

A hiring decision that disrupted whiteness: A critical autoethnography of equity-focused educational leadership

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ees**Melanie Drake**¹ 

Abstract

This article presents a critical autoethnographic examination of an equity-driven leadership decision in a historically segregated primary school: the appointment of a highly qualified Black African English teacher in an environment where whiteness had long shaped institutional culture, professional legitimacy, and community expectations. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, culturally responsive leadership and resonant leadership, the study interrogates how this decision surfaced deeply embedded racialised assumptions about language, academic ‘standards’, and belonging. The narrative illuminates the coded and explicit forms of resistance that emerged, revealing how appeals to ‘tradition’ functioned as mechanisms for maintaining racialised institutional norms. Through analysis of reflective journals, the article explores the emotional and relational labour involved in confronting such resistance, including the spillover of tensions into family life. While foregrounding that this experience cannot be equated with the systemic racism endured by marginalised educators, the study demonstrates how whiteness disciplines white leaders who disrupt its expectations. The findings highlight the fragility of equity gains in schools where transformation lacks structural anchoring. The article argues that sustainable equity work requires institutional, not individual, commitment and contributes to broader scholarship by offering a nuanced account of race, leadership, and the ongoing struggle for justice in education.

Keywords

culturally responsive leadership, equity leadership, critical autoethnography, historically segregated schools, whiteness, educational leadership

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Introduction

South Africa’s education system continues to bear the deep and enduring imprint of a history shaped by institutionalised racial segregation, dispossession, and structural inequality.

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Although the formal dismantling of apartheid and the introduction of a progressive Constitution and Bill of Rights in the mid-1990s established the legal right to education for all citizens, the lived realities within many schools reveal that transformation remains uneven and incomplete. Historical privilege, unequal access to resources, and persistent exclusionary cultures continue to reproduce racialised hierarchies within educational institutions (Badat, 2016; Ntombana et al., 2023).

Historically segregated schools, in particular, embody a profound contradiction. While their student populations have become increasingly diverse, their institutional cultures, staffing profiles, and leadership practices often continue to reflect the normative authority of whiteness. These schools frequently present themselves as bastions of ‘tradition’ and ‘excellence’, narratives that can be mobilised to sustain historical hierarchies through the language of standards, reputation, and institutional legacy (Christie and McKinney, 2017; Drake, 2025). In this way, transformation is both demanded and resisted, creating a deeply contested leadership terrain.

This article presents a critical autoethnographic narrative centred on one leadership moment: the decision to appoint a Black English teacher in a school where whiteness had long structured professional legitimacy, linguistic authority, and institutional identity. This decision, routine in form but disruptive in its implications, became a site through which the tensions of South Africa’s unfinished educational transformation were laid bare. The narrative traces how this moment exposed underlying racialised assumptions, catalysed institutional resistance, and revealed the emotional, relational, and political challenges of leading for equity in a historically segregated educational space.

Early in my tenure as principal, an English teaching vacancy arose; an opportunity to address a longstanding absence of staff diversity in a school where informal recruitment networks had historically resulted in teaching staff who did not reflect the increasingly diverse student

body. Determined to align the school’s staffing profile with its stated commitments to inclusivity and excellence, I broadened the recruitment process and explicitly encouraged applications from all educators, including Black African educators. All formal hiring procedures were followed rigorously, and the shortlisting process, based on qualifications, professional experience, and interview performance, identified a highly qualified Black African teacher as the leading candidate.

What should have been a standard appointment quickly revealed itself to be a deeply political act. The selection panel, composed of senior staff and School Governing Body¹ members, expressed immediate unease. In a private meeting, a senior staff member voiced the anxiety that had been circulating in coded language: *‘You can’t hire a Black English teacher. How will the parents react? How will the children cope with the accent? Our school has always prided itself on a certain standard...’*. Here, ‘standards’, ‘fit’, and ‘reputation’ became discursive placeholders for deeper racialised fears; fears tied to the historical alignment of the school’s identity with whiteness.

As a white principal new to the community, I was acutely aware that this decision was not only a leadership challenge but also a disruption of the school’s collective sense of self. The appointment confronted long-held assumptions about who is seen as credible, intelligible, and legitimate within English-medium spaces; assumptions shaped by colonial histories and socialised expectations. Drawing on principles resonant with Critical Race Theory and transformative leadership scholarship, I approached this decision with reflexive awareness of both its moral necessity and its likely consequences.

Anticipating resistance, I initiated structured dialogues with staff and the school governing body to frame the appointment within the school’s legal, ethical, and educational obligations. However, I also recognised privately (through journaling and reflective supervision) the potential risks for the new appointee, who would inevitably be subjected to heightened

scrutiny. Despite opposition, the appointment went ahead, marking a visible and, for some, unsettling departure from longstanding norms.

It is within this complex landscape that I locate myself. As a white principal appointed to lead a historically segregated public primary school, I entered a leadership context framed by expectations to preserve tradition while simultaneously responding to growing calls for inclusion, representation, and accountability. My positionality as a white leader, beneficiary of structural privilege yet committed to challenging racialised norms, deeply shaped both my experience and how I later interpret it. Rather than approaching this narrative as a neutral observer, I write as someone implicated in the systems I critique.

Researcher positionality

I am acutely aware that my narrative is shaped by the privileges and protections afforded by whiteness – privileges that shape how I experience, interpret, and narrate events. My positionality is historically and socially located within a system that institutionalised advantage for white individuals while systematically marginalising Black, Coloured,² and Indian communities. Acknowledging this positionality is therefore essential to the ethical, methodological, and intellectual integrity of this work.

Positionality, as feminist and critical scholars have argued, is not a neutral descriptor but an active lens through which knowledge is produced and interpreted (Alcoff, 1991; Pillow, 2003). My whiteness shapes how I am perceived, the authority I am granted, the risks I encounter, and the legitimacy of my voice within both educational and academic spaces. Engaging critically with this reality requires what Pillow (2003) refers to as ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’; a mode of reflection that does not seek absolution but rather foregrounds discomfort, complicity, and ethical tension.

My use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a white researcher introduces additional complexity. CRT emerged from the intellectual

labour of Black scholars who theorised from lived experiences of racial oppression and systemic marginalisation (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2020). To engage with CRT as a white researcher is therefore not an act of neutrality but one that demands humility, reflexivity, and a critical awareness of the danger of epistemic domination or recentring whiteness (Leonardo, 2004). Any engagement with Critical Race Theory therefore demands an explicit commitment to challenging, rather than reinscribing, those structures (Brandehoff and Silverstein, 2016; Matias, 2016). I draw on CRT not to speak on behalf of those who experience racialised marginalisation but to interrogate how whiteness operated within the institutional culture of the school I led and how my leadership practice became implicated in both the preservation and disruption of exclusionary systems. My intention is to expose – with honesty – the discomfort, contradictions, and ethical dilemmas that emerge when white leadership attempts to enact equity within institutions historically designed to exclude.

It is important to clarify that this is not a conventional study aimed at producing generalisable outcomes. Instead, this article offers a critical autoethnographic narrative: a situated account of my experience as a school leader navigating equity, resistance, and institutional power in a historically segregated context. The value of this narrative lies in its capacity to provoke dialogue, self-reflection, and critical engagement rather than to prescribe solutions or universal truths.

In the tradition of critical race scholarship, counter-storytelling is used to illuminate aspects of institutional life that dominant narratives often obscure or silence (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). However, I make a deliberate distinction here: my role is not to author counter-stories that speak on behalf of marginalised voices but rather to engage with them ethically and interpretively, recognising their epistemic authority and lived legitimacy. This stance aligns with contemporary discussions of epistemic justice, which challenge the exclusion of marginalised

knowledges and call for research practices that resist the historical silencing of non-dominant groups (Fricker, 2007; Goldberg, 2017).

By foregrounding my positionality in this way, I seek to ensure that this narrative does not obscure power relations but renders them visible, situating my account as one grounded in critical self-interrogation, relational responsibility, and a commitment to equity-driven leadership.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

This study is anchored in a theoretical framework that brings together Critical Race Theory (CRT) as its primary analytical lens, alongside two key leadership frameworks: culturally responsive leadership and resonant leadership. Together, these conceptual and theoretical tools enable a critical interrogation of how race, power, and leadership intersect within historically segregated school contexts and how equity-oriented leadership decisions both disrupt and expose the racialised foundations of institutional practice.

My analysis is informed by these frameworks not as abstract conceptual tools but as interpretive lenses through which I critically examine my lived leadership experiences, the institutional responses to change, and the emotional labour entailed in navigating resistance. Collectively, these perspectives allow me to foreground the interplay of race, power, resistance, and relational vulnerability within a schooling environment deeply shaped by historical injustice.

Critical Race Theory as theoretical foundation

Critical Race Theory provides the central theoretical foundation for this study. Emerging from legal scholarship, CRT challenges the assumption that racism is exceptional or episodic, instead asserting that it is ordinary, systemic, and

structurally embedded within social institutions (Bell, 1992; Delgado and Stefancic, 2023). Within educational contexts, CRT has been widely used to expose how schooling systems reproduce racial hierarchies through policies, governance practices, staffing patterns, and institutional cultures (Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2020).

CRT pushes this study beyond surface-level notions of diversity or inclusion by demanding an interrogation of how power and privilege are sustained through seemingly neutral practices. Several CRT principles are particularly salient in this narrative.

Whiteness is positioned as a normative standard against which legitimacy, competence, and authority are measured, shaping who is perceived as suitable for leadership and subject authority (Leonardo, 2004). Harris's (1993) concept of *whiteness as property* further illuminates how the resistance to appointing a Black English teacher was rooted in the symbolic ownership of academic authority, language, and 'standards' as historically white domains. This resistance reveals how educational excellence itself becomes racialised.

CRT also asserts the permanence of racism within institutions (Bell, 1992), a principle that becomes visible in the later undoing of equity-driven changes under new leadership, underscoring the fragility of transformation in historically entrenched systems. The concept of *interest convergence* further explains how progress is tolerated only when it aligns with dominant group comfort, a dynamic evident in the tensions between equity and institutional reputation (Ray, 2019).

Through CRT, this study interrogates not only explicit resistance but also the coded discourses of 'tradition', 'fit', and 'standards' that mask racial exclusion.

Culturally responsive leadership. Culturally responsive leadership further informs this study by emphasising the need for educational leaders to actively engage with the cultural identities, lived experiences, and social realities of all members

of the school community (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Falkner and Tillis, 2025; Khalifa et al., 2016). This framework rejects the notion that leadership can be culture-neutral or colour-blind, instead asserting that equity-oriented leadership must explicitly address power differentials and challenge the dominance of whiteness as the unstated norm.

In historically segregated contexts, culturally responsive leadership demands more than symbolic inclusion; it requires structural and relational shifts that disrupt exclusionary traditions and re-centre marginalised voices. The appointment of a Black English teacher thus becomes a culturally responsive act that challenges entrenched assumptions about linguistic authority, professional legitimacy, and pedagogical excellence. This framework strengthens the argument that leadership decisions are never merely administrative; they are cultural and political interventions that shape who belongs, who is recognised, and whose knowledge carries authority within the school environment.

Resonant leadership and the emotional labour of equity work. Resonant leadership provides a further lens through which to understand the emotional and relational dimensions of equity-focused leadership. Resonant leadership emphasises emotional intelligence, empathy, relational authenticity, and moral presence as essential for leaders navigating complex and contested change processes (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005). Fullan (2016) similarly highlights that sustainable change requires relational trust, coherence, and emotional engagement, particularly when leadership challenges institutional norms.

Within this study, resonant leadership legitimises the emotional labour involved in confronting resistance, managing personal criticism, and maintaining ethical resolve in the face of social and professional backlash. It allows for a scholarly articulation of how leadership work extends beyond policy enactment into deeply personal and relational spheres,

affecting not only the leader but also their family and community.

This integrated theoretical approach enables a nuanced reading of how leadership functions as a moral, political, and emotional act within historically segregated schools. It allows this narrative to illuminate not only what occurred but also how and why resistance emerged, how power was negotiated, and what this reveals about the persistent tensions between equity, tradition, and institutional identity in South African schooling contexts.

Methodology: Critical autoethnography as inquiry

This study adopts critical autoethnography as its methodological approach. Autoethnography brings together personal narrative and cultural analysis, enabling researchers to interrogate their lived experiences as sites of meaning, power, and social reproduction (Berry, 2013). A *critical* autoethnographic stance extends this by explicitly focussing on structural inequities, interrogating power, and situating personal narrative within broader socio-historical and political contexts (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021). This methodological orientation aligns with both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and culturally responsive educational leadership, providing a robust framework through which to examine race, leadership, and institutional resistance in a historically segregated school.

Critical autoethnography is particularly well suited to inquiry in racialised institutional contexts because it requires the researcher to make visible their positionality, complicity, and involvement in the systems they analyse. Through this methodological stance, I engage my leadership practice not as neutral or self-contained but as an entry point for understanding the operation of whiteness, the politics of school leadership, and the emotional and relational labour of equity-driven decision-making.

The primary data for this study consists of contemporaneous reflective journals I kept during my tenure as principal. These journals were not initially produced for research purposes but as a professional and personal practice to document decisions, tensions, emotions, and reflections as they unfolded in real time. Reflective journaling has long been recognised as a rigorous source of qualitative data, enabling access to the immediacy of experience, the evolution of meaning-making, and the tacit emotional and cognitive processes that rarely surface in formal reporting (Adams and Ellis, 2012; Poulos, 2013).

At the same time, reflective journals are not neutral or exhaustive records of events. They are shaped by the immediacy of experience, by what I was able or willing to notice at the time, and by the emotional and positional lens through which I wrote (Chang, 2016). As such, the journals do not provide transparent access to ‘what happened’ but rather to how events were experienced, interpreted, and documented in the moment. Across these journals, I recorded:

- detailed accounts of leadership decisions and community interactions;
- dialogue from staff and parent meetings (both formal and informal);
- my emotional responses, including fear, doubt, anger, and exhaustion;
- reflections on race, power, whiteness, and institutional dynamics;
- concerns for my staff, my family, and the newly appointed teacher;
- observations of institutional resistance and coded racism;
- moments of support, affirmation, and growth.

These journals formed a reflexive archive that enabled me to revisit the leadership moment not as nostalgia but as data; textured, situated, emotionally, honest and analytically rich. As Chang (2016) notes, autoethnographic data emerges through both remembering and re-interpreting; the journals allowed me to do so

with fidelity to the lived experience. Later analysis did not simply confirm my original interpretations. In several instances, entries that I initially framed as interpersonal tension, professional disagreement, or community discomfort were re-read through Critical Race Theory as manifestations of institutional whiteness, coded racism, and racialised expectations of leadership. The analytic process therefore involved not only revisiting the journals but also recognising shifts in emphasis and meaning between contemporaneous reflection and later critical interpretation.

Data analysis was iterative and reflexive. Consistent with Saldaña’s (2021) description of qualitative analysis as cyclical and heuristic, I conducted multiple analytic passes through my journals, moving from holistic engagement to theory-informed interpretation and thematisation. In this study, these passes involved: (1) narrative immersion, reading the journals holistically to re-enter the emotional and institutional landscapes of the time; (2) reflexive interrogation, questioning where whiteness structured my perceptions, decisions, or vulnerabilities; (3) CRT analytic framing, identifying discourses of whiteness, coded racism, tradition, legitimacy, ‘standards’, and interest convergence; (4) leadership lens alignment, examining how tensions intersected with leadership frameworks such as culturally responsive and resonant leadership; and (5) meaning-making and thematisation, distilling the core tensions of equity decisions, institutional resistance, and emotional burden.

This process was intentionally reflexive and interrogative. Pillow (2003) warns against treating reflexivity as confession or self-justification; instead, I approached reflexivity as methodological discipline, a commitment to discomfort, complexity, and ethical transparency (Berger, 2015).

Autoethnographic writing is itself a mode of analysis; a process that generates insights through the act of constructing narrative (Richardson, 2003). As I wrote this account, new understandings emerged about the

convergence of race, leadership, and resistance. The writing process allowed for re-seeing: patterns became visible, emotional burdens gained language, and institutional contradictions crystallised.

This aligns with the view that autoethnographic texts are not passive narratives but active analyses that ‘show and tell’ the sociopolitical terrain (Mingé, 2013; Pathak, 2013). Through writing, I was able to weave together personal experience and theoretical critique, producing a layered account that foregrounds both meaning and method.

Given the racialised nature of the inquiry, reflexivity was essential. As a white leader researching my own leadership in a South African context, I approached the analysis with an acute awareness of the risks of re-centring whiteness or reproducing dominant narratives. Following Matias (2016), I viewed whiteness not simply as identity but as structural location; a location from which I benefitted and through which I interpreted interactions.

This required ongoing self-interrogation:

- Whose discomfort was I prioritising?
- When did I misinterpret equity resistance as personal conflict?
- How did whiteness shape my authority, vulnerability, and emotional labour?

Critical autoethnography provided the methodological space to examine these tensions with honesty, humility, and political clarity.

Ethical care

Because this article engages with real people, governance structures, and a school community to which I remain connected, ethical care was central throughout the research process. While the narrative centres on my own leadership experiences, I recognise that my actions unfolded within a relational and institutional ecosystem. Protecting the confidentiality, dignity, and psychological safety of all individuals and the school community therefore required

careful consideration and deliberate methodological choices. Although the narrative arises from a staffing decision involving another educator, the article does not seek to represent that individual’s perspective or experience as a standalone account. Its analytic focus remains on my own leadership practice, reflexive interpretation, and the institutional dynamics surrounding the decision.

In addition to anonymising all names, roles, and locations, several layers of protection were embedded into the research design:

- Use of composite characters:

Some individuals portrayed in the narrative represent composite figures based on multiple interactions, rather than direct one-to-one representations of identifiable people. This approach preserves the integrity of the experience while reducing the likelihood that any specific person can be recognised (Edwards, 2021; Ellis, 2007).

- Contextual modification:

Certain biographical, chronological, and institutional details have been deliberately altered or generalised. While the core events remain accurate, these modifications disrupt direct traceability without compromising analytic meaning.

- Role diffusion:

Descriptions of governing body members, senior staff, and parent groups intentionally blur specific roles or professional identities. This avoids aligning key comments or actions with identifiable individuals.

- Focus on self rather than others:

The narrative prioritises my own reflections, vulnerabilities, decisions, and emotional labour rather than scrutinising, judging, or attributing motives to others. This reflexive positioning

maintains the ethical principle of relational respect. The teacher at the centre of the appointment is therefore not presented as a one-to-one character study or as the primary subject of the article, but only insofar as their appointment forms part of the leadership decision under examination.

- Avoidance of identifiable organisational features:

Institutional practices, traditions, or community structures that could reveal the school's identity have been generalised to reflect common patterns across historically segregated schooling contexts.

These strategies align with established guidance for autoethnographic and narrative research (Ellis, 2007, 2009; Pathak, 2013), ensuring respect, relational integrity, and protection of participants. At the same time, I acknowledge what scholars (Adams and Ellis, 2012; Edwards, 2021; Tullis, 2013) describe as ethical dissonance or ethical dilemmas in autoethnography: the recognition that, because my leadership roles are publicly traceable, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Rather than pursuing an impossible ideal of total concealment, I prioritise minimising harm, avoiding identifiable attribution, and maintaining ethical responsibility in how individuals and institutions are represented. The purpose of this narrative is therefore analytic rather than documentary, foregrounding structural dynamics and reflexive meaning-making rather than reconstructing identifiable events.

Narrative case and emergent findings

The narrative that follows is drawn primarily from my leadership journals and later analysed through a critical autoethnographic and CRT-informed lens. Rather than presenting the case as a linear story, I organise the account around three interrelated tensions that emerged during

analysis: (1) leading for equity in a racialised institution, (2) encountering resistance grounded in whiteness, and (3) navigating the emotional and personal costs of equity-driven leadership. These tensions provide insights into the racial politics of leadership in historically segregated schools and reveal the challenges of disrupting institutional whiteness. A final subsection, 'A Fragile Victory', serves as a reflective extension to these themes, drawing together journal-based reflections with later observations and interpretations about the short-lived nature of the equity gains that followed.

Leading for equity: A decision with institutional consequences

A vacancy in the English department presented a chance to address the disconnect between the school's increasingly diverse student body and its racially homogenous teaching staff. Historically, staff appointments had circulated through informal, predominantly white professional networks; an unspoken but powerful practice that reproduced a staffroom reflective of the school's segregated past rather than its demographic present. In my journals, I noted my discomfort with this pattern, writing: *'The staffroom reflects the past, not the present, and certainly not the future'*.

In response, I initiated a transparent, open recruitment process that deliberately broadened the pool of applicants. This included outreach intended to ensure that all educators, including Black African educators, were aware of the vacancy; an action grounded in the belief that equitable processes cannot occur within inequitable networks. Formal appointment procedures were followed with precision, and the shortlist produced a highly qualified Black English teacher whose pedagogical strengths were clear. My recommendation for their appointment was not only based on their professional excellence; it was a conscious expression of equity-focused educational leadership. Representation is particularly

significant in English-medium schools in South Africa, where language, legitimacy, and academic authority have historically been policed through whiteness.

Recommending their appointment was therefore both a principled and pedagogically sound decision. Yet even at this early point in the process, I sensed that the decision would be far from routine. My reflective notes reveal an awareness that we were stepping into contested terrain: *'This will not be received as normal practice. It will be read as change. As challenge'*. What should have been an administrative decision became an early signal of how deeply racial identity and institutional tradition were intertwined.

This moment constitutes the first key finding of this autoethnography: in this school, and for key actors involved in this appointment process, equity-focused leadership was framed less as organisational development than as institutional disruption.

The act of appointing a Black English teacher, despite their unquestionable qualifications and adherence to every procedural requirement, exposed the school's unresolved racial tensions and the fragility of its stated commitments to inclusion. It demonstrated that equity leadership is not only about transforming structure' but also about confronting the cultural logics that sustain racialised expectations of 'fit', 'standards', and legitimacy within educational institutions.

Encountering resistance: Whiteness, 'Standards', and the politics of legitimacy

Resistance surfaced rapidly and with striking clarity. In a closed-door meeting, a senior staff member expressed concerns that captured the racialised anxieties circulating among some members of the school community:

You can't hire a Black English teacher. How will the parents react? How will the children cope with the accent? Our school has always had a certain standard.

Although framed politely, the objections rested on racialised assumptions about linguistic legitimacy, professionalism, and the protection of the school's 'reputation'. My journals captured my immediate reaction: *'They are not talking about accent, they are talking about race'*.

During later analysis, it became clear that these objections were manifestations of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), where English language instruction was implicitly guarded as a domain of white cultural authority. Comments about 'standards' and 'tradition' served as coded proxies for racial exclusion; mechanisms that maintain institutional whiteness while appearing race-neutral. Resistance also emerged from members of the School Governing Body (SGB), who framed the decision as risky, destabilising, and potentially divisive for the parent community. Their concerns centred on tradition, legacy, and parental expectations, highlighting how school prestige remained tied to racialised constructs of excellence.

In the journals, I reflected:

They talk about protecting the school culture, but whose culture is being protected? And who is excluded from this imaginary tradition?

This led to a second major finding: in these interactions, resistance to the appointment appeared to function less as a concern about competence or process and more as a defence of tradition and whiteness as institutional identity.

The emotional and personal costs of equity work

While institutional resistance was expected, its personal intensity was not. The reaction extended beyond professional disagreement into emotionally charged and publicly visible forms of pushback. Social media posts accused me of 'changing the school too quickly', 'destroying tradition', and 'lowering standards'. Some comments targeted my character and leadership integrity, shifting from critique to attack.

The emotional burden was substantial. My journals reflect a period marked by exhaustion, fear, and deep vulnerability:

I expected disagreement. I did not expect to become the symbol of everything people feared.

‘My children came home asking why other kids said their mother was “ruining the school”’.

But the tensions escalated further when they began to affect my family in tangible ways. One journal entry captured a moment that crystallised how deeply the resistance had penetrated the school environment:

Today I learned that one of my children was spoken to sharply and unfairly by a teacher who has openly opposed my decision to appoint our new English teacher. It was a minor classroom incident, but the disproportionate reaction was unmistakable. My child was humiliated in front of peers, and when I asked gently for clarification, the teacher’s tone made it clear: this was not about my child; it was about me.

This moment became one of the clearest signs of how institutional resistance can spill over into personal relationships, blurring boundaries between professional leadership and family life. In later analysis, this incident stood out as an example of how the emotional labour of equity work is not confined to the leader; it reverberates through their family, creating secondary sites of strain and vulnerability. Resonant leadership literature acknowledges the emotional toll borne by leaders (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005; Theoharis, 2008) but rarely addresses the collateral emotional impact on those connected to them.

In my reflective notes following the incident, I wrote:

This is the moment I realised the resistance is no longer philosophical. It is personal. It is targeted. And my child is now entangled in a conflict they have no part in.

The emotional weight of this period was immense. I carried the dual responsibility of protecting my staff member from racialised scrutiny and shielding my children from the fallout of decisions they did not make. Holding both roles, leader and mother, made the stakes acutely visible.

The tensions also became evident in broader community spaces. My husband, who regularly attended our children’s hockey and netball matches, began to notice a subtle but unmistakable shift in social dynamics. Parents who had previously interacted warmly with him now avoided eye contact, cut conversations short, or chose to stand at a distance. What unfolded was a form of quiet social withdrawal; an embodied discomfort directed not at him personally, but at the disruption to whiteness that our family had come to represent. His reflections captured this poignantly: *‘It was as though we had crossed an invisible boundary. People weren’t angry. They were uncomfortable. And their discomfort became distance’*.

This widening ring of resistance underscored the extent to which equity-focused leadership can unsettle not only institutional norms but also community relationships. It also reinforced an important lesson: that leading for equity is never confined to the professional sphere; it becomes lived through the bodies, relationships, and emotional worlds of everyone connected to the leader.

Over time, this strain shaped my understanding of whiteness in leadership. Although CRT centres the experiences of those marginalised by racism, critical reflexivity revealed that when white leaders disrupt institutional whiteness, they may experience a backlash that punishes deviation from white communal expectations. This does not equate to the experiences of racialised colleagues who face systemic racism; rather, it reflects a different dynamic; one in which whiteness disciplines those who challenge its norms, enforcing racial boundaries

through discomfort, social sanction, and relational withdrawal.

This distinction is crucial. My own discomfort and vulnerability were situational and contingent on a specific leadership decision; they did not constitute racial oppression. Instead, they revealed how whiteness functions as a regulatory force; protective when aligned with its expectations and punitive when challenged.

This leads to an expanded articulation of the third finding: in this case, equity-focused leadership carried profound emotional and personal costs, extending beyond professional boundaries into family life and relationships, particularly as racialised expectations of leadership were disrupted.

As I wrote during that period:

I am learning that disrupting whiteness as a white leader comes with its own backlash, not in the same way Black colleagues experience racism, but as a rupture of what white communities expect from their leaders.

A fragile victory: The limits of structural change

The teacher was appointed. Their presence in the school was a quiet but powerful act of transformation. Students responded positively, many expressing for the first time that they ‘saw themselves’ reflected in an English teacher, someone who understood their linguistic realities, cultural contexts, and ways of speaking. Their classroom quickly became a space where learners felt affirmed and academically stretched; several parents shared how their children’s confidence in English had grown under their instruction.

Colleagues who were initially anxious soon observed their competence and professionalism. Their contributions to literacy instruction became increasingly visible: they introduced new pedagogical strategies, collaborated on reading interventions, and contributed meaningfully to curriculum planning. Their expertise enriched

the school’s English department and broadened its pedagogical repertoire in ways that had long been needed.

Yet even as their practice flourished, I became aware of how the appointment was perceived within the wider professional community. A colleague who attended a district curriculum meeting later recounted that a teacher from another school referred to me, long after I had left my position, as ‘that principal who hired a Black English teacher’. The remark was not offered in neutrality; it was said with a tone of derision, reducing my entire leadership tenure to a single decision that, in their view, marked me as a disruptor of the racial status quo. The dismissiveness in the comment captured how deeply racialised norms continued to shape perceptions of leadership across neighbouring schools. It also revealed how an act of equity could be weaponised to define, diminish, or discredit a leader who refused to uphold inherited racial boundaries.

Despite the clear positive impact of the appointment, the progress proved fragile. Under new leadership, many of the equity-focused initiatives introduced during my tenure were reversed. Staff reverted to established recruitment networks, diversity-related practices were discontinued, and the appointment that had been so hard-won was treated as an anomaly rather than a precedent.

This reversal revealed a sobering reality: equity gains in historically segregated institutions remain precarious when not anchored in collective commitment or structural accountability. CRT’s principle of the permanence of racism, and its theorisation of interest convergence, offers a compelling explanation for the institution’s reversion to historical norms. When equity initiatives challenge whiteness without serving dominant interests, their longevity depends on the leader who initiates them, rendering them vulnerable to erasure as soon as leadership changes.

Discussion

The findings of this critical autoethnography illuminate how, in this particular school context,

attempts to enact equity triggered deeply embedded racialised tensions, revealing the persistent influence of whiteness on institutional culture, leadership expectations, and community responses. While these findings are case-grounded rather than empirically generalisable, they generate interpretive insights with broader relevance for thinking about race, power, and equity-focused educational leadership. In unpacking these tensions, this discussion connects the narrative to the theoretical frameworks guiding this study; Critical Race Theory (CRT), culturally responsive leadership, and resonant leadership, to analyse the broader implications for equity-focused leadership practice.

Disrupting whiteness and the racialised logic of 'Standards'

The resistance encountered following the appointment of a Black English teacher in this case demonstrates how whiteness operated as an unspoken organising logic within the institution. Although objections were articulated through coded discourses of 'standards', 'tradition', and 'reputation', CRT reveals that these frames function as racialised mechanisms of exclusion that protect the symbolic property of whiteness (Harris, 1993). What was positioned as concern for 'quality' was inseparable from racialised assumptions about linguistic legitimacy, professional competence, and the normative association of English with whiteness.

The pushback from both staff and the SGB reflected more than individual prejudice. It indicated a collective attachment to an imagined past in which excellence was implicitly defined through white cultural markers. As Gillborn (2006) and Solórzano et al. (2000) argue, racism in education often manifests not through overt hostility but through the everyday processes that maintain racial hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. The resistance described in this case echoes this pattern, revealing how white institutional identity is preserved through

discourses that appear race-neutral but function to privilege whiteness. This accentuates a central point: equity leadership is not simply about diversifying staff but about challenging the racialised definitions of professionalism and excellence that underpin institutional culture.

Equity leadership as institutional disruption

Culturally responsive leadership scholarship emphasises the need for leaders to engage directly with the cultural and demographic realities of their school communities (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016). This case suggests that, in historically segregated contexts such as this one, such engagement may be perceived as destabilising rather than developmental. This appointment challenged deeply embedded norms and expectations, prompting stakeholders to perceive equity-centred leadership not as organisational growth but as a threat to institutional identity.

This reaction aligns with the CRT principle of interest convergence (Bell, 1992): equity is accepted only when it aligns with dominant interests. When equity is perceived to conflict with tradition, reputation, or parental expectations, resistance intensifies. The intensity of the opposition suggests that equity leadership exposes institutional fault lines, revealing where commitments to transformation are symbolic rather than substantive.

From a leadership perspective, this case illustrates that equity work requires confronting institutional narratives that idealise the past while marginalising those not historically represented within it. The tensions that emerged demonstrate the limits of surface-level support for diversity in contexts where whiteness remains the default cultural reference point.

The emotional and relational burden of disrupting whiteness

The emotional toll that accompanied this decision illuminates a frequently overlooked

dimension of equity-focused leadership: the relational and affective labour required to confront institutional resistance. Resonant leadership scholarship highlights the importance of emotional intelligence, relational authenticity, and moral presence when navigating conflict and complexity (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005; Goleman et al., 2013). These capacities were critical as I worked to maintain trust, support the newly appointed teacher, and manage fractured relationships within the school community.

However, it is essential to emphasise that the emotional distress I experienced as a white leader cannot be compared to the systemic racism, marginalisation, and harm historically endured, and still endured, by Black educators and communities. My discomfort emerged because I challenged the norms of a system designed to privilege people like me. The resistance I faced was a disciplinary mechanism of whiteness. Critical race theorists note that whiteness regulates itself by sanctioning those who deviate from its expectations (Applebaum, 2010; Matias, 2016). My experience aligns with this dynamic: the backlash functioned as a reminder of the boundaries that white communities often expect white leaders to maintain.

At the same time, the emotional and relational consequences were real. Resistance escalated into personal attacks, ruptured professional relationships, and incidents that spilled into my family life. The episode in which a teacher directed disproportionate criticism at my child became a vivid example of how institutional resistance can cross ethical lines and generate secondary harm. Leadership literature seldom addresses the ways in which equity work can affect the families of leaders, revealing a gap in understandings of the wider relational terrain of educational leadership.

This case therefore extends existing scholarship by showing that equity leadership in racialised institutions carries personal consequences that are rarely acknowledged or theorised. The emotional burden did not stem from being marginalised by race but from confronting the protective mechanisms of

whiteness within an institution invested in its own continuity. Recognising this distinction is crucial: the emotional labour borne by white leaders who disrupt whiteness must never be conflated with the lived realities of those who experience systemic racism.

Equity leadership is not merely technical or strategic; it is deeply personal, emotionally demanding, and relationally complex. It requires leaders, particularly white leaders, to sustain reflexivity about their own positionality while navigating the social sanctions that arise when institutional norms are challenged.

The fragility of equity gains in racialised institutions

The later reversal of equity-focused initiatives under new leadership underscores, in this case, the fragility of racially progressive change in an institution shaped by historical segregation. CRT posits the permanence of racism in social systems (Bell, 1992), suggesting that without sustained, collective commitment, institutions often revert to established patterns aligned with dominant interests.

The dismantling of equity initiatives in this school illustrates precisely this dynamic. It demonstrates that individual acts of equity-driven leadership are insufficient when structural arrangements, governance practices, and cultural norms continue to reflect racialised hierarchies. Unless change is intentionally embedded in policy, culture, and accountability structures, equity work remains vulnerable to erosion during leadership transitions.

This reversal raises several critical questions for the field. What structural and cultural conditions are necessary for equity initiatives to endure beyond the tenure of individual leaders? How do school governance arrangements reinforce or challenge the racialised norms that shape historically segregated institutions? And what mechanisms of institutional accountability are required to ensure that diversity and inclusion efforts are sustained rather than abandoned

when leadership changes? Addressing these questions requires a shift from viewing equity leadership as an individual endeavour towards understanding it as a collective, structural, and ongoing process.

Implications for equity-focused educational leadership

The tensions illuminated in this study offer several significant implications for leadership practice within historically segregated and racially complex schooling contexts. First, the narrative demonstrates that equity leadership must be explicitly anti-racist rather than neutral or colour-blind. Approaches that avoid naming race risk reinforcing the very norms they seek to challenge, particularly in institutions where whiteness continues to shape notions of legitimacy, authority, and belonging.

Second, the emotional labour associated with confronting racialised resistance emphasises the need for robust support structures for leaders engaged in equity work. Mentoring, peer networks, and institutional recognition of the affective demands of challenging entrenched norms are essential for sustaining leaders over time.

Third, the findings highlight the pivotal role of school leadership and school governance in either protecting or undermining equity initiatives. Meaningful and sustained transformation requires leaders to engage strategically with these structures to ensure that organisational processes, decision-making practices, and institutional priorities align with equity goals.

Fourth, the fragility of equity gains in this case illustrates that transformation must be structural rather than individualised. Policies and procedures, particularly those governing recruitment and professional advancement, need to be redesigned to prevent a return to informal networks that reproduce racial homogeneity. Without institutional embedding, equity efforts remain vulnerable to reversal when leadership changes.

Finally, the study affirms the necessity of naming and interrogating whiteness as an organisational force. When schools rely on discourses of ‘tradition’, ‘standards’, or ‘community expectations’ without critical examination, these narratives can function as proxies for racialised norms. Making whiteness visible is therefore essential to advancing culturally responsive and socially just forms of leadership.

Collectively, these implications contribute to broader scholarly conversations about educational equity by offering a textured, contextually grounded understanding of how race and leadership intersect within the everyday practice of schooling.

Conclusion

This critical autoethnography has shown how an equity-driven staffing decision exposed deep racialised tensions within a historically segregated school. Using Critical Race Theory as an analytic lens, the narrative demonstrates how whiteness continues to inform institutional norms, definitions of professionalism, and assumptions about legitimacy long after the formal end of apartheid. The resistance to appointing a highly qualified Black English teacher illustrates how racialised expectations are maintained through coded language and appeals to ‘tradition’, revealing the ongoing contestation surrounding transformation in such spaces.

The account also highlights the emotional and relational dimensions of equity leadership. While my experience cannot be compared to the racism endured by marginalised colleagues, the backlash, extending into my professional relationships and family life, attests to the social sanctions that can accompany disruptions to institutional whiteness. These insights expand conversations in leadership scholarship by acknowledging the affective complexity of equity work and the ethical, relational labour required to sustain it.

A key insight from this study is the precariousness of equity gains. Despite the positive

impact of the appointment, the later reversal of equity initiatives under new leadership underscores how vulnerable transformation remains when not structurally embedded. This pattern aligns with CRT's analyses of the permanence of racism and the conditional nature of racial progress. The implications for educational leadership are clear: meaningful transformation requires institutional, not individual, commitment. Structural reforms to recruitment practices, governance processes, and accountability mechanisms are necessary to prevent reversion to racialised norms.

By offering a candid and reflexive account, this article contributes to ongoing scholarship on race, leadership, and justice in education. It affirms that while challenging whiteness is difficult and often costly, it remains essential for realising educational environments that honour the democratic and constitutional ideals to which schools aspire.

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Ethical considerations

This study is based on the author's personal reflections and professional experiences as a school principal, examined through a critical autoethnographic methodology. No data were collected directly from students, staff, parents, or other participants, and no identifiable personal or institutional information is disclosed. All names, locations, and contextual details have been anonymised or generalised. In line with institutional and disciplinary guidance for autoethnographic research, formal ethical approval was therefore not required.

Author contributions

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Data Availability Statement

The data generated and analysed during this study consist of personal reflective journals and narrative accounts produced by the author as part of a critical autoethnographic research process. Due to the deeply personal nature of these materials, and to protect the confidentiality of individuals, institutions, and communities described, the data are not publicly available.

AI Use Declaration

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely to support grammar, syntax, and formatting refinement during manuscript preparation. No AI tools were used for conceptual development, data analysis, interpretation, or generation of arguments. All intellectual content and conclusions are the author's own.

Notes

1. School Governing Bodies (SGBs) are democratically elected governance structures in South African public schools, composed primarily of parent representatives. Although schools operate under state administration, SGBs hold substantial authority over school matters, including recommending appointments.
2. In the South African context, the term 'Coloured' refers to a diverse group of people with mixed ancestry, including descendants of European, Asian, and Khoisan populations. It has specific historical significance, particularly under apartheid, where it was used to classify individuals outside the 'white' or 'black' categories.

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