Leadership for Social Justice through the Lens of Self-Identified, Racially and Other-Privileged Leaders

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Abstract: This study explores leadership for social justice from the perspective of school principals who identify as privileged. Furman’s (2012) Praxis-Dimension-Capacities Framework of leadership for social justice is used to explore the perspective of four white, middle-class female school administrators, who self-identify as social justice leaders and as privileged in relation to the students, families and communities they serve. Drawing on critical pedagogies, with a focus on critical race theory and critical whiteness studies, in-depth interviews were conducted with four administrators in the Toronto District School Board to explore how this demographic of administrators understands and enacts the five dimensions presented in this framework. Findings suggest that despite having a strong commitment to enact transformative leadership for social justice, participants have an underdeveloped sense of how their white privilege informs their understandings of leadership for social justice. This resulted in the re-centering of whiteness, the perpetuation of oppressive systems and relations, the engagement in ‘safe’ notions of transformative change and benefitting from systems that promote individual status over collective solidarity. Centering critiques of whiteness and other forms of privilege is a necessary component of leadership preparation and development. This study suggests that further exploration is required to explore how leaders with various and intersecting privileges enact leadership for social justice, to inform how we understand the limits and possibilities of educational leadership for social justice.
Introduction

Schooling has often been described as a colonizing structure (Dei & Kempf, 2006; McGovern, 2000) that reproduces social injustice (Freire, 1998). One example is the predominance of white, middle-class educators and their role in creating and maintaining inequitable patterns of achievement and opportunity based on social class and race (Picower, 2009).

While efforts need to be made to change the demographic of both teachers and leaders in schools to better reflect the student demographic, it is also imperative that all educators engage in the ongoing interrogation of their intersecting forms of privilege and power as an important attempt to counteract the hegemonic structures that dominate schooling practices. This study will focus specifically on how educational leaders’ understanding of their racial and other privileges influence their leadership for social justice.

Leadership for social justice identifies and responds to structural barriers to equitable schooling that result in differential access, opportunity and experiences for students who have been traditionally marginalized within and outside of education systems (Shields, 2004; Marshall, Young, & Moll, 2010; Furman, 2012). Furman (2012) states that “these persistent inequalities demand new approaches to transformative action in schools and, thus, new approaches to educational leadership” (p. 212). The growing field of leadership for social justice (used interchangeably with leadership for social justice in this study) provides specific practices used by leaders to promote social justice as well as the beliefs, values and capacities that underlie them (Furman, 2012). The literature is sparse on how the social identities of administrators influence their leadership for social justice, especially leaders with greater relative power and privilege compared to the students and families they work with. How might leaders’ awareness of the power and privilege afforded by their identities inform their practices of leadership for social justice? How might opportunities for dialogue, professional learning and leadership preparation be constructed differently to acknowledge and disrupt our access to power and privilege depending on our social identities? This study explores the ways in which educational leaders, who self-identify as privileged, social justice leaders, make sense of their leadership practices. In particular, this study will center the participants’ racial acknowledgement of power and privilege (and intersections with social class and faith) and explore how these understandings challenge or maintain racial and other hierarchies.

Leadership for Social Justice

Social justice is an umbrella term that remains highly elusive in that it is complex, evolving and has multiple meanings (McMahon, 2010; Furman, 2012). Meanings of social justice also differ depending on the theoretical stance from which they are constructed. From a positivist, neo-liberal perspective, social justice is defined as equity of outcomes designed to reduce the social costs associated with inequities, without
challenging the underlying structures or programs, and while assuming that all members of society want the same things (Shahjahan, 2011). Critical theories focus on the lived experiences of marginalized groups and inequities in educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes (Furman, 2012, p. 194). The intention here is to both identify and eliminate marginalization in schools and transform inequitable power relations beyond schools (Theoharis, 2007).

Leadership is seen as critical to the success of students from diverse backgrounds (Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Like social justice, there are many examples of critical leadership theories that fall under the umbrella term *leadership for social justice*. These include, but are not limited to: transformative leadership (Shields, 2003; Brown, 2006), inclusive leadership (Ryan, 2006), critical race leadership (Lopez, 2003), critical ecological leadership (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004), feminist leadership (Blackmore, 1999; Grogan, 2002), communitarian leadership (Shields, 2003), culturally responsive urban school leadership (Johnson, 2006), critical spirituality leadership (Dantley, 2003), dialogic leadership (Shields, 2004), advocacy leadership (Anderson, 2009) and democratic leadership (Woods, 2005). While theorists initially identified with a more specific type of critical pedagogy, many in the field of educational administration are now positioning themselves more generally as advocates for social justice, perhaps because of the growing recognition of the intersectionality of social identities, and perhaps to gain strength in numbers and common language (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009). One potential danger in the generalization of social justice is that the very ‘difference’ (i.e., social identities) that necessitates a social justice approach is rendered invisible in search of a ‘toolkit’ for social justice leaders (Furman, 2012). The generalization and the specificity need to be held in tension, and despite these differences in approach and focus, leadership for social justice is often concerned with identifying and challenging inequities in schooling outcomes and opportunities, with a focus on historically marginalized groups who are underrepresented and underserved in schools.

Several studies have explored the need for leadership for social justice (Skrla & Sheurich, 2001; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Marshall et al., 2010), the affective domain of this type of leadership with a focus on attitudes, beliefs, values and identities (Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Theoharis, 2008; Dantley, 2010) and the practice of leadership for social justice in various settings (Theoharis, 2007; Kose, 2007). Some studies describe the personal and interpersonal characteristics of leaders for social justice. For example, Theoharis (2008) notes three key findings that are important to the identity of social justice administrators: arrogant humility, passionate leadership and a tenacious commitment to social justice (p. 3). Dantley (2005) maintains that a psychology of critical self-reflection is necessary for social justice leaders in which the leaders come to terms with their own identity (p. 503). Furman (2012) notes that several studies examining the identity of social justice leaders indicate that “stubborn persistence”, courage and commitment are common findings particularly because of the barriers and resistance that must be faced to practice social justice in schools (p. 196). ‘Identity’ here is based on personal attributes and individual identities as leaders, rather than socially
constructed, collective identities. Other studies explore the role of leaders in challenging systemic issues (Shields, 2004; Rottmann, 2007; Portelli & Campbell-Stephens, 2009; Furman, 2012). Conceptions of leadership for social justice also move beyond notions of hierarchy and legal authority vested in individuals (Ryan, 2010, pp. 1-2) and some view leadership as collectives, ideas, processes or sets of relationships, such as certain notions of shared and distributed leadership and hierarchical power structures that allow for more voices to influence decision-making processes (Ryan, 2010, pp. 2-3).

There are also a number of challenges to leading for social justice, some of which include: deficit thinking that is prevalent in most educational settings (Theoharis, 2007); neoliberal and bureaucratic policy environments that intensify social inequalities and which make leading for social justice difficult (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009; Saldivia & Anderson, 2016); leadership preparation programs that focus on the technical as opposed to moral or political realms in education (Theoharis, 2007); and, among leadership programs that do focus on social justice, a lack of a coherent theory of action for social justice (Saldivia & Anderson, 2016).

Social Identities, Privilege and Whiteness

In the realms of sociology, psychology, politics and education, several studies describe the relationship between privilege and social identity (McIntosh, 1992; Black & Stone, 2005). Critical social psychology describes identity as a social construction that is learned through interactions with others and the world, and that has a strong impact on who we become (Allen & Rosatto, 2009, p. 175). Critical pedagogy centers notions of power and privilege in its understandings of identity and differentiates between the identities of those who are privileged (who see themselves as normal and “human”) and those who are oppressed (who see themselves as “alien” and “other” in reference to the privileged who are normal) (Tatum, 1997). Black and Stone (2005) draw on common elements of the scholarship on privilege to prescribe its five core components:

First, privilege is a special advantage that is neither common nor universal; second, it is granted, not earned or brought into being by one’s individual effort or talent; third, privilege is a right or entitlement that is related to preferred status or rank; fourth, privilege is exercised for the benefit of the recipient and to the exclusion of detriment of others; and finally, a privileged status is often outside the awareness of a person possessing it. (p. 244)

Social privilege exists on the basis of complex and intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, ability, class, faith/religion, age and sexuality and the relative distance of these identities to dominant identities and power (Black and Stone, 2005, pp. 243-244).

Complexities with identity mirror complexities associated with acknowledging and naming privilege. Curry-Stevens (2007) notes that defining who is privileged can prove
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difficult because focusing on one form of privilege may negate other forms of oppression (pp. 36-37). For example, Fellows and Razack (1998) describe the “race to innocence” in which privileged persons overlook their privilege in order to be constructed as oppressed.

Hobgood (2000) asserts that the social and economic separation that the privileged experience from the majority of the population leads to an ignorance that stems from their lack of contact with the lived realities of the average and more vulnerable citizens. This ignorance can lead to an arrogance rooted in the assumption that the world works for the majority in much the same way that it works for them, the privileged. In commenting on white privilege specifically, McIntosh (1997) explains:

Most Whites believe that they are nice, kind, caring, and benevolent people who have worked hard to obtain their wealth and status (Gallagher, 1997). They seem to have little consciousness of how many people of color distrust and fear them (hooks, 1990). Also, they are unaware, or repress awareness, of their day-to-day privileges, let alone what was done historically to procure the privileges that come with being White in a society built by White racism. (p. 175)

Privilege and oppression are fluid and contextual concepts, in part because we have multiple and intersecting identities that either serve to magnify experiences of privilege or oppression (McIntosh, 1997, p. 37). Razack (1998) describes the “universal construction” of privilege, which asserts that we are in fact all privileged and all oppressed as a result of our multiple and intersecting identities (p. 47), but that pluralizing privilege should not result in a rush to complexity in which a desire to acknowledge multiple forms of oppression deflects from the attention that needs to be paid to issues of race that are often ignored (Crosby, 1997).

In education, concepts of privilege and social identities have been explored in the context of preparing pre-service teachers in education (Matias & Mackey, 2015; Allen & Rossatto, 2009; Page, 2009), teaching secondary school students about privilege (Nurenberg, 2011), the Privilege Identity Exploration Model that examines psychological defenses which occur when discussing privilege (Watt, 2007) and teaching about privilege in adult education settings (Underiner, 2000; Van Gorder, 2007; Curry-Stevens, 2007). There is also a growing body of research on pedagogy for the privileged, which is summed up here:

The terms “pedagogy for the non-poor” (Evans, Evans, & Kennedy, 1995), “whiteness studies” (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Helfand & Lippin, 2002; Katz, 2003); “pedagogy of the oppressor” (Kimmel, 2002; Schacht, n.d.; Schapiro, 2001); or more generally, “education for the privileged” (Goodman, 2001) collectively define a new task to be added to transformative education’s strategic tool kit—one that intentionally seeks to engage privileged learners in workshops...
and classrooms and to assist in their transformation as allies in the struggle for social justice.” (Curry-Stevens, 2007, p. 33)

Pedagogy for the privileged has political and practical applications in education. At a political level is the question of whether the privileged should be involved in the process of liberation as allies in the struggle for justice. Curry-Stevens (2007) suggests that pedagogy for the privileged draws on Freire’s (1998) theory of critical consciousness and Mezirow’s (1991) theory on transformative learning because it focuses on counter-hegemonic pedagogy for social justice; however, it is different from these approaches in that it distinguishes the needs of those who are privileged and who require different supports to deepen their commitment to, and involvement in, social justice (p. 34). While Freire (1998) believes that oppressors, by definition cannot initiate liberating education, Curry-Stevens (2007) responds to this claim by asserting the need to “place the needs of the privileged learner on par with the needs of the oppressed” (p. 53). While she acknowledges that efforts to work against hegemonic structures can be challenged by pedagogy for the privileged, they can also be powerful political tools to change oppressive structures if approached consciously (p. 53). Rothenberg and Scully (in Curry-Stevens, 2007) further assert that they (the privileged) “form a cadre of potential allies for social change… particularly by bringing their relative power to bear and by making the surprising move of advocating against their apparent self-interest” (p. 34).

Placing the needs of the privileged on par with the needs of the oppressed is a dangerous line of thinking because it serves to re-center instead of critique privilege, while masking it as anti-oppression or anti-racism work, thereby perpetuating the invisibility of the violence, oppression and trauma inflicted on marginalized and racialized groups. This thinking also makes the false assumption that our collective oppression, and therefore our collective liberation are separate, isolated experiences and ends. The focus then turns to individual self-interest instead of collective solidarity and community. Since hegemony dehumanizes all of us (hooks, 2003), collective action is required and “those who persist in the struggle are awarded with an increasingly multiracial and multicultural existence” (Tatum, 1997, p. 109).

While this study could have explored privilege with regards to social class or faith, racial privilege was deliberately centered because of the elusive ways it operates through invisibility and normalization. For example, one of the participants in this study made no mention of her racial privilege, while all four participants reflected on their class, and, where applicable, faith privilege. Racial privilege in this study is conceptualized as intimately connected with other forms of privilege. At a practical level, pedagogy for racially privileged leaders is concerned with the complexities and nuances in practices dedicated to the transformation of privileged leaders. However, caution must be exercised to center a critique of white privilege, and not whiteness itself.
Conceptual Framework

This study explores the phenomena of leadership for social justice and privileged identities from a critical theory perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Apple, 2006). Critical theory is concerned with how power is constructed in human relations, how democracy is subverted and how domination takes place (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 71). Through self-reflection, individuals come to understand how their values, beliefs and attitudes are socially constructed by their environments and social identities, and how unexamined private beliefs and public opinions are shaped by dominant discourses (p. 72). Critical theory asserts that reality is a social construction, thereby rendering the notion of objective reality a falsity (p. 71). Schools are therefore sites of a “consequential struggle between social reproduction and the emancipatory interests of students who have been historically marginalized by schooling” (2014). From a critical theory perspective, this study will examine the relationship between an awareness of privilege and leadership for social justice. In particular, the study will answer the following research question: How do administrators who self-identify as privileged practice leadership for social justice in their schools?

Within the context of critical theories, this study will focus more intentionally, although not exclusively, on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). DeCuir and Dixon (2004) describe CRT using five tenets: 1) counter Storytelling (stories that counter the dominant narrative about racialized groups); 2) permanence of racism (racism is a permanent part of our lived experiences that may be conscious or unconscious, and continues to re-emerge in new and different ways); 3) whiteness as property (a property right that includes policies and practices that reinforce white supremacy; 4) interest convergence (concessions that do not disrupt the normal ways of life); and 5) a critique of Liberalism (i.e., a critique of colour-blindness, the myth of neutrality and meritocracy, incremental change, etc.). CWS examines the ways in which whiteness and white privilege have become institutionalized and identifies the social arrangements and systemic factors that contribute to its continued dominance (Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Rodriguez, 2000). CWS has served to challenge the ways whiteness is normalized, invisible and colourless (Rodriguez, 2000), allowing the denial of a racial hierarchy and the accompanying privileges afforded to individuals and through group memberships that are unearned and unacknowledged (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997). Robin DiAngelo (2011) describes the racial insulation that white folks experience that causes them to expect racial comfort and react defensively to racial stress, otherwise known as white fragility. Defensive reactions include both outward displays of emotions (e.g., anger, guilt, fear, etc.) and behaviours such as silence, argumentation and leaving a stress-induced situation (DiAngelo, 2011). While much of the work on Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies comes out in the United States, this study explores the voices and experiences of four administrators in Toronto, Canada, where ‘diversity’ includes people of a much broader spectrum of ethno-racial identities.

To avoid a positivist approach to leadership for social justice, caution needs be taken
that its foundations are not essentialized, that its practices are not reduced to prescriptive or technical formulae, and that it is viewed as dynamic, complex and context-specific (Bogotch, 2002 as cited in Furman, 2012, p.196). With this caution in mind, the model for leadership for social justice to be used in this paper is called the Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework that was developed by Furman (2012). This model is premised on three central concepts: praxis (involving both reflection and action), multiple dimensions (listed below) and the need for leaders to develop the capacity for both reflection and action under each of these dimensions. According to Furman (2012):

The nested model simultaneously suggests the uniqueness of praxis at each level (e.g., capacities for praxis at the interpersonal level will differ from those at the communal level) and the interdependence of the levels (e.g., capacities at the interpersonal level depend on previously developed capacities at the personal level). Thus, the nested model represents the gestalt of leadership for social justice as praxis across multiple dimensions but also that this praxis can be understood in more detail by considering the specific nature of reflection and action in each dimension. (p. 204)

Drawing on the theories of praxis from Freire (2002) and others, Furman (2012) defines praxis as the “continual interplay between reflection and action” (p. 203). Following is a list of the dimensions in the Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework as well as the capacities for reflection and action that leaders need to develop in each dimension.

1. **Personal**

   **Reflection:** Involves deep, critical and honest self-reflection about biases and stereotypes related to race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, faith, and other social identifiers. In addition, leaders need to reflect on their “shadow side”, which includes self-esteem, power and control, competitiveness, etc.

   **Action:** Leaders need to act on the self-knowledge and reflection to transform themselves as leaders. This could involve guided reflections/journals and cultural autobiographies that inform leadership growth plans.

2. **Interpersonal**

   **Reflection:** Focuses on building trusting and caring relationships with all stakeholders across all social demographics. Self-knowledge is needed here about one’s interaction and communication style that potentially marginalizes or silences others’ voices. Knowledge about cultural differences in beliefs, norms and values is important to honour different ways of knowing and to prevent deficit thinking. Finally, knowledge of interpersonal styles is important to foster open and honest communication.
Action: Involves the proactive practice of interpersonal communication that involves care, respect, trust, open and clear communication and active listening. Many of the skills developed in the personal dimension are a prerequisite for this dimension.

3. Communal

Reflection: Involves building community across cultural groups through inclusive and democratic processes. This requires an intimate knowledge of the communities and cultures connected to the school, as well as an understanding of democratic practices and inclusive practices.

Action: Proactively creating opportunities for multiple voices (that are traditionally marginalized) to be heard through democratic processes for dialogue and decision-making. Many of the skills developed in the interpersonal dimension are a prerequisite for this dimension.

4. Systemic

Reflection: “Praxis in the systemic dimension includes assessing, critiquing, and working to transform the system, at the school and district levels, in the interest of social justice and learning for all children” (Furman, 2012, p. 210). Reflection here includes developing a critical consciousness or ethic of care regarding systemic issues of inequity. It also includes a review of current school practices including classroom teaching from a pedagogy of social justice.

Action: This involves a deep commitment to and persistence in removing barriers and injustices in the face of resistance, as well as engaging others in this work. This could include professional learning and curriculum rooted in social justice.

5. Ecological

Reflection: Involves an awareness that schools and school-related social justice issues operate within a larger socio-political, economic and environmental context of injustice, oppression and sustainability.

Action: Involves designing pedagogical experiences for students and teachers to further explore these broader issues, especially in the context of their local environments.
While this framework was initially designed for administrator preparation programs, it will be used in this context as a model of developing and deepening understandings of leadership for social justice for racially privileged leaders. Given the large number of school administrators who are privileged in relation to the students and families they serve, there is insufficient literature in educational administration on the connection between an awareness of one’s social privilege and the practice of leadership for social justice. The Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012) of leadership for social justice does not take into account the social positionality of the leader, which inevitably influences how leadership for social justice is understood and practiced. This study will take a closer look at how self-identified, racially privileged leaders engage the Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012).

The findings in this study explore common themes from participant responses under each of the sub-sections. Due to a limited sample size and a variance in participant responses, themes are generated for further exploration under each of the five components of the Praxis-Dimension-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012) from the perspective of a self-identified, privileged leader. Figure 2 below demonstrates an analysis of the Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012) analyzed from the lens of critical pedagogy, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS).
Methods

Racial privilege and leadership for social justice are both highly complex terms and when brought together in the context of a study, other dimensions of complexity are added. As a result, qualitative methods were chosen to “work with and through the complexity, rather than around or in spite of it” (Schram, 2003, p. 6). Inherent in this complexity are the assumptions and preconceived notions that I bring to this area of study (Schram, 2003). There are three points that will help to contextualize my relationship to this study. First, I am a qualitative researcher by nature, which means: I search to uncover taken-for-granted assumptions; I believe in posing questions and highlighting complex, subjective realities over providing definitive, objective answers; and I am comfortable with a changing structure and purpose of my research as I uncover new knowledge based on participant responses and readings (Schram, 2003). Second, I am an educator who is deeply committed to the dispositions and processes of social justice as much as I am committed to its content, therefore I have engaged in what Kirby and McKenna (1989) refer to as the self-interview to uncover conceptual baggage (i.e. thoughts, feelings, personal history and experiences) brought to the research question and process throughout the study. Third, being a critical researcher, my goal in research is to critique and challenge the status quo through transformation and empowerment (Merriam, 2009). I believe in the tradition of activist research, which is used to better understand the root causes of inequality and
strategies for transforming current practices are developed in conjunction with the participants in the study (Apple, 1994 in Theoharis, 2008).

As a South Asian woman, I have reflected deeply on how experiences of racial injustice have shaped my commitment to social justice, and the relative racial privilege and access I have as a model minority and in relation to Black and Indigenous colleagues. However, I am also extremely interested in learning how white administrators become interested in, and advocate for, leadership for social justice. Over time, my focus changed from finding participants who were privileged administrators to finding participants who self-identified as privileged, because it became important to me to understand how the participants understood their privilege and its connection to their leadership. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to generate “information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 2002 as cited in Merriam, 2009, pp. 77-78) as well as snowball sampling (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998 as cited in Merriam, 2009), for one participant. Four elementary school administrators in the TDSB were chosen for this study based on the following selection criteria: a) they were an administrator in a public, elementary school (vice-principal or principal); b) they had discussions with me previously about the social privileges they have in relation to the students and families they serve; and c) they demonstrated practices in the previously stated framework of leadership for social justice including the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic and ecological dimensions.

The method of data collection relied on in-depth interviews conducted as “conversations with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970 as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 88). This method was chosen because it was the best fit for the nature of this study – how self-identified, privileged administrators come to understand and interpret their privilege and the influences on their leadership for social justice practices. Merriam (2009) states that interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe how people feel or how they interpret the world around them. The initial interview questions were refined to ensure that they were open-ended and included a mixture of experience and behaviour questions, opinions and values questions, feeling and knowledge questions and background/demographic questions (Patton, 2002 in Merriam 2009). The interviews were semi-structured in that the interview started with a specific guide of questions and probes that were used flexibly and as needed throughout the interview (Merriam, 2009). A pilot interview was conducted with a colleague prior to the formal interviews to gauge the flow of the interview and to tweak questions as needed.

A transformative interview method was employed to “intentionally challenge and change the understandings of participants” (Merriam, 2009, p. 92). All of the participants commented on the fact that this interview made them think about their practice in more nuanced ways and was therapeutic in nature. Three of the participants continued the conversations or conducted their own research on conceptions of privilege following the interview. Another aspect that contributes to the complexity of this study is my
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relationship with the participants. I am a teacher who works with and for three of the four participants in this study, which may have influenced the level of comfort and openness of my participants in this process. In my opinion, my relationship with the participants added to the ease with which they could share their thoughts, feelings and experiences, but there may have been areas that were not explored because of our relationship.

Furman’s (2012) Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework was used as a starting point to inform the interview questions and data analysis. However, examples within each of the dimensions emerged that required further exploration. At this point, I used the constant comparative method of data analysis (also known as grounded theory) because it is “compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 as cited in Merriam 2009, p. 199). Categories were formed and re-formed at the various stages of coding: open coding (creation of large, expansive categories), axial coding (relating categories and their properties to each other) and selective coding (development of core category and hypotheses for suggested links between categories or properties) (Merriam 2009). The literature review was completed after the first coding of data and played a key role in recoding the data. Initially, coding and analysis was explored through the lens of critical pedagogy but an inadequate naming and exploration of racial privilege among participants prompted an exploration and recoding of the data through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies. In the discussion section, findings were recoded once again within the framework of the Praxis-Dimension-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012) using participant responses and the literature review.

Findings

Three of the four participants in this study were vice-principals and one was a principal. Two participants had been administrators for one year, one participant had been an administrator for 7 years, and one participant had come back to administration after a leave. All four administrators work in schools in the Toronto District School Board, and three of the four work in settings with a higher percentage of families living at or below the poverty line and a wide range of ethno-racial diversity. The final participant is an administrator in a middle-upper class school with less ethno-racial diversity.

One purpose of this study was to understand the awareness of participants’ privilege in relation to the students and families they serve. Participants were asked to describe the similarities and differences between them and the students/families they serve in relation to social identities to understand how they conceptualize difference and privilege. Table 1 depicts how each of the four participants explains differences and similarities between their social identities and those of the students and families they serve.

Table 1 highlights that understandings of similarities and differences in identity and privilege differ among the participants. All four of the participants are white women who
were born in Canada and grew up in two-parent households. They vary in ethnicity, faith (Christian and/or Jewish), first language, parents’ levels of education (grade 8 to postgraduate), family income levels growing up (working class to upper class) and how long their family has been in Canada (newcomers to several generations). Of particular importance is that while all four of the participants identify as white, P1 did not name her racial privilege in the interview. Yet, all four participants commented on their (current) class privilege, and where applicable, their faith privilege. It is also noteworthy that all four participants described personal or familial experiences or memories of oppression (i.e., religious persecution, first/second generation experiences, etc.) in describing their understanding of oppression. Two of the participants acknowledged significant differences and complexities in their comparison. All four participants did not identify on the basis of sexuality, gender identity or ability. These are also areas that require greater exploration in the literature on leadership for social justice. Notwithstanding the variance in expressions of privilege, common elements emerged from the data on the development of an awareness of privilege and the practice of leadership for social justice, which includes the barriers, strategies and supports required to further develop as social justice leaders.

As Bogotch (2002) reminds us, there is no one right or objective model of leadership for social justice, and that models change as contexts and people change (p. 196). Nonetheless, themes have emerged from the findings that allow for a blending of an awareness of privilege and leadership for social justice practices. Each dimension of the Praxis-Dimension-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012) will describe reflection and action from the perspective of self-identified, privileged leaders and be analyzed through the lens of critical pedagogy, with a focus on CRT and CWS.

**Personal**

This study explored the critical and honest self-reflection that is central to this dimension and included the following reflections and actions to be developed in privileged leaders:

**Reflection for Privileged Leaders**

This involves understanding the double consciousness of the oppressed, reflecting on the oppressor’s role in creating problematic identities for the oppressed (hooks, 1990, as cited in Allen & Rossatto, 2009) and developing multiple consciousness based on multiple and intersecting identities. The following quote from P3 highlights an awareness of multiple consciousness:

I see the biggest difference between us is that you look at me and you look at them and...you don’t see, I mean diversity is everywhere, but you don’t see that diversity on my face or in my person and I do feel that I come from a place of privilege and I do feel that my students
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don’t have or are working towards those same opportunities, but still have a long way to go. So in that way I see the struggles that they are facing. The parents of my students were doctors and lawyers and pharmacists back in their home country and they come here and they’re not working – and if they are working, they’re working at Tim Horton’s or McDonald’s or very low-income jobs. Whereas with my parents, when they came here, they gave up their jobs but they were able to step into jobs that gave them the money to live in a house rather than an apartment and me going to university was never a question. The money was there and it was gonna happen.

Multiple consciousness involves reflecting on “difference” and the complexities of multiple and intersecting identities, but with an approach that normalizes difference instead of viewing it as something that needs to be celebrated or pathologized (Shields, 2004). All four participants acknowledged their subjectivity, which encouraged them to question the taken-for-granted assumptions that are intimately connected with their racial and/or class privilege (Allen & Rossatto, 2009). As students’ and families’ lived experiences were revealed to participants that differed from their own lived experiences (both as an administrator and as a teacher), all four participants shared their desire to understand and reflect upon, instead of judge or pathologize, differences. For example, P3 stated:

I loved getting to know these kids and for seeing them for who they were and understanding where they were coming from and it was an entirely different world. These kids were so new to Canada, like days in Canada, and every day was a different type of challenge for me to understand and every day caused me to reflect on who I was – a day would come where the kids would pee outside because they don’t use toilets. They’ve never used a toilet and then I’m thinking – I’m thinking about that, I’m processing that like wow, what do you mean? And it just made the whole earth, the whole world feel so much smaller to see that this was happening in Toronto and I’d never even thought about it. And how do I process that without judgment?

Cognitive and emotional reflection is required to overcome cognitive and emotional dissonance (Jansz & Timmers, 2002; Gorsky, 2009). Participants demonstrated a range of responses including guilt and shame for having greater privilege in relation to others, yet limited awareness of, and reflection on, their racial bias. Participant reactions to guilt included not knowing what to do with the feeling to a willingness to work through the discomfort instead of repressing the emotions or shutting down in the process. Feelings of guilt for racial, class and faith privilege indicate participant understandings of themselves as individuals who are either good or bad, rather than as part of a more complex system of intersecting oppressions from which they benefit (DiAngelo, 2012).
P2's reflections indicate an individualized response to racial and class privilege:

But I guess also being comfortable in your own skin, not feeling like I’m going to be judged because I’m white. And that for me, the guilt, has been a thing my whole life. And not just white, but white and middle-upper class. My parents are both still alive. I always have them to fall back on. So, you know, being ok with that over time…being ok to say it, being ok to say I’ve had extreme privilege and still working with people who haven’t…working with people who as a family make less than $25,000 a year but still being able to connect, putting aside the barriers and being able to connect on you know, what are we going to do to work together and not from this place of I want to help you or I want to assist you. And I think this is something I’ve come to realize working in an urban setting and an urban school board…no matter which school you went to or which title you have, that you can have a very rich life, you can have amazing ideas, you can be phenomenal at certain skills and it doesn’t matter where you come from. And we have to push past all of that and we have to see that people who live in poverty live an extremely rich life. I have to be okay with getting to a point where I see things differently and I see my role differently, and that can be really tough.

At the beginning of the quote, P2 notes some discomfort with being judged for being white (an example of racial protection, insulation and comfort), while at the end of this quote, P2 articulates an understanding that her lens of students and families needed adjustment to be of greater service (a more responsible response to her racial privilege). P2 articulates how difficult it is “see things differently”, which indicates an awareness of a lens of the world that is informed by her positionality. However, P2 was the only participant to explore racial privilege and discomfort this explicitly. The absence of participant reflection on racial privilege may speak to the universalism that is central to whiteness and white privilege, which fails to acknowledge Whiteness as an identity, thereby maintaining a racial order (DiAngelo, 2011).

In the literature on engaging pre-service teachers in conversations about whiteness, Yep (2007) and Ringrose (2007) both advocate for moments of struggle as they may lead to potential critical engagement. As Zingsheim and Goltz (2011) argue, “Pedagogies of whiteness are characterized by affect, conflict, discomfort, and risk” (p. 219). In speaking of class privilege, two participants voiced that in addition to allowing for discomfort with cognitive and emotional dissonance, leaders for social justice are able to turn challenges into opportunities and problems into new beginnings. However, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) caution that privileged leaders need to practice being in conflict and discomfort without prematurely looking to solve the problem to overcome their own dissonance. This is especially important in the context of race to ensure that what start off as
conversations about race do not end up re-centering the needs and experiences of white people (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). This is a negative consequence of centering white racism instead of whiteness (Sleeter, 2001). Furthermore, while race and social class are intimately connected, conversations about privilege must be confronted within the context of anti-racism to ensure that conversations about race do not turn into safer conversations about gender and social class when racial ascription and the complicity in racial inequity become too ‘uncomfortable’ to talk about.

Finally, participants demonstrated an activist identity and all four participants identified social justice as a central aspect of their identity as an educational administrator and beyond. Of the four participants, two named their racial and class privilege and discussed growing up in households that were social justice-minded with parents who made deliberate choices to question and give up this privilege. P2 remarks:

And I remember growing up and asking why I couldn’t go to this club that all my friends went to – this prestigious sports club where they all took swimming and skating lessons. My parents would say ‘because that club excludes people who are black or people who are Jewish’. So I feel like from this very early age I grew up in sort of this left-leaning household, even though I was from a very white, privileged, upper-class neighbourhood.

The other two participants spoke about experiences in pre-service teaching or in professional development settings that caused them to engage with social difference in critical and transformative ways. What was not named in these experiences was a focus on whiteness ideology, however there were some references to learning about class privilege. In speaking about the relationships between students and teachers, Matias (2013) notes that without a focus on whiteness ideology (both by white teachers and racialized teachers who have internalized whiteness ideology), racial liberation for racialized students is not explicitly bound to the racial liberation of their teachers. The challenge here is that “they may problematically assume the ‘white savior’ role, hoping to liberate [urban] students of color without realizing their own racial culpability in maintaining whiteness as (perhaps unwitting) subscribers to white savior mentality” (Matias 2013 as cited in Matias & Mackey, 2015). Therefore, social action needs to be constructed from the vantage point of interdependent liberation.

**Action for Privileged Learners**

Participants described engaging in activities to further self-reflection such as centering their privilege in their journal writing and actively thinking about how their privilege impacts their leadership styles. Other activities that were named involved engaging in critical dialogues with colleagues about power and privilege, learning with and from people with different lived experiences and keeping informed about current socio-political issues and conflicts.
As well, all four participants noted that they struggled with finding the balance between their personal and professional lives in their attempts to lead for social justice. Participants discussed examples of self-care they engaged in to be able to welcome and engage the discomfort that arises from cognitive and emotional dissonance (e.g., meditation, being in nature, strong support networks, critical friends, etc.). However, none of the participants noted the privilege that is associated with being able to engage in self-care practices or the recognition that many of the students and families they connect with have more limited access to any of the self-care supports that were suggested. Three participants named the inability to navigate cognitive and emotional dissonance as the number one barrier to why other leaders may not engage in leadership for social justice. At the risk of re-centering the needs of those already in power (school administrators and white school administrators), which is often done at the expense of the needs of students and families, systemic supports are required for leaders to be expected to engage in anti-racist work. Self-care needs to be redefined to negotiate the ambiguity and discomfort with anti-racist work, while shifting the focus away from individualized understandings and responses and towards a systemic analysis of white supremacy and other systems of oppression.

**Interpersonal**

The development of trusting and caring relationships and the self-knowledge about one’s communication style that is central to this dimension can include the following reflections and actions to be developed in privileged leaders:

**Reflection for Privileged Leaders**

Self-reflection involves questioning whether an ethic of care and a sense of responsibility to students is constructed from a paternalistic, charity model of benevolence that addresses the material and socio-emotional effects of the problem, or from a transformative, liberatory stance that attends to socio-political, economic, moral and historic causes of the problem. Reflection is also required to understand how issues of power and privilege have negatively impacted marginalized communities, and how as leaders who represent power and privilege, respect and acceptance into historically marginalized and racialized communities must be earned. Of particular interest to this study was an awareness of administrators that the communities they entered were already established and that because of their racial, class and faith privilege, trust had to be earned from students, parents and community partners. There is a keen awareness that trust and acceptance cannot be expected as P3 notes:

> I think I work really hard. It’s a priority for me to find other ways to communicate to them that I understand something of their social identity because it can’t be seen to be written on my face. So I make conscious decisions for instance to learn phrases in the language, to dress when in traditional cultural attire when we have events at the
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I bring my children to school, my own children to this school and involve them, because I am aware that when they look at me...I need to show them, I need to explicitly demonstrate that I understand that I have a different identity than they do, but that I want to feel included in what they're doing. And for me, I want to appeal to their hearts and for me the way to do that has been to make the efforts – those are conscious decisions that I make. It’s about bringing yourself into the heart of what’s already happening in the community. It’s about building connection and for me the easiest way to do that is from mother to mother. That’s a tool that I use and I know that when you are a mother, that’s probably the most important thing – most people define themselves that way when you become a mother. And so I’m able to do that when I involve my family and teach my children to speak a few words in their language. So, it opens their arms more to envelop me into their world – and that’s what I want.

While P3’s comments demonstrate an awareness of the need to build trust, they raise some concerns. Building trusting and caring relationships to feel included in marginalized and racialized groups to which you do not belong, re-centers the needs of the privileged to maintain a sense of comfort and safety. This is evident in phrases such as, “I want to feel included” or, “So it opens their arms to envelop me into their world – and that’s what I want”. Building trusting and caring relationships must center the needs of marginalized and racialized students and families. This means that leaders must account for historical mistrust and the myriad of ways both within and outside of schools that the safety and comfort of parents and students are compromised daily. In doing so, trust-building requires a sustained commitment to de-centering the need for comfort and safety of the white leader.

Participants also demonstrated varying but limited degrees of reflection on how their sense of self was informed by their relationships with students and families. Most of their reflection centered on how they viewed students and families. Despite working to challenge deficit thinking, maintaining a gaze on students and families continues to situate both the problem and the solution with the Other instead of focusing on one’s complicity in systems that maintain hierarchical power structures. Kumashiro (2000) suggests the importance of moving beyond the Self/Other binary in critical approaches, and suggests that we can learn much from a queer, poststructural approach:

I do not mean that we should see the Self in the Other, or the Self as the Other, but that we should deconstruct the Self/Other binary. We might look, for example at how our normalcy needs, even as it negates, the Other, as heterosexuality does the homosexual Other (Fuss, 1991) or literary Whiteness, the Black shadow (Morrison, 1992)...And then we might ask, how does this knowledge come to bear on my sense of self?
By changing how we read normalcy and Otherness, we can change how we read Others and ourselves. (p. 45)

Leaders must challenge their understandings of themselves in relation to students and families with less relative power and privilege by reflecting on how otherness constructs, maintains and protects the Self. For example, white leaders might ask themselves how the construction of racial innocence and virtuosity or the expectation of racial comfort influences their actions and beliefs as leaders. Once again, a focus on the individual cannot be a substitute for identifying and challenging systemic inequities and ideologies (such as individualism) that benefit white, middle-class and other-privileged leaders.

**Action for Privileged Learners**

This involves the recognition that there are multiple ways of understanding and demonstrating concepts such as trust and care in relationships and actively learning about them from multiple perspectives. Three participants discussed the importance of being able to dialogue across difference and address controversial and sensitive issues. They described skills they have used such as suspending judgement, being aware of one’s immediate reactions, and listening beyond words. The skills mentioned by participants are important to address differences in opinion among people with similar privilege. They do not, however, address the skills needed to dialogue across difference in which there are racial and other power imbalances. For example, white leaders may need to learn skills such as identifying and responding to racial microaggressions (e.g., overlooking the contributions of a racialized person) as Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo and Rivera (2009) suggest that the success or failure of facilitating difficult dialogues related to race is indirectly linked to the ability to recognize racial microaggressions.

These three participants also commented on how important it is for them to talk less and listen more. P2 remarked: “People who look like me need to learn when to talk and to talk less. Our voices are heard enough. We need to make spaces for other voices.” Ratcliffe (2005) suggests that rhetorical listening can be used to identify troubled identifications with gender and whiteness in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication on any topic, as it examines how whiteness functions as an ‘invisible’ racial category and accounts for complexities in the political and ethical positions of rhetoric.

**Communal**

The creation of democratic and inclusive processes that build community across cultural groups can include the following reflections and actions to be developed in privileged leaders. ‘Culture’ needs to be defined broadly here, including complex, fluid and intersecting aspects of social identities.
Reflection for Privileged Leaders

All four participants discussed what they have learned about, from and with the community and families with different lived experiences both personally and as educators. They also discussed how they have come to value different perspectives on schooling, parenting and child development. P1 identifies how an unknowability of the Other (Ellsworth, 1997 as cited in Kumashiro, 2000) has informed her leadership:

I may not in fact know what is in the best interest of the students in my school. Their experiences with the world are so different from mine. I will only ever know some of my students to a degree, maybe all of the students for different reasons. So I can’t make all of the decisions. There’s no sense in that. I have to involve parents and students and make the decisions collectively...and be willing to learn new things. And if there is something that is way off, then I have to step in.

However, P1 demonstrates a safe notion of ‘knowing students’ that does not fundamentally challenge her practice or what constitutes ‘knowledge’. For example, “stepping in if something is way off” suggests that there are limits to acceptable knowledge and notions of parent engagement, reinforcing structures and discourses that allow administrators to determine the boundaries of normative schooling processes. P1’s initial attempts to involve different perspectives is an example of interest convergence (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004), in which inclusion may be supported because it is beneficial to a professional identity and social cohesion. Privileged leaders require skills and training to embrace and learn from broader notions of schooling, parenting and child development that may disrupt normative schooling practices.

Furthermore, none of the participants discussed the importance of creating democratic processes from critical perspectives. Critical democratic processes would identify and challenge: (un)intentionally promoting dominant narratives of the Other; positioning a member of the Other as the expert of that group; and creating false binaries between the privileged and the Other that essentialize the Other in ways that diminish the complexity and nuances between and within groups (Kumashiro, 2000)

Action for Privileged Learners

Three of the four participants identified themselves as a connector, or matchmaker of people, ideas and resources. What was common among all three participants in relation to the matchmaker identity was their desire to draw on the strengths and interests of multiple stakeholders while maintaining a focus on an equity-related goal. The following quote by P4 demonstrates the matchmaker identity in the context of building a common vision:
What I like doing is, I like to work with people’s strength and around their weaknesses. I like to create an environment where there is a lot of possibility and energy, almost like a matchmaker. I think that part of my role is to make connections between people and ideas and resources that maybe otherwise wouldn’t happen. So, I’m kind of – I’m both a sequential and a random thinker – so sometimes my thought process isn’t always apparent to other people. But I see things that other people don’t necessarily see as connections. So I see part of my role is to articulate the joint vision of the people I’m working with and then help make it happen.

Too narrow a focus on the privileged leader risks perpetuating the false assumption that different stakeholders (many of whom are students, families and community partners who are racialized and marginalized) do not have the skills to identify their own strengths and to connect those strengths to others’ strengths and to common goals, which are features of deficit thinking. This is in contrast to another participant who discussed welcoming parents into the school to share their expertise with students and staff on a variety of topics, given that a large portion of the parents and guardians were internationally educated without access to stable work in Toronto. Caution must be exercised in not reinscribing a racial or other order that is connected to the perceived ability of a subordinated group to contribute to knowledge, and instead seek to acknowledge and honour the knowledge(s) of all families and students and co-construct new knowledge. Two participants noted that matchmaking was especially important when it brokered social and cultural capital to allow students who are marginalized in and by the system greater access and opportunities.

All four participants also viewed their role as inclusive leaders (Ryan, 2006). In particular, participants discussed advocating for inclusion, nurturing dialogue and adopting inclusive decision-making practices (Ryan, 2006). P4 shares her experiences:

So, there was a lot of concern about gangs and violence and a lot of bad press about the neighbourhood and so the way I entered the school was I asked for a day to interview people. And so, I interviewed various staff members, some students I think, some parents…it was very exciting to be in a new situation where I didn’t know all the answers and to learn about the community, to learn from the community, that’s what made the job interesting. I knew how to teach, but to be in an environment where…not only was I so different from the people I was working with, but the people were so different from each other – and trying to negotiate the potential conflict and trying to bring people together to work for a common goal. Where I started after I did my interviews was, what do we all agree on? And that’s how we started to move forward. We agreed that our kids were fabulous. We agreed that
they had lots of talent. We agreed that education for many of them was going to be an opening of possibilities for them and that the potential is limitless – so those kinds of things we agreed on, so then it was just trying to figure out how to negotiate relationships so that we can actually move forward in one direction.

The challenge with inclusive decision-making is that it may assume neutrality and render white privilege and class privilege invisible. To “learn about the community” and “to learn from the community” are relational approaches that involve speaking directly to families, students and partners in the community and centering their voices. The communal approach to this model must actively de-center the overwhelming power of the school, the administrators and the teachers by actively promoting the voices of students, families and community partners in decision-making and learning practices.

Critical democratic perspectives would also be important to consider in relationships between and within students, educators, families and community partners. This requires vigilant awareness of who is being represented and how, and a commitment to intervening to create more truly democratic spaces (i.e., actively creating avenues and opportunities for the most marginalized voices to be heard). This must also happen with an understanding of the ways in which internalized and horizontal oppression operates between and within racialized groups, given that each group, although still a part of the oppressed population, has its own histories and is affected by systems of oppression in unique ways (Takaki, 2008). Finally, it involves structural and systemic mechanisms, policies and practices that support leaders (and hold them accountable to) engaging critical democratic processes.

**Systemic**

The goals of assessing, critiquing and working to transform the system are central to this dimension and can include the following reflections and actions to be developed in privileged leaders:

**Reflection for Privileged Leaders**

Reflection at a system level involves questioning how normative practices have contributed to inequitable outcomes and opportunities for marginalized and racialized populations and how to use and expand one’s locus of control to create more equitable and inclusive schooling practices. All of the participants mentioned the importance of regular reflection of the students’ and families’ experiences, opportunities and outcomes. P4 reflects on the impact of schooling on the life trajectory of students:

I see what we do as being potentially very harmful or potentially very helpful. So I see my role as principal as creating a humane environment
in which we are doing as little harm as possible (because I think
schools can be harmful places) and where we’re creating a sense of
possibility in everybody who crosses our doors or hears about us or
know us... It’s recognizing that how a child is treated in a school may
change the direction of a child’s life.

This description is an example of a normative practice that has contributed to inequitable
outcomes by focusing on the individual level instead of the systemic level. It speaks to
the ways in which ‘harm to students’ was positioned in the data as a challenge to
interpersonal shortcomings of educators in the building (an individualized approach),
rather than as institutionalized and systemic shortcomings giving rise to the conditions
for poor interpersonal relationships. This one example by P1 highlights an attempt to
focus on more underlying ideologies, but still focuses on the individual teacher:

And that’s a huge part of who I am and how I question especially those
kids who aren’t doing well, who aren’t motivated. I’m always
questioning – what is it? What would make them want to be here?
What do we need to do differently? Why hasn’t that teacher discovered
it yet and what does that teacher need to be able to discover it? What
haven’t I done yet to support this child or support this teacher in
supporting this child?

Of interest, is that participants identified very few systemic policies and practices at the
level of the school board or Ministry of Education that affect student outcomes and
experiences. For example, one participant described supporting a newcomer and
racialized family in understanding and advocating for their rights in the special education
process, despite the fact that the family was advocating against the participant’s peers.
However, there was no mention of their role in naming and working to transform unjust
board or Ministry practices such as: streaming, the disproportionate suspensions and
expulsions of racialized male students; opportunity gaps that result in achievement gaps
on the basis of race and social class; limited opportunities for students to explore and
affirm their racial and other identities; and, policies, practices and structures that do not
center anti-racism and anti-oppression. One explanation for this is that challenging
systemic structures from which one benefits can have a direct, and often negative effect
on a leader’s well-being, sense of self and professional advancement. This speaks to
Freire’s (1998) notion of false generosity that focuses on ‘saving people’ instead of
‘transforming systems’ from which one benefits and is therefore invested in. For
example, in reflecting on the potential limitations of privileged leaders in promoting
social justice for students with less privilege, P3 states:

I will never, ever, ever, ever go through what they’re going through
simply because of the way that they appear – the way they look,
because they look so completely different to the people who make the
decisions in this city – and I do look like the people who make the decisions in this city. And they need people who look like them in positions of power. And I feel, I wish I didn’t look this way sometimes because I want to be a role model for these students and I feel I can be a role model to a certain point and then it just stops, because I feel like I will never really understand that last little bit.

Here, P3 acknowledges the importance of students seeing themselves in those who hold positions of power and the limitations she poses as a white leader. However, the desire for P3 to be a role model is an example of false generosity in that it positions allyship as an identity and badge of honour, instead of an act towards collective liberation. Furthermore, there is no mention of working in solidarity with racialized leaders to recognize, challenge and change hiring and promotion practices to account for a greater representation of leaders to reflect the students, families and communities they serve. That would be an example of Freire’s (1998) notion of ‘true generosity’, in which white administrators demonstrate a willingness to give up one’s status and safety and join in solidarity with racialized leaders to struggle collaboratively against the policies and practices that maintain oppression.

**Action for Privileged Learners**

Participants shared strategies for changing the mindsets of teachers in their schools. All four of the participants expressed the need to regularly break the silence with their staff that maintains oppression by engaging in courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006), P1 states:

Because we’re through with the silences – that’s what’s created so many inequities in the world – and that’s how voices have been lost and people have been broken. It’s about speaking up, and it takes courage. It’s about having those conversations and fighting those fights that you need to fight.

Participants noted that using identity-based data about students and families that explores gaps in opportunity, achievement, well-being and engagement, helps to initiate and sustain difficult conversations because it is perceived as ‘objective information’. The following quote by P1 describes how data can be used as an instructional tool to develop more responsive teaching practices and challenge deficit thinking:

I learned to let the data do the talking and let the data start those conversations and then through understanding data, that’s when you get a sense. When you ask them for their input on that data, that’s where you start to hear a lot of their beliefs and a lot of their perceptions and a lot of their needs. So I often, often refer to data…data about the students we’re serving, data about the community
we’re serving, but also data about current research.

All four participants also talked about bringing in “outside experts” on equity and social justice to talk about issues that they did not feel knowledgeable enough to speak about or that might lead to the misrepresentation of a population. They also felt that staff would better receive certain messages if it were not coming from someone in authority and rather a peer.

Interestingly, most of the systemic actions mentioned by participants involved within-school initiatives, such as providing professional learning opportunities that engage courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006) around race, class, faith, gender, sexuality and ability and advocating for more time and resources for teachers to reflect on, analyze and develop social justice curriculum. As stated above, participants did not engage in critiquing or challenging inequitable policies and practices at the level of the school board and/or Ministry of Education that lead to more equitable outcomes for all students. These activities challenge the power, status, safety and well-being of white and other-privileged administrators. One participant alluded to the subversive ways in which she challenges the system by asking probing questions and looking for lateral support among colleagues who are administrators in more affluent parts of the city.

*Ecological*

Creating an awareness that schools and school-related issues operate within a larger socio-political, economic and environmental context of injustice and oppression is central to this dimension and can include the following reflections and actions to be developed in privileged leaders:

**Reflection for Privileged Leaders**

All four participants demonstrated an understanding of how local, national and international events and politics influence student achievement, well-being and engagement. P3’s quote demonstrates an understanding that students’ experiences in schools are influenced by larger, unjust social and economic realities:

The minute I stepped into the role of teacher or educator where it was my role to teach these children and prepare them for the life they’re going to have, that’s when to me, it became so much more than charity. And I still didn’t conceive of it as social justice – I just thought – I want the best future possible for these little people sitting on my carpet and what do I need to do to make that happen? And then start thinking about what needs to change – what needs to change in Toronto, in Ontario, in Canada, in the world for these kids to make their future the one they deserve to have?
There were significant differences in how participants conceptualized the influence of larger socio-political factors on student achievement and well-being. For example, while one participant essentialized the experience of poverty in the city, two participants discussed the need to understand the experiences of newcomers living in poverty as they often differ from those who experience generational poverty. The fourth participant spoke about “the colour of poverty” in the city, making explicit links between social class and race. However, there was no mention among the four participants of how historical contexts might influence the achievement, well-being and engagement of students and families, such as the (continued) influences of colonialism, segregated and residential schools, etc. Furthermore, there was limited reflection among the four participants on their complicity in systems of oppression beyond their role as school leaders. For example, there was limited reflection on how white supremacy (e.g., remaining silent in the face of interpersonal or systemic racism, normalizing white experiences, etc.) and capitalism (e.g., what they choose to buy/own, etc.) operate in their personal lives beyond the school.

**Action for Privileged Learners**

This involves creating experiences for students and teachers to explore larger, socio-political issues that include an exploration of how we contribute to and perpetuate inequities. Three of the four participants discussed their role as centering the community in the curriculum and infusing issues of equity and social justice into curriculum planning and professional learning opportunities for staff. P2 explains her primary role as a social justice instructional leader in the following quote:

I consider myself the curriculum leader at the school. I’m very involved with the students and so I’m able to still see first-hand what the leadership is that I offer because I can follow it right through – because I look at the student work, I look at what’s happening, I look at what’s going on in the classroom and so I’m constantly trying to learn as much as I can so that I can guide the school in its pathway towards learning more about social justice….So by participating in and supporting things like community walks, faith walks, getting the community into the school as much as possible – I see that as a big part of my role as being a leader for social justice and for them to understand the demographics of the student population and really digging into that and understanding what it means.

All four participants discussed the importance of inviting the community into the school and creating partnerships with local and international community agencies. Two of the principals noted that they were committed to supporting students and families in advocating for their rights outside of the board. One participant described supporting families in the community by addressing standard of living concerns in an apartment
Three participants discussed the need to keep abreast with local and global news with an understanding of the ways in which the media misrepresents people and stories, along with an eye for stories that broaden and challenge dominant narratives of marginalized and racialized students.

**Conclusion**

Privileged leaders have an important role to play in transforming inequitable and oppressive schooling practices, policies, discourse and relationships. This study explored how four, self-identified privileged leaders (white, middle-class) practice leadership for social justice as explored in the Praxis-Dimension-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012) and analyzed through the lens of critical pedagogy, CRT and CWS. Participant interviews provided examples of all five sections of the Praxis-Dimension-Capacities Framework (Furman, 2012) and similar to the framework, findings in this study should be understood as both unique praxis in each dimension and as an interdependent system.

Findings suggest that social justice leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to enacting transformative leadership but have an underdeveloped sense of how their white privilege informs understandings of their leadership. First, there is limited awareness of how their whiteness operates in invisible ways to correlate with normalcy. Many examples of their reflection and action focus on how to understand and improve conditions for the Other, with limited analysis of the reframing and unlearning needed to understand their complicity in, and benefit from, white privilege and white supremacy. Social justice leadership therefore, needs to explicitly name, explore and respond to systems of oppression instead of simply trying to learn about the Other. Second, social justice leadership for privileged leaders cannot serve to re-center the experiences, feelings and beliefs of dominant groups in an effort to support their learning and unlearning towards more transformative notions of leadership. White leaders (and white educators more broadly) would benefit from constructing new white identities that center a critique of whiteness, by: exploring their investments in a system of racism; exploring ways in which whiteness constructs innocence and virtue and maintains a sense of comfort; making visible that which is intended to be invisible; and, to guard against manifestations of whiteness, such as the white saviour. Third, white leaders engaging in social justice leadership need strategies to dialogue and facilitate dialogues across difference in ways that account for power differences and racial hierarchies between and among different stakeholder groups. This requires a complex and nuanced understanding of the ways in which white privilege operates (e.g., microaggressions, white fragility, internalized oppression of subordinated groups, etc.), or these strategies run the risk of being ‘safe’ discussions that perpetuate oppressive relationships, discourses, policies and practices.

Fourth, leaders for social justice must continue to guard against the insidious ways that deficit, blame-the-victim thinking creeps into educational discourse. This requires a commitment to the ongoing unlearning that accompanies learning and relearning. Fifth,
in describing their reflections and actions on addressing systemic barriers, the administrators in this study named within-school systemic foci (e.g., professional learning for teachers) and ecological foci (i.e., supporting families with challenges beyond schooling). However, limited examples were provided in naming and challenging systemic barriers within the school board or within the Ministry of Education, which may have a direct effect on the leaders’ professional well-being and advancement. As stated above, white administrators committed to challenging oppression demonstrate a willingness to give up their status and join in solidarity with racialized leaders and communities to struggle collaboratively against the policies and practices that maintain oppression. Sixth, white leaders need to be comfortable with not knowing, and recognize that their incomplete and partial truths require that they hold their proposed solutions tentatively and resist the urge to find immediate solutions to avoid discomfort. Finally, participants made little mention of how white privilege operates in other parts of their lives. White leaders are encouraged to blur the lines between their professional and personal selves and develop a gaze to how white privilege operates in and through them, beyond their roles as administrators. Developing this gaze at a personal level deepens the gaze at a professional level, and guards against adopting a critique of whiteness for professional mobility or to satisfy a job requirement.

Given that only four participants were interviewed for this study, more research is required to be in dialogue with ideas presented here. Furthermore, research is also required to explore how leaders with various and intersecting social privileges understand and practice leadership for social justice. This research will help provide a more thorough understanding of leadership for social justice as a social construction based on socially constructed identities. For example, findings from these interviews did not speak to role of spirituality in leadership for social justice (Dantley, 2003) or teaching for wholeness and healing (hooks, 2003).

This study prompts some important questions. First, which of these findings are applicable to leaders with different intersections of privilege? Understandings of leadership for social justice cannot be neutral. Therefore, it is incumbent upon researchers and practitioners to not only contextualize leadership for social justice on the basis of who we are leading (e.g. racialized students), and where we are leading (e.g., urban school districts), but also on the basis of who is leading (the social identities of our leaders). Developing a greater awareness of how the identities of social justice leaders inform their understanding and practice of leadership for social justice will allow for more focused praxis (reflection and action) based on who is leading. This presents an interesting tension and opportunity: research that explores social justice leadership from the perspectives of leaders with different, intersecting identities needs to be held tenuously to avoid essentializing identities, yet it also needs to be explored more deeply and rigorously to broaden our understandings of the limitations and possibilities of leadership for social justice. Furthermore, the field of leadership for social justice would benefit from an analysis of different critical and post-cultural theoretical frameworks (e.g., critical queer studies,
critical disability studies, anti-colonial frameworks, etc.). The purpose here is not to generate a toolkit of best practices in social justice leadership. The purpose is to explore conflicts and opportunities and to center change, ambiguity and discomfort in our very understandings of social justice leadership. This requires a recognition of the partiality and unfinishedness of any theory and its subsequent analysis.

Another question to consider is: how might these findings apply to privileged leaders who do not identify as social justice leaders? In exploring how self-identified privileged leaders understand social justice leadership, we can further understand how the processes of normalization of white experience and thought, and the tendency to render it invisible, are enacted in leadership. This knowledge should have a direct effect on leadership preparation programs and professional learning opportunities for administrators. Not only should these programs and learning opportunities center critiques of various and intersecting forms of privilege, educational leaders should be expected to engage in learning/unlearning opportunities related to their specific experiences of privilege. Systemic policies, programs and structures need to support this type of professional preparation and development, along with the corresponding changes in hiring and promotion practices.
References


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Ryan, J. (2002). Inclusive leadership for diverse schools: Initiating and sustaining dialogue. In H. Fennell (Eds.), *The role of the principal in Canada* (pp. 119-141). algary, AB: Detselig.


### APPENDIX

#### Table 1

| Participant 1 (P1) (Vice Principal – 1 year) | - Named more similarities than differences on the basis of family income level (growing up). Named class privilege in relation to students now.  
- No mention of difference in experience on the basis of race.  
- Similarities on the basis of the newcomer experience (English language learners, cultural and language barriers for parental). |
| Participant 2 (P2) (Vice Principal – 1 year) | - Currently works in a predominantly white, middle-upper class school. The descriptors below are in relation to working with multiple ethnicities and generally lower-income communities:  
- Named and described privilege on the basis of race and class and intersections between these social identifiers (i.e. family-owned cottage)  
- Similarities on the basis of social issues (gender, bullying, etc.)  
- Has some understanding of the issues of newcomers because she is married to someone of a different race who came to Canada at an early age as a refugee |
| Participant 3 (P3) (Vice Principal – 5 years with break in between years 3-4) | - Parents were immigrants, so can connect with parents on the newcomer experience (i.e. parents who want a better life for their children and place a high value on education).  
- Parents experienced religious persecution and can connect with students and families on discrimination on the basis of religion/faith.  
- Acknowledgment of privilege on the basis of race and ethnicity and its connection to privilege on the basis of class (i.e. different levels of access to employment partially based on racial and ethnic differences) |
| Participant 4 (P4) (Principal – 7 years) | - Parents experienced religious persecution and can connect with students and families on the basis of religion/faith discrimination.  
- Participant notes that many newcomer families were probably of a similar class in their home country but different upon their arrival in Canada.  
- Difference on the basis of time in Canada – participant is a second-generation.  
- Canadian and many students and families are newcomers.  
- Difference on the basis of class between participant and students who are also second- or third-generation Canadians.  
- Acknowledgment of difference on the basis of race and ethnicity. |
Author Biography

Dr. Vidya Shah teaches in the Faculty of Education at York University in the Master of Leadership and Community Engagement Program and the Initial Teacher Education Program. She has also taught courses in the Professional Master’s Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Western Ontario. She received her Doctorate in Educational Administration from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and her research explores contributing factors to district reform for equity. Vidya has worked in the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and was a primary, junior and intermediate classroom teacher in the TDSB. She is actively involved in education-related community initiatives and works closely with parents and community partners to mobilize research education and support educational reforms.