

The Great White Hope? Examining the White Privilege and Epistemology of an Urban High School Principal

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jcel.sagepub.com**Terrance L. Green¹ and Michael E. Dantley¹**

Abstract

This case was developed for use in courses on the principalship as well as school reform, with an emphasis on developing socially just, epistemologically and racially conscious school leaders. Data are presented about the principal, the school district, the school, the students, and the community. This case explores notions of White privilege to develop epistemological and racial consciousnesses, and works toward disrupting systems of repression. To do so, this case seeks to problematize how urban school reform can be self-serving for White principals, and aims to provoke urban school principals to go beyond epistemological and racial awareness, to action. Course instructors can use this case to examine students' epistemologies as well as racial consciousness, explore the nexus of White privilege and urban school reform, and discuss race and racism in American schools.

Keywords

urban education, urban high school reform, social justice leadership

Case Narrative

Sara Williams, the new principal of Baxter High School (BHS), is shaking frantically, yet optimistic as she approaches the front door of her new job. Due to Williams's appointment, scores of African American students, teachers, parents, and community members are protesting outside of the school. While being escorted by policemen into

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the building—to elude her fears—the 33-year-old, White female keeps refocusing her thoughts on, “I can save these kids and turn this school around.” But, her thoughts are constantly being drowned out by the crowds as they vehemently shout, “Leave our school alone, tell Sara Williams to go back home!”

Williams replaced John Brown, an African American male who held the reigns at Baxter for the past 20 years. John Brown was a rarity, in that, African Americans only account for approximately 10.6% of U.S. principals. Moreover, Mr. Brown was known throughout the community as a down-to-earth principal, a community activist, and was loved by literally everyone in the BHS’ local community. The mayor replaced John Brown after the school district was unable to meet Average Yearly Progress (AYP) for several years. The sole responsibility for the less than stellar test scores were placed on Mr. Brown, even though there were a host of complex factors that contributed to the district not meeting AYP. For example, the school and local community face several macro constraints, like inequitable fiscal, political, and structural systems, coupled with ideologies that undercut and demean BHS. The average family income is US\$35,000 and the major businesses in the community have left. To improve neighborhood conditions, the local community council constantly presents an agenda for community renewal to the city council, but it is continuously dismissed or ignored. Students at BHS consistently performed below district averages in math, reading, and science. Disaggregating achievement data shows that the school district and Baxter High are in need of systemic reform.

The School District

BHS is a part of the West Park Public School District (WPPSD), which is located in an inner city in the Midwestern United States. Over the past 15 years, the school district has experienced a mass exodus of students, largely exacerbated by deindustrialization. Over the past decade, the school district has lost approximately 10,000 students per year. To make matters worse, the school district has a US\$200 million deficit, which is the superintendent’s justification for closing 62 schools over the past 3 years. The abrupt closing of schools has sparked even greater resistance among teachers, parents, community members, and students. During a town hall meeting, a Baxter parent added, “Our schools are one of the last vibrant institutions in our community, so you can’t close Baxter.” BHS was on the list to be closed, but the collective action of community members forced the superintendent to give BHS *one more chance*. To appease the community mobilizers’ insurgence, the superintendent gave Baxter a lifeline—he sent a new principal, Sara Williams.

The School and Community Context

Baxter is located in an overwhelmingly Black community that was once home to an economically thriving Black middle class, during the 1950s and 1960s. The displacement of African American teachers and principals during desegregation, the infusion of crack cocaine, post-industrialization, and inequitable economic and political

systems have contributed to disrupting the community fabric and cohesiveness of Baxter's local community. As a result, the community has encountered high crime rates, drugs, and poverty. Despite such arduous times, there remains a remnant of local residents who still engage in block club meetings, community events, and take pride in their neighborhood. The most recent U.S. Census data revealed that 95% of the residents in the schools census tract were African American. Currently, BHS enrolls 1,935 students and 75% are eligible for free and/or reduced lunch. The teaching staff is more racially diverse than the student body. African American teachers account for 70% of the BHS' faculty, while Whites are 25%, Latino/as are 2.5%, and Asians comprise the rest of the teachers. Racial demographics for students are:

- African American—95%
- Asian—3%
- White—1.3%
- Latino/Latina—0.35%
- Native American/American Indian—0.35%

The district's zero-tolerance policies—which do not allow for any misbehavior—coupled with social promotion and host of other factors have contributed to Baxter having a 21% graduation rate. Even more alarming, African American males are the most severely impacted by these conditions. Only 17% of African American males graduate in 4 years from BHS.

The Principal

Epistemologically and Racially Unconscious and Incompetent

Sara Williams grew up in a suburban middle-class home in the Northeastern United States. Her parents came from low-income families, as well as taught Sara and her siblings the value of hard work and education. Sara's parents worked hard and endured many sacrifices to give Sara and her two siblings a better lifestyle than the ones they had enjoyed. As a result, Sara viewed hard work and education as the antidote for eradicating poverty and experiencing social and economic mobility. After graduating at the top of her—homogeneously White—high school class, Williams attended a predominantly White Research I Institution in the Midwestern United States. Williams always had a passion for education, but was not sure if she wanted to pursue the profession. She vacillated between majors in business, engineering, medicine, and education. However, she chose the field of education. Heavily inspired by films like *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995) and *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) that position White females as superheroes that save “failing” urban high schools and students of color. Williams envisioned herself as the contemporary of these women. Sara Williams tacitly harbored thoughts about inner-city youth like “They need help,” “I can help them break their cyclical and pathological culture,” “My parents were poor but worked hard and used education, so why can't those kids?” and “They just need someone to show them the

way.” Unconscious of her worldview, which included her life experiences and popular stereotypes—Williams’ epistemology was informing her thoughts and feelings about race and urban youth. She never troubled the celebrated curriculum that served as the foundation for the teaching practices used in predominantly African American schools. To Sara, what she learned and the ways that she had learned it worked for her and she was convinced that it would work for anybody. She believed that if given the chance, Black students in urban schools could master the traditional curriculum. Therefore, Sara vowed to teach in a predominately Black urban school, because she desperately wanted to help urban students. She felt a moral obligation to see to it that Black students had the same quality education as she had.

One day, while in undergrad, Williams saw a sign for a course on social justice leadership. Immediately, Sara thought, this sounds interesting and may also be beneficial. At first, the class was philosophically and personally uncomfortable. Issues like White privilege, racism, and critical perspectives were regular topics of discussion (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McIntosh, 1998). Holding onto the wisdom of her parents, Sara worked hard to get through the class. In fact, she believed that because of her parent’s working-class background, the notions of White privilege could not be laid at her doorstep.

By the end of the class, Sara began to view herself as a “good White person” and an ally to marginalized Black urban youth. Although these issues made Sara uncomfortable, she believed that she was up for the challenge. Fired up, excited, and committed to social justice, she followed up with courses on equity in public schools and multicultural education. In fact, Sara stayed in school two additional years to earn a master’s degree in educational leadership. She gladly discovered that the graduate program not only taught the technical challenges that faced educational leaders, but also the social justice imperatives that prospective school leaders should implement. Now, Sara was steeped in progressive thought having been exposed to critical theory, critical feminist theory, some critical race theory, and poststructural and postmodern perspectives. She was able to think beyond the objective and neoliberal ways that she had been nurtured to think. Williams was now determined to use her newly found understanding and commitment to transform Black urban high schools.

Upon graduating, Ms. Williams spent two years teaching math and science at a local inner-city high school. During this time, Sara’s excitement and commitment to social justice and equity dissipated. With all of the demands of her new job as a teacher, she soon—by default—relapsed to the worldview that she operated from before taking the courses on social justice. In retrospect, Sara claims, the beginning of her teaching career was extremely arduous, so much so, that she contemplated quitting during her first 6 months. But, she kept thinking, “My hard work will pay off. It did for mom and dad, and for the women in the movies, so I know it will pay off for me.” Desperately searching for answers, Sara had a serendipitous moment when Martha Johnson approached her. Mrs. Johnson welcomed Sara with open arms and gave her advice on how to improve her teaching. Martha Johnson—a well-regarded and highly respected teacher shared many lessons about teaching that she learned during her 27 year career as a high school teacher.

Mrs. Johnson, an African American female, and was the science department chairperson. Johnson’s dream was to become a high school principal, but for some reason,

things never worked in her favor. For more than 10 years, Martha Johnson was overlooked for principal positions. However, Mrs. Johnson continued to serve faithfully, because she loved teaching and was cherished by many students, parents, and community members. Williams became instantly drawn to Mrs. Johnson's charisma, while she mentored and coached her for more than a year. After applying Johnson's wisdom and strategies, Sara and others began to notice significant improvements in her teaching. Mrs. Johnson helped Sara to blend progressive theoretical knowledge with pragmatic pedagogical practices.

District administrators were so pleased with Sara's performance that after her 3rd year of teaching she was offered an assistant principal's position at a "failing" high school across town. Initially, Sara was puzzled and immediately thought, "Why didn't Martha get this position? . . . she has literally taught me everything that I know about education." As Sara began to superficially interrogate this thought it became too discomfiting. Therefore, she ignored the thoughts. Williams wanted to remain in an epistemological and racial place of safety, blamelessness, and certainty (Thompson, 2003). Besides, other thoughts pervaded her mind like, "My parents were right, hard work does pay off." So, the thoughts about Martha getting the position quickly faded away, because of the local and district accolades that Williams received. Sara Williams was totally oblivious to her White privilege, which allowed her to ignore and evade issues like race that engendered feelings of discomfort and uncertainty (Rusch & Horsford, 2009).

Meanwhile, Williams received frequent emails and postal mail that read, "Thanks for saving those kids and that school" and "If only those other teachers could be as superb as you." In fact, Williams received a piece of mail stating, "They should make a movie about you." Her numerous accolades and favorite movies (e.g., *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*) helped to bolster Sara's sense that she was making a monumental, almost superhuman difference.

Developing Racial Consciousness, but Incompetent

During Sara Williams' leadership preparation program, she was introduced to social justice leadership that focused on developing leaders who would create equitable outcomes more equitable outcomes for *all* students. For Williams, this was an eye-opening experience that incited her burgeoning motivation to help "those marginalized urban youth." To become familiarized with popularized issues at Black urban schools, she immersed herself in the work of African American scholars, with a particular emphasis on those who focus on multicultural education and culturally relevant practices. Books by Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill-Collins, to name a few, filled Sara's bookshelves. Sara spent the entire summer reviewing these works in preparation for her new assistant principal position. After reading tens of books, taking four classes on equity and social justice leadership, and reviewing more than one hundred articles, Sara Williams was convinced that she was ready to change the world of urban Black youth.

Sara prided herself on being an out-of-the-box thinker. Ever since her serendipitous experience of meeting Martha Johnson, that relationship had caused her to think and

rethink many of the foundational beliefs she had previously held so dearly. Mrs. Johnson helped Sara to view some notions about Black students differently. Intrinsically, Sara believed that Martha was exceptionally good at causing her to reevaluate her long-held traditions and even the inherent motivations behind her espoused commitments to social justice. Martha was wary of the genuine intentions of “good White” people who voiced a commitment to making things equitable and democratic especially between Black and White folk. Martha, and rightly so, was suspicious of White educators proclaiming a call to serve in an urban, primarily Black high school. Martha had observed, with jaundiced reality, the way some of these White folk would mouth a social justice agenda from 7:30 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon and then leave. But life after school in the urban community was up to those who did not have the luxury of leaving and heading to the suburbs. She also lamented how many of her Black colleagues fled that urban area if not right at the close of school, well before lights came on. Martha tried Sara’s intentions. She questioned Sara’s integrity and went to her during alone times to compel Sara to come to grips with what really was stored in her heart particularly about Black people. Martha took every chance she could to build with Sara an iron-sharpening-iron relationship. She had witnessed a difference in Sara. In her own heart, she believed that Sara could make a difference in an urban high school but for the students’ and community’s sake, Martha had to interrogate and keenly investigate Sara’s motivation. And so she did. As an assistant principal, Williams expanded upon Martha Johnson’s philosophy and practices, coupled with her training in social justice leadership. As a result, by her 4th year, Sara was made the head principal at BHS.

After becoming principal of Baxter, to better assess and understand the conditions at BHS, Williams aimed to conduct an equity audit (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans heavily utilized these audits to assess the equity of institutions. Williams remembered learning about equity audits in her leadership preparation program. She figured that this could help her shorten the chasm between practice and research. Besides, she thought, conducting an equity audit would give her credibility with her African American staff members. Therefore, conducting an equity audit was Williams’ first item of business as principal. On receiving the data from the equity audit, Sara began to feel sorry for the students. But more so, the data caused her to slip into White guilt (Tatum, 1994; Thompson, 2003). Like the incident with Mrs. Johnson being constantly looked over for principal positions, she quickly became uncomfortable; but this time, she pushed past her comfort zone. The equity audit data ultimately caused her to put on the cloak of social justice, but still at the core, her motive and paradigm was to save those kids, and turn their school around.

The Faculty Meeting Showdown

After receiving the equity audit results, Williams held an emergency staff meeting on a Friday—which was extremely unusual for Baxter teachers. So the staff anticipated that something exceptionally important would be discussed at the rare Friday afternoon meeting. As she presented the data, Sara began to cry, as she lamented over the

numbers. As tears streamed down Sara's eyes, Mrs. Jones—a well-respected veteran Black teacher—leaned over to her colleague and said, “Here we go again, another White woman crying because of how societal and structural racism manifests itself in our schools.” Jones, for several years, had served as one of the leading voices of the faculty. Whenever an issue arose, Jones was one of the first teachers to voice an opinion. Generally, her responses were well thought out and were almost always expressed for the benefit of the students.

By this time, Williams' tears increased immensely. Finally, Mrs. Jones could not take it anymore, so she stood up and interrupted Sara Williams. Mrs. Jones fervently exclaimed, “If you are that sad, then stop crying and use your White privilege to do something about it.” Immediately taken aback, Williams did not know what to say. Now, her mind was moving faster than a racecar at the INDY 500. She quickly tried to retrieve something from the hundreds of articles that she had read, but nothing was coming to mind, except, “You have the nerve, I am risking my safety by coming to the *hood* to help you and these students.” But, to avoid public conflict and to seem interested, Williams calmly acquiesced and replied, “Tell me more.” Jones continued,

Why are you really here? We don't need you to feel sorry for us. We were okay before you came and we will be okay after you are gone. Are you only here to pad your resume? Let's get real, at the end of the day you go back to your fancy home in the suburbs, but our kids go home to a different reality.

Jones also added, “Now quit your crying and if you really want to help, let's discuss actions that we can take to change this.”

Immediately after the faculty meeting, Williams, who was infuriated, called Martha Johnson to get her perspective. Sara told Martha every detail about the meeting and ended with, “So what do you think?” Martha said, “Jones was right.” She added,

All of your crying, guilt, reading books, and discomfort does not change anything at Baxter. In fact, if you are not careful, all of that stuff can be more self-serving than anything. The question is what are you going to do with your White privilege to disrupt and help change what's going on at Baxter?

Then, it hit Sara Williams like a ton of bricks. She thought, “All of my reading, guilt, and crying is not enough, I must do something.” As Sara was thinking, a long pause filled the conversation. Martha said, “Hello, are you still there?” “I have to go,” said Williams. When she got off the phone, Sara Williams sat down at her desk and said, “How can I use my White privilege to disrupt and change the conditions at Baxter High School?”

It Is More Than a Notion: The Spiritual Dimension of Doing Socially Just Urban School Reform

Twenty-four hours later, a Saturday night in early March, a cold, crisp evening with only the stirring of an antiseptically cold wind, Martha called Sara and invited her

to come with her the next morning to her church. Martha felt in her gut that Sara's response to her invitation would be solid evidence of her commitment, or lack thereof, to the Black community. When Martha called, Sara was relaxing, reading a book, sipping from a chilled glass of Riesling, lying warmly ensconced in an afghan, resting, and hardly considering matters of any real significance when the music of her cell phone disturbed the silence and her tranquility simultaneously. Martha's unsuspected invitation caused Sara to sit straight up, in quasi respect set aside her drink and to engage her mind in first creating a reason not to attend Martha's church.

Sara was at best an agnostic. She felt that weddings and funerals were the only legitimate reasons to ever set foot in a church building. She had long ago divorced herself from religious convictions and rituals and so this invitation caused Sara to instantaneously mentally marshal her statements of opposition to go to church. Martha spent no time cajoling or attempting to convince Sara to come to church, as Martha's method was to get Sara to come to grips with what might be her madness. Sara, in an inkling of inspiration, realized that the wrong answer, an excuse, or an attempt at delay would seal her fate with Martha and would speak volumes while supplying Martha with all the answers she had always sought. So Sara said yes. After some superficial dialogue about appropriate dress, Sara returned the Riesling to its original spot in the refrigerator, reshelved the magazine, neatly, though with a modicum of agitation, restored the afghan to its rectangular shape and headed for bed, reluctant about the outcome of the next day's jaunt.

So as not to afford an easy escape, Martha picked Sara up in her 2005 bluish-gray Camry and brought her to church. As they neared the church campus, located in the same urban neighborhood as the high school, Sara took notice of the cars, the plethora and variety of cars. The cars were descending on this religious space from all directions. Parking lot and traffic attendants, in regal and military fashion, directed the movement of each driver. They parked and entered the large 2,500-seat sanctuary. Yes, you're correct, Sara did stand out not because she was fashionably dressed, demonstrating impeccable taste, and not merely because some students who attended the church pointed at Sara with a mixture of suspicion and delight, wonder and anticipation but because she was the newest of very, very few White faces that ever set foot in Living Word Christian Fellowship.

After the singing, the dancing, the loud and vibrant antiphonal responses, the heat, and the kinetic orality of the first 90 minutes of the service, the pastor stood to preach and preach he did. His text was from Psalm 6 and Isaiah 58 where he instructed the congregants on human beings being called to enhance the lives of others through feeding the poor, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, and working to dismantle every system that "othered" people or marginalized those who were outside the status of power. His aim was to call comfortable people out of a place of self-promotion and self-aggrandizement to one of an obligation to set captives free, to demythologize the celebrated, hegemonic notions of meritocracy and democracy that have been touted historically as the tenets of the American way. He preached with conviction and great vehemence and endurance. And Sara was shaken and visibly moved by his message.

Sara believed that this encounter, another serendipitous one, had richly and deeply impacted her. Somewhere beneath the superficial layer of her existence, Sara had been touched.

Conclusion

Within 16 months, BHS and Sara Williams made significant strides. Williams approached her job from a tempered radicalist perspective (Alston, 2005; Meyerson, 2001). In doing so she destabilizes her Whiteness at times, and at others, she uses it to help reform BHS. For example, during her 2nd year as principal, Sara brought Martha Johnson in as an assistant principal. Everyday, Williams learns from Martha, engages in critical dialogue, and helps maintain an atmosphere for teachers to implement a more critical curriculum. But, most importantly, Williams realized the need and value of indigenous leadership. As such, she and Martha Johnson are working on creating a pipeline for African American leadership in Baxter's local community—beginning with Martha. Sara's plan is to leave Baxter within three years and turn the reigns over to Martha Johnson. In a conversation with once-antagonistic teacher—Mrs. Jones—Williams remarked, "There is nothing I can do to change my phenotype from being White, but I will strategically employ my Whiteness during necessary times to benefit Baxter."

After really taking a step back and listening to students, teachers, and community members, Sara Williams began to really engage in epistemological interrogation and uncomfortable conversations that led to action. She really moved out of the way, so the talent, activism, and achievement at Baxter High could emerge. The Baxter students and faculty coalesced around implementing critical pedagogy across the school, and ramping up their urban youth activism efforts. For students, the curriculum was more relevant and meaningful. Consequently, the students became more active in addressing neighborhood issues like joblessness, violence, economics, and home foreclosures. These new leadership and pedagogical practices were contributing factors that led to increased test scores, student engagement, and student activism. Now, critical teacher collaboration and in-depth conversations are school norms. Although Baxter High School and Sara Williams have made some progress, they have an enormous way to go.

Teaching Notes

This case was developed for current and prospective students in educational leadership preparation programs. Professors can use this case in several ways, including (a) to examine and discuss students' privilege (specifically White privilege) and epistemology; (b) to interrogate motives for engaging in urban school reform; (c) to conduct a group activity during class to identify strategies for urban high school reform, destabilizing privilege, as well as approaching communities of color from asset-based perspectives, and (d) to engage in a class discussion on neoliberal reform policies, racism, and oppression.

Case Questions

Personal Questions

1. How might it be problematic for school leaders to immerse themselves in literature about critical theory, antiracism, equity, cultural relevance, and social justice, without engaging in action?
2. What might Sara Williams gain and/or lose by engaging in this reform effort from a critical and socially just perspective?
3. When Williams is confronted about her White privilege, why does she experience guilt, become defensive, and seek to counter the critiques of her Whiteness?
4. In what ways can Sara and other principals rupture their White privilege to move beyond being uncomfortable to being socially just school leaders?
5. How can Sara and other school leaders use their White privilege to ignore issues of race that are uncomfortable?
6. In what ways can Sara develop and sustain a worldview that is critical and racially conscious, while mitigating the self-serving effects of this work?
7. How can Sara Williams use her White privilege to disrupt and change the conditions at BHS?
8. In what ways does spirituality inform leadership for social justice?

School-Level and Community Questions

1. How can Sara Williams destabilize her White privilege to work with communities of color?
2. Discuss how Ms. Williams can work with the school and community to help develop a pipeline of African American community leaders.
3. Taking an asset perspective, how can district leaders view the current conditions at BHS?
4. Explain how this reform can create space for students to engage in social activism, political action, and disruption of macrocommunity restraints (e.g., social, economic, structural, and ideological).
5. How can Williams create an atmosphere for a critical pedagogical curriculum?

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