

# White-washing in International Schools: Examining BIPOC Underrepresentation in Senior Leadership Roles

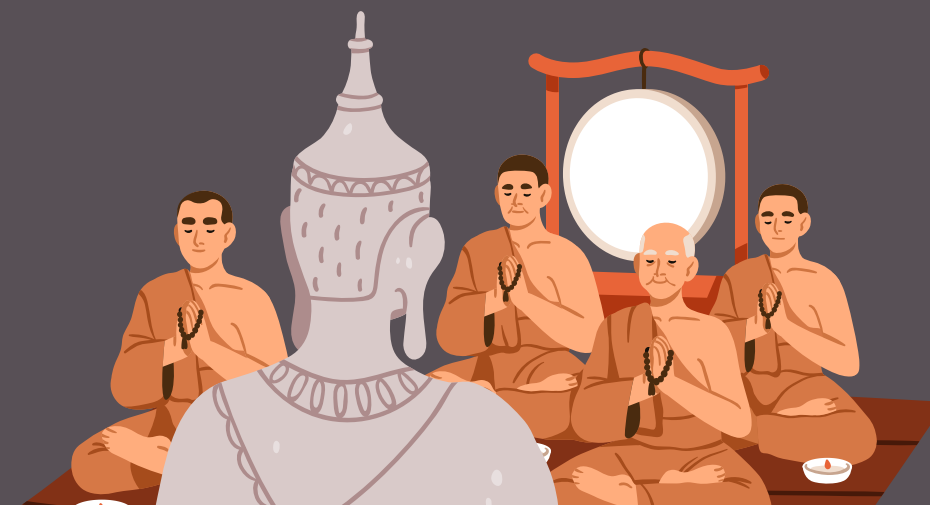
Mona Fairley-Nelson, Ed.D  
September 30, 2025



# Research Problem Continued

The scarcity of BIPOC individuals in senior leadership positions ultimately results in limited multicultural understanding, decreased social justice, inequity, and compromised learning experiences for marginalized students.

The problem is that there is a profound deficiency of diversity in senior leadership positions within international schools, which can prevent students of color from seeing themselves reflected in the leaders that are charged with serving them.



# Research Question

What are the lived experiences of international heads of schools who strived to create senior leadership teams with BIPOC representation?



# Purpose of the Study

- The purpose of the study was to **investigate the behaviors and decisions of heads of international schools who intentionally worked to diversify the senior leadership teams of the international schools they led.**
- Explore the lived experiences of heads of schools who strived to create senior leadership teams with BIPOC representation.
- Gather and **present the collective experiences of international heads of schools in their efforts to increase diversity at the senior leadership level.**
- Importance of this study lies in its potential to **enhance measurable outcomes of DEIJ initiatives within international schools that were particularly focused on these results.**
- Sought to **unpack the recruitment efforts and strategies of heads of schools that believed in creating inclusive leadership teams.**



# Significance of the Study

- **Discrimination** in senior leadership positions in international schools **continued to be an evolving global issue.**
- Lived experiences and **personal biases of decision makers impacted their approach towards recruitment.**
- **Ethnic and cultural diversity was absent in school administrators, it removed the sense of purpose and understanding needed to attack the educational barriers that existed for underrepresentation students.**



# Courageous Leadership

Is a call to action for former and current heads of school and other members of the patriarchy.

Participants' spoke to the mission of their respective schools and how inclusivity, multiculturalism, globally-minded were key words, but these words were not living and breathing in the daily functions and practices of their organizations.

White leaders embrace critical race theory, they begin to see the bigger picture—the deep-rooted barriers that have kept students, teachers, leaders, and communities of color from having the same opportunities as others.

With this awareness, heads can make more equitable decisions that truly prioritize inclusion, not just in theory but in everyday practice.



# Improving Access and Opportunities

Many of these interconnected obstacles were outside the head of school's locus of control. The majority of barriers that come into play are external factors, which are often more difficult to correct. These external factors included the perception of the good ole boys' network.

In examining ways to improve access and opportunities, the white gaze phenomenon is a critical aspect of understanding. White gaze centers all white experience as the baseline for discrimination of historical systems and structures.

The literature further suggests that white gaze, develop pedagogies and epistemologies that are undergirded by white supremacy and are damaging and have a negative impact on BIPOC and their upward mobility.



# Dismantling Cultural Hegemony

In the international context, cultural power is less restricted and international schools market and take advantage of the hegemonic system by perpetuating structures of power established by colonialism and extended by capitalism [which] has given rise to a new transnational class of eliteness or international bourgeoisie.

When heads of school promote race-conscious pedagogy that validates students' cultural identities while acknowledging systemic inequities, it cultivates safe-inclusive environments where racial justice is prioritized, student voice is amplified, and curriculum reflects diverse histories and perspectives.

Culturally competent leadership has the potential to serve as the glue that connects actions to beliefs, values, and philosophies within the organization's mission and vision.



# Implications

An internal strategy to combat this disparity, is to promote from within the organization by focusing on building mid-level leadership pipelines.

When heads of schools advocate and promote diversity within their organization it cultivates a welcoming environment for all members of the school community.

Heads of school have the ability to create leadership pipelines, pathways, and mentoring opportunities to increase diversity.

When school culture does not align with diversity and inclusion initiatives, there is a distinct void in policies and practices that promote access and equity for all.



# Recommendations for Practice

- ✓ Viable solutions include recruitment strategies that involve intentional and more inclusive policy shifts, such as equitable competency and proficiency-based hiring practices, affinity-based mentoring programs, and structural changes to teacher and leadership pipelines.

- ✓ Recruiting firms and schools must consider creative ways to increase access and information to more diverse diverse candidates. This strategy includes marketing and rebranding efforts to intentionally seek BIPOC candidates from unconventional sources.

- ✓ Build partnerships with domestic and host country colleges and universities to create viable teacher and leader preparation programs. These programs could include 8-12 week onsite practicums. These internships could build a new pipelines of candidates.



# Recommendations for Future Research



Based on the consensus that more research is warranted from the perspective and lived experiences of BIPOC seeking to acquire senior leadership roles in international schools.



Investigate how BIPOC school leaders navigate the intersection of their racial identity and leadership role, particularly in predominantly White institutions. CRT allows exploration for considering if racial identity plays a role in how BIPOC leaders approach leadership.



Researching how organizational policies, such as recruitment strategies, professional development programs, and diversity initiatives, influence the creation of diverse leadership teams with BIPOC representation.



Explore if professional learning and training in the areas of DEI and culturally responsive leadership positively impacts how heads of school approach recruitment of BIPOC, representation in leadership, and the reation of inclusive spaces for disenfranchised individuals.

# Recommendations for Future Research Continued



Examine how heads of school mentorship and sponsorship impacts the advancement of BIPOC educators into senior leadership roles. This will confirm or deny the research on creating organizational pipelines for underserved populations that seek leadership positions.



Ensure that BIPOC's voice is taken into consideration in the literature. BIPOC's voice adds value and credence to the barriers and challenges that were encountered on the road to senior leadership.



Explore the head of school selection process and what leadership competencies school boards look for when recruiting for the head of school position.



Investigating the perception of the school governance structures and if diversifying the head of school position would be beneficial to the organization.

# Conclusion

Despite significant progress in recent years, BIPOC remains disenfranchised in senior leadership and positions of power.

**It is** critical to analyze and disaggregate the elements that may have contributed to the lack of equity in international educational leadership. This study shows that both visible and hidden barriers continue to prevent BIPOC leaders from accessing senior leadership roles.

**These** challenges can be addressed and overcome through deliberate actions from school leaders, recruitment firms, international education organizations, and global affinity groups.

**This** research study was intended to shed light on the varied and complex barriers and challenges of heads of schools that aimed to improve BIPOC diversity within their senior leadership teams in international schools.