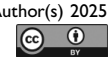
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Exploring diversity in principal promotions: A systematic review of global trends and challenges

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Abstract

The role of school principals is pivotal in enhancing pupil achievement, second only to high-quality classroom instruction. Yet, despite growing global diversity, school leadership remains largely homogeneous, with women and ethnic minorities significantly underrepresented. This systematic review examines diversity in principal promotions across primary and postprimary schools. Twenty-five empirical studies published between January 2015 and March 2025 were analysed, revealing persistent biases in selection procedures, particularly around race and gender. Women face internal barriers such as self-doubt, alongside external systemic discrimination. Ethnic minorities, especially Black and Latinx individuals, encounter compounded disadvantages due to intersecting racial and gender biases. Multiple minority identity individuals face heightened obstacles in career advancement. Feminist theory and critical race theory offer a lens to analyse these inequalities, emphasising intersectionality. Key barriers include lack of mentorship, gender bias and entrenched stereotypes. The review also highlights the neglect of other diversities—such as age, disability, national origin, sexual orientation, social class and religion. Inclusive promotional practices and targeted interventions are urgently needed to build a leadership pipeline that reflects today's diverse school communities.

Keywords

Promotions, diversity, educational leadership, race, gender, career progression

Introduction

Effective school leadership is crucial for driving school improvement, shaping school organisation, culture and pupil performance (Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005). However, diversity in school leadership remains a challenge. Women and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in leadership roles, despite evidence showing that diverse leadership positively impacts

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student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021). In the United Kingdom, women hold only about half of principal positions, despite comprising a significant portion of the teaching workforce (DfE, 2020). Similar trends can be seen in the gender demographics of principal roles in both Ireland and the United States (Gov.ie, 2024; NCES, 2024). Ethnic minorities also face a similar underrepresentation at principal level in comparison to their percentage share at teacher level both in the United Kingdom and the United States (Bailes and Guthery, 2020; DfE, 2020). These disparities highlight the ongoing challenges faced by female teachers and those from ethnic minority backgrounds in securing leadership positions (Fuller et al., 2016; Grissom and Keiser, 2011). These challenges are especially acute for individuals who are both female and from an ethnic minority background, as they experience the compounded effects of multiple forms of diversity – an overlap referred to as intersectionality. Intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw (1989), discusses the overlapping markers of identity, such as race and gender (amongst others), and how they intersect to create multiple layers of discrimination (Bowleg and Bauer, 2016). We acknowledge that studies by Fuller et al. (2016), Lee and Mao (2020), Lumban-Gaol (2021), Aravena (2022), Perrone (2022) and Bush et al. (2022) have explored similar themes related to principal promotions. However, this study specifically examines promotional practices, preappointment, through the lens of diversity. While our intention was to adopt an international perspective, it must be noted that much of the literature reviewed originates from the United States, with only a limited number of studies from other regions. This highlights a significant gap in the evidence base across diverse contexts.

Our study aims to identify the diversity dimensions that occupy the spotlight within principal promotions and to broaden the diversity discourse by addressing the underexplored areas, if any, within the existing literature. In doing so, we seek to present a more nuanced understanding of diversity, or lack thereof, in school leadership, particularly in relation to principal selection and hiring practices over the past decade. By engaging with the literature, we look to contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on how diverse leadership can be promoted within educational settings.

Diversity in the school staff pipeline

Research shows that pupils thrive when teacher demographics reflect their diversity (Dee, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Villegas and Irvine, 2010). However, underrepresentation of minority educators is a global issue, affecting countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, Canada and the United States (Burns et al., 2022; DfE, 2018; Easley, 2023; Ryan et al., 2009; Ullman, 2020). In the United States, minority teachers make up only 20% of the workforce, despite students of colour being in the majority in many areas (Ingersoll et al., 2022; NCES, 2024), while Nordic countries also struggle to integrate immigrant teachers due to language and certification barriers (Schleicher, 2018). In the United Kingdom, ethnic minority representation is also disproportionately low, with only 8% of headteachers coming from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to 34% of the teaching workforce (DfE, 2020).

The pathway to principalship plays a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes; however, leadership diversity remains limited, with notable disparities in access to promotional opportunities (Davis et al., 2017; FitzPatrick Associates, 2018). Despite women constituting 75% of the teaching workforce in the United Kingdom, they occupy only 50% of headteacher roles (DfE, 2020). Similarly, in Ireland, women represent 82% of primary school teachers but just 51% of principals (Gov.ie, 2024). Countries where the gender balance between teachers and school leaders falls significantly below the equal feminisation line, as highlighted in the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) report (2018), include Japan, Turkey, Korea, South Africa, VietNam, Mexico and parts of Canada. While many nations exceed the OECD average, only

Sweden and Brazil report a higher percentage of female staff in leadership roles compared to teaching positions. On an international scale, women lead just 25% of schools, and 84% of international school principals identify as white, reflecting deep-rooted inequities (Neyra, 2021). The urgency for more inclusive leadership is growing, driven by increasing globalisation and evolving migration patterns that are significantly altering the demographic composition of school populations worldwide. These disparities discussed above are particularly concerning given the growing body of evidence that diverse leadership enhances pupil outcomes, especially when leadership reflects the diversity of the student population (Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Diversity

Diversity encompasses a broad spectrum of physical, cultural, psychological and behavioural differences within organisations (Jackson and Joshi, 2011). These differences include age, disability, gender, national origin, cultural background, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, social class and religious beliefs (Chui et al., 2015). Diversity beliefs in the workplace refer to employees' attitudes and perceptions regarding the value and impact of diversity within their organisation (Wa, 2023). Positive diversity beliefs can enhance team dynamics, employee engagement and overall organisational culture by viewing a diverse workforce as a source of strength, contributing to creativity, innovation and problem solving (Homan et al., 2008). Conversely, negative diversity beliefs can lead to resistance, conflicts, or feelings of exclusion, undermining the potential benefits of a diverse workplace (Plaut et al., 2011).

Conceptual framework

To critically examine diversity in educational leadership, this study employs an intersectional theoretical framework grounded in feminist theory and critical race theory (CRT). Feminist theory contributes by interrogating gender-based inequalities and the societal structures that perpetuate gender oppression. Core concepts such as gender inequality, prescribed gender roles, the gendered division of labour and the objectification of women help illuminate how traditional leadership hierarchies often marginalise or devalue women's contributions, particularly within patriarchal contexts (Chafetz, 1997; Jones and Budig, 2007; Lorber, 2005).

In parallel, CRT provides a lens through which to analyse how racism is institutionalised within education systems (Dixson and Anderson, 2018). It critiques policies and practices that reinforce racial inequities and normative whiteness while foregrounding the lived experiences of people of colour. CRT not only challenges dominant racial narratives but also connects contemporary disparities to historical legacies of oppression. Importantly, it advocates for intersectional inquiry, recognising how race intersects with other social identifiers such as gender, class, language and immigration status, and it promotes action-oriented change.

By integrating these two theoretical perspectives into a framework (Table 1), this study is equipped to uncover the interwoven structures of privilege and oppression that shape access to, and experiences of, leadership in education. This combined approach enables a more nuanced analysis of the barriers faced by underrepresented groups while offering a foundation for promoting more equitable and inclusive leadership practices.

Methodology

This paper reviews the literature on principal selection processes with a focus on diversity lenses in both a primary and postprimary school context. Multiple procedures were implemented to ensure

Table 1. Framework for study.

Dimension	Feminist theory	Critical race theory (CRT)
Adapted from	Chafetz (1997); Jones and Budig (2007) and Lorber (2005)	Dixson and Anderson (2018)
Core focus	Analyses gender-based inequalities and the systemic structures that perpetuate gender oppression.	Examines how race and racism are ingrained in societal structures, particularly within legal and educational systems.
Key concepts	Gender inequality: Disparities in access, opportunities and treatment based on gender.	Racial inequity as systemic: Recognizes that racial disparities are embedded within societal systems.
	Gender oppression: Systemic subjugation of individuals based on gender.	Role of policy and practices: Analyses how educational policies and practices perpetuate racial inequalities and normative whiteness.
	Gender roles: Societal expectations dictating appropriate behaviours for different genders.	Challenging dominant narratives: Rejects notions of inherent racial inferiority or superiority.
	Gender objectification: Treating individuals primarily as objects based on their gender.	Historical context: Connects current educational inequities to historical patterns of racial oppression.
	Gender division of labour: Allocation of tasks and roles based on gender norms.	Intersectional analyses: Considers how race intersects with other identity markers (e.g., gender, class, sexuality).
		Advocacy for equity: Aims for transformative outcomes that address and rectify racial disparities.
Application in education	Critiques curricula and pedagogies that reinforce gender stereotypes.	Examines how standardized testing and tracking systems may disadvantage students of colour.
	Advocates for inclusive educational practices that empower all genders.	Challenges curricula that marginalize or omit contributions of people of colour.
	Highlights the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within educational institutions.	Advocates for policies that address systemic racism and promote equity in educational outcomes.
Goal	To dismantle patriarchal structures in education, promoting gender equity and inclusivity.	To expose and challenge systemic racism in education, striving for a more equitable and just educational system for all racial groups.

the literature review met high standards of quality. The selections were guided by the four overarching criteria established by Guarino et al. (2006): (a) relevance, (b) scholarly contribution, (c) empirical grounding and (d) overall quality.

First, to determine the relevance of the literature, this review focused on studies that offer insights into principal selection procedures, preappointment. Second, the review prioritised literature situated within the realm of diversity-focused hiring, specifically studies examining the selection of principals from underrepresented or marginalised groups. This study adopts an approximate 10-year review window, from January 2015 to March 2025, to capture both pre- and postpandemic developments. Third, the review was limited to scholarly research published in peer-reviewed journals and academic

publications. Consequently, sources such as reports, working papers, conference proposals, dissertations, opinion pieces and materials from nonpeer-reviewed outlets, including newspapers and general media, were excluded from consideration. Fourth, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, introduced by Moher et al. in 2009, enhances transparency and consistency in reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. By following the PRISMA checklist, researchers can clearly outline study identification, selection and assessment processes, facilitating replication and reducing selective reporting biases. This structured approach also improves comparability across studies, aiding in evidence synthesis. Ultimately, PRISMA promotes rigorous reporting standards, leading to more reliable and actionable evidence.

Data sources and search strategy

Seven electronic databases, which are multidisciplinary and discipline specific, were searched for peer reviewed, fully published, journal articles: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycINFO, Business Source Complete, Education Source, Eric, Google Scholar and Scopus. Boolean operators, limiting and expanding search terms and keywords were used. Combinations of the following keywords were used: principal, headteacher, school leader, administrator, application, mobility, recruitment, hiring, selection, promotion, career, progression, primary school, elementary school, primary education, elementary education, secondary school, high school, secondary education, junior high and middle school. There was a limiter of January 2015 to March 2025, which is roughly a 10-year sample of peer reviewed, fully published, journal articles. The selection procedure commenced with the identification of 326 studies through database searches. Following the removal of duplicates, 311 records remained for screening. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed, reducing the pool to 80 relevant articles. A subsequent full-text assessment further narrowed the selection to six studies, with 74 articles excluded due to irrelevance or failure to meet inclusion criteria. To expand the dataset, a snowball sampling technique was employed, yielding an additional 19 studies through reference tracking. As a result, the final sample comprised of 25 studies for inclusion in the review (Figure 1).

Findings

This systematic review investigates research evidence in international literature pertaining to whether diversity had an impact on promotional practices to the role of principal at both primary and post-primary school level. A total of 25 studies were selected for specific focus, and in synthesising the findings from these, it was found that there is an unfair bias toward those from what are deemed to be ‘diverse’ or ‘minority’ backgrounds when it comes to promotional practices within the field of education. The findings from this literature review focus heavily on gender diversity and on ethnic minority diversity as well as the intersectionality of the two. Several areas are explored such as internal and external drivers and barriers in relation to gender and the implicit bias directed at those from Black and Latinx minority communities. The following synthesis of the literature from the 10-year period of 2015 to 2025, looking at the inclusion of diversity, or lack thereof when it comes to the process of principal selection will be presented and provides an insight into the likelihood of promotion to the principal role and the factors which influence this.

Table 2 shows the studies which have been included in this systematic review. They have been categorised to detail the themes that have been discussed in each of the papers.

Table 3 outlines the author(s), the title of the study, the year the study was published, the study type, the location of the study as well as the journal in which the study was published.

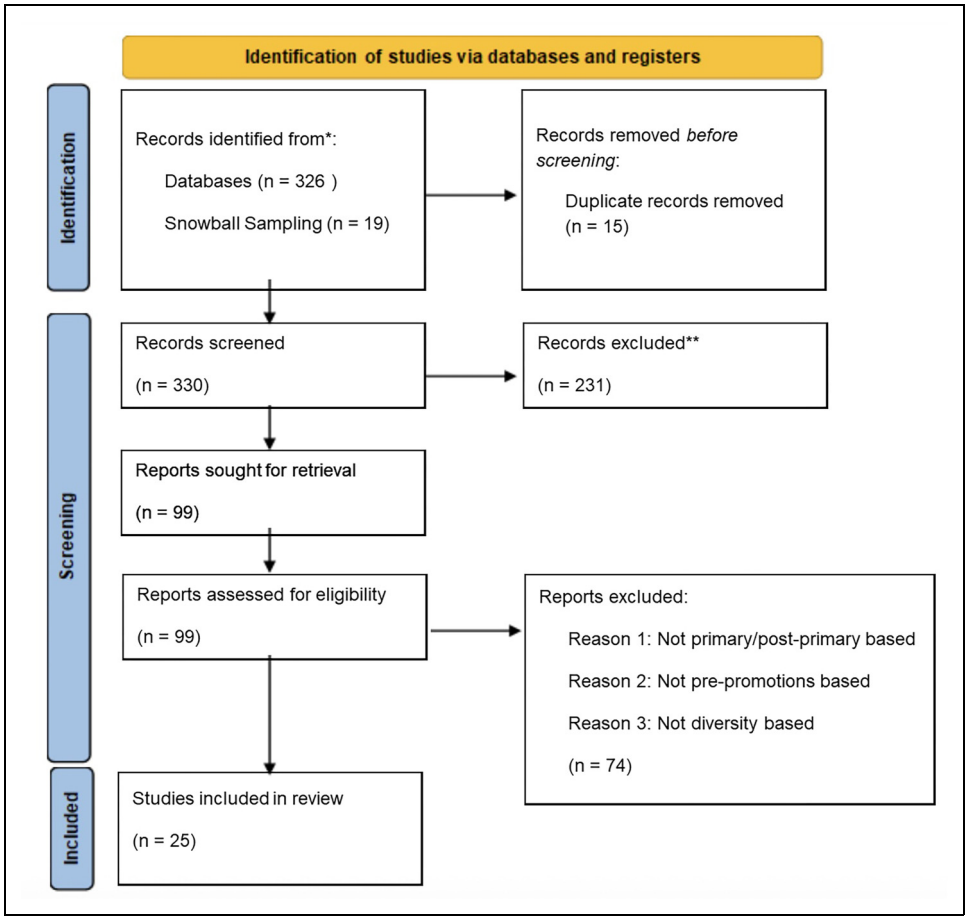


Figure 1. Study selection process.

Climbing uneven rungs: Gendered barriers to school leadership

Among the 19 studies reviewed that examined the topic of gender, nine revealed that women were significantly less likely to be promoted to the role of school principal (Akinola and Naidoo, 2024; Bailes and Guthery, 2020; Davis et al., 2017; Fuller et al., 2019; Komiti and Moorosi, 2020; Mberia, 2017; Murphy, 2020; Pendola and Fuller, 2021, 2022; Suter, 2017). Feminist theory highlights how gender inequality is built within organisational systems; this pattern of men being more likely to get promoted shows the structural barriers women face in their journey to senior leadership positions. Two studies noted that the participation rates of females within leadership were increasing over time (Fuller et al., 2019; McGrath, 2020); however, several studies continued to highlight barriers to promotion for women. Mendez-Morse et al. (2015), Akinola and Naidoo (2024) and Kruse and Krumm (2016) stated that females who wish to be promoted to the role of school principal often delay their leadership journey due to familial commitments such as raising children reflecting the traditional gender roles as posited by feminist theory. Davis et al. (2017) explained that men were 1.20 times more likely to ascend to the role of school principal than their female counterparts. Following certification, women were likely to spend an average of 5.62 years until

Table 2. Overview of studies by categories.

Diversity dimension	Studies	Reference
Gender	19	Akinola and Naidoo (2024); Bailes and Guthery (2020); Buckman and Sloan (2022); Dagnew Kelkay et al. (2020); Davis et al. (2017); Fernandez et al. (2015); Fuller et al. (2018); Fuller et al. (2019); Karamanidou and Bush (2017); Komiti and Moorosi (2020); Kruse and Krumm (2016); Mathebula and Potokri (2022); Mberia (2017); McGrath (2020); Mendez-Morse et al. (2015); Murphy (2020); Pendola and Fuller (2021, 2022); Suter (2017); Yang et al. (2021)
Race	8	Bailes and Guthery (2020); Crawford and Fulle (2015); Davis et al. (2017); Fernandez et al. (2015); Mendez-Morse et al. (2015); Miller (2016); Pendola and Fuller (2022); Reynolds and Tabron (2022)
Intersectionality	7	Bailes and Guthery (2020); Davis et al. (2017); Fernandez et al. (2015); Fuller et al. (2019); Gurmu (2020); Mendez-Morse et al. (2015); Pendola and Fuller (2021, 2022)
Age	4	Fuller et al. (2019); Murphy (2020); Pendola and Fuller (2021, 2022)
Political affiliation	1	Gurmu (2020)
Religion	1	Murphy (2020)
Culture	1	Palmer et al. (2016)

they received a promotion to the role of principal, whereas men typically spent only 4.94 years (Bailes and Guthery, 2020). This aligns with feminist theory, whereby it is noted that women often work harder and wait longer to by seen as equally qualified as their male counterparts, further reinforcing the systemic gender inequities that exist. Females gave vivid and detailed descriptions of the struggle of trying to 'break in' to the male-dominated domain of school principalship giving rise to the theory of gender oppression where leadership is shaped by male norms which makes it harder for women to be accepted into their roles (Fernandez et al., 2015). This sentiment was echoed by two participants in Murphy's (2020) study, who cited gender bias as a significant and persistent barrier to their leadership progression. Kruse and Krumm (2016) stated that women often use their additional time building on their skills so that they have a more complete portfolio when they do apply. Mendez-Morse et al. (2015) explained that once females ascend to principalship, they often struggle to find a healthy work–family balance due to the demands of the role.

A participant in Murphy's (2020) study stated that she felt the current principal under whom she was working constrained her leadership development, which was in direct conflict with the national policy of distributed leadership in the Republic of Ireland. This lack of mentorship or support systems can hinder the development of female leaders despite feminist theory stressing the need for much more inclusive practices that support leadership development. Kruse and Krumm (2016), Akinola and Naidoo (2024) and Karamanidou and Bush (2017) echoed this sentiment, stating that while mentorship and support systems aid promotion prospects, such opportunities for females are indeed rare. The gap between genders is closing within certain contexts. In Australia, McGrath (2020) noted that while the percentage of males in senior leadership roles is still higher than that of males in the general teaching workforce, the gulf between males and females is diminishing. This was similar to studies by Buckman and Sloan (2022) and Yang et al. (2021) that found women were more likely to be hired than men, perhaps owing to their larger share of the teaching population. Fuller et al. (2018) explored the gender composition of school principals in different locales classed as rural, urban and suburban. From 1990 to 2012, rural schools had the lowest representation of

Table 3. Overview of studies included for review.

Record	Author(s)	Title	Year	Study type	Location	Peer-reviewed journal
1	Akinola, D.A. & Naidoo, P.	Breaking the glass ceiling: an examination of gendered barriers in school leadership progression in South Africa	2024	Qualitative	South Africa	*Cogent Social Sciences*
2	Bailes, L.P. & Guthery, S.	Held Down and Held Back: Systematically Delayed Principal Promotions by Race and Gender	2020	Quantitative	United States	*AERA Open*
3	Buckman, D.G. & Sloan, B.	Repairing the Principal Pipeline: Does Hiring Type Slow the Leak?	2022	Quantitative	United States	*International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*
4	Crawford, E.R. & Fuller, E.J.	A Dream Attained or Deferred? Examination of Production and Placement of Latino Administrators	2015	Quantitative	United States	*Urban Education*
5	Dagnew Kelkay, A., Yirdaw, A. & Asrat, S.	Challenges that contribute to low participation of women in educational leadership at government primary schools, Ethiopia: Women Educational Leadership participation	2020	Quantitative	Ethiopia	*Contemporary Educational Researches*
6	Davis, B.W., Gooden, MA & Bowers, A.J.	Pathways to the Principalship	2017	Quantitative	United States	*American Educational Research Journal*
7	Fernandez, R. Bustamante, R.M., Combs, J.P, Martinez-Garcia, C.	Career Experiences of Latino/a Secondary Principals in Suburban School Districts	2015	Qualitative	United States	*International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*
8	Fuller, E.J., Pendola, A. & LeMay, M.	Who should be our leader? Examining female representation in the principalship across geographic locales in Texas public schools	2018	Quantitative	United States	*Journal of Research in Rural Education*
9	Fuller, E.J., Hollingworth, L. & An, B.P.	Exploring intersectionality and the employment of school leaders	2019	Quantitative	United States	*Journal of Educational Administration*
10	Gurmu, T.G.	Primary school principals in Ethiopia: Selection and preparation	2020	Qualitative	Ethiopia	*Educational Management Administration & Leadership*
11	Karamanidou, M. & Bush, T.	Women primary school principals in Cyprus: barriers and facilitators to progression	2017	Mixed Methods	Cyprus	*International Studies in Educational Administration*
12	Komiti, M. & Moorosi, P.	Career development of women principals in Lesotho: Influences, opportunities and challenges	2020	Qualitative	Lesotho	*Journal of Education*

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Record	Author(s)	Title	Year	Study type	Location	Peer-reviewed journal
13	Kruse, R.A. & Krumm, B.L.	Becoming a Principal: Access Factors for Females	2016	Case Study	United States	*The Rural Educator*
14	Mathebula, D.G. & Potokri, O.C.	Female teachers' promotion barriers and mitigation strategies: Multiple case study findings from South Africa	2022	Qualitative	South Africa	*Journal for Advocacy, Research and Education*
15	Mberia, A.	Women and Leadership in Mixed Secondary Schools in Kenya; Do Stakeholder's Attitudes Matter?	2017	Mixed Methods	Kenya	*International Journal of Social Science*
16	McGrath, K.	When female leaders outnumber men: the decline of male school principals in Australia	2020	Qualitative	Australia	*Journal of Gender Studies*
17	Mendez-Morse, S., Murakami, E.T, Byrne-Jimenez, M. & Hernandez, F.	Mujeres in the Principal's Office: Latina School Leaders	2015	Quantitative	United States	*Journal of Latinos and Education*
18	Miller, P.	White sanction, institutional, group and individual interaction in the promotion and progression of black and minority ethnic academics and teachers in England	2016	Qualitative	UK	*Power and Education*
19	Murphy, G.	Leadership preparation, career pathways and the policy context: Irish novice principals' perceptions of their experiences	2020	Qualitative	Ireland	*Educational Management Administration & Leadership*
20	Palmer, B., Kelly, J. & Mullooly, J.	What Should be Done with 'Fit' in Principal Selection?	2016	Qualitative	United States	*CLEARvoz Journal*
21	Pendola, A. & Fuller, E.J.	Strength from Within? Internal Recruitment and Principal Turnover	2021	Quantitative	United States	*Journal of Education Human Resources*
22	Pendola, A. & Fuller, E.J.	Homeward Bound? Rural Principal Hiring, Transfer, and Turnover Patterns in Texas	2022	Quantitative	United States	*Educational Administration Quarterly*
23	Reynolds, A.L. & Tabron, L.A.	Cultivating Racial Diversity or Reproducing Whiteness?: A QuantCrit Analysis of School Districts' Early Principal Hiring Practices	2022	Quantitative	United States	*Leadership and Policy in Schools*
24	Suter, E.J.	Social Cultural Factors Influencing Appointment of Headteachers in Primary Schools in Eldoret East Sub-County, Kenya	2017	Quantitative	Kenya	*Journal of Education and Practice*
25	Yang, M., Lee, S.W. & Goff, P.	Labour Dynamics of School Principals in Rural Contexts	2021	Quantitative	United States	*AERA Open*

female principals, while urban and suburban schools had much greater numbers of female principals. In towns and rural locales, 31% of principals were female compared to 45% in medium and large-sized cities as well as suburban areas (Fuller et al., 2018). This has been an increase since 1991, where the numbers were 14% and 34%, respectively. Fuller et al. (2018) also noted that females are frequently hired to lead schools in disadvantaged areas, giving credence to the glass cliff theory which feminist theory often uses to show how women are placed in risky roles reinforcing the unequal treatment in comparison to that of their male counterparts (Ryan and Haslam, 2005).

Cultural and societal expectations continue to pose significant barriers to women's advancement into school leadership roles across diverse contexts. In Ethiopia, Dagnew et al. Kelkay (2020) highlighted how deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs frame women as inherently unsuitable for leadership, reinforcing internalised patriarchal norms as outlined within feminist theory. Similarly, in South Africa, Mathebula and Potokri (2022) found that negative societal perceptions and traditional gender roles diminish women's confidence and deter them from pursuing promotions. In Cyprus, Karamanidou and Bush (2017) observed that patriarchal family structures, particularly in traditional towns, often limited women's leadership aspirations, though younger principals reported less influence from such norms. Mberia (2017) reported that in Kenya, widespread negative attitudes among educational stakeholders reflect entrenched cultural biases against female leadership. Finally, Komiti and Moorosi (2020) noted that in Lesotho, patriarchal beliefs continue to define leadership as a male domain, constraining women's career progression despite their qualifications and readiness to lead furthering the idea of gender norms as understood from feminist theory.

Colour-coded promotions: The racial divide in access to school leadership

Eight studies dealt with race within this systematic review. Five discussed how teachers of colour were still at a disadvantage when it came to receiving a promotion to school principal (Bailes and Guthery, 2020; Davis et al., 2017; Miller, 2016; Pendola and Fuller, 2022; Reynolds and Tabron, 2022). One study dealt with participation rates in principal certification and progression onto the role of principal (Crawford and Fulle, 2015), two dealt with internal and external barriers and drivers to promotions (Fernandez et al., 2015; Miller, 2016), while Mendez-Morse et al. (2015) spoke of the lack of mentors and role models that those from ethnically diverse backgrounds face when seeking promotion to principalships. Ethnic minorities are underrepresented within the leadership space in schools. Black assistant principals in the United States are 18% less likely to attain the role of principal in comparison to their White counterparts (Bailes and Guthery, 2020). This gives credence to the notion from CRT that racial inequality is systemic and does not occur in isolation. Similarly, barriers prevent those from the Latinx communities from making the progression to principal. There has been a steady increase in Latinx candidates' ascension to the role (14.2% to 20.5% from 1990 to 2010, respectively); however, this has not remained in line with the percentage share of Latinx teachers nor has it remained in parity with the percentage share of assistant principals of Latinx ethnic backgrounds (17.2% to 24.5% in the same period; Crawford and Fulle, 2015). Mendez-Morse et al. (2015) reported that mentors and role models exert a significant amount of influence on the career choices of becoming a school principal. Fernandez et al. (2015) echoed this, noting that family support, educator role models and mentors both inside and outside of their own school districts were cited as external drivers for seeking promotions; however, Miller (2016) stated that there can be systemic barriers to this sponsorship resulting in lack of progression as merit and experience is overlooked. Crawford and Fulle (2015) noted that the population of Latinx school

principals was not in keeping with the percentage share of Latinx school teachers. This is not a pipeline issue but an access issue, as noted by one participant in Fernandez et al. (2015) study, where a hiring superintendent stated that 'most Latinos were just not qualified' upon hearing a suggestion of hiring more Latinx candidates. This underscores CRT's assertion that policies and procedures favour candidates from White backgrounds and thus blocks progress for ethnic minorities and is furthered by harmful rhetoric by white gatekeepers as evidenced above.

In the United States, those who wish to pursue the role of principal must go through a principal preparation programme, also known as principal certification. Crawford and Fulle (2015) noted that Latinx candidates wishing to obtain principal certification increased from 15% in 1990 to 20% in 2010, with the highest being 25% in 2009. Between 2005 and 2010, the number of White candidates going for principal certification rarely dipped below 60%, while Black candidates hovered typically around 14%, with some variance throughout the years. Most promotions to principal happen in the first 6 years after being promoted to assistant principal. Black assistant principals are 4–5% less likely to be promoted within the first 4 years of being assistant principal, and then that gap widens between the fifth and sixth year. White principals typically get promoted 4.67 years after being made assistant principal, the only other ethnic group that ascends to the role faster is that of 'other race', with Black and Latinx candidates being promoted at a slower rate. Davis et al. (2017) stated that White candidates are 1.67 and 1.55 times more likely to get promoted than their Black and Latinx counterparts. All five Latinx candidates in Fernandez et al. (2015) study stated that despite such obstacles, they had a strong desire to progress their careers. The hiring processes were seen as systematically and socially biased (Miller, 2016). Reynolds and Tabron (2022) found that hiring committees consistently failed to address longstanding patterns of inequity and exclusionary practices within their policies. This perpetuates the reproduction of whiteness in the principal pipeline (Reynolds and Tabron, 2022), and the idea of White sanction by Miller (2016) reinforces this stating that endorsement from White colleagues was a prerequisite for promotion. CRT calls for real and effective change, not just diversity for diversity's sake, but instead mending longstanding issues that cause inequality. White candidates occupy the highest percentage share of principal roles (Bailes and Guthery, 2020; Davis et al., 2017); this can remain the status quo because White superintendents and hiring committees looking to make 'safe' or 'traditional' hiring decisions compound the Whiteness of the industry and are therefore unlikely to make hires that reflect the demographics of the school at student and teacher level. CRT reminds us that this is not new, instead it 's part of a long history of racial exclusion within the education sector. It is evident those from minority backgrounds must develop a 'thick skin' to avoid having their leadership capabilities questioned by those above and below (Fernandez et al., 2015).

Intersecting identities and unequal opportunities: Diversity challenges in promotion pathways

Intersectionality is dealt with in seven of the papers within this systematic review, although some were more pertinent than others. Bailes and Guthery (2020) suggest that there is no significant difference for those who share more than one diversity trait seeking promotion to the role of principal. Fernandez et al. (2015) had four participants in their study who perceived that being female was more hindering than being a member of the Latinx community. Feminist theory helps explain this by showing how gender roles and expectations often make it harder for women to be seen as leaders, regardless of their ethnic background. Throughout the 16 years of their study, Davis et al. (2017) found that White women had better chances at promotional opportunities than their Latina counterparts, except for the seventh, eighth and 10th years of that study where there was

a slight variation. Being male of any colour significantly increased the chances of promotion to principal over females of any ethnic background (Davis et al., 2017). This echoes Mendez-Morse et al. (2015) sentiment that female minority educators are exceptionally challenged when it comes to promotions to principal. CRT and feminist theory both highlight how race and gender combine to shape unequal outcomes. This shows how women of colour face double barriers, being disadvantaged both by their gender and their ethnicity. Gurmu (2020) noted in Ethiopia that female teachers applying for the role of school principal get an extra 3% toward their application to combat inequity issues (a similar percentage is allocated to disabled candidates). Pendola and Fuller (2021, 2022) also found that women of colour stood a better chance at being promoted when they were promoted from within their own school system. This also rings true for more diverse schools. Fuller et al. (2019) noted that there was an increase in females of colour applying for their principal certification, which will in turn impact the diversity in the principal pipeline. However, upon completion, there was still difficulty achieving the role of principal compared to their white male counterparts.

Peripheral yet powerful: How nondominant diversities shape access to principalship

There were cross-sections of other diversities mentioned in some of the papers listed above, including age, political affiliations, religion and culture. Fuller et al. (2019) noted how younger and older candidates were less likely to receive promotions than their 'middle-aged' counterparts, suggesting that there is a sweet spot relative to age for promotions. A participant in Murphy's (2020) study reflected on how ageism was possibly a factor when she was applying for promotion, citing the fact that she was a young female. Similarly, she also spoke to the fact that she was nonreligious, seeking a promotion within a religious school, which could be detrimental to her chances. Pendola and Fuller (2021, 2022) found that age matters when applying for promotions, suggesting that being under the age of 40 was a significant advantage. Gurmu (2020) suggested that political affiliation comes into play in Ethiopia when applying for the role of principal and it can act as a barrier depending on the hiring committee. Palmer et al. (2016) found that the notion of fit and having commonality in culture presented opportunities to candidates who held the same cultural background as the hiring committee. This was congruent with findings by Reynolds and Tabron (2022), who found that the recruitment practices by hiring committees led to similar candidates being consistently interviewed and not contributing to a diverse leadership workforce in their schools. They found that the district's recruitment practices are overly reliant on social networks with in-group connections to the school and/or district. Beyond basic recruitment activities (such as posting on the district website and internal vacancy announcements), the district heavily depends on word-of-mouth (53%), social media (53%) and employee referrals (34%), rather than utilising more formal recruitment strategies that could reach a broader and more diverse audience. The above is better framed when looked through the lens of CRT and feminist theory, whereby systems of power and privilege intersect to disadvantage individuals who do not fit dominant norms through biased expectations, unequal access to opportunity and exclusionary recruitment practices.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the dynamics of diversity in promotional practices to the role of school principal. The discussion points below are driven by the framework presented earlier in this article (Table 1). Our aim was to identify the diversity dimensions that occupy the spotlight within principal promotions and to broaden the diversity discourse by addressing underexplored

areas. Gender, race and the intersectionality of the two have been heavily evident within the findings of this paper, while other diversity dimensions have also appeared (Table 2); however, some diversity dimensions remain underexplored (religion and culture/national origin) or completely absent (disability, sexual orientation and social class) from our findings. The findings revealed significant disparities and systemic issues that affect the promotion and representation of diverse candidates in educational leadership roles.

Interpretation of findings

Gender. The findings reveal persistent gender-based inequalities in principal promotions, with limited attention to how national policies and accountability structures shape hiring practices. Despite the high proportion of women in teaching across OECD countries, only in Sweden and Brazil, do females occupy more than their fair share of leadership roles (OECD, 2019). Societal norms and institutional cultures continue to frame men as leaders and women as nurturers, reinforcing a metaphorical glass ceiling that restricts women's advancement. Barriers (noted in Feminist Theory) such as caregiving responsibilities, limited mentorship and gender bias delay progression into leadership (Eagly and Sczesny, 2009; Tjahjana et al., 2024; Tremmel and Wahl, 2023). These patterns reflect broader literature on gender disparities in education, where stereotypes such as think manager, think male and metaphors like glass cliff and labyrinth describe systemic challenges (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; Schein, 1993). Concepts such as glass walls and glass floors further illustrate how opportunities may be visible but remain inaccessible (Srivastava and Nalawade, 2023). Although support systems exist, few studies explore how leadership traits are perceived differently by gender, such as assertive women being seen as aggressive. These dynamics reinforce bias and slow progress, with female representation in leadership increasing only gradually (McGrath, 2020).

Race. All studies related to racial diversity bar one (Miller, 2016) originated from the United States, raising concerns about the lack of empirical research from other national contexts. While the United States is notably diverse, rising global migration means other countries are also becoming more racially varied; however, this shift remains underrepresented in the literature. Findings show that Black and Latinx candidates face persistent barriers to principalship, including limited access to mentoring, biased hiring and minimal institutional support (Bailes and Guthery, 2020; Davis et al., 2017; Miller, 2016). These patterns reflect core tenets of CRT, highlighting how racism is entrenched within educational structures (Arday, 2018). Ethnically diverse teachers often encounter systemic exclusion, inadequate recognition and experiences of marginalisation that contribute to burnout and attrition (Hernandez-Johnson et al., 2021; Myrie et al., 2024; Scott et al., 2023). Moreover, teacher preparation programmes are frequently ill-equipped to address these racialised challenges (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2017). A school culture that centres whiteness and assigns extra, unpaid emotional labour to teachers of colour further compounds inequities (Reynolds and Tabron, 2022). These findings underscore the need for international research attention and policy responses to support racially diverse educators into leadership roles; however, this should be culturally and contextually specific.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality underscores how overlapping identities, such as gender and race, compound disadvantage. The findings show that women of colour face distinctive barriers to principalship, shaped by both sexism and racism (Corneille et al., 2019). These challenges reflect the 'double jeopardy' effect, where the intersection of marginalised identities results in delayed career progression (Lukkien et al., 2024; St. Jean and Feagin, 1998). Compared to White women or men of colour, women of colour often experience more exclusion and fewer leadership opportunities

(Lovelace and Rosen, 1996; Mundra et al., 2003). While the review identified scholarship at the intersection of race and gender, it found limited attention to other intersecting dimensions, such as disability, age or sexual orientation. This highlights a significant gap in the diversity discourse. The compounding influence of structural inequalities, dominant narratives and societal roles, as viewed through both feminist and CRT lenses, helps explain the persistent underrepresentation of multiply marginalised individuals in leadership. The findings affirm the importance of intersectionality as a lens to understand and address the complex realities facing aspiring school leaders.

Integration with conceptual framework

Linking our findings to the conceptual framework (Table 1) underscores how patriarchal and racialised structures coproduce inequalities in principal promotions. Feminist theory elucidates how gender norms and the gendered division of labour frame leadership as masculine, while CRT reveals that 'colourblind' meritocratic discourses mask systemic racism. Together, they highlight intersectionality as a critical analytical tool for understanding the multifaceted nature of oppression and for designing equity-centred interventions. Our study contributes theoretically by extending 'glass' metaphors beyond gender to illustrate how multiple formal and informal 'barriers' intersect.

Implications of findings and policy recommendations

Diversity inclusion. This study reveals that diversity in principal promotions is often limited to race and gender, overlooking dimensions such as age, disability, class, religion and sexual orientation. These factors significantly shape leadership experiences and access. Broader representation across all diversity dimensions is essential for inclusive leadership and equitable student outcomes.

Broaden diversity criteria in promotions: Leadership recruitment should explicitly include underrepresented dimensions such as age, disability, sexual orientation, social class, religion and cultural background, alongside race and gender.

Geographical scope. The literature is heavily focused on the United States. Research from regions such as Asia, South America and Continental Europe is scarce, despite unique leadership challenges shaped by local histories and systems. The exclusion of non-English and earlier studies further narrows the field and could be a reason for the lack of literature. Greater inclusion of diverse contexts is needed to inform more equitable and locally relevant leadership policies.

Support global research inclusion: Policymakers and funders should prioritise research from underrepresented regions to inform more contextually relevant and equitable leadership policies.

Leadership perceptions. Leadership traits such as assertiveness are often aligned with White, male norms, disadvantaging women and racially minoritised leaders. Assertive women may be seen as aggressive. Cultural communication styles can also be misinterpreted, reinforcing biased perceptions of leadership fit. These dynamics create subtle barriers to promotion. Future research should examine how leadership standards may privilege dominant identities.

Redefine leadership standards: Leadership evaluation criteria should be reviewed to ensure they do not reinforce gendered, racialised, or culturally biased norms, and instead reflect diverse leadership styles and identities.

Evaluating interventions. Despite widespread use of mentoring and diversity initiatives, there is limited evidence evaluating their long-term impact. These programmes are often promoted in policy

but rarely assessed using measurable outcomes like promotion or retention rates. Without robust data, it is difficult to determine what works. Future research should prioritise longitudinal studies to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of these interventions.

Mandate evaluation of diversity interventions: All diversity-focused initiatives should include longitudinal evaluation using measurable outcomes such as promotion and retention rates.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the limited and uneven ways in which diversity is addressed within the literature on principal promotions. While race and gender continue to dominate the discourse, other important dimensions such as age, disability, class, religion and cultural background remain largely neglected. The findings reveal not only a narrow framing of diversity but also a lack of global representation, implicit biases in leadership norms and minimal evaluation of inclusion-focused interventions. These gaps point to the need for researchers, school leaders and policymakers to reconsider how leadership potential is defined, supported and assessed to ensure that promotion practices genuinely advance equity and inclusion in educational leadership.

Diversity dimensions that remain notably underexplored or altogether absent in the reviewed literature may be due to a combination of factors, including discomfort in discussing these dimensions, limited data collection practices and a lack of inclusive research frameworks. These are also very context specific dependent on the dimension. However, these dimensions significantly shape individuals' experiences in educational settings and their access to leadership opportunities especially for those who have intersecting diversity dimensions. Future research should actively seek to include these perspectives by engaging with marginalised communities while advocating for broader data collection policies. Doing so would not only enrich the understanding of diversity in leadership but also help dismantle the systemic barriers that prevent truly inclusive promotion practices.

This review focused on peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles to ensure consistency in quality and methodological rigour. As a result, grey literature was excluded due to challenges in verifying credibility and comparability across sources. Non-English studies were not included, primarily due to resource constraints and the need for linguistic consistency in analysis. These decisions, while practical, may have led to the omission of valuable insights from non-Western contexts. Additionally, the prevalence of United States based studies in this review reflects the substantial body of research that has examined leadership promotion in that context. While these studies provide valuable insights, they may not fully capture the nuances of leadership promotion practices across different cultural or policy environments. While every effort was made to conduct a comprehensive and systematic search of the relevant literature, it is possible that some studies may have been inadvertently excluded due to limitations in database coverage, search terms or publication accessibility. As such, the findings and conclusions presented should be interpreted with an awareness of this potential limitation.

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