

The Firsts: The Interiority of Black South African Principals Inside White-Majority Schools

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In this essay, Jonathan D. Jansen and Samantha Kriger make visible the inner lives of the first Black principals in white-majority schools in South Africa. Through in-depth, on-site, narrative interviews with thirteen principals, and using the lens of interiority, they report on the anxieties, insecurity, and uncertainties experienced by these pioneers in the aftermath of apartheid, as well as their aspirations, commitments, and determination to transform predominately white institutions. Respondents spoke openly and candidly about their vulnerability as Black leaders in white schools, discussing the toll of school-based racism and resentment on their emotional lives, explaining the struggle between advancing and yet holding back change to avoid alienating white parents and teachers, and revealing how the racialized contexts in which they work awakened a reassessment of their own identities and of those they lead.

Keywords: interiority, school principals, predominantly white institutions, trauma, transformation leadership

The stories we present make visible the inner lives, or *interiority*, of the Firsts—in this case, the first Black principals to lead predominantly white schools in the wake of apartheid. In the process, the principals' stories reveal an undocumented moment in the drama of South Africa's transition to democracy: the human costs of school leadership inside a racially divided country in the throes of social change. At the same time, the individual narratives lay bare the enduring effects of race and resentment in the lives and leadership of these first Black principals.

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Interiority refers to the inner lives of the Black principals as pioneers in the deracialization of South African schools—their aspirations and insecurities, commitments and anxieties, determination and uncertainty—as they stepped into strange and unfamiliar leadership positions. The external lives of these principals are very much evident in their daily words and actions. “We are being watched, observed, looked at all the time,” said several of these school leaders. Yet little is known about the often-unspoken hurts and humiliations or the hopes and healings of Black principals in white-majority schools.¹

Telling and hearing these stories in the principals’ own words is important. Storytelling creates connections and is a powerful means for these leaders to teach and inspire others. We approached the storytelling as members of the Firsts. Samantha Kriger was the first Black teacher in a white suburban school, and she experienced many of the same emotions the principals in this study expressed. Similarly, Jonathan D. Jansen (2009) was the first Black dean at an urban white university and the first Black vice chancellor of a largely rural white university. While the memory of our own interior lives as transitional leaders enabled us to craft appropriate interview questions and to understand the struggles of the Firsts, we tried to bracket our own experiences so that the words of the respondents enjoy prominence in the telling of their stories.

We approach the storytelling with a focus on interiority, documenting the ways these principals responded to racially demanding situations in their schools. We explore how they reasoned with themselves, what internal adjustments they made in their encounters with whiteness, and how their racialized contexts shaped their educational decisions. In short, we are curious about what happens inside the social, emotional, psychological, and political lives of Black principals in the course of leading white-majority schools and their settled inhabitants.

Schools in South Africa

At the dawn of South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, the country had four racially segregated education departments—one each for whites, Indians, Coloreds (“mixed race”), and Africans—which in the case of Africans was further divided ethnically into ten rural Bantustan (homeland) departments and one department for those living in the urban areas.² Whites constituted a small minority in South African society, just 13 percent of 41.5 million in 1995 (CSS, 1996). White schools with a mere 3,436 principals served 932,181 students. In the urban African schools alone, there were 7,800 principals at the same time leading more than 2.2 million students, with another 3,000 African principals responsible for more than 3.26 million students in just one of the larger rural Bantustans (KwaZulu Natal) (Lindsay & Zath, 1994).³

In general, each school under the four segregated departments had principals, teachers, and students from their officially designated racial group (e.g., white teachers taught white students in schools under the leadership of white

principals). However, the end of apartheid meant that legally no student could be denied admission to any school and that all teachers could apply for advertised positions at the educational institution of their choice. Similarly, principals could compete for leadership jobs at any South African school.

In South Africa, each local school's School Governing Body (SGB), which includes parents, select teachers, and principals, advertises vacant positions, interviews a short list of candidates, and then submits the names of preferred candidates to the government's provincial department of education, which makes the final choice for appointment, though in most cases the school's first choice is respected. That is the formal process. In reality, most white schools, heavily privileged in terms of status and resources, tend to enroll mainly white students and appoint mostly white teachers and principals since school authorities enjoy considerable autonomy in decision-making (Jansen & Kriger, 2020).

However, since the early days of democracy white schools have been under political pressure from progressive Black and white parents in their schools and their respective departments of education to open access to Black students and teachers. Slowly some of the former white schools also started to appoint Black principals as "the Firsts" of their group, and it is this pioneer group whose stories of leadership we present in this essay.

The principals we spoke to were from the Western Cape of South Africa, in particular the more densely populated area of metropolitan Cape Town. This is the area where many of the most elite white schools of South Africa were established over more than a century ago, with traditions entrenched in racial exclusion since colonial occupation (1650s on) through the years of formal apartheid (1948–1994). In these Cape Town schools a small group of white principals continued to be (re)circulated through an elite system of privileged schools until recently, when some of them opened their doors to the first Colored principals.⁴

It was expected that coming into these established white schools as the first Black principals would be a harrowing experience, given the nation's long history of racial exclusion, cultural prejudice, and class elitism (Jansen & Kriger, 2020). To work as a Black teacher alongside white colleagues would be difficult enough (le Roux, 2022); to lead white teachers and the children of white parents in the wake of apartheid would be a completely different challenge. But what actually happened to these pioneering Black principals, and how did they account for their experiences? Until now, the early leadership experiences of the Firsts were clouded in mystery.

Understanding Interiority

How do Black principals think, feel, and account for their experiences inside white-majority schools? What wrestling happens within, and how do they make sense of these unfamiliar, sometimes hostile environments? We describe the complex, conflicted, and concealed inner lives of the principal leaders as their interiority.

Interiority is seldom visible; it is, rather, an inner dialogue with oneself. In the stories that follow, we find that Black principals in white schools often keep their internal emotions in check. Over time, as the first Black leader settles into the school community, it becomes easier to talk about those inner distresses with relative strangers, such as researchers, and to “share stories and experiences that [they] thought were stored away” (Carter, 2020).

Interiority also implies a constant wrestling with one’s own history, identity, and position. Learning, teaching, and leading in all-Black schools, the Firsts were seldom challenged in their inner lives with questions of their racial identity. But in their role as a Black principal in white-majority schools, they find themselves questioning their own identities in relation to white colleagues, parents, and students. Who are they really? What accommodations should they make in terms of their own values, culture, and politics? And how do they make sense of whiteness and white identity in the confrontations to their leadership? As the stories will show, these are deeply unsettling questions that disturb their innermost lives.

It is through the lens of interiority, therefore, that we make visible how these leaders grapple with racism and resentment following their appointment. How they make sense of white flight and the fury of white teachers, parents, and governors within their schools.⁵ How they account for racial humiliation and self-doubt in their encounters with whiteness and explain and defend their reasons for desiring to lead in these fraught contexts. How these leaders manage assimilation pressures and diminished expectations from the school community and plot and plan for the transformation of their schools.⁶ This deep look into the interior lives of Black principals reveals extraordinary stories of race, emotion, and transformational leadership, starting with how they are received at the gates of their new institutions.

Principal Narratives: From Arrival to Allyship

The stories of these thirteen Black principals, six women and seven men, came out of in-depth conversations we had with them at their respective schools. We began these conversations by having them sketch out their biographies, then asking them to detail experiences within their current schools. We probed how they navigated the new space and finally asked what lessons they had learned as Black principals in white-majority schools. We organize the stories around common experiences of the Firsts, including their reception, grappling with self-doubt, and ultimately acting authentically and from their values.

Facing Humiliation from the Start

A person can only take so much humiliation. (Neville)

When Neville arrived for his first day as principal of a small primary school, he was met at the gate by the chairperson of the SGB. “You are not welcome

here,” said the former navy captain. As the first Black head of this white, seaside school, Neville was devastated. He had been appointed by the regional government’s Department of Education over the SGB’s preferred white candidate. “I was not allowed to fulfill my duties for about three days,” he reported. Neville sat in his car outside the school until the Department intervened. Unlike at other schools when a new head is appointed, Neville was not accompanied by the chairperson of the SGB when he was introduced to the parents at a first meeting. “I walked in alone,” he said with sadness. It was a humiliation he would never forget. But somehow he found the courage to reassure the whites in the room: “This is not my school; it is our school.”

It was not always direct insults, as Andrew, the new principal of a primary school, discovered. The slightest “mistake” would be pounced on, such as when he was haughtily told, “You do not sign a certificate with a blue pen”—which to Andrew “was so condescending, the way she implied ‘don’t you know?’”

For Soomaya, race, gender, and religion combined to humiliate her. “I was a Colored, Muslim woman and had about three resignations . . . They were quite open about it,” she recalled. A poll conducted before her appointment asked the staff what they expected in terms of the new principal at their coeducational high school. The response was unequivocal: “It must not be a Muslim and it must not be a female.” Once appointed, Soomaya had to determine how to deal with anticipated hostility from staff. In a previous deputy principalship at a white school, Soomaya had already felt the sting of being unwanted as a senior Black professional: “I was not their chosen candidate, so they tested me, my mental strength.”

For Chris, the insults kept coming, often unvarnished. He initially thought it was a joke when he was told that “this must be quite an achievement for a chap like you,” but he soon realized that his colleague was “dead serious.” He was introduced to the staff as having “a background in finance, so we will all be okay.” “It hurt,” he said of this suggestion that the finances of the school would not collapse under the first Black principal.

Roland thought he was paying his new white Afrikaans school a compliment when he told one of the department heads, “Ma’am, this school is very clean.” Her response was devastating: “Ek hoop jy gaan dit só hou” (I hope you will keep it that way). “I was totally, totally shocked,” he reported. Afrikaans schools provided teaching in a home language for white Afrikaans families. This was an attempt to maintain the white-majority learner body in these schools, which is counter to inclusion in a country where 92 percent of the population is Black (Jansen & Kriger, 2020).

Shannon came from the hardscrabble working-class community of Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats, where people speak a less formal Afrikaans and a flat, plain English. Though more qualified than most of the white teachers, Shannon bore the brunt of the intertwined prejudices of race and class. “They made fun of me, the way I speak,” she said. “They laughed at me and that was so painful. Yes, my English may not be so posh, but I’m a qualified teacher . . . *It was an internal battle for me, a journey* [emphasis added].”

When reaching out to white parents, Rookaya received racially tinged reactions. Her former white high school had quickly turned Black after a series of very public controversies; white families had fled from the still-white neighborhood, leaving behind “the little Black school,” as it was called. Rookaya, as a Black principal, wanted to keep a diverse school, but the response was sharp. One parent told her, “I have R50,000 [US \$2,900] . . . I’m not going to bring it to [your] school.”

The only thing worse than being questioned was to question, as Anisha, the new Black principal of a primary school, discovered when she questioned the outgoing white principal about the school’s academic results. “The look on her face was, ‘Who the hell do you think you are?’ and I looked back and I’m thinking, ‘I’m going to wait for your answer.’ Finally, she gave it.” The emotions of race and resentment on the part of whites filtered through the experiences of most of the Firsts, and it took its toll.

Encountering Resentment and Resignations

You quickly become aware of the sinking ship narrative. (Chris)

It was not only Soomaya who witnessed the departure of white teachers after her appointment. At Chris’s school about half the staff left. Some of the white teachers left for better pay or promotion, others because they simply did not like the new direction of the school, and still others because there was a Black principal. “Just be aware,” an outgoing white principal told the first Black head. “There are a number of people asking for a testimonial”—that is, a reference for another job.

For some, there was a wait-and-see attitude, as Basil found when he asked a white deputy principal whether she had met a fellow First at her nearby prominent girls’ school. “No,” the deputy principal said. “I’m still sussing [checking] her out; I’ll see how things go. There’s no guarantee I’m sticking around.” The Black woman principal, Berenice, was unsure whether anyone had left because of her appointment—“not that I know of,” she shared, but then quickly added, “I’m not naïve. There are probably those voices [talking about leaving], but I’m not easily offended.”

Behind all these departures was a narrative of loss. The Firsts recalled these kinds of statements in slightly different variations across the thirteen interviews: “The ship is sinking.” “The standards will drop.” “Nothing has happened yet,” but the anticipation of loss was already a reality in the minds of many, though certainly not all, of the white teachers. Basil felt the sting personally as an incoming principal: “I will never forget. When I came to [the primary school], somebody came in and they said that the school will probably go to the dogs now because here comes the Colored boy.” Of course, the standards did not drop, and the school extended its academic reputation, even as more Black learners were enrolled. By the time Basil left to lead another white school, some of the parents were begging him to stay because he was “the best thing that happened to the school for a long time.”

Yet, for all the principals, at the time of appointment there was a clear message that “we’re headed for a downward spiral,” and this affected them emotionally as they sought ways of responding to the feeling of impending doom. They felt that their “credentials were being questioned,” and that regardless of qualifications or experience, or any evidence to the contrary, as Black principals they were expected to lead the school on a downward trajectory.

Not all white teachers left. Some remained because they had no options in a tough labor market for teachers. Others stayed because they liked the new direction of the school under the new principal. And there were always progressive white teachers who welcomed the first Black appointment at their school. Yet, in every school there was a resistant group of teachers who either left immediately or stayed to test the inner fortitude of a new principal.

To a resistant core, the Firsts were seen to be enjoying access and privileges properly reserved for whites. When Roland asked a white teacher to accompany him to deal with an irate white parent, her response was bitter: “No, you wanted to apply for this post. Why must I help you?”

Chris, too, faced white resentment on arrival. He could not even get the keys to the school. “I was cold-shouldered,” he remembered vividly. There was no handover but a lot of resentment, not least from the white deputy principal who lost out in the selection process. Chris felt alone.

Experiencing Self-Doubt

I was insecure, always worrying about what the white people would say. (Basil)

The rejection and resistance by white governors, parents, and teachers gnawed away at the already shaky confidence of the Firsts. All but one of these Black principals arrived with “inner turmoil” from a lifetime of doubting whether they were good enough. The Firsts were remarkably candid about the ways apartheid had built in them a subjective sense of Black inferiority to white people and white institutions. “I was insecure, coming from Hanover Park,” said Ivan of his upbringing in a violent and unstable working-class community. Yet he went on to become one of the most sought-after principals of Cape Town’s elite white schools.

We pressed the Firsts, asking, “Why so much self-doubt?” One particularly revealing interview exposed the roots of the problem. Basil explained, “Because we come from a history where unfortunately Black teachers always had the stigma that we don’t work hard, we don’t have a work ethic, we’re lazy.” Then he recalled an expression that was defined in an apartheid-era Afrikaans dictionary that had been used in schools: “So dronk soos ‘n Kleurling onderwyser”—as drunk as a Colored teacher. He said that that racist memory informed his personal drinking habits as a teacher and principal: “People laugh about it, but they can read it. So, I don’t touch alcohol from Monday to Friday, because I don’t want to walk into a school and feel like there’s something for them to say like ‘Oh, typical!’”

This tension between the objective reality of being competent and the subjective feeling of lacking confidence ran throughout the interviews. The exception was one First who was philosophical about the matter, saying, "It is human nature to ask, 'Is it really that they've taken me because I'm capable or it is because of the color of my skin?'" The assessment of that new principal's appointment was clear: a very public racial crisis at that white-majority school had forced the hand of the governing body; the next principal had to be Black.

Andrew had no illusions about his working-class roots and how they shaped his internal response to whiteness. As with the other principals, the moment of revelation came when he entered the staffroom: "Walking in gave me a fright, all those white faces!" Similarly, Roland experienced "Black shock" when he saw

a sea of whiteness, all looking at you and because of the way you were raised, white people were superior, white people are always right. When I came here, I had that sense also, but now you had to sink or swim; there's nothing else you could do.

And there was the reality of white shock that every Black leader encountered when first entering white spaces. Chris recalled, "How many times this has happened here. I introduce myself, and then that reaction. You can see the clocks turning, trying to process the question, 'What am I dealing with here?'" Others, in the moment of shock, said they became overfriendly, as Soomaya explained: "Overcompensating for them being white and me being Colored."

A different shock awaited Andrew—that he might have been appointed for much more mundane reasons:

I heard afterward that there was a thrust toward a sort of Colored, Black principal, since the intake had become darker and discipline had become a problem. The husband of one of the teachers actually told me, "Hulle het mos gesoek vir 'n kleeerling ou want daai man moet nou die dissipline kom reg maak" [They searched for a Colored chap because that man might come and fix the discipline problems].

Andrew felt deflated. In his mind he had been hired to create a compelling vision for the school, to drive a change strategy, to lead and inspire staff and students. "Now I felt almost lesser," he confided. "Is this all?" That led to another round of self-doubt.

It was, however, not only feelings of personal inadequacy that the Firsts had to reckon with on arrival. The instant sense of class privilege also had to be confronted. "We don't have boardrooms where I come from," observed Berenice. Chris noted that even as a teacher at a white school, he had already felt the sting of generational inequity:

I sat in the staffroom, and all my colleagues were talking about their holiday in Italy or the United Kingdom, and one has a holiday house, but we were the same age; up until that point I never understood what a financial legacy was.

The personal wrestling with the privileges of race and class had never been so real for the Firsts. But there was a job to do, even as they grappled with their internal emotions and the challenging politics that confronted them.

Being Oneself amid Assimilation

I am actually a staunch Muslim, but I don't wear my scarf in this environment.
(Soomaya)

Clear from our interview data, white schools (and universities) in South Africa hire leaders who “fit into” the regnant culture of the institution. Several of the principals in the study said they were selected to lead a school because they had experience as teachers in other white schools—“I was a safe bet.” Gopal, the first Indian principal of a white school in the conservative northern suburbs of Cape Town, had a sterling reputation as a senior teacher in school management. Thus, he was expected to both stamp his authority on the school as principal and apply what he had learned through his experience. Soomaya also worked in predominantly white schools as a deputy principal, and this, she believed, eased her into the leadership of another white school. Both of these Firsts had already, to some extent, assimilated into the cultures of these schools and were expected to be less out of place than might otherwise be the case.

The pressure to assimilate was also felt by those Firsts whose class and culture were not too different from their new schools'. Berenice was adamant: “I'm just who I am, I'm not going to assimilate to anybody or what anybody thinks the principal needs to be like.” She was, however, referring only to her style of leadership as compared to that of the outgoing principal. For Soomaya, though, the decision to assimilate or not was easily the hardest decision among the Firsts, because it went to the heart of her faith commitment. But not assimilating was an almost unbearable burden for this Black, Muslim woman leader, so she decided against wearing the scarf.

In the white Afrikaans schools, the fast track to assimilation for the Firsts was to speak the resident language. The new principals were acutely aware of this unspoken rule of assimilation—*praat Afrikaans* (speak Afrikaans)! Andrew calculated that “unless you become a white person you won't fit in,” and so he acted accordingly: “I made it my business to speak more Afrikaans.” Soomaya also discovered that being accepted into a circle of local principals also required language assimilation: “They used to be a closed group, but I think my advantage is that I can speak Afrikaans very well, and when I speak Afrikaans to them it's more like I can communicate with them and then they sort of trust you.”

Shannon felt the pressure to assimilate more than any other of the Firsts. Speaking with a flat township tone, she stood out in the white primary school where she was first appointed teacher, later deputy principal, and then acting principal. “My accent was a problem, so I had to change the way I said things, but, for me, I was still Shannie.”

For the Firsts, assimilation was always unidirectional. The new leaders could not expect accommodation of their language, culture, or religion in the white school and its community. Being accepted into the school meant making inner and outer adjustments, or the task of leading became even more difficult.

Managing Emotions

Don't go in and change everything, because you're going to have resistance, unless that's your intent. (Chris)

The Firsts learned quickly that as leaders who were closely watched, they needed to modulate their internal emotions. Every reaction to provocation had to be carefully measured, every insult absorbed. This was difficult for Chris when he was openly demeaned by a white parent during an open forum event. Chris knew that any reaction would be labeled an overreaction in this heavily white community, and so he made some internal adjustments—"You're supposed to keep quiet even as things get tense."

Yet, the Firsts' decisions to be careful, quiet, and measured meant that the change strategy for their new schools would invariably be gradual, moderated by the spoken fear of the loss of "everything." Especially in the early years of appointment, all the principals made a conscious decision not to rock the boat too much and to keep as many people as possible on their side. "I want to drive my objectives," said Berenice, "but I need to be careful." Their default response was one of reassurance: standards would not drop, staff would be appointed on merit, nobody would lose their jobs. Whatever change was planned would be pursued lightly.

Accordingly, all the Firsts engaged in consultative processes with everyone inside and outside of the school. "Process is your friend," said one, describing how they had adopted open-door policies, conducted surveys, and scheduled one-on-one staff meetings. Another principal spoke of "navigating conversations that are not confrontational." This approach—which allowed the new leader to probe how the organization worked, identify allies, build relationships, refine strategy—was new in most of the schools, and it was generally welcomed as "a breath of fresh air."

Most importantly, consultations allowed the principals to build their inner confidence to lead. They could now take on the really difficult transformation imperatives, such as changing the names of buildings or houses to make them more inclusive. Taking the consultative route, it was possible for the Firsts, with careful steering of the change process, to build a new identity for the school—despite being told, "You're messing with the history of the school."

One of the most common change imperatives was dealing with parents who refused to have their children taught by a nonwhite teacher or even seated next to a nonwhite child. Said Basil, "I shudder every year when the kids come to meet their new teacher. Then the emails come. 'I'm not happy

about my child going into this teacher's class.' Not because she's not competent but because she's Colored and the other teacher is white." White teachers even channeled their own children attending the school to the classrooms of white colleagues. "You need to be very observant," warned Chris, because "some teachers plot for their child to only be in the blonde teacher's class." However, in time, the Firsts offered, the same white parent-teachers admitted that "it was the best decision" to have their child in the class of a teacher of color.

The more settled principals, those with experience of the school and a track-record of management, could act with confidence. So, when a teacher bowed to a white parent's complaint that she did not want her child sitting next to a Colored child, Gopal drew a firm line: "If that happens again, I don't want you in my school." For Roland too, in time it became his school: "After five, six, or seven years I became comfortable, and after a school function would say, 'Nobody leaves here until everything is cleaned up!' I started to find my feet. Now I'm in control. Now I am fully in charge." There is a direct link between how the principals managed their internal emotions and the nature, pace, and timing of change leadership.

Drawing on Values

These values shaped me, despite education under apartheid. (Basil)

Deep inside the consciousness of the Firsts was a strong sense of the steering values that informed their leadership practices. For Basil, it was spiritual values—"my religion formed my value system." As a Catholic, he believed that he brought to his leadership strong foundational values. That sense of his core commitments framed his relationships with students, teachers, and parents. It also guided his approach to change—"I am here to work for you"—and his messaging to the school community—"We are on this journey together." His latest appointment was at an elite private Catholic girls school after years of service in public schools.

In contrast, Denise told us that her value set came from her long involvement in progressive politics in the Cape. What informed her leadership practice was a deep commitment to democratic values like participative decision-making and inclusion regardless of race, class, faith, or culture. But that commitment to inclusion took an unusual twist at her school. In a short period of time, the white families fled as more and more children of color enrolled. This particular school sat on the margins of a white area and a mainly Colored middle-class area, so that the local Colored families could afford the modest school fees. However, that former all-white, lower-middle-class school became a mostly Muslim, Colored school in terms of student enrollment (Jansen & Kriger, 2020). For Denise, both situations (all white or all Muslim) were unacceptable given her politics of inclusion. So Denise started recruiting non-Muslim students.

Like Denise, Rookaya was an education activist and a member and onetime leader of the Progressive Principals Association. She came to her school as white parents fled the Black-majority enrollment and following a highly public clash at the school over hair regulations that were perceived as racist toward Black girls. So Rookaya also started to recruit white and Colored students back into the school out of a deep commitment to diversity. The transformation commitments of these two principals went beyond race, however. It was also about installing a democratic culture in these once-elite schools: "I needed to do the opposite of what the previous principal did," said Rookaya.

Berenice, though more cautious than the political activists, also recognized that what she did on the outside—her visible leadership actions—came from who she was on the inside: "I bring who I am into this space." Building relationships and being approachable were very much a consequence of who she was as a person. It was her own Catholic primary school, she said, that instilled those values in her despite the harshness of apartheid society.

The Firsts often had to draw deep on those inner value reserves, whether they came out of faith or politics or simply common human decency. Racial conflicts in the schools brought out the complexity of those value commitments. It happened, for instance, when teachers refused to participate in the Firsts' projects. In one example, Soomaya decided that a good education practice was to meet with teachers in their workspaces, but "they were resistant to me visiting their classes." This particular case sits on the margin between teacher autonomy and leadership support. Yet, in the cauldron of change, it could so easily be interpreted as white teachers keeping the Black principal at arm's length.

These kinds of confrontations troubled the interiority of the Firsts, especially when they believed that they were doing the right thing. More than one principal confided that they had had to recalibrate their assessments of whites as a result of troubling experiences of racism. Chris said, "I'm going to say something to you now. I've never been as aware of my racial identity as I have been since I started working here."

Experiencing Allyship and Antagonism

Those who understood where I wanted the school to go were my greatest allies.
(Roland)

The experience of racism and its challenge to the interiority of Black principals was uneven within the participants' former white schools. All the principals spoke of white allies who supported them in devising change strategies, implementing operational plans, and navigating difficult situations. As Basil recalled, his strongest allies were those who trusted him and bought into his vision for the school. But white allies had to be cautious so as not to be seen as too enthusiastic in their support of the Black principals. Roland stated:

There were a lot of white people who were on my side—if you can say on my side—not openly, but you can sense it when you were in conversations and in meetings, and when they spoke to you and they complimented you on something, you could see they actually were.

Often those allies were mentors—an outgoing principal, a former head of the school, or simply someone with experience of leading in white education. These mentors proved invaluable on several fronts. They helped many of the Firsts keep perspective in these racially fraught contexts. Clearly not all whites were against them or the transformation project as they offered wisdom and direction in difficult situations. They provided friendship in what was sometimes a lonely experience. And they strengthened the inner composure of many of the Firsts, which was so much needed when they were under pressure.

To the surprise of the Firsts, there was also antagonism from a completely different quarter: Colored teachers already at the school. When the white principal left after a scandal, Rookaya was perplexed that it was “nogals [surprisingly] my Colored colleagues who gave me a hard time . . . I have no idea why our people are not supportive of us.” Andrew had the same experience: “There were many Colored people who preferred a white principal, and that was blatant.”

Although Soomaya also experienced resistance from Black parents—“a woman cannot lead a school,” she was told—the strongest resistance to her and her leadership came from Colored teachers. Fighting white resisters was something the Firsts expected; dealing with antagonism from Colored staff was something they did not see coming.

Discussion: The Interior Lives of the Firsts

Approaching and telling these stories through interiority brings out several unique and critical threads. These narratives of the Firsts reveal that at the center of the inner lives of Black principals sits a trauma that has yet to be accounted for in the education leadership literature. While the concept of racial trauma has been recognized in psychology and psychotherapy (Kinouani, 2021), there is little empirical work in education scholarship on the physical, emotional, and mental distress that comes with intense exposure to racism inside white-majority institutions. These accounts underscore the need to treat racial injury not simply as unfortunate or episodic incidents in the lives of Black leaders but as something that has health consequences. As one of the principals recalled, “I got ill there. I lived on injections. Today I suffer from fibromyalgia because of anxiety . . . I don’t want somebody else to treat me like that.”

A focus on interiority also highlights the fundamental relational nature of our inner lives (Berry, 2017). The awareness of the racial self, as Basil explained, emerges out of an inescapable relationship that Black principals must form with their white colleagues on a daily basis. The interior lives of the Firsts are reshuffled in these everyday workplace encounters. They must

constantly recalibrate their internal understandings of who they are and who their colleagues (white people) are.

The inner turmoil of these Firsts led to interesting behavioral responses to racial stereotypes and low expectations of their colleagues. Most of the principals reported that they overworked, often to prove their white detractors wrong. There is confirmatory evidence for this from other national contexts, with another study's participant revealing, "I countered their negative influence by working countless hours" (Wiley, 2016, 14). The impending threat that "standards will fall" led some of the Firsts to work hard to not only maintain but in fact to raise the academic standards of their school (Jansen & Kriger, 2020). Many were already hard workers and committed leaders, but in their new roles they felt compelled to do more in response to the threat of conforming to the stereotypes of their group (Steele, 1997).

In these self-revelations of their interior lives, the Firsts were caught between projecting strength and conceding insecurity. Theirs was a constant wrestling with the two poles of their leadership identity: steering their schools using the inspiration of their inner values and at the same time acknowledging how the apartheid legacy dented their confidence to lead. Importantly, there is no linear narrative of an insecure new Black principal becoming a secure, confident, and assertive leader years later. They made clear that even when they had proven themselves, there was still a nagging doubt, such as that prompted by a white colleague asking, "Is meneer se mense almal só?"—"Sir, are all your people really as good as you?"

Even in the face of racism and resentment, it is a particularly powerful discovery that the response of the Firsts to white rejection was not retribution or revenge but reassurance and restoration. There was undoubtedly inner hurt and distress, but how this worked out in the lives of these Black principals led them to try and restore relationships with white staff and white communities.

It would be difficult to explain such uncommon grace in leadership outside of an interiority defined by the Jesuit intellectual Bernard Lonergan as "foundational self-presence, that realm in which each person dwells within him/herself" (quoted in Jansen, 2018, 235). It's no small wonder that when asked about giving advice to "the Seconds"—the Black principals appointed in the future—all the Firsts turned inward: know yourself, retain confidence in your own identity, be authentic. In other words, look inside of yourself.

This exploration of the internal worlds of the Firsts reveals a striking candor about their vulnerability as Black insurgents in long-settled white environments. As observed in other studies, "the desire to be accepted by the very same people who rejected [them] was ever present" (Wiley, 2016, 4).

Conclusion: Significant Stories

These stories of Black principals in white-majority schools draw both research and policy attention to what is missing in studies on education, race, and

leadership in postconflict societies. It is not enough, as these narratives show, to prepare principals with external tools or strategies to deal with everyday racial encounters in desegregating schools. The provocations that these Black leaders face strike deep into their personal lives in ways that evoke painful memories, unsettle confidences, generate uncertainty, and affect emotional states. These insights therefore hold intellectual significance, since they address a lacuna in the small body of research on Black principals in white schools across national contexts. The stories also lay the groundwork for bold theorizing about the inner lives of school leaders deemed to be outsiders in white-majority schools.

What these accounts of principals' lives further suggest is that the preparation of principals for leadership has to extend the curriculum to include concerns about how to lead in racially antagonistic environments. Once again, such preparation must move beyond the so-called tool kit approach and deal with the social, emotional, psychological, and political lives of courageous leaders who are willing to lead in unfamiliar settings. It should be a matter of policy for principal development institutes, for example, that the professional competences of new school heads include measures of the inner lives of leaders as a starting point for thinking about leadership.

Then there is a very practical significance that emerges from these accounts. Just as individual principals (Black, in this case) reveal their inner lives in the stories shared, schools (white, in this instance) have their own racial biographies, too, which are seldom accounted for in the literature. It is not enough to prepare Black principals for leadership in white schools; it is equally important to prepare white schools for Black leaders. In none of the schools reported on in this essay was there any evidence of institutional preparation for the incoming Black principal. The onus for transformation cannot rest on that lone individual; it must also rest on the receiving institution as a matter of course. This is important since a key contribution that emerges from the Firsts' stories is how school contexts impact and influence their inner lives, emotions, and responses as incoming leaders.

In other words, when the inner lives of Black principals and white schools both receive attention in research, policy, and practice, then there is at the very least a connecting point for transformative conversations about the larger issues of education and social justice.

Notes

1. *White-majority schools* refers to the immediate years after the end of apartheid when the majority of students at these schools was still white. These enrollments patterns changed across time for some schools where Black students became dominant as a result of white flight, while others remained white-majority schools with smaller numbers of Black students enrolled. *Former white schools* is a historical reference only; these were exclusively white, segregated schools in apartheid South Africa.

2. *Black* is often used in South Africa, as we do in this article, to refer jointly to Indians, Coloreds, and Africans as one group. The descriptor *nonwhite* is frowned on because of the negative connotation implied in the referential standard “not white.”
3. Because official data from that turbulent period is scant, a more comprehensive picture on enrollments and appointments is not readily available.
4. An obvious explanation for the appointment of Colored principals in our sampled schools is that the majority population in the Western Cape is Colored people. A more noxious reason might be that white schools prefer Colored principals because of perceived cultural affinities (such as shared primary languages like English and Afrikaans) compared to African heads of schools.
5. Governors are selected by each school and are responsible for management and ensuring policies are suitable for the school.
6. *Transformation* is the term South Africans use to indicate the racial transformation of post-apartheid society, which for schools means allowing greater access for Black students, teachers, and principals to the relatively well-resourced white-majority schools.

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