



## *The Embeddedness of White Fragility within White Pre-service Principals' Reflections on White Privilege*

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### **Abstract**

*This study analyzes the prevalence of white fragility within the six white, pre-service principals' online responses to readings about white privilege. Six white, pre-service principals were asked to provide commentary to class readings on the relevance of white privilege to their preparation for future positions as principals. The findings showed that all six pre-service principals provided fragile responses, meaning that they minimized the significance of white privilege. The minimization is explained in accordance to individualism, meritocracy, and innocence.*

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

Schools continue to be filled with students from racially diverse backgrounds (Banks, 1999, 2008; Baron, 2007; Hernandez & Marshall, 2009; Howard, 2007; Young, Madsen, & Young, 2010). However, the teaching force remains predominately white. As such, there is a cultural mismatch between a mostly all white teaching corps and non-white students. Research has suggested a key approach to bridging this gap is through culturally proficient school leadership. Nested within this approach are school leaders who can engage teachers in critical discussions on race, especially white privilege.

White privilege is a system of unearned advantages that are continually afforded only to white people (Kivel, 1996; Lee & Helfand, 2005; McCarthy, & Crichlow, 1993; McIntosh, 1988; McIntyre, 1997; Morrison, 1992). In her classic text *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) explained that white people struggle with recognizing the privilege of being white. According to her, difficulties with recognizing white privilege are twofold. First, being white is a location of structural advantage and of race privilege. Second, white people and white values are usually unmarked and unnamed. In other words, the meaning of being white in American society is viewed as normal and neutral forms of racial existence.

Much research has cited the advantages of increasing white teacher effectiveness with discussing race and race related concepts such as white privilege (Horsford, 2011; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009; Rusch & Horsford, 2009; Singleton & Linton, 2005; Tatum, 2007). Research has also indicated that these conversations are often derailed by white fragility (Diangelo, 2011, 2012). White fragility is defined as defensive moves used by white people to avoid discussions about race, especially white privilege. The defensive moves range from minimization and denial of the significance of race to avoiding and explaining away race.

Because of the need to understand race and privilege in schools, principals must be prepared to address this topic. A proactive approach is for principal preparation programs to prepare

principals who can discuss race. One way to achieve this goal with white, pre-service principals is through examining white fragility. Better stated, pre-service principal programs should examine the extent to which white, pre-service principals demonstrate white fragility during discussions on race, specifically white privilege. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the prevalence of white fragility among white, pre-service principals' approaches to discussing white privilege.

### **Research Question**

The research question for this article is as follows: To what extent do white, pre-service principals' responses to discussion board prompts demonstrate white fragility?

### **Significance of Study**

The significance of this study is twofold. On the one hand, there continues to be a significant increase in the racial diversity of schools (Banks, 1998; 2008). On the other hand, schools are still rooted in a system of whiteness that privileges white people. Hence the term white privilege. Specifically, white people are often privileged to rarely, if ever, have negative racialized experiences that adversely impact their lives.

White principals will be the key leaders in addressing this racial dichotomy (diversity and privilege). The reason is that the principals of most school are white (Sanchez, Thornton, & Singer, 2009). Consequently, white principals must recognize how white privilege impacts themselves and their non-white students. This level of understanding should be developed during white principals' tenure as pre-service principals. That is, pre-service principals must receive the training needed to understand how being white will influence their knowledge, skills, and disposition to serve racially diverse school populations. By addressing white privilege and white fragility, pre-service principal programs will graduate white, pre-service principals who are better equipped to serve as culturally diverse school leaders.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this research is Robin Diangelo's (2011) concept of white fragility. White fragility is defined as defensive moves used by white people to avoid discussions about race. The defensive moves range from minimization and denial of the significance of race to avoiding and explaining away race, especially white privilege. A key aspect of the defensiveness is that white people seek to avoid the racial stress that results from racial discussions that challenge their racial worldviews.

White fragility remains in place because of the way in which society is constructed in accordance to white people (Diangelo, 2011). In essence, white people are able to live as Americans who are insulated from race-based stress and racial inconvenience. This configuration provides white people with the comfort of experiencing life in ways that reinforces their racial perspectives and views. The high levels of racial comfort are upheld by the premise that only white people are considered to be standard examples of normality, universality, and goodness.

Diangelo (2011) argued that white people become highly defensive when they are presented with ideas that challenge the following racial worldviews:

- Objectivity-White people's views are always non-racial in nature.

- Openness-It is inappropriate to openly discuss race.
- Protection-White people should be emotionally protected by non-white people during discussions about race.
- Divulgence-Non-white people should meet the expectation of providing white people with their experiences and answers to questions about race.
- Solidarity-White people should hold and share the same racial perspectives as other white people.
- Innocence-White people's intentions and actions are and should be viewed as being harmless in nature.
- Individualism-Racial group membership has no impact on the behavior of people, especially white people.
- Meritocracy- Equal access to opportunities and resources exists for all racial groups.
- Authority-White people represent legitimate leadership and authority.

Challenges to these viewpoints disrupt the racial position and equilibrium that create the power, privilege, and dominance of white people.

Diangelo (2012) further explained that there are several reasons that explain white people's fragile responses to race-based discussions. First, many white people apply a good/bad binary toward race and racism. Here, racism is an act that is committed by bad and mean people. That is, people with certain types of character can only be racist. Thus, as long as white people are nice people who treat people nicely, they cannot be inherently racist.

Second, most whites are taught to see themselves as individuals, rather than as part of a racial group (Diangelo, 2012). The disadvantage of this worldview is twofold. First, individualism allows white people to define racism as being isolated acts instead of being a part of the structural fabric of society. Second, individualism convinces white people that they have not benefited over time from the historical and generational accumulation and dissemination of wealth and opportunities to generations of white people.

Third, white people are almost always in the comfort of white spaces (Diangelo, 2012). White spaces are public, segregated racial spaces that are largely controlled and legitimized by the presence and control of white people. The impact of these spaces is threefold. First, white spaces provide the subtle and direct messages that in comparison to non-white people, white people are better, normal, and superior. This message is reinforced through the centrality of white people in textbooks, media, heroes, leaders, neighborhoods and other representations of America.

Additionally, white spaces nurture a strong sense of racial belongingness among white people (Diangelo, 2012). That is, by virtue of skin color and social standing, white people belong and are considered to be the most valuable members in society. Third, white spaces allow White people to travel through society without navigating race. In effect, white people interact with other racial groups in two nonracialized ways. One way is to never think about race. The other way is to dismiss or minimize racial discussions and issues. The underlying belief to responses is that only non-white people are racial and therefore have race. This study may indicate whether or not these factors are a part of white, pre-service principals' responses to discussions about race.

### Methodology

This study consisted of six white, pre-service principals in a master's level program for educational leadership. The participants were enrolled in an online course entitled "Cultural Proficiency for School Leaders" The purpose of the course was to develop the pre-service principals' understanding of how to demonstrate culturally proficient school leadership. At the beginning of the course, participants completed a written profile of themselves. Key points of the profile are as follows:

Participant	Gender	Years of Experience	Upbringing*
One	Male	4 Years	White People
Two	Male	3 Years	White People
Three	Female	6 Years	White People
Four	Female	14 Years	White People
Five	Female	11 Years	White People
Six	Female	9 Years	White People

\*This part of the profile stated, "I have spent the majority of my life around a) white people; b) non-white people; or c) white people & non-white people."

Toward the end of the course, the author conducted a two-week class session entitled "The Relevance of White Privilege to Teaching, Learning, and Leadership." The purpose of the session was to develop participants' competence and confidence to discuss the relevance of white privilege to culturally proficient school leadership. In addition, the session was designed to nurture reflections on how being white would impact the participants' abilities to address white privilege in culturally responsive ways.

During the first week, the participants and I discussed Allan Johnson's (2013) article, "What is a System of Privilege?" and the book, *Power, Privilege, and Difference* (2005). The focus of Johnson's perspective on white privilege were the following points:

- White people enact with privilege because of a system of factors that gives them unearned, socially conferred rights and advantages in society. This system is built on dominance, identification, and centeredness.
- A system of white privilege is white-dominated, which means the default is for white people to occupy positions of power (Johnson, 2013).
- White-identification means that the culture defines white people as the standard for human beings in general (Johnson, 2013). People of color, for example, are routinely identified as non-white, a term that doesn't tell us what they are, but what they are *not*.
- White-centeredness is the tendency to put white people and what they do at the center of attention—the front page of the newspaper or magazine, the main character in the movie (Johnson, 2013).
- When you organize a society in this way, the result will be patterns of unearned advantage that are available to whites simply because they are socially identified as "white."

For the second week's discussion, the students and I reviewed "Diversity vs. White Privilege" (Miner, 2000), a compilation of Dr. Christine Sleeter's perspectives on white privilege. In the article, Dr. Sleeter explained the need to move multiculturalism from just appreciating diversity to addressing racism and white privilege. The section below provides her main points regarding the need to approach white privilege from this perspective.

Q: You talk a lot about white privilege. Why do you use that term and how do you explain it to white teachers?

A: If I do well at something, nobody is going to say, "You're a credit to your race." Saying that presumes that the race that the person is a member of ordinarily doesn't do very well. Because I am white, nobody says that about me. Yet such statements frequently surround kids of color. People make assumptions about their intellectual ability, about their family support, simply on the basis of their skin color. That's what I mean by reaping privileges of white racism, just on a personal level. At a more institutional level, I sometimes use this example:

My grandfather was a painter and wallpaper hanger who did fairly well in his life by buying property, renovating it, and then selling it. I grew up with the family story that he only had a second-grade education and look how well he did. Yet he was buying property at a time in which property ownership was much easier for white people. As a part of New Deal legislation, Franklin Delano Roosevelt made a deal with southern senators that the money for low-cost federal subsidized housing loans would be made available to white families and not to families of color, because the southern senators wanted to keep African Americans working as sharecroppers. Part of that New Deal legislation was specifically crafted so that people like my grandfather could buy property. I have inherited then, the benefits of that piece of systemic, historic white racism. Even today, I can walk into a real estate office and will more likely be shown places in "better" neighborhoods. I am also more likely to be given a better mortgage deal. Those are examples of how white racism keeps reaping me benefits. Sometimes I am aware of it and sometimes I am not.

Q: A lot of white people resist using terms such as white racism, white supremacy, and white privilege. How do you break through that defensiveness where they might argue, "I am where I am because I worked hard, not because I am white?"

A: One tactic is to look at family stories and situate those stories in a historical context. Let's use my grandfather as an example again. My grandfather worked very hard and I can't say that he didn't. But I can't just individualize his success. I have to look at it in the historical context of who had access to what. This allows me to say that yes, my grandfather worked hard, but in a situation in which the doors were closed to people who may have worked equally hard but who were not white.

Q: A lot of teachers might respond, "That was 80 years ago. Today, we're in a color-blind society and it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of race. How can you say white privilege still exists?"

A. Often, I have my students go out and do mini-investigations in the community. Here's an exercise that helps. One of the investigations involves students pairing up—one white student and one student of color. Sometimes they've looked at places to rent and one will go in and then the other, and they later compare notes. I have a colleague who's done a similar exercise with the students applying for the same job. Sometimes my students will go shopping together—that seems to be a popular one—and they will compare their treatment by store clerks. With that one, inevitably they come back with biased differential treatment. After these investigations, the students will try to interpret what happened. Students of color aren't surprised by the differing treatment, but the white students tend to be surprised. And some will say, "Well, that was just that store clerk, who was having a bad day."

If the white students are allowed to think of the differing treatment only in terms of one particular instance, they can still minimize and individualize the phenomenon. But in classes where I have been teaching about institutional racism, I'll have groups of students come in and report what they've found. If eight of 10 students report incidents of racism, it becomes much harder to say that racism doesn't happen today. And when they report that data in conjunction with information I bring to class—statistical data about racism and home mortgages, and racism in educational tracking, and racism in racial profiling by police—it makes a powerful statement. (p. 4)

Like the sessions, these readings were designed to develop participants' competence and confidence to discuss the relevance of white privilege to culturally proficient school leadership. Second, the readings were used to develop participants' understanding of how being white would impact their ability to address white privilege as culturally proficient school leaders.

To build on the readings, I provided students with the following writing prompt:

*Your assignment is as follows:*

1. *Take the next week to think about our discussions on white privilege.*
2. *Provide an online response to the following questions:*
  - A. *As a Person: How do this week's readings on white privilege relate to my life as a white person?*
  - B. *As a Principal: What is the relevance of this week's readings on white privilege to my preparation for demonstrating culturally proficiency leadership?*

*Answers should be one-half page to one page in length.*

The pre-service principals completed these steps and provided an online response to the course website. I used the students' responses to the writing prompt to determine if I met the goals of the sessions and readings.

### **Data Analysis**

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

information. I then looked for specific occurrences of patterns in the data. Next, I reread the patterns to determine if the pre-service principals' descriptions were aligned with white fragility. Specifically, I determined if and which pre-service principal responses matched the triggers conducive to white fragility (Diangelo, 2012).

Next, I conducted a member check (Creswell, 2012). Here, I provided the pre-service principals with my description of their narratives. I then asked them to verify my descriptions of their narratives with the original narratives that were submitted to me. Finally, I wrote the findings in ways to reveal the extent to which pre-service principals' responses matched the triggers conducive to white fragility (Diangelo, 2012).

## Findings

The findings in regard to the research question showed that white fragility was embedded in pre-service principals' online responses to the research and questions regarding white privilege. The fragile responses emanated from challenges to individualism, meritocracy, and innocence. Unlike Diangelo's (2011) research, the responses did not completely reject the presence and prevalence of white privilege in society. Instead, majority of the participants acknowledged the existence of white privilege. However, the fragility is seen in how the participants' responses minimized the impact, power, and influence of white privilege. The remainder of this section provides descriptions of the fragility-embedded responses of the participants.

### Challenge to Individualism

Two pre-service principals provided responses that showed defensiveness to the online discussions about white privilege. For example, pre-service principal one indicated that he agreed with the concept of white privilege. However, he still believed that individualism was more influential than the systemic nature of white privilege. Pre-service principal two did not acknowledge the existence of white privilege. Instead, this pre-service principal responded to the discussions with a description of the importance of treating people as individuals. For this participant, treating everyone as individuals is the best solution to any privilege. In their own words:

#### *Pre-service Principal One*

The text discussed the idea of white privilege and color-blindness. Dr. Sleeter's discussion was rather eye opening. She discusses the idea that many white people have the idea that most of the racial issues of the country were extinguished or nearly resolved with the Civil Rights movement. She says that the idea of white privilege is evident throughout our society through job placement, income, as well as socially. She describes an experiment that she has her students complete that allows the white students to see just how evident white privilege is in our society. Although there is no denying that this privilege exists, I do not agree that it is fair to lump all people into a stereotypical mold of behaviors. I believe that all individuals should be evaluated by the content of their character rather than their outward appearance.

### ***Pre-service Principal Two***

After reading Dr. Sleeter's views on white privilege, I wonder what she thinks is a solution to this problem. She discussed what she does to help her students to see it and how she uses examples from her own family, but what does she think would solve the problem of white privilege. I don't necessarily consider myself color-blind and therefore never see people for who they are. I interact with each person as an individual. I have always gotten to know my students and their parents as people, not as a particular culture. As I have said before, each person is different and there are no absolutes. So instead of assuming about any culture, I get to know the person on a personal level. I have also always had the same high expectations for every one of my students.

### **Challenge to Meritocracy**

The discussions on white privilege challenged three pre-service principals' beliefs about meritocracy. Specifically, these participants believed that everyone has equal access to opportunities. As such, individuals must take advantage of opportunities to achieve success in their chosen endeavors.

For example, pre-service principal three supported her fragile response to the white privilege discussions with a story about meritocracy. She talked about a Hispanic friend who encouraged her husband to move his son from a traditional class to an honors class. According to pre-service principal three, her friend indicated that the change improved his grades. The pre-service principal then opined that the change also provided him with the privilege to be in honors classes. This pre-service principal further explained that this level of privilege is the same as the privilege given to her because of being white. She supported this perspective by making comparative points between her white privileged opportunities and the Hispanic child's advanced class privileges.

Pre-service principal four's meritocracy was based on never thinking about being privileged. The reason is that this pre-service principal was taught and tells her own children that "if you work hard you can do anything you want...own a business, be a doctor, be a teacher, a ballet dancer, you can be anything."

Pre-service principal five approached meritocracy with a discussion about exceptionalism. In essence, the pre-service principal reported that she initially started to avoid the request to provide an online response to discussions on white privilege. She then decided to enter the discussion with an example of African American educators who have excelled in her school and district. She indicated that an African American teacher was selected from a pool of white teachers to be the "Teacher of The Year" for her school. She then explained that another African American woman was chosen for a principalship instead of equally qualified white candidates. She indicated that in both instances, the merit—not race—of both African American educators is what caused them to achieve success. She then acknowledges the existence of white privilege. Again, in their own words:

### ***Pre-service Principal Three***

This topic led me to reflect on a recent conversation I had with a very good friend of mine. She is a Hispanic educator working on her doctoral degree and lives in Laredo. She was talking to me about how she encouraged her husband, who has a



7th grader, to put him in honor classes two year ago. The son, who is Hispanic and in a weak school system that is primarily Hispanic, went from being in the regular classroom in the fifth grade to an honors classroom in sixth grade. She was telling me about how not only did his grades improve greatly, his friends changed, and how he spent his free time changed. Even though he was just an average student in the fifth grade he went to exceling in the sixth and seventh grade in the tougher classes because of who he was around and what they were doing. Her stepson, who made the change to honors classes from elementary to middle school, doesn't even recognize the difference. He is just doing what everyone else around him is doing- they talk and competes about grades so he talks and competes with his grades. Essentially, by their decision to move him into honors classes he has now been given a privilege he doesn't even know he has.

This make me think of the white privilege—there are things as a white person that I have always taken advantage of that have benefited me greatly because I am white. Just as my friend's stepson's life will forever be changed because he placed with a group of students that were on a different tract and he has now been privileged to be a part of the honor's group at his school. He doesn't even know what happened to him—but his life will just be a little easier, safer, and a little different now. This really makes me think about how the white privilege is the same. There have been opportunities and situations that I have been put in because I am white that others have not and it has changed the trajectory of my life. While I am thankful for all the opportunities that have come my way, I am frustrated by the path that this is not available to everyone. I agree with what the authors said when they discussed how this is something that exists because it is in our schools and our government and the daily media. I think about how my friend's knowledge of the school system and education gave her stepson the upper hand in his school and how she had to use that knowledge to challenge that status quo of his school and place him in honors classes and how he met that challenge. I feel like the white privilege has 'placed' me before on a better path because it was just there. My friend's example shows me though how better education can and honesty about what is happening in the schools amongst different races, really did affect her stepson in a positive way.

#### ***Pre-service Principal Four***

After our class, I have had some time to reflect on the idea of being “privileged.” I never thought of the white race as being privileged. I grew up in a middle class family and everyone that I knew worked full time, came home to tend to the house, and earned everything that I saw. Not one day in my life did I think I was privileged. The circle activity made me understand the relationship that each of the races has toward one another. I had not thought about living in a “white” world until that discussion.

Our discussion in class also referred back to what we were going to be or what we could be when we grew up or what we tell our children. I was told and tell my girls, if you work hard you can do anything you want...own a business, be a doctor, be a teacher, a ballet dancer, you can be anything. I think that was an eye opener when Dr. Hines spoke of the African American mother that told her son that he could be president but only after Obama was elected, but before that, it was an unreachable goal.

### ***Pre-service Principal Five***

After reflecting on the readings and posts, I was tempted to skip this week's post. My heart was heavy and I thought my comments would be more emotional than logical. Then I started reflecting on recent events I've seen taken place at my current and previous school, and decided to post about these factual events. The school that I'm currently teaching at has one black classroom teacher. She was last year's teacher of the year. She was up against many white teachers and deservedly earned the honor. She is a dedicated and well-respected teacher, and that was all that mattered when it was time to vote.

At the school where I previously taught, a black woman was just promoted to principal and replaced and beat out other white candidates that were equally qualified (as far as years of experience). I honestly believe color wasn't a factor and that she was hired because she truly deserved the job.

While I definitely feel like there is/has been an obvious white privilege, I also believe we as a society are making strides in equality and cultural proficiency. I do believe we still have work to do. I also believe we are headed in the right direction.

### **Challenge to Innocence**

Pre-service principal six's fragility can be attributed to innocence. Specifically, this pre-service principal described white privilege as being a historical slight on race relations that is now largely ineffectual to modern society. He then noted that "I believe that the white culture for the most part are not aware of it or do not act on it, however as others stated we are just white and do not think anymore into it." His statement suggests that white privilege is harmless because of supposedly being unnoticed and not influential to white people. The section below provides an extended description of the views of this pre-service principal.

### ***Pre-service Principal Six***

White Privilege is something that exists due to the history of our country. I do believe that over time it will fade away as it has already weakened in the past 100 years or so. I believe that the white culture for the most part are not aware of it or do not act on it, however as others stated we are just white and do not think anymore into it. I also believe that other cultures as time goes may also have certain privileges that assist them in certain areas. Such as ELL's, although these students do need the extra assistance in class, what about the white students that have a hard time with certain subjects just because they have not been exposed to certain instances. Not taking away from the area of white privilege though. Just something that I thought culturally speaking that every culture could have privileges in certain aspects of life.

### **Discussion**

This research revealed two significant findings. First, white fragility was embedded in pre-service principals' responses to online responses about white privilege. Second, the triggers of individualism, meritocracy, and innocence were also embedded in the responses. In my opinion,

this paradigm created racial cognitive dissonance. Here, participants seemed to employ an “acknowledge-minimize” perspective to their views regarding white privilege. That is, they acknowledged the existence of white privilege. However, the counterpoint acknowledgment is fragility, which is seen in the minimization of the significance of white privilege. In the section below, I analyze specific parts of the responses—again, the actual words of the participants—that highlight minimization of the significance of white privilege.

### **Individualism**

In my opinion, the specific narratives related to individualism are as follows:

#### ***Pre-service Principal One***

She describes an experiment that she has her students complete that allows the white students to see just how evident white privilege is in our society. Although there is no denying that this privilege exists, I do not agree that it is fair to lump all people into a stereotypical mold of behaviors. I believe that all individuals should be evaluated by the content of their character rather than their outward appearance.

#### ***Pre-service Principal Two***

I interact with each person as an individual. I have always gotten to know my students and their parents as people, not as a particular culture. As I have said before, each person is different and there are no absolutes. So instead of assuming about any culture, I get to know the person on a personal level. I have also always had the same high expectations for every one of my students.

In both responses, the fragility was triggered by challenges to the pre-service principals’ beliefs about individuality. For pre-service principal one, the challenge is to see that individualism does not resolve the issue of white privilege. The fragility in pre-service principal two’s response is seen in the belief in just looking at individuals instead of culture. This focus allows the pre-service principals to minimize the importance of how culture creates systems of privilege for white people. The focus also allows both participants to overlook the notion that we can look at individuals and cultural tendencies as the same time.

### **Meritocracy**

In my opinion, the specific narratives related to meritocracy are as follows:

#### ***Pre-service Principal Three***

He is just doing what everyone else around him is doing—they talk and compete about grades so he talks and competes with his grades. Essentially, by their decision to move him into honors classes he has now been given a privilege he doesn’t even know he has. This make me think of the white privilege—there are things as a white person that I have always taken advantage of that have benefited me greatly because I am white. Just as my friend’s

son's life will forever be changed because he placed with a group of students that were on a different tract and he has now been privileged to be a part of the honor's group at his school. He doesn't even know what happened to him- but his life will just be a little easier, safer, and little different now.

#### ***Pre-service Principal Four***

Our discussion in class also referred back to what we were going to be or what we could be when we grew up or what we tell our children. I was told and tell my girls, if you work hard you can do anything you want...own a business, be a doctor, be a teacher, a ballet dancer, you can be anything. I think that was an eye opener when Dr. Hines spoke of the African American mother that told her son that he could be president but only after Obama was elected, but before that, it was an unreachable goal.

#### ***Pre-service Principal Five***

The school that I'm currently teaching at has one black classroom teacher. She was last year's teacher of the year. She was up against many white teachers and deservedly earned the honor. She is a dedicated and well-respected teacher, and that was all that mattered when it was time to vote. At the school I previously taught at, a black woman was just promoted to principal and replaced and beat out other white candidates that were equally qualified (as far as years of experience). I honestly believe color wasn't a factor and that she was hired because she truly deserved the job.

Using Diangelo (2011) as a guide, I purport that all three participants believe that meritocracy positions racial privilege as being based on the idea that hard work creates merit and opportunities. In this context, people from all races can have the same level or privilege. For example, pre-service principal three's narrative shows a belief in how class enrollment allowed a Hispanic/Latino student to achieve a certain level of racial privilege. That is, through hard work, a non-white student was able to achieve racial privilege that is similar to the privilege that comes with just being white. I also equate this perception to the pre-service principals indication of how "Essentially, by their decision to move him into honors classes he has now been given a privilege he doesn't even know he has."

The pre-service principal is overlooking the notion that white privilege is not about tangible items. White privilege is about the intangible of being considered the norm or default race for all other racial groups. That said, no amount of success in a classroom would provide non-white students with the same racial privilege that has been consistently afforded to and inherited by white people.

As with pre-service principal three, pre-service principal four also confuses privilege with merit. In this case, the pre-service principal states that "I was told and tell my girls, if you work hard you can do anything you want...own a business, be a doctor, be a teacher, a ballet dancer, you can be anything." However, the pre-service principal is surprised to learn that an African American perceived that her son could be President of the United States only after the election of the first Black president. Thus, this example showed the pre-service principal that people who are not white do not share the same perspective of believing that merit and hard work alone will

achieve success for non-white people. This pre-service principal saw this perspective as an eye opener because of being white in a country that is based on white privilege.

Pre-service principal five uses the educational advancement of two African American educators to show that white privilege is becoming secondary to equal opportunity for everybody. This pre-service principal overlooks the notion that patterns, not outliers, tell the story regarding privilege. In other words, examples of one or two non-white people's success in career advancement do not erase the establishment of and impact of white privilege on opportunities for non-white people.

### **Innocence**

It appears that the innocence-based aspect of pre-service principal six's narrative is as follows:

#### ***Pre-service Principal Six***

White privilege is something that exists due to the history of our country. I do believe that over time it will fade away as it has already weakened in the past 100 years or so. I believe that the white culture for the most part are not aware of it or do not act on it, however as others stated we are just white and do not think anymore into it.

The innocence is seen in the pre-service principals' belief in that there is a universal benignness that shapes the experiences of being white. That is, white people are either not aware of or not wanting to acknowledge the centuries of advantages and privilege that come with being white. Therefore, the influence of white people and white culture is harmless or innocent in nature. Thus, being white affords white people the privilege of benefitting from while not acknowledging their long-term power, dominance, and authority over other racial groups.

Overall, the fragility narratives may be further explained by Diangelo's (2011, 2012) views of the causes of white fragility. For instance, consider white people's views of race through the good/bad binary. Diangelo's description of this binary is evident in pre-service principal six's use of innocence to frame white privilege. His description purports that white privilege was initially committed by bad white people. Nowadays, white privilege has become more innocent because of not being used by good white people.

As another example, Diangelo's explanation of individualism relates to two pre-service principals' (one and two) responses to the course discussion on white privilege. Their responses suggested that white privilege is not about white people as a group. The main reason, as suggested by Diangelo, is that most white people are taught to see themselves as individuals (Diangelo, 2012). Therefore, white privilege can be addressed by simply treating people as individuals without acknowledging the historical and generational accumulation and wealth and opportunities to generations of white people.

I think that the most significant contributing factor to all of the pre-service principals' responses to white privilege is white spaces. Diangelo (2012) clearly communicated that white people's socialization is largely exclusive of people from other racial groups. This type of socialization was probably a key component to the upbringing of the participants for this study.

The participants' responses do not suggest that they have the sense of superiority and belongingness that comes with white spaces. However, their responses strongly suggest that they live

in accordance to some aspect of racelessness. For these pre-service principals, being white has privilege. But the privilege does not hold more importance than individualism and meritocracy. Thus, the supposedly harmless nature of white privilege minimizes the meaning of being in individualized versions of white skin. Evidence to this effect can be seen in these pre-service principals' uses of individualism, meritocracy, and innocence to deracialize and minimize the relevance of white privilege.

### Implications

The main implication from this research is for participants to engage in conscious reflections on race. The initial reflection should be on whiteness and white privilege. This reflection would help these pre-service principals to develop a sociocultural consciousness to be culturally proficient school leaders. Villegas and Lucas (2007) defined sociocultural consciousness as "the awareness that a person's worldview is not universal but profoundly influenced by life experiences, as mediated by a variety of factors including race, ethnicity, gender, and social class" (p. 31). In this case, white, pre-service principals would begin to see that their views about race have been socialized through the white norms of individualism, meritocracy, and innocence.

They may then be able to interrogate these perceptions in ways that place their racial perspectives among other perspectives regarding race. This suggestion is consistent with Villegas and Lucas' (2007) beliefs in that without a sociocultural consciousness, educators rely on their own experiences "to make sense of their students' lives—an unreflective habit that often results in misinterpretation of those students' experiences and leads to miscommunication" (p. 31). In the context of this study, the lack of sociocultural consciousness would allow these white, pre-service principals to perpetuate narrow assumptions-based views and interpretations about how race and white privilege works in society.

The presence of this consciousness would increase the pre-service principals' likelihood of recognizing the flaws of their perspectives about white privilege. With regards to this study, the pre-service principals would see that white privilege is reinforced—not minimized—by deracializing meritocracy, individualism, or innocence. In addition, adding racelessness to white privilege upholds the recurring beliefs, principles, and systems of white supremacy. By understanding this racial structure, the participants of this study may be more likely to see themselves and their racial views as being a part of the racial order that superimposes white people over other racial groups.

By using this structure in place of their fragility, the white, pre-service principals could become principals who effectively display culturally proficient school leadership. Based on my work on race in schools, I believe the racial component to culturally proficient school leadership necessitates the need for demonstrating the following skills:

1. **Racial Competence**—Principals understand the need to foster a school culture and climate that pursues a clear and compelling understanding of how race works in society and schools and on their particular campuses. This pursuit is also used to reveal the role that white privilege plays in the structure of race on their campuses.
2. **Racial Reflection**—Principals understand the need to foster a school culture and climate that allows for spaces within race reflections and between race reflections of what "being racial" means. This means that faculty, staff, administration, and students from all racial groups find a spot to make sense of what it means to be a member of their

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

As principals, the white, pre-service principals of this study could use this skill set to engage teachers in authentic discussions about race and privilege. This outcome could then resolve some of the race-based inequalities that are built into schools and classrooms (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

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