An Examination of Educational Leadership Preparation in Ontario: Are Principals Prepared to Lead Equitably?

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Abstract

In response to the changing demographics of schools in Canada and to efforts to better equip principals to challenge inequity, leadership preparation programs have adopted new policies focusing on leading with an equity lens. However, studies have demonstrated a disconnect between what is covered in these leadership programs and how school principals actually perceive their ability to lead equitably and work with diverse learners. Six current school principals and vice principals in Ontario, Canada who have successfully completed a Principal Qualification Program course were interviewed to understand their perceptions of the program's ability to prepare them to lead and of concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The racial experiences and identities of each participant shaped their definitions of EDI as well as their understanding of difference. The findings indicate several critical areas of change for principal preparation programs in Ontario: training guidelines, efforts to prepare educators to be equitable leaders, and the educators' perceptions of their preparedness to lead. Moreover, the use of Critical Race Theory in Education and Applied Critical Leadership helps frame analysis and supports the need to integrate culturally relevant pedagogical practices into leadership preparation programs.

Keywords: principal preparation, educational leadership, equity, diversity, inclusion, critical race theory, applied critical leadership

Introduction

Canada has become increasingly diverse in recent decades, with Ontario regarded as the most ethnically diverse province in the country (Tuters & Portelli, 2017). Unfortunately, under the surface lies a weighted history of anti-Black racism and exclusive teaching and leadership practices toward racialized, particularly Black, Indigenous, and marginalized, students (Abawi, 2021; Lopez, 2019; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Tuters & Portelli, 2017; Wallin & Peden, 2014). This reflects the implicit biases teachers and school leaders might have about their students (McMahon, 2007; Tooms, 2007) as well as harmful school policies either established or maintained by its principals.

According to the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT, 2017), the Principal Qualification Program (PQP) provides foundational preparation for Ontario's principals and vice principals. In response to the changing demographics of schools and the imperative to better prepare principals to address inequities, leadership preparation programs in Ontario have adopted new policies related to a more equity-oriented (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011) leadership approach. For example, updated changes to the Ontario Leadership Framework, which informs the PQP guidelines, defines leadership as "intended to be inclusive of the diversity found in schools and communities across the province" (The Institute for Education

Leadership, 2013, p. 9). The PQP guidelines describe the Ontario principal as one that leads through an equity lens and after completion of the program can "identify and respond to systemic barriers and … advocate for all students and honour diversity of voice and perspective" (OCT, 2017, p. 5). This was also seen through the enactment of Regulation 274/12 by the Ontario government in 2012, which was meant to curb reported instances of nepotism and favoritism that "skewed teacher hiring and detrimentally impacted racialized and Indigenous educators" (Abawi, 2021, p. 85). At first glance, this might appear to be appropriate and responsive solutions; however, existing research on Ontario principal perceptions of race and equity indicate a disconnect between the PQP guidelines and demonstrated examples of equity-oriented leadership.

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: to examine educational leadership preparation programs in Ontario and to understand PQP participant perspectives on equitable leadership. Accordingly, this will offer a better understanding of the ways principal preparation programs in Ontario train future educational leaders to confront inequity and best serve their diverse student populations. The overarching question to address this phenomenon was: After completing the OCT PQP, what are participant perceptions about leadership responsibility for maintaining equitable spaces? There were two supporting questions. First, after completing the PQP, how prepared do participants feel to directly address and/or challenge issues of inequity? Second, how are the PQP guidelines addressing topics related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)?

Researcher Positionality

It should be noted that while this study examines school administrators, I have never been one myself. However, my personal experiences as a cisgender heterosexual woman, racialized person, teacher, and student, and the ways I have been impacted by myriad microaggressions and explicit racial and gender discrimination from classmates, teachers, and colleagues, all serve as inspiration for this study. I was raised by a Chinese American mother and a Black American father. Learning about my parents' struggles and strengths as racialized people and my brother's experiences as a gay man, as well as reflecting on my own racialized identity and experiences as a woman, taught me to appreciate and understand, rather than judge, diversity. While my elementary and secondary school touted itself as diverse and inclusive, many issues that contributed to an unwelcoming school environment unfolded in subtle but harmful ways. As a result, I internalized oppressive ideas about myself and my race. This internalized oppression is powerfully described by Love (2019) as "spirit murdering" which serves to "rob dark people of their humanity and dignity and leave personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries" (p. 38).

These issues carried over into my teaching experiences, which exposed me to the many biases teachers and administrators bring to their work and engagement with students. Continuing my journey into academia, I have prioritized engaging in critical self-reflection about my own privileges and the unlearning of oppressive ideas about myself. I believe this same process is critical for school leaders to engage in, particularly given the practical power they hold in educational institutions. Principals can effect school-wide change, such as enforcing equitable policies, shaping school culture, and engaging staff in consistent professional development and workshops related to anti-racism and equity (Capper et al., 2006; Kempf, 2020; Khalifa, 2018).

Literature Review

Principal Preparation Programs in North America

Effective leadership programs have been documented to contain various elements essential to leadership, including a strong internship or mentoring component, activities or experiences that link theory to practice, and developing long-lasting relationships with schools and districts (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Jiang et al., 2009). While these efforts are noteworthy, discourse on leading equitably to best serve a diverse student population is minimal. This is largely due to, as Galloway and Ishimaru (2017) explained, the educational leadership field lacking the language that explicitly expresses leadership development "focused on fairness in processes, structural and learning conditions, and student outcomes within the context of an unequal playing field for nondominant students and communities" (p. 3). This also supports the need for these programs to intentionally offer learning opportunities focused on social

justice and cultural awareness (Guillaume et al., 2020; Khalifa, 2018).

Moreover, scholars (Churchley et al., 2017; Guillaume et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2014) have added to this discourse by pointing out that leadership preparation programs in North America lack attention to the cultural context of schools and their student and family populations. These programs seem to continually adopt traditional notions of principals as managers leading in a hierarchically organized institution (Khalifa, 2018). It is also important to consider the ways these programs appear to "avoid critical dialogue and examination of social justice … [yet implement] curriculum that preserves prejudice and discrimination" (Guillaume et al., 2020, p. 284). Prioritizing topics such as professional learning communities, how to manage a budget, and human resources management indicate the values of these educational leadership programs and what they believe to be necessary for a successful career as a principal.

What exactly comes to mind when diversity is mentioned? For many, race and ethnicity are at the forefront, and racialized school leaders have reported navigating their role among instances of anti-Black racism, racial microaggressions, and behaviour that is unsupportive of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education (Abawi, 2021; Evans, 2007; George et al., 2020; Lopez, 2019; Wallin & Peden, 2014). While addressing issues of racial inequity in leadership preparation is important, it seems that in these same programs, topics related to disability, sexuality, and gender are severely overlooked (Capper et al., 2006).

Love (2019) affirmed this claim by pointing out that while supporting racialized students is imperative, it "cannot come at the expense of trans folx, folx with disabilities, or women" (p. 4). Accordingly, LGBTQIA+ harassment in educational spaces has been well documented in both the United States and Canada (Capper et al., 2006; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Taylor & Peter, 2011; The Canadian Press, 2023; Tooms, 2007). Taylor and Peter (2011) found that "64% of LGBTQ students across Canada and 61% of students with LGBTQ parents reported that they feel unsafe at school" (p. 17). Tooms (2007) further illuminated the reality of educational leadership development by pointing out the "heterosexist mind-set" (p. 602) that school administrators and other professionals are socialized to follow.

Principal Perceptions about Leading Equitably

Many studies in North America investigate principal understandings of social justice and racial awareness as they relate to leadership ability (Jiang et al., 2009; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011; Webber et al., 2014). For instance, McMahon (2007) investigated Canadian principals' understanding of power and privilege expressed through whiteness and maintained by systemic inequities based on race. The results revealed that the participants rarely identified, and were less urgent to address, issues of inequity in their schools, which the author connected to "the power and privilege attached to whiteness [that] is so pervasive … it becomes invisible" (McMahon, 2007, p. 291). This also relates to extant literature (see Evans, 2007; Pollock & Briscoe, 2019) on principal sensemaking about race, primarily the belief in treating the school community the same with no need to adjust teaching or leadership practice to accommodate changing demographics in their schools. Stone-Johnson et al. (2021) highlighted the deficit perspective many new school leaders have about their students and families (i.e., holding negative beliefs about a student due to their background, resulting in lower expectations and exclusive practice), which hinders one's potential to engage in educational reform.

These studies highlight an aspect of principal preparation that perhaps has not been given enough attention: how one's perception of EDI impacts school leadership. To answer this question, Jiang et al. (2009) acknowledged limited research on participant experiences from educational leadership preparation programs and claimed a need for these programs to both attract and develop leaders with a "strong sense of social justice" (p. 78). Stone-Johnson et al. (2021) echoed this claim by observing that improving leadership preparation programs "requires knowing more about where [leadership preparation] students … are before they enter [these programs]" (p. 39).

Principal Impact on School Climate and Culture

The power and influence school principals hold is well known, and the extent of that power has been found to impact teacher and student behaviour, parent perceptions, and the wider school culture (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Cherkowski, 2010; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Khalifa, 2018; Santamaría et al.,

2014; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012; Wallin & Peden, 2014). This is further explained by Kutsyuruba et al. (2015) who stated that the "interpersonal dynamics" among a school community largely influence the emotional, social, and academic success of its students (p. 107). Additionally, Parsons and Beauchamp (2012) found that dynamics and behaviours found within a school are highly impactful on teachers and often stay with them throughout their careers.

Positive impacts on school climate are closely linked to high-quality leadership preparation, which supports the notion that strong leadership and creating inclusive environments can be taught and developed (Webber et al., 2014) and that these environments humanize students (Khalifa, 2018). Alternatively, negative leadership behaviour can be connected to traditional school structures built to establish principal-teacher relationships that "confirm school-centric perspectives and … devalue or dismiss student viewpoints" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 67). As is often seen in hierarchically organized institutions, this harmful behaviour has a high chance of trickling down and negatively impacting teaching practice and student achievement.

Importantly, these negative behaviours indicate programmatic construction of effective leadership and the impacts of leadership behaviour and practice. For instance, Abawi (2021) pointed out how the normalization of whiteness in educational institutions informs leadership norms and culture, even extending into leadership identity. Principal involvement in Ontario's New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) offers deeper insight into this phenomenon. Since principals must assign teacher mentors to newly hired teachers, and successful completion of the NTIP is contingent upon this relationship, the authority principals are given acts to further reinforce power structures within settler colonial systems with a majority white and middle-class teaching and leadership staff (Abawi, 2021).

Additionally troubling is the fact that many educators who engage in racist, oppressive, or exclusionary behaviour are often unaware of the ways they impact their students both in and outside of the classroom (Love, 2019). Any refusal to take responsibility is what Love (2019) explained as "denial of dark [and other marginalized] people's knowledge of how racism [and oppression] works" (p. 36). These examples have larger implications for the ways that school leaders impact teaching and learning quality as they hold responsibility to create spaces that empower rather than exclude.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) allows for the interpretation, analysis, and challenging of existing inequities in schools. Furthermore, adoption of a CRT lens in education practice helps challenge what Howard (2003) and Yosso (2005) refer to as deficit thinking that educators have about their students. To address these challenges, some scholars (e.g., Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012) have advocated for the applicability of CRT to the analysis and interpretation of issues related to educational leadership. This includes a strong connection between the utilization of CRT in leadership practice and of one's identity because of the person's lived experiences. However, white educators who utilize a social justice mindset can toe the line between white savior and genuine social justice educator, where the educator "maintains uncritical subjectivities" and perpetuates "majoritarian narratives that isolate students of color" (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 211).

The practical application of CRT in Education can be better understood through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which has been argued by many (Howard, 2003; Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lopez, 2015; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015; Yosso, 2005) to be an essential component of teaching and leadership practice that ensures academic success and well-being for racialized and marginalized students. CRP is significant to teacher and principal leadership because it forces educators to develop a critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This helps educators understand their own positionality within the classroom and school context, critically reflect on their biases and assumptions about others, and focus their practice more on equity and social justice (Howard, 2003; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Wallin & Peden, 2014).

Applied Critical Leadership

Applied Critical Leadership (ACL) (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2015) is an emergent theory born out of a reconceptualization of Transformational Leadership and CRT that addresses "educational issues … using a critical race perspective to enact context-specific change in response to power, domination, access, and achievement imbalances" (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, p. 7). Leaders who embody characteristics of ACL in their practice are not only proud of and grounded in their core identity but also use it to deflect any negative assumptions or stereotypes others might have about them (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014). In this way, like CRP, difference is viewed as empowering. Furthermore, ACL functions heavily through a CRT in Education lens whereby school leaders operate in a state of normalized oppression and segregation while also offering a new conception of leadership that is removed from "patriarchal … and management paradigms" (Santamaría, 2021, p. 2). In this way, educational leaders are forced to reconsider how approaches related to equity and access are developed.

ACL has been documented to be most useful for educational leaders who identify as Black, Indigenous, or other racialized groups (Santamaría et al., 2014; Santamaría et al., 2017; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). In these studies, principals from American and New Zealand contexts all demonstrated similar desires to engage in a process of unlearning and relearning to best support their staff and students. This allowed leaders to approach their work in a way that permits understanding through shared experiences of oppression and difference (Santamaría, 2021). Furthermore, ACL can and should be utilized by white school leaders who operate as co-conspirators[1] (Love, 2019) through their "co-decolonization" efforts (Santamaría, 2021, p. 5). Abawi (2021) reaffirmed this idea by claiming that ACL helps white leaders unpack their conscious and unconscious biases within their leadership practice such as how bias is portrayed through hiring practices.

Methodology

After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board, I employed purposeful snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012) to recruit six current school administrators who successfully completed a PQP course through an accredited university or the Ontario Principal's Council. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Brown & Danaher, 2019) with the intention to create space that fosters dialogue and engagement and builds trust. In addition to notes taken during the interviews, I engaged in preliminary exploratory analysis and coded the data through thematic analysis (Creswell, 2012; Saldaña, 2013).

To participate in the study, potential participants needed to self-identify as Black, Indigenous, racialized/person of color, or white; be male or female (trans and gender non-conforming people were welcome); be current school administrators (principals or assistant principals); and have successfully completed a PQP course in Ontario, Canada. Table 1 represents a demographic breakdown of all six participants in the study. The pseudonyms were either assigned to or chosen by the participants and will be used in this article.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Pseudonyms	Gender	Race	Position	Years of experience
Harris	Male	white	Principal	20
Elizabeth	Female	Asian	Vice Principal	1.5
David	Male	East Asian	Acting Principal	<1

[1] Although the term *co-conspirator* might appear to have a negative connotation, it is meant to represent a deeper form of solidarity—one that moves past the sometimes performative nature of allyship. It is best described by Love (2019):

> In many intersectional social justice groups, the language is shifting from needing allies to coconspirators. Allyship is working toward something that is mutually beneficial and supportive to all parties involved …. This type of ally-ship still centers Whiteness in dark spaces …. [A coconspirator is] willing to use [their] intersections of privilege, leverage [their] power, and support [others] to stand in solidarity and confront anti-Blackness. (p. 117)

Pseudonyms	Gender	Race	Position	Years of experience
Wanda	Female	white	Vice Principal	1.5
Vanessa	Female	white	Vice Principal	2
Aysha	Female	South Asian	Vice Principal	5

Limitations

While this study addresses an important issue and has significant implications for future leadership preparation, it has a number of limitations. The time frame for completing the study was limited. I initially intended to interview current school administrators who identified in different ways, particularly in terms of their racial and gender identity, because they could offer unique perspectives on orientations to equity in leadership. However, as shown in Table 1, no Black or Indigenous school administrators participated in this study. Given the scarcity of Black and Indigenous educators in leadership positions (Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020), including people who represent this demographic is critical. Excluding their voices was not intentional and, had they participated, the results of the study would have been different; the important contributions and insights they could offer are not lost on me.

Findings

The school administrators in this study strongly connected their racial identity to their leadership practice and orientations to equity work. Three prominent themes emerged from several rounds of coding. As stated earlier, the racial and gender makeup of each participant allows for unique offerings of leadership. Thus, their perspectives will be presented in the same way to highlight their different lived experiences.

Principal and Vice Principal Acceptance of Responsibility and Challenges in Equity-Oriented Leadership Practice

The participants were asked to define equity and explain how it fits into their leadership practice. Each participant shared how they viewed their responsibility as school leaders and the challenges they encountered in establishing and maintaining equitable spaces.

Acceptance of Responsibility

Each participant shared their journey into leadership, including motivations and external support systems that pushed them in the right direction. This, in connection with extensive teaching and classroom experience, contributed to an understanding and acceptance of their role as school leaders. Vanessa, a vice principal, gained experience as a teacher leader, coordinating NTIP and mentoring teachers, and felt the reach of leadership outside her classroom. She shared:

> I got to a point in my classroom where I felt that I could have more of an impact if I brought this to a bigger school …. I could really see the impact of instructional leaders going into classrooms and helping teachers with what they wanted to work on. It was great to have that partnership and those opportunities. And that's when I kind of got the taste of what I thought it would be like to be an administrator: that I could support educators in improving their instructional practice and improving the lives of students.

Harris, a principal, offered a more systematic and authoritative perspective on his role as a school leader. He stated, "I craved order, organization, preparation … as a teacher in general … I found that that's where I met with success and supporting students into understanding what process means and or-

ganization." Harris additionally described exploring leadership opportunities in educational technology which gave him a "sense as to how other schools function, how tech leaders and other schools deal with the same kinds of challenges or issues ... and that opened [his] eyes to sort of going beyond the classroom."

Other participants described their responsibility through definitions of equity. Wanda, a vice principal, defined equity as "making sure that everybody gets what they need to be as successful as they want to be whatever their definition of success may be, because it's gonna be different from person to person." She added that in the context of her school board, leading with an equity mindset is imperative "given how many communities … had been marginalized by our system, it's disrupting that system." Wanda further shared that "evening playing fields where it's been unequal, providing opportunities that maybe haven't been provided before" is important.

Similarly, Elizabeth, a vice principal, emphasized the importance of assuring student success through community building. She shared:

> We need to build the relationships with your students, the relationship with your family. A classroom environment that feels like a community. And children need to not only feel safe in the classroom or the school; they need to feel brave. And if they don't feel that they can be brave, we're not going to see the best part of them. They're never going to share the parts of them that make them special and unique and where they're going to shine …. You have to know them as people before you can help them learn, and they need to be part of that learning process. Otherwise, we're not really teaching them anything.

Elizabeth's strong alignment with community intersects with leadership that is culturally responsive as she demonstrates prioritization of student well-being. The wide range of experiences in the classroom and through leadership opportunities allowed many of these school administrators to understand the value of community connections and the influence they hold.

Challenges in Practicing Equity-Oriented Leadership

Despite each leader's commitment to their role, they encountered challenges. Most of the participants shared that there was resistance to change from their staff, especially due to deficit views and implicit biases their staff had about students and families. For the racialized leaders in particular, they were plainly aware of the added layer of discrimination that accompanied any kind of pushback or resistance to their leadership. David, a principal, acknowledged this difficulty as he continually tries to have "courageous conversations" with his staff. According to him, "We have these unconscious biases that impact the way that we treat different children, whether we recognize it or not. So, I'm starting the sideways conversations." David highlighted the racial consequence of these conversations that white educators might not be aware of. He explained:

> What nobody addresses is that, yeah, you can drop these equity bombs, but no one talks about what happens to the restorative relationship pieces. Like there's a personal consequence to … [these] conversations that always comes back [to] the racialized people. It can't come back to the people who are doing the work.

As a new and acting principal in his school, David was still figuring out how to navigate his role while also being aware of how his positionality impacted the relationships he was trying to build with his staff.

Aysha, a vice principal, expressed similar sentiments regarding the challenges of navigating administrative roles as a racialized person and as a woman. She explained:

> In terms of the skin I sit in, as a female, as someone who's, you know, in her 40s, and is maybe perceived to be younger, is of South Asian descent … I've definitely experienced not always blatant discrimination but sometimes like an underlying tone, or assumptions or stereotypes … I have been in schools where I've experienced racism and sexism … When I say

something, you know, it doesn't really get taken seriously. But if a male says the exact same thing, especially a white male, it's like, oh, yeah, that's a great idea.

Nearly all participants shared similar journeys of teaching and motivations to pursue leadership. Despite related experiences of challenging deficit views of their staff, the stories diverged when race and gender were considered.

Identity as an Avenue of Connection

The second aspect of their leadership that connected to perceptions and practice of equity was identity formation, reflection, and embrace. As Santamaría and Santamaría (2012) illustrated through ACL, understanding one's positionality is a significant factor in educational leadership, and both racialized and white leaders use this approach differently. For example, given his personal experiences as a racialized person and extensive teaching experience, David easily recognizes racially unjust situations and supports his students to ensure their safety and comfort. This led him to explain more about how his race impacted his role: "I'm very conscious of what my role as Asian is …. I recognize that I can flow through spaces quite readily." Building on this thought, David critically reflected on the ways his internalized oppression was externally expressed. Characterizing this as "Asian risk," he asked:

> Does my racialized learning and being myself always take the kind of quiet complicit side? Like as a model Asian … that invisibility … you're just the model person and just be quiet all the way through …. Have I been conditioned in a way because of my race to be responding to situations in a specific way?

Understanding the complexity of his own positionality, the privileges he carries as a man and the oppression he bears as a racialized and Asian person forced him to question how he navigates relationships with his staff.

Elizabeth also reflected on her journey of identity formation and acceptance: "I spent the first 30 years of my life aligning myself to whiteness … [so sharing] my culture [with others] is a really good thing." Moreover, she described how she built strong connections with others when she first entered her leadership role:

> As an administrator … in order for us to be able to lead teachers in appreciating and celebrating other people's identities, or students' identities … we have to be comfortable exploring our own identities as ourselves …. At the first staff meeting [it was important to] really show the staff that I have visible identities. I have identities that some people may know if they know a little bit about me and then I have hidden identities. And really showing staff the layers of a person … and how much we make assumptions about the people we interact with every day …. I'm going to be vulnerable with you, and I'm going to share stuff with you. And I will never expect you to share all parts of your identity with me that you're not comfortable with, but in order for me to even ask you to do this kind of work, or begin to start doing this kind of work, I need to be vulnerable and show you there is value in it and that I've actually done it myself.

After learning to embrace her Asian culture and identity, Elizabeth understood the power in both confidently expressing her culture to the school community and being vulnerable with her staff.

Using racial identity to connect with others was perceived differently by the white school leaders. Wanda was quick to acknowledge how her identity impacts her leadership practice: "I am carrying … positional power as a school leader [and] societal privilege for being white … I know that my identity is definitely influencing my perceptions and my decision-making and my interactions with people." Similarly, Vanessa was keenly aware of her race and how her different lived experiences from her students require greater efforts to connect with the school community. She shared:

> I have families that are coming to my school that do not have a history of trust with educa-

tion, whether it's because of the experience their child has had or their experience …. And they look at me and I represent every white teacher they've ever had, who's made them feel like they didn't belong. And I can see it on their face sometimes, when they walk into the office and they see me standing there and they think, great, my kid is gonna have the same experience that I had. And you know there's a phrase where, you know, you meet someone halfway. When you look like me, I can't meet someone halfway, I have to go further. I've got to continue to build and build and build and I have to follow up on what I say.

PQP Impact on School Leadership Practice

All participants recalled various benefits and detriments to completing their PQP. In terms of its benefits, most highlighted the practicality of the PQP in teaching about decision-making and school policies and associated their positive experiences with effective instructors. David, for instance, explained that his PQP instructor "gave on-the-ground practical examples and was really engaged as an educator. She had a wealth of people who she brought in, guest speakers … which was really useful to hear … real life perspectives." Wanda echoed this sentiment and described one of her PQP instructors, who was a principal at the time, as very focused on "sort of the nitty-gritty process things that you need to know, like, policy and procedure, the law, where to find resources, all about the spec ed requirements and things of that nature."

When asked about how their PQP experience related to their ability to lead equitably, all six school leaders unequivocally expressed no connection. Moreover, they all explained that any orientation they had or developed toward equity was a result of previous teaching or current, as Harris described, "on-the-job experiences" and not the PQP. Vanessa did not feel she learned as much as she should have in terms of practical leadership skills. She shared:

If I'm being very honest, I don't think there was anything in my PQP that prepared me for this job. There are legal documentation around medical care for students like plans of care, supervision schedules, timetables, emergency binders, emergency procedures … that guarantee student safety. And I had no idea how to do any of them …. These are documents that I should have had some basic understanding of before my very first day.

Clearly frustrated about the steep learning curve she felt she was thrust into, Vanessa also shared that any meaningful learning she had was of her own volition. She often asked her instructors questions related to the practical application of course content.

In addition to developing understanding of equity beyond the PQP course, the participants highlighted areas of the course itself that were harmful, mainly its exclusive teaching methods. While reflecting on the different ways the PQP could have approached teaching about equity, such as through discussions, workshops, or assignments, Elizabeth shared that "all of our guest speakers where white." Aysha described a similar experience of racially exclusive teaching:

We had a guest speaker who he seemed kind of surface level where he brought in, I think he did like a dancing. And he was sort of like a white male talking about equity. And then the dancers were Black …. That guest speaker was a principal who later got demoted to VP. So, I mean, … I don't think they gave us sort of, I don't know, crème de la crème or high quality, and it was just very much like an add-on on what equity is. It didn't at all get into systemic issues or, you know, how to change school culture and tone …. It just seemed very superficial.

These participants demonstrated varied understandings of equity and shared similar experiences of dedicating their work to ensuring student success. They also demonstrated an awareness of their positionality in their leadership practice. Race, more so than gender, appeared to dominate the ways they identified and understood how to be equitable and to support their students. It is also what differentiated their perspectives and approaches to education. Their strongest association came from their experiences in the PQP and reflections on the negligible influence of the program on their orientations toward equity.

Discussion and Implications

The racial experiences and identities of each principal in this study appeared to shape their definitions of EDI as well as their understanding of difference. Harris, the only white male participant, often responded differently from the other participants and did not demonstrate as strong of a commitment to reflexivity as the others. Relating his motivations to pursue leadership to establish order and organization also revealed an understanding of the role of principal through white-dominated and colonial approaches to education (Khalifa, 2018; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). The other white participants, Wanda and Vanessa, openly acknowledged their race and were still figuring out how to best utilize it in a way that disrupted, rather than contributed to, biased and colonial leadership practice.

This approach is best explained by Santamaría (2021) who encouraged white school leaders to participate in the "co-decolonization" process alongside and in support of their racialized counterparts (p. 5). Additionally, this aligns with existing literature on white school leadership where principals demonstrated understanding of their positionality as white leaders in predominantly Black and Brown schools and an ability to lead professional development focused on race and equity for their staff (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). These principals were grounded in their identity, and each expressed various approaches "to undertake [the] emotional management work" (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 493) required to understand how to challenge racial inequity.

On the other hand, the experiences of the racialized participants, David, Elizabeth, and Aysha, aligned more so over their journeys to self-acceptance, discrimination faced in leadership, and fighting internalized oppression. All three participants shared at least one story of discriminatory behaviour from colleagues and how that has impacted their practice. Moreover, the inescapable burden racialized leaders carry in their work (Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020), particularly when trying to make their schools safe for students, was notably juxtaposed with the privileges white leaders carry. Even more difficult for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized school leaders is whether they can accept and celebrate their own race and culture, moving from deficit-based to strengths-based leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). Elizabeth illustrated immense progress in this area through her explanations of the power of vulnerability, which not only solidified relationships with her staff but also created a path for collaborative and equitable work.

While the scope of this study is small, its implications on educational leadership preparation in Ontario is significant. The salient theme of *identity as an avenue of connection* reveals an important area of coverage toward which the PQP should dedicate greater efforts. It is clear from all participant stories that racial (and gender) identity have immediate and direct impacts on education leadership practice and engagement with the school community. This result aligns with recent literature on principal perceptions of race. As well, 93% of the principals registered in the Ontario public school system identify as white (Pollock & Briscoe, 2019), compared to 29% of Ontario residents identifying as Black, Indigenous, or part of other racialized groups (Abawi, 2021). Thus, the idea that principals who neither recognize how they impact their students nor consider how they are maintaining exclusive practice must be more heavily considered.

Moreover, critical self-reflection did not appear to be tied to any formal preparation but to previous experiences in equity work or personal intentions to heal. While no one should be expected to be in the same place in understanding and accepting their own identity, there must be greater standardization in requiring school leaders to better understand the impact of their actions on students and families. There is a danger in placing adults in positions of power without developing in them an awareness of self-accountability. Those who seek leadership for the simple gratification of authority and influence only maintain an oppressive, dichotomous relationship between the powerful and the powerless. Hence, professional learning programming must prioritize examining educator awareness on EDI and dedicate greater resources to addressing bias, encouraging critical self-reflection, and supporting the embrace and use of positionality in leadership.

Conclusion

The desire to improve academic, social, and emotional environments for all students has never wavered and remains a significant reason why educators are dedicated to their jobs. However, there is a difference between good intentions and demonstrated acts of success. The six school administrators in this study

shed light on critical areas of change for principal preparation programs in Ontario: training guidelines, efforts to prepare educators to be equitable leaders, and the educators' perceptions of their preparedness to lead.

Updating language to be more inclusive of the kinds of practices required to support students in a more equitable environment (OCT, 2017) is commendable and a necessary step to establish more accountability within Ontario's education system. Yet, research conducted on principal preparedness and efficacy (George et al., 2020; Lopez, 2019; Tuters & Portelli, 2017), and how students perceive their own safety and well-being (Capper et al., 2006; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Taylor & Peter, 2011), seem to demonstrate that these language changes are not enough and also highlight a disconnect between what educational programs intend for future school leaders and what these participants are actually learning and absorbing.

A closer examination of the performative aspects inherent in EDI initiatives and discourse must also be considered, given that a fair amount of equity work is veiled in tokenizing racialized staff and oppressing students (Dei, 2011; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Also, principals entering new schools might not dedicate the time and attention historically marginalized students deserve. This requires the explicit naming of the communities that encapsulate a diverse student population and identifying of the specific ways these groups are oppressed and how they can be supported (Lopez, 2019). Thus, future research must focus on ways that programs address ableism and how support for the LGBTQIA+ community is considered in leadership preparation. Trans youth in particular increasingly face discrimination in school (Fields & Wotipka, 2022; Taylor et al., 2022). Hence, it is imperative that programs such as the PQP explore ways to best support these students and their families. As educators embrace this greater focus on culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa, 2018), their impact on the wider school culture, student safety, and well-being is certain to change.

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