRT and eliminate diversity training among faculty (Staver, 2023). It is time for the public education system in predominately White school districts to take the next step beyond hiring BIPOC educators. White school district leaders must create systems that will support BIPOC school leaders as successful leaders and key contributors to the fight against systemic racism.

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