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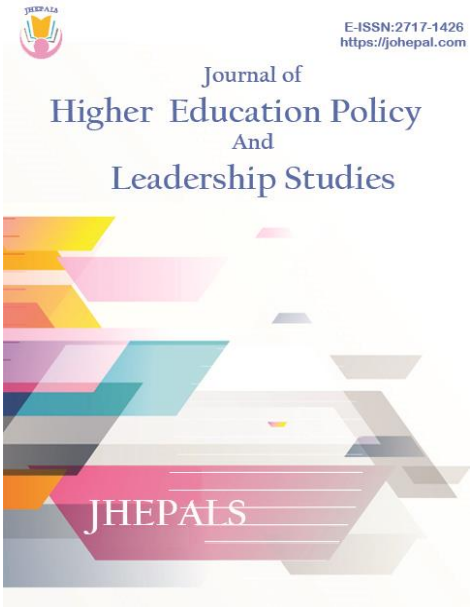

The (White) Elephant in the Room: A Qualitative Critical Whiteness Study of Two Inclusive Leadership Programs

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Abstract

Leadership education has taken an important turn towards inclusive leadership learning and practice (Chunoo & Guthrie, 2021; Dugan & Humbles, 2018). Yet, understanding how Whiteness influences these spaces still requires exploration (Mahoney, 2016; Irwin, 2021; Wiborg, 2020). In this study, we examined two leadership programs at the same institution through an exploratory qualitative approach framed in Critical Whiteness (Applebaum, 2016; Nichols, 2010). We sought to understand how students' inclusive leader identity was developed in relationship with their racial identity and Whiteness. Our findings indicated imperatives for tackling Whiteness and White Supremacy in the context of inclusive leadership learning. Additionally, we emphasized the need of centering social justice metacognition as a crucial factor in the development of student leadership identities. We noted a continuing necessity for educators to consider students' previous and current environments of socialization in power systems (particularly Whiteness and White Supremacy). We identified the relevance of creating a learning container cognizant of these environmental factors that addresses the distinct needs of students (van Montfrans, 2017). Lastly, we clarified the importance of creating a humanizing learning space by building a collective embodied understanding of the social impacts on society and how to nourish social justice thinking.

Keywords: Whiteness; Inclusive Leadership; Critical Pedagogy; Social Justice; Leadership Identity Development

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Introduction

Leadership educators have a social responsibility to address the (White) elephant in the room: we attempt to support students' leader development journey without discussing or intentionally disregarding how Whiteness and White Supremacy culture influence leadership learning. We recognize in the current political U.S. climate where diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, or DEI, is heavily scrutinized and the embedded Whiteness* (Wargo, 2025) influences United States social structures (Gretzinger et al., 2025; Runnels, 2023). Our intention is to hold the spotlight on what continues to be shockingly invisible: the power Whiteness holds over student leadership identity development.

Educators can foster inclusive leadership learning environments by first examining and understanding the influence of race, gender, socio-economic status, and other identity categories on the social construct of leadership (Kezar et al., 2017). Recent literature calls for a critical perspective on leadership to promote comprehension of social constructions of leadership, social identities, and power dynamics (Dugan & Leonnette, 2021; Jones & Bitton, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2023). Leadership educators utilizing the leadership learning framework (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018) should identify and incorporate this lens to best support leader identity, efficacy, and capacity development for learners (Mia et al., 2024). Using critical Whiteness theory (Nichols, 2010), this exploratory qualitative comparative case study examines how students in a leadership [*Note: The authors chose to capitalize the word White and Whiteness to signify the pervasiveness of Whiteness as a power system in our society (Wargo, 2025)] program, predominantly first-generation and underrepresented Women of Color, articulated inclusive leadership compared to students in a gender-coeducational, predominantly white program.

Literature Review

In a review of the relevant literature, we sought to understand how researchers have examined connections of learning leadership to students' racial identities and how student racial identities shape students' experiences in the learning experience. We also explored literature on White supremacy culture in relationship to leadership learning spaces. Finally, we examined how scholars have incorporated elements of the leader identity in the leadership learning framework (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018) through lens of racial/ethnic identity development.

The Intersections of Racial Identity and Leader(ship) Identity

Ospina and Su (2009) argue "...race continues to be a key determinant of individuals and group's fate in the social structure, as well a key social identity construct" (p. 132). As Campbell (2016) points out, it is crucial for higher education to acknowledge the significance of race both historically and in contemporary times. For instance, researchers have uncovered that White students do not feel the need to identify themselves as White (Jackson, 2011). The first time many White individuals become aware of their racial identity is in their initial interactions with People of Color (Tatum, 2003), which can often first happen in higher education experiences (Mahoney, 2016). Yet, scholars highlight that while one recognizes the inequities associated with racism, it is important to recognize the

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intersectional nature of oppression and how it is co-created with other systems such as sexism, ableism, and classism (Collins, 2019).

Leadership education scholars have emphasized the relevance of centering student social identities, positionalities, and learnings about systems of power, privilege, and oppression as crucial to leadership learning (Beatty et al., 2020; Chunoo & French, 2021). Identity can be defined both internally and externally which lays the foundation for understanding multiple and interacting identities (Deaux, 1993). Students' identities directly affect how they perceive and develop their leadership practice (Komives et al., 2005).

A crucial element to enacting leadership, leader identity (perceiving oneself as a leader), along with efficacy (believing in yourself as a leader) and capacity (having the skills to lead) are a key learning objectives within the leadership learning framework (Rocco & Davis, 2024). Leader identity is directly impacted by other social and personal identities as well as the socialization experienced by a person in all their lived experiences. How a person perceives themselves as a leader (or not) and why they claim that title (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) is directly related to how they understand the role of leader and their relationship to that role. As leaders and leadership can be historically (and currently) associated with negative, oppressive power systems, often how students form a leader identity is shaped by their racial, gender, and socio-economic identities (Rocco & Davis, 2024).

Dugan et al. (2008) explored gender, race, and sexual orientation as influential factors in students' understanding and development of leadership. Their results highlight how a students' context and lived experiences of race directly influenced their understandings and perceptions of leadership, including what was valued as part of being a leader. There is often an experienced dual identity that must be navigated between racial and leader identity for Leaders of Color (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Racial identity influences students' motivation to lead (Rosch et al., 2015) and their leadership development overall (Dugan et al., 2012). Enhancing leadership efficacy can have a moderating effect on the negative influences of stereotype threat for Students of Color at PWI's (Rossetti, 2022). Turman's (2017) study on Women of Color college student's leadership development at PWI was "first and foremost about [gender and racial] identity" (p. 90) and highlights the necessity to focus on social identities, particularly of students from marginalized groups as a key factor of leader identity development.

While scant, literature surrounding White racial identity and leader identity focuses more on how White student leaders engaged (or not) in conversations about race. White student leaders often deferred in conversations about social identities to their Peers of Color to avoid racial discomfort (Weaver et al., 2023). Building on this challenge, Foste (2020) noted that White student leaders presented performative posturing of racial innocence when engaged in conversations about race, rather than diving deeply into complex and nuanced dialogue. Taylor (2023) found White student leaders did not engage in systemic thinking about leadership and race, including being unaware of Whiteness. These students also often framed race from a colorblind lens and avoided discussing race because they were afraid to say something incorrectly. Some leadership educators have addressed how to approach the learning and development needs of White students in leadership learning, including navigating resistance of structural impacts of Whiteness (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021) and considering how to avoid pushing White students into a "panic zone" that disrupts their

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ability to learn leadership from an inclusive lens (Taylor & Manning-Ouellette, 2022). The literature is clear that racial identity distinctly influences leader identity and leadership understanding. Building on this literature, this study centered race due to the demographics of the leadership programs studied and history of the university as a HWCU.

White Supremacy Culture

Modern critical race theorists frame White supremacy as:

> ...a political, economic, and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings (Ansley, 1997, p. 592).

Furthermore, White supremacy culture has been defined as:

> the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that Whiteness holds value, Whiteness is value (Okun, 2021, pg. 4).

White supremacy culture also carries characteristics like the right to comfort, the fear of open conflict and perfectionism as there is only one (White) way of doing things (Okun, 2021). Ignorance is also a throughline of White Supremacy. As benefactors of oppressive systems, White individuals are socialized to be ignorant of structural racism and systemic oppression (Neville et.al., 2013). A dangerous aspect of Whiteness is the lack of awareness of White supremacy and how these ingrained social constructs perpetuate positions of privilege (Gillborn, 2005).

Scholars have noted students with privileged identities often have difficulty in analyzing and understanding social stratification (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991). The first time White college students may confront other ideologies is when they arrive on a college campus (Chesler et. al, 2003; Mahoney, 2016). Rowe and their colleagues (1994) suggest two categories of White individuals: they have either achieved racial consciousness or they have not. “Those who had achieved racial consciousness included dominative, conflictive, reactive, and integrative individuals, creating a spectrum of sorts—those who had not consisted of avoidant, dependent, and dissonant individuals” (Jones, 2019, p. 53).

This colorblind and dominant ideology leads to White entitlement: White individuals process a sense of ownership over spaces and belief that spaces must reflect White ideology (Gusa, 2010). Many environments are White (Lipsitz, 2005, 2011), including institutions of higher education which marginalize the views and lived experiences of BIPOC individuals (Gusa, 2010). Several student development theories highlight the impact of a campus environment on student development (Evans et. al, 2010).

Historically, scholars of leadership education have carried the assumption that leadership is race-neutral (Riad, 2011) and thus, White student learning is prioritized in leadership education (Wiborg, 2020). This only perpetuates Whiteness as the norm in leadership (McLaughin & Colquitt Jr., 2023; Mahoney, 2016; Parker & Grimes, 2009; Liu, 2020). Beatty and Lima (2022) described this vicious cycle in leadership learning:

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"Whiteness is legitimized when students are rewarded for conforming to white norms or hegemonic leadership" (p. 5). Simultaneously, leadership education is charged with the responsibility to cultivate individuals' knowledge and capacity to solve complex systemic issues (Manning-Ouellette, 2018). This requires awareness and a critical lens. Having an awareness of one's thought process or metacognition is centered in the leadership learning framework (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Metacognition enables one to grasp gaps of understanding (Black et al., 2016). When integrated into the leadership learning landscape, it allows one to critically analyze and question assumptions about leadership (Volpe-White, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

In framing this study, we looked at works in critical Whiteness studies (CWS). Critical Whiteness theorists examine the social constructions of white privilege (Matias, et.al., 2023) and underscore inequitable and oppressive systems (Nichols, 2010). CWS theorists center revealing the normality of Whiteness (Matias, et.al., 2023); exploring the social positioning of White people relative to others; and exposing Whiteness and decolonizing the oppressed and the oppressors' imaginations (Steyn, 2007). CWS theorists argue Whiteness maintains racist systems through ignorance of how Whiteness has been intentionally and systemically produced (Anderson, 2016; Leonardo, 2002). Analyzing Whiteness enables one to deconstruct the privilege and social construction of Whiteness and its ongoing implications (Fine et. al, 1997). It also creates a space to explore one's responsibilities in the broader racist context (Giroux, 1997). As previously mentioned, leadership has been framed as race-neutral in leadership education thus perpetuating Whiteness as the dominant norm (Riad, 2011). With critical Whiteness as the framework, we examined the role of Whiteness in the students' leader identity as they explored the concept of inclusive leadership as well as its influence in the metacognitive processes.

Positionality

We identify as White cis-gender women educators and advocates for reflexivity in the process of leadership development and social change. Two of us identify as straight, one as bisexual, all recognizing our tapestry of identities that marginalize us sometimes and privilege us at all times. Our economic backgrounds compose of low-to middle class with family dynamics ranging from single-parent homes to first in our families to attend college. Our through line is understanding the privilege we hold and the impacts it has on our teaching and scholarship. We center our students and their stories as beacons for our analysis and, hopefully, for yours well.

Research Methodology

We implemented an exploratory qualitative study of two leadership programs (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999). Through the lens of critical Whiteness studies, we sought to understand how two leadership programs influenced students' leader identity development, knowledge and understanding of inclusive leadership concepts, and application of these concepts to their own roles as leaders through the process of metacognition. Research questions included:

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1. How does Whiteness influence participants' leader identity develop through the lens of inclusive leadership?
2. How does Whiteness serve as a framework for experiencing metacognitive processes?

Institutional Context

This study occurred at a single medium-sized, historically white college and university (HWCU) in the western United States. The university highlighted inclusivity, diversity, equity, and inclusion as primary values, but the lived experience of Students of Color and students from other marginalized identities decried these articulated values. Specifically, Whiteness and affluence was a normalized influential (and often an invisible) factor at the institution.

We studied two programs under the same leadership minor. The programs had similar curriculum, but disparate histories and demographic foci. For both programs, the minor included six classes required in the first and second years. The minor also required six credits of electives and concluded with a capstone in the third or fourth year. Both programs integrated co-curricular programming for participants. Trisha was the instructor for all classes analyzed, served as the director and professor for the WOCLP, and as a professor for the PWLP; both programs are described further below.

As leadership studies students at a private, HWCU, affluent liberal arts institution in the Western United States, the participants in each program were directly influenced by the environment they experienced prior to college and how their own social identities and backgrounds aligned or did not align with the environmental factors also present at their institution and within leadership programs themselves. The PWLP group exhibited a similar demographic makeup to the larger institution (White, affluent, continuing-generation college students). Alternatively, the WOCLP provided a unique environment where a majority of Women of Color, first-generation college students, and LGBTQ+ identified students came together in an affinity-group space.

The Predominantly White Leadership Program (PWLP)

Formed in 1995, the Predominantly White Leadership Program (PWLP) offered a 24-credit leadership minor with a living-learning community component for the first year. Eighty-eight first-year students were admitted to the program annually through a selective application process. Students came from a variety of locations, backgrounds, and pursued varied majors and degrees. At the time of the study, 29% of students in the PWLP were Students of Color and 71% were White; 40% of students identified as men and 60% identified as women.

The Majority Women of Color Leadership Program (WOCLP)

The Women of Color Leadership Program (WOCLP) was founded in 2016 after the closure of a degree-granting women's college at the institution. The program was intentionally created to model the curriculum of the PWLP but have a separate community to provide an affinity group space (Contreras et al., 2025). The program received scholarship funding and legacy connections from the former women's college. At the time of the study, the WOCLP admitted 12-15 new first-year students each year through a selective application and interview process. The WOCLP did not have a live-on component for the first year. All students in the program identified as first-generation college students, Women of Color,

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and/or part of the LGBTQ+ community. Applicants must also have demonstrated financial need in order to have received up to $5,500 in scholarship funding annually. At the time of the study, the WOCLP included 94% Women of Color and 6% White women students. Seventy-six percent of students identified as first-generation college students and 90% of students received scholarship funding from the program.

Course Context

In the fall of the first year of the programs, both groups took a course entitled "inclusive leadership" which utilized the book, A Journey of Diversity and Inclusion in South Africa (Molefi, 2017). The readings, assignments, and the instructor of the classes were identical and offered through the lens of critical leadership pedagogy (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011; hooks, 1994). I, Trisha, first focused the curriculum on exploration of social identities, systems of power, privilege, and oppression, and their relationship to inclusive leadership. I integrated concepts from Molefi's (2017) text including learning how to "unpack" baggage packed for us that perpetuated biased thinking and actions towards others different from us. Students engaged in significant self-reflection and collaborative discussions in the classroom to process applying these ideas to their understanding and enactment of inclusive leadership. The course culminated in a final assignment where students submitted a 4–5-page synthesis and reflection paper that integrated learning from the course, the program, and Molefi (2017) and included their definition of inclusive leadership.

Data Collection

The data analyzed in the study came from two classes described above and included close analysis of the final synthesis and reflection paper. Students were informed of their eligibility to participate in the study in the first class session by a member of the research team. Students were assured their status in the class and in the program would not be impacted by their participation or non-participation in the study and their data would be de-identified prior to analysis. Thirty-three students consented to participate in the study, 22 PWLP students and eleven WOCLP students. Of the WOCLP students, ten were Women of Color and one was a White woman. For PWLP, there were two Women of Color and four Men of Color participants; there were ten White women and six White men participants. Person of Color (PoC) was selected to protect the small sample size of participants in each program as more specific racial/ethnic identifiers could compromise the confidentiality of participants.

Data Analysis

Within the lens of Critical Whiteness studies, we analyzed the data first through open, inductive coding (Saldaña, 2012). We developed a codebook from the first round, with the ability to add codes if we identified missing elements. For the second round, each paper was coded by a second researcher, and we then compared and affirmed inter-coder reliability to mitigate bias (Creswell, 2009). In the final round, we identified high level themes across the most representative codes in the data. Both Ileya and Nicole were not given information on which program the participant was in as they were coding. This allowed the researchers to avoid bias towards assumptions based on previous knowledge of both programs.

The researchers also used content analysis to analyze the text. Content analysis is a systematic coding and categorizing approach often used for large amounts of textual

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information to determine patterns of frequency, relationships, and structures (Gbrich, 2007). The content analysis process allowed us to observe repetition in syntax and structure. Emergent themes highly represented in the findings were: empathy, power-over, power-with, and inclusive leadership understanding, defined in the findings section below.

Findings

The understanding of inclusive leadership varied by program in students' articulation of themes of empathy, power, and construction of their inclusive leader identity. In the WOCLP, students exhibited a high focus on empathy, human-centeredness, and understanding of how systemic oppression would shape their work as inclusive leaders. In the PWLP, many struggled with processing their role in holding privileged identities in Whiteness, masculinity, and/or socio-economic status. The students' experiences showed a broad spectrum of development in considering these complexities. A few students were prepared to step into the journey and expressed a growth-oriented lens.

Empathy

Empathy was a notable theme for students in both programs conceptualizing inclusive leadership; particularly when discussing moments in cultivating connection and mindful listening. We defined empathy as an ability to feel the emotions attached to what another person is experiencing; moments to create connection and mindfully listen. A PWLP student, Quinn, defined inclusive leadership through using empathy to connect:

> *Inclusive leadership means connection: to listen to the narratives of others, being aware of how my actions impact others, permitting discomfort to arise especially if it means connecting with others, and accepting that my perceptions and leadership are susceptible to change as they evolve alongside me.*

Both groups often discussed listening as an empathetic tool to connect with others and cultivate belongingness. As stated by a WOCLP student, West,

> *...By empowering others, one needs to put themselves in other's shoes, listen, and realize the influence you have over others. A lot of micro-inequities [Molefi] can be solved simply by listening and understanding someone's situation and social differentials. There is so much power in simply listening to someone.*

While both groups noted the relevance of empathy to their understanding of becoming inclusive leaders, some students in the PWLP offered generalized perspectives to how inclusive leadership could be enacted through empathy without consideration of systemic inequities, Sarah shared, "*If people were more open minded towards others than (sic) inclusion would be a lot easier.*"

Power

We observed two forms of conceptualizing power in the data: *power-over* and *power-with*. *Power-over* was defined as a hierarchical and/or individualistic approach to leadership. *Power-with* was defined as shared and cultivated through many. While found in both programs, the data in the WOCLP tended more towards power-with, while the data from the PWLP aligned more with power-over perspectives.

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How students viewed power was frequently emulated in their essay syntax structure. PWLP students often put themselves as the subject; WOCLP students often placed the situation or others as the subject. For example, one PWLP student, Mandy, discussed power as a force they held:

> *I want to encourage the transformation of good communities into even better communities...Molefi [states], 'when leaders drive transformation from the top, it gives the whole exercise credibility.' This means that if I pursue transformation, I will be able to prove that the exercise is a real thing and that people are willing to invest effort into it.*

The quote suggests the student is positioned closely to power and control. The goal may have been to encourage a transformation within communities, yet she saw herself as a person of positional power. Moreover, she centered herself as the subject (I) and communities (they) as the object. Empathy was overshadowed by the assumptions of *power-over* to make positive social change.

In contrast, the WOCLP students used empathy to connect and nurture people's power. Often, students reflected on how their experiences as engaged community and family members related to inclusive leadership. A WOCLP student, West, expressed her focus on sharing power with others by noting how dominant narratives influenced her experiences in the world and highlighting her determination to disrupt them,

> *As a Latina, I've seen and encountered many micro-inequities [Molefi, 2017] around me and towards me because of my social differences. Nevertheless, this has taught me to be different. I don't want to be a leader that disempowers those around me…As a leader, one needs to learn to address and break the narratives in your life.*

WOCLP students also shared situations they were part of and how they worked through them - rarely as a leader in position. They often tied their sense of belongingness and/or exclusion to how they treated others or how they had been treated. Using empathy became the fuel to cultivate collective power-with.

Inclusive Leader Identity Development

We found students grappling with how to integrate the concepts of inclusive leadership introduced in the curriculum into their own identities as "inclusive leaders". Codes persistent in this theme included perceiving leadership from either collectivist (human-centered) or individualistic (self-centered) lenses. Further, we explored how students processed ideas of "unpacking baggage" (Molefi, 2017, p. 34) of implicit biases learned through socialization.

Collectivist vs. Individualist Perspectives

The WOCLP students had a personal connection to the systems of oppression and a human-centric approach to liberation, offering a collectivist lens to understanding inclusive leadership. We defined *human-centeredness* as honoring the dignity in others, the promotion of self-worth, and viewing people as humans first. The WOCLP had a higher density for this code. For example, one WOCLP student, Brona, stated, "...*in order to be an*

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inclusive leader…one must validate to a person that they are an important piece to the whole."

In much of the data from the WOCLP, students reflected on how their racial identities informed their understanding of inclusive leadership. These included addressing societal and institutional factors of oppression as a step to being an inclusive leader. One student, Aspen, shared,

> *There were times when I didn't feel as if I belong in my own country. I'm afraid of speaking my native language, I fear being ridiculed, accused, discriminated against daily…I know others have experienced similar and/or different setbacks. It is my social responsibility to acknowledge this. By doing so I will be an inclusive leader.*

WOCLP student, Melissa, expressed this collective, decentering viewpoint in her reflection on inclusive leadership: *This is not about you. Once you realize that, you may conclude that you are limited in your knowledge.*

Conversely, many of the students from the PWLP demonstrated a more individualistic approach. Mandy shared, "*Overall, I can and will make myself more of an inclusive leader. I will stand up and encourage discomfort. I will walk a mile in another's shoe. I will be the force that drives transformation.*" In this quote, there is a sense of responsibility and commitment to inclusive leadership, but the individualistic approach hearkens back to a Whiteness informed traditional understanding of leadership where power-over dynamics perpetuate a leader-as-hero narrative.

A few PWLP students directly resisted the content about inclusive leadership and did not find the concepts "useful."Jessica stated, ?*I plan on becoming a more inclusive leader… using the concepts that most resonated with me (seeing as most of the ideas I found not to be useful for me)"*. In this quote and in other data, we noted frustration from White students in the PWLP. They did not feel a connection to the inclusive leadership concepts and therefore did not see a reason to integrate most of them into their leader identities. Rather, like Jessica, these students stated they would take the content that "resonated most" and leave the rest behind.

Unpacking Baggage

Building on these distinctions, we examined how students approached the concept of "unpacking baggage" (Molefi, 2017, p. 34). While many students across programs dug into the concept of baggage as a metaphor for implicit biases (aligned with course content) some students from the PWLP seemed to miss or ignore this point. Instead, they noted "positive" bags packed for them by their parents, including being inclusive and treating those who are "different" kindly. One PWLP student, Kimberlee, shared,

> *My actual baggage is trying to differ my passion from what's realistic… my over-arching goal is… to build sustainable businesses in developing/third world countries…. It has been hard to figure out what path I should take: be a successful businesswoman first and then do good works, or be less profitable but be able to help others immediately.*

Kimberlee did not connect with the interpretation of packed baggage as implicit bias, but rather a personal struggle, where she also implies it is her role to lead in saving

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developing countries, exhibiting a White savior-type lens. She did not engage in personal reflection on her own implicit biases or consider how these would influence her leader identity in pursuit of her goals.

Other PWLP students noted unconscious bias as an issue, but believed they had overcome the problem. Tristan stated, "*this "unconscious bias" (Molefi, 2017, p. 127) was something that I had to work to get rid of and erase from my subconscious...I feel strongly that as a leader, it is necessary to spread acceptance and kindness because it will make all the difference to the people around you."* . These types of responses showed students in the cognitive dissonance of recognizing they had implicit bias, but offering individualistic, simplistic, or idealistic solutions to "overcome" these challenges rather than seeing them as part of larger systemic issues. Further, these data often perpetuated Whiteness myths that if we just were kind and accepting, systemic oppression would go away.

Another sentiment lingered in the PWLP statements: guilt. In one example, the student's statement addressed a sense of guilt as they unpacked their biases. However, they did not disclose any identities, name privilege, or center others. Following this pattern, we found if the student mentioned privilege, they also distanced themselves from the oppressive systems while at the same time offered solutions. For instance, one PWLP participant, Rachel, noted "…*I need to teach myself how to not feel guilty about my privileged life, but to rather acknowledge it for what it is, and then use the platform I am in, to raise others up.*". The guilt-infused statements hint at experiences of discomfort as White students struggle with forming new narratives within inequitable systems.

A few PWLP students were in a different developmental space. These students could wrap their arms around the complexities of social inequality and their roles in the systems. Many still noted the course content itself allowed for an "eye-opening" experience that transformed their understanding of the world. Adam shared,

> *These biases and inequalities are instilled within us through socialization...I now realize that in addition to removing the unapproved baggage that we carry, a much larger societal transformation is also necessary to eliminate a particular bias or inequality...I have opened my eyes to various inequalities* .

In the WOCLP, students understood packed bags as stereotypes to be seen and dismantled from an equity-oriented lens. Aspen stated,

> *That's why as a leader I want to be aware of the unpacked bags I carry due to my traditional upbringing. It is not enough to treat everyone equally. Equity requires more than that, it requires being aware of what might hold an individual back and making sure to give them the tools… to succeed like everyone else.*

One WOCLP student, Cara, connected bias and fear: "*Most of the biases that people have are the result of the fear of losing something, which can be seen as an explanation of why people find it necessary to oppress others...by addressing the fear ...an inclusive leader [can] effectively make change."*

The students in the WOCLP were formulating their inclusive leader identity informed by their lived experiences and addressing it from a collective, equity-oriented lens. This was not a new idea in their conceptualization of leadership, but instead something obvious. One WOCLP student, Cara, shared,

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> *The idea of inclusive leadership was something that had not seemed foreign to me. It was neither revolutionary nor groundbreaking, but it also was not something that I had thought much of because I believed it was something that was so inherently obvious. I did not imagine a world in which inclusive leadership did not exist.*

In contrast, many students in the PWLP were just having their "eyes opened" to creating an inclusive leader identity, wrestling with guilt along the way. The PWLP students discussed the course content as eye opening, uncomfortable, or difficult, noting concepts were often new and pushed against their previous understandings of the world. Grant noted,

> *This experience was very eye-opening….as many people shared feelings and motivations…that I never knew existed... [it] was a major turning point in my growth as a leader.*

We saw most of the PWLP participants were at the beginning stages of recognizing the importance of inclusive leadership, including understanding systems of oppression and self-reflection, looking at inclusive leadership outside of an individualistic lens, and understanding social identities and location as crucial factors in forming their leader identities.

Discussion

In this study, we examined two leadership programs, hoping to understand how to encourage students to envision themselves as inclusive leaders. We found that how inclusive leadership content was received and redefined by students was shaped by the systems of dominance in Whiteness and White supremacy. This aligns with challenges highlighted by Liu (2020) that leadership continues to be "a love song to Whiteness" (p. 23). We offer discussion below on considerations of the influence of Whiteness in how students conceptualize inclusive leadership, their own (inclusive) leader identity, and the metacognitive processes that influence these developmental learning experiences.

The Relationship of Leader Identity and Whiteness

Across the data, we saw clear links between how students were beginning to articulate a leader identity and Whiteness. These findings connect to the conceptualization of leader identity as forged through socialization and lived experiences (Rocco & Priest, 2023). Additionally, leader identity is related to "one's positionality, how it is enacted and how others perceive and respond to it" (Owen, 2023, p. 13).

While these two programs did center social identities and encourage students to consider systems of power, privilege, and oppression in the curriculum, how the students were arriving when encountering the content exploring inclusive leadership informed how they integrated these ideas into their leader identity formulation. We saw clear evidence of students "claiming" (Ashford & DeRue, 2010) an inclusive leader identity by sharing how they saw themselves in that role and what they would do to enact the principles learned.

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The (White) Elephant in the Room

While most students claimed an inclusive leader identity (which was directly influenced by the prompt for the final paper), *how* students articulated this claim was distinct.

The students in the WOCLP envisioned a world where they were inclusive leaders in a collective capacity. They identified key learning moments in their own lives that related with the course content on navigating micro-inequities and systems of oppression. From these reflections, they identified how they wished to reformulate leadership to be considerate of the most marginalized and from a human-centered lens. Further, they noted how empathy must be the driver of a power-with perspective for becoming and being an inclusive leader. These data affirm previous studies that Students of Color may exhibit a more collectivist paradigm (Dugan et al., 2008) and that their leader identity development is directly informed by their lived experiences of navigating oppression in a world grounded in White supremacy culture (Turman et. al, 2018).

The PWLP students also highly emphasized the relevance of empathy and listening in the efforts of being an inclusive leader. Many also identified the course content as relevant to their efforts to be a leader in the world. The data also showed us that how the PWLP students claimed their inclusive leader identity was more individualistic, fueled by discomfort and guilt, and centered their own power as leaders. These findings mirror research on how Whiteness as a construct promotes a traditional leader-follower framing that is grounded in Western and White framing of individualism (Owen et al., 2024) and reifies White, masculine, heteronormative heroic leadership narratives (Liu, 2020). This echoes findings from Dugan et al. (2008) where White students had lower scores for socially responsible leadership, a collaborative approach, suggesting an individualistic value system. While the majority of the students who presented this perspective were White-identifying, there were also a small number of Students of Color in the PWLP cohort and one WOCLP student who exhibited more power-over and individualistic perspectives, affirming that White Supremacy Culture influences everyone, regardless of individual racial identity.

The findings also align with recent calls from scholars in leadership education to center social identities in leadership education research (Beatty et al., 2021). Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for exploration of awareness of one's positionality and its connection of power relations in leadership education (Rose, 1997; Wiborg, 2020). These developmental learning experiences must also include supporting students' leader identity development through capacity building in metacognition, as explored below.

Leadership Learning and White Supremacy Culture

Scholars across disciplines have examined how our lived environment influences our understanding of the world (Turman et al., 2018). Learning is not merely a skill or strategy that occurs in a vacuum of time and context (Jackson, 2011). When considering leadership knowledge, one cannot ignore how leadership is socially constructed to perpetuate dominant narratives (Liu, 2020; Owen et al., 2024). The overpowering role of White supremacy in leadership learning is noticeable in the power dynamics evident in the findings. In PWLP, the centering of *I/me/my* narrative and solutions-orientation speaks to the power-over dynamic: empower others while still maintaining credit for being the exception to the rule (aka the 'good White person'; Edwards, 2006).

Conversely, those with a collective and human-centered understanding of leadership exhibited a less-hierarchical power dynamic, choosing instead to create and maintain

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interconnected power with others. Again, leadership learning is bound by the learners' reflection to make meaning of their experiences and context (Volpe-White, 2024). With WOCLP students, the findings suggest power through a collective lens and a desire to disrupt societal factors of oppression. Marginalized youth see themselves as a collective effort to challenge the inequities they experience (Watts et al., 2011). This approach is aligned with how scholars framed inclusive leadership as "… the purposeful integration of people's experiences, knowledge, and perspective in all aspects of the leadership process with the intent of minimizing hierarchy, sharing power, and collectively working towards positive impactful change" (Chapman & Gruver, 2014, p. 30).

The varying framing of inclusive leadership speaks to the spectrum of critical analysis skills needed to disrupt oppression (Love, 2000). Metacognition is vital for critical leadership development as metacognitive abilities enable one to identify inconsistencies and make new meaning (Dugan & Humbles, 2018; Black et al., 2016). First-order thinking processes are an experience without impact on one's self-construct and development, whereas second order thinking is embedded in introspection (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). Reflection is key in connecting to the metacognitive process as learners articulate and claim their leader identity and how their social identities, such as their race/ethnicity, impact who they are as a leader and their framing of leadership (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016).

The reflection and questioning threads of metacognition fuels the process of critical consciousness. Scholars conceptualize critical consciousness in three dimensions: critical reflection, critical efficacy, and critical action (Wallin Ruschman, 2018). It is also described as a praxis or a reciprocal relationship between theory and action (Watts et al., 2011). Metacognitive abilities enable critical reflection, or the awareness of systemic oppression, as it feeds the reflection needed to question assumptions while analyzing sociopolitical contexts (Volpe White et al. 2019; Watts et al., 2011).

McLaughin and Colquitt Jr. (2023) note that for White individuals "...a critical consciousness for practicing leadership will not only require an awareness and capacity for reflection on their Whiteness, but a capacity for examining how Whiteness shapes the ways they experience the rest of their identities" (p. 44). However, in the PWLP students' narratives was a hesitancy or inability to name systemic inequity or confront the complicated nature of one's role.

Many individuals shared moments of cognitive dissonance in having their "eyes open". These moments speak to their metacognitive journey. Metacognitive abilities enable learners to evaluate their leadership knowledge as they may recognize their emerging framing of leadership does not align with their former understanding, spurring further questioning (Volpe-White, 2024). Guilt was often mentioned, yet processing through that guilt was avoided in favor of unrealistic solutions. While sitting in the guilt in perpetuity is not the solution (DiAngelo, 2018), avoiding such feelings allows a person to escape the very real "...ongoing structural roots of the issue – racism and White supremacy" (Beatty et al., 2021, p. 261). The distancing from guilt speaks to how individuals are encouraged and rewarded for ignoring critical reflections on systems of oppression (hooks, 1994).

As a key element of critical consciousness, critical reflection is an analysis of social inequities through a systemic lens (Watts et al., 2011). Critical reflection enables members of privileged groups to examine power and privilege while avoiding recreating oppressive structures (Diemer et al., 2016). The originator of the concept of critical consciousness,

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Paulo Freire, played a significant role in the field of critical pedagogy that emphasizes the importance of collective learning (Tarlau, 2014). The next section explores the role of social or collective learning and the findings' connection to social justice metacognition. As supported by scholars, the advancement of social justice metacognition and critical consciousness are intertwined (Hassell-Goodman, et al., 2014).

Collective and Social Justice Metacognition: Centering Power-with and Empathy

A power-with paradigm grows when we recognize it as a relational energy, which is cultivated by acknowledging each other and feeling bound to one another through the strands of empathy (Walker, 2020). This energetic connection pulsates as a way of thinking: thinking forward and thinking collectively. Understanding power as a relational energy means empathy is a mechanism for collective and social justice metacognition. Metacognitive social justice is "…the awareness and control of one's thoughts, examining new knowledge and experiences by consciously questioning who has equitable opportunities to obtain and use resources, and who is positively and negatively impacted because of his or her social identity" (van Montfrans, 2017, p. 12–13). This is noted as a process of high-order thinking within an embodied effort, implementing intentional critical thinking and reflection when engaging with others who are different from you (Hassel-Goodman et al., 2024). Within the arena of leadership education, there is opportunity to develop metacognitive social justice through co-creating activities, like in dialoguing, group projects, and team problem-solving (Hassell-Goodman et al., 2024).

Through this study, we have identified examples of how leadership educators can consider students' stories as critical knowledge to as an effort of metacognitive social justice in understanding leadership and, simultaneously, in influencing the students' leader identity development. Students' examinations of empathy and power-with allow for examples of community steps in redeeming leadership away from power and dominance (Lui, 2020); instead reclaiming it as collective and interconnected to self, other, and society. Empathetic listening, acknowledging vulnerability in learning, and sharing personal experiences and their relation to inclusive leadership offered pathways for students to understand liberatory practices of inclusive leadership and simultaneously build an embodied and collective metacognitive social justice (van Montfrans, 2017).

Additionally, the WOCLP students expressed the classroom was a home and safe space to address the discomforts and aggressions of the outside world in a space with others who understood their experience. This finding affirms other literature on the relevance of counter-spaces for students from marginalized identities (Contreras et al., 2025; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016). Hence, we found the co-learning and affirmation shared in the WOCLP students' narratives shaped the students' metacognition and confirmation of an inclusive leader identity through the means of an empathic and power-with environment.

We recognize this continues to be a challenge in a diverse, yet majority White classroom where barriers of Whiteness influence the learning space. Volpe-White (2024) noted engaging with critical beliefs as a key factor in developing the skill of metacognition. Yet, Whiteness impacts students' ability to be open to new (critical) perspectives and therefore, influences their ability to be open to metacognitive processes. If a person is socialized in a highly closed environment that also happens to be from a majority

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advantaged position, it is likely more difficult to consider alternative perspectives, which is a key skill of metacognition.

With these factors in mind, how do educators create learning environments that are co-created, particularly if the space is filled with different experiences, stories, and social location identifications? Educators can use empathy as a tool to generate classroom compassion and cohesion (Schwartz, 2019). The responsibility the educator has in leading co-created spaces requires an embodied practice of attending to their senses. Simultaneously, attending to senses dictates their perception of others, themselves, and how they lead (Ladkin, 2021). Inviting vulnerability as a conduit to learn and using empathy to connect, we can support a more engaging and connected learning environment where mutual empathy and power-with can occur (Schwartz, 2019). Coupling co-created spaces with critical awareness to systems of oppression can enhance and normalize human dignity (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994, Salazar, 2013) as well as broaden learner's capacities for metacognitive social justice (van Montfrans, 2017). Moreover, instead of controlling and boxing, a reconstruction of power occurs in a container where fluidity and interconnection become the norm and a driver for collective, metacognitive social justice (Hassel-Goodman et al., 2024).

Implications and Future Directions

In 2016, Mahoney argued the walls of Whiteness (Brunsma et al., 2012) present in HWCUs reinforced dominant narratives of leadership learning. He emphasized that to "nurture the development of diverse students and foster transformative learning environments, educators must consider pedagogical strategies that are able to challenge and reconfigure dominant paradigms of knowing, being, and doing" (Mahoney, 2016, p. 48). In this study, we examined two programs that implemented these strategies – and we still found uniquely complex outcomes based on the students' racial identity and the majority racial identity demographic make-up of the programs in relationship to their articulation of an inclusive leader identity and their metacognitive processes.

In building on Mahoney's (2016) considerations to overcome walls of Whiteness in leadership education, facilitating inclusive leadership learning requires the understanding of social identity development in relationship to the ever-reinforced systems of dominance within the environmental context (Foste, 2024). This is affirmed by the most recent National Leadership Education Research Agenda, noting the centering of social identities in relation to dominant systems of power as the first priority in our scholarship (Beatty, et al., 2020). We also recognize that in this current political and societal context, depending on where you are in the US, you may be forced to navigate Walls of Whiteness even more strategically and covertly to combat them.

We encourage leadership educators to use critical pedagogy and inclusive leadership curriculum, taking into account the racial identities of students within the program and institutional environment as it relates to the students' leader identity development (Beatty & Manning-Ouellette, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2023). Critical pedagogy is aimed at analyzing social inequities (Hytten, 2009) and has been applied to leadership education by cultivating efficacy and agency through the centering of issues related to race, power, and identity (Beatty & Manning-Ouellette, 2018; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2023). Scholars

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suggest incorporating critical approaches to leadership learning to deconstruct assumptions and integrate reflection on meaning making to strengthen learners' metacognitive abilities (Brooks & Champman, 2018). Specifically, purposeful integration of social justice metacognition into the leadership learning spaces can create opportunities for learners to foster critical reflection for self-awareness development (Hassel-Goodman et al., 2024), valuing each person's narrative, and become more attune to unseen forces and the origins of ideas and intent (van Montfrans, 2017).

We also recommend considering the developmental readiness of students to learning about topics in race and social justice. Our findings align with Taylor and Manning-Ouellette's (2022) research that emphasizes the need to facilitate students into a growth zone in learning, without reaching a panic zone that creates an emotional and cognitive shut-down. Teaching that centers identity development, facilitates learning of metacognitive social justice, considers developmental readiness, and co-creates an environment where power-with and empathy become connectors rattles the silence that is needed to keep systems of power in place (Herńandez, 2016).

Teaching leadership development will continue to be a contested space depending on the identities of the instructor/facilitator and the students (Wiborg, 2020). This must be recognized by leadership educators and considered as a purposeful practice without an endpoint or achieved "goal". Rather, it is a consistent effort and learning opportunity (Liu, 2020). Our findings agree with current calls to prioritize recognizing the powerful influence students' social locations and lived experiences play in the learning space (Pendakur & Furr, 2016; Wiborg, 2020). Further, our study reinforces the need to understand and attend to Whiteness, including White fragility in the leadership learning process (Beatty et al., 2021). We encourage all leadership educators to consider the findings of this study as relevant data for understanding and shaping the leadership learning environment. We recommend implementing intentional foundations and tools, as well as pedagogical structures for noticing and disrupting hegemonic elements of Whiteness and White Supremacy within the classroom environment and pedagogy to create more equitable leadership learning for all our students.

Limitations

While the majority of students in the WOCLP were Women of Color and the majority of students in the PWLP were White, there were students who were White in the WOCLP and Students of Color in the PWLP. We recognize the PWLP does not have a cohort-by-class element, as each term offered multiple sections of required courses, but students still participated in a co-curricular cohort environment and lived together in one building, allowing for cohort growth in a different circumstance. We also recognized, we, as the researchers, are cisgender, White women; therefore, varied identity perspectives in analysis were absent.

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