

## What Can You Do When You Don't "Fit the Mold"? Dismantling White Privilege Affecting Career Advancement in the Education System

Anonymous Author\*

\*The author has chosen to conceal her identity because she has been advised by her teacher's union that "your employer views you as the 'public' face of the organization, and it has been accepted in law that school boards are employers that have reputations to protect. If you are commenting in a public manner on an issue that could be viewed to negatively tarnish the reputation of the board there could be disciplinary action laid against you."

### Abstract

This paper describes the barriers to career advancement in the education system faced by a Chinese Canadian male. He receives suggestions to "Whiten" his name on his resume to increase his chances of being called for an interview for teaching positions. Later in his career it is suggested that he become a principal, he may need to change his manner of speaking to better reflect White norms. He resists both suggestions, instead opting to stay true to his personal identity and not conceal his ethnicity. By doing so he acts as an inspiration to others who may be faced with the same suggestions to hide who they are. Those who seek to better understand how White privilege impacts career advancement for minorities would be interested in reading this article.

*Keywords:* Career advancement; Chinese; Education sector

The author is a certified teacher with over 15 years of experience in educating middle school age students in the Greater Toronto Area. One of her passions is exploring issues of equity, and encouraging her students to think critically about the world around them. She is also the proud parent of two young children whose constant curiosity serves as an inspiration to her.

As a teacher, I appreciate how important it is to honor the voices of the students in my class. I make a conscious effort to ensure that their diverse perspectives and voices are heard, as well as reflected in how and what is taught within the classroom. However, each day I am faced with the reality that the leadership within the school board that I work for seems, paradoxically, to privilege a White perspective when it comes to career advancement. Looking at the team of more than 10 educators that make up the senior administration, I see just 2 non-White faces. Yet, this composition of leaders does not equitably reflect the diversity of students or teaching professionals that make up my school board. The question is: How does someone dismantle this apparent White privilege from within the education system?

For my husband and teaching colleague, a Chinese man born in Hong Kong, the answer was to do four specific things: (a) refuse to compromise his identity when confronting privilege head on, (b) speak out, (c) call attention to the privilege by asking thoughtful questions, and (d) explore the development of a support network. This paper is in essence a case study, told in narrative form, of his personal journey to dismantle privilege affecting career advancement in education. By referencing several studies and scholarly works from the significant body of knowledge that exists on the topic of White privilege, this paper also provides a useful framework of empirical evidence, academic thought, and reflection to better understand his actions. The specific experiences described, and much of the research cited, shed light on the effects White privilege has had on my husband as an Asian individual. While there are likely similarities in the

barriers faced by Black educators and other marginalized educators, it is not possible to make broad generalizations about their experiences with White privilege and the effect it has had on their ability to advance their careers in education. It is also important to recognize that the ways of responding to White privilege are unique to individuals and their particular situations. For instance, my husband could take a firm stand against White privilege early in his career because he was young and did not have dependents. Other people may have faced financial obligations, or family pressures, that would not have allowed them to react the same way. There is a definite need for further study into the reasons why, in similar circumstances, persons of Color, or individuals of other minority groups, might respond differently than my husband did to White privilege. Not everyone can, nor should they attempt to, dismantle White privilege affecting career advancement in education the same way that my husband did, but by sharing his story, perhaps others may discover a path that is right for them.

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My husband came to Canada from Hong Kong in the mid-1970s, when he was five and a half years old. To this day he still speaks to his parents exclusively in Cantonese. It is often stated that “the years before five last the rest of their lives.” This slogan, trademarked by the Ottawa-based charity Invest In Kids Foundation, has been adopted by the FAIR START screening process that is used in every licensed child care center in Thunder Bay and as a step for registering for junior kindergarten. It is also a saying that has been used in early years programs operated in community libraries in southern Ontario. For my husband, this

means that Chinese cultural patterns of speech—tonal-based word meanings; quick-paced delivery; and dogmatic, to-the-point statements (Krauss & Chui, 1998)—are deeply engrained in him, and indeed contribute to his perception of self-identity. As Robert M. Krauss and Chi-Yue Chiu (1998) point out, “language is a part of the mental architecture used to represent cultural experiences” (p. 51). It molds and shapes us into the human beings we are.

Living in Toronto, with its thriving Chinese community, my husband's family could successfully function using their Cantonese language skills, and there was no pressing need for his parents to learn English. They were able to secure jobs, complete paperwork, shop, bank, and socialize in their first language. Being so young, my husband had a desire to learn English so that he could converse with the other children at school and the adults who occupied that social sphere. My husband freely admits to learning most of his English language skills from watching television, though I'd like to believe that at least some of his proficiency in English is a result of the efforts of the teachers he had in his life.

My husband graduated from secondary school in Toronto and moved to Waterloo to attend a university. After obtaining an undergraduate degree with a double major, he went to Teacher's College at Queen's University in Kingston. He became a certified teacher in the mid-1990s and was eager to launch his career in the education system. It was at the very starting point of his career that he first encountered White privilege's effects on his job prospects. After my husband had submitted numerous resumes applying for hundreds of jobs without any success, a White teacher suggested to him that he change his Chinese first name to something more English

sounding in order to improve his chances of getting calls for interviews. The insinuation was that people would not know how to pronounce his name and would therefore not bother contacting him about a position. Additionally, an ethnic-sounding name could lead to the assumption that he spoke with an accent or had less proficient English skills compared to other candidates with more familiar-sounding names. Perhaps this suggestion should not have surprised him. More than 50 years ago, Goffman (1963) noted that racial minorities attempt to conceal or hide their ethnicity when seeking jobs. This practice still occurs today. Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, and Jun (2016) completed a two-year study that found that 40% of Asian respondents had engaged in “resume whitening.” Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), along with Oreopoulos (2011), have observed that names can be a strong signal of racial heritage and thus a basis for discrimination. Changing one's name is an attempt to overcome this potential employment barrier. Indeed, Kang et al. (2016) found that when Asians whitened their names on their resumes, job call-backs increased from 11.5% to 18% (p. 492). However, making the decision to change one's name for the sake of potential employment opportunities could mean that one is suppressing one's own personal identity and cultural background in an effort not to stick out.

My husband did not want to do this. He confronted White privilege by **refusing to compromise his identity**. He chose not to whiten his name and persevered with his job search until he was offered an occasional teaching position. Through demonstrating his teaching talents in this position, he secured a permanent job and, more importantly, shattered the stereotypes that some people have regarding teachers with ethnic-sounding names. He has now been an

employee of the same school board for over 20 years. In 2008, he made the shift into administration, becoming a secondary school vice principal, out of a desire to be an agent of change.

It has now been almost a decade since my husband began his path towards leadership. He has made it known for many years that he aspires to advance his career by becoming a principal. He has had many conversations about his career goals with the principals he has worked for and even superintendents within the school board system. On his first attempt to “go forward” he was given an interview and received the message back that he needed more years of experience, a more diverse set of experiences at different high schools, and greater participation leading board wide initiatives. The problem with this feedback is that vice principals in his board are placed at schools without their input. Administrators are also selected by the board to lead and plan systemwide initiatives. In short, the prerequisite experiences that were being suggested to my husband as being necessary for career advancement were not within his control to attain. It is like being told you are not well known because you haven't gone to the right parties, yet no one has invited you to any of them. This seems to fit with the claim made by Chow and Crawford (2004) that ample evidence exists regarding the unequal experience of racial and ethnic minorities in the workplace, especially their limited access to, or exclusion from, committee membership and informal interaction networks that provide a variety of resources that are critical for performance and career advancement.

Chow and Crawford (2004) also note that ethnic minorities in the workplace tend to be denied honest feedback and support.

Such was the case with my husband. In his next few attempts to become a principal, he was not even given a chance to be interviewed. He was told that there were issues with the way he interacted with parents and staff members. After trying to obtain greater insight into what these “issues” were, someone finally sat down with him and explained that he might be perceived as “abrupt” during conversations. It was suggested that he change his style of speaking and use the word “please” more to appear politer. But wait—there is no commonly used word for “please” in Chinese! How could a person be expected to use language that was not part of their formative cultural lexicon? Yang (1993) has explained that a notable difference between Chinese and American patterns of communication is that the former favors fewer words to communicate ideas and the latter emphasizes eloquence. This makes acculturation of Chinese speakers into the mainstream challenging. As Emdin (2016) points out, there is definitely an “expression of white middle-class norms in the slower paced, non-overlapping speech” used by the dominant group in North American society (p. 83). Was it being suggested that my husband's career success was dependent on his speaking or “acting White,” an association that educational researcher John Ogbu (2003) has identified? This insight into a possible barrier to his career advancement stung deeply, and my husband felt personally wounded.

At this point my husband decided to try to dismantle White privilege by **speaking out**. He attempted to enlighten his colleague by explaining that there is no Chinese word for “please.” For greater understanding, the person who gave him the suggestion used the Google translate application to try to find a Cantonese word for “please.” This effort revealed that in

place of the word “please,” a Cantonese speaker would literally say “not necessary” (Chan, 2008), and it is used predominantly as a way of thanking someone for doing a service for you before they have actually done it. In English, this would be like saying to someone, “Thanks for pouring me a cup of coffee,” which could be perceived as a directive. Conversely, asking, “Can you pour me a cup of coffee?” is an indirect request because someone is not asking if you can pour a cup of coffee, but rather implying that they would like you to get them a cup of coffee. As has been noted by language researchers—all things being equal—indirect requests are judged by White people to be more polite than their direct versions (Francik & Clark, 1985; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990). Language plays “an important role in defining the speaker's identity for him- or herself” (Krauss & Chui, 1998, p. 63). Asking someone to change their culturally engrained ethnic speech patterns to sound more like the predominant group is akin to asking someone to alter who they fundamentally are as a person. Whenever possible, it is important for individuals to speak out when such requests are made of them, and additionally, to try to turn such incidents into “teachable moments” that help illuminate the existence of White privilege for those who are not conscious of it.

Speaking out can then morph into **asking questions** that serve to further dismantle privilege. In sharing his experiences with fellow administrators within the school board, my husband has been told, “but you have been in Canada so long. Can't you just slip into the White culture when you want, or need, to?” To which my husband responded to his colleague by asking, “Why should I have to?” This opened a whole discussion about the value of including different voices and

styles within the upper leadership levels of the education system and how this change could occur. As Singleton (2015) describes it, a courageous conversation about race was taking place. I realize that speaking out and asking questions is not without the risk of being ostracized—that is why they are called courageous conversations. However, it is my belief that by carefully calling attention to White privilege, and by asking thoughtful questions, it is possible to help others discover their unconscious bias and better understand how their actions inadvertently perpetuate systemic barriers to career advancement of non-Whites within the education system. The intent of such conversations is not to make accusations of wrongdoing, but rather, as Singleton suggests, to help others notice what is currently happening, understand the meaning of it, generate empathy for those affected, and ultimately shift people's thinking. As Singleton stated during his 2013 speech at the School Improvement Network Innovation Summit in Colorado, his “hope is that everyone will be able to talk about race. It won't cause blame, shame, or any of these things. It will just allow us to move forward as human beings.” Only then can changes in actions and behavior be expected to occur.

I am White and I married my husband in part because conversing with him about his experiences challenges my perspectives, causing me to grow and become a better person. I know that over the past 15 years, my teaching practice has become more inclusive because I am now more aware that the type of language I use to engage with my students, as well as the kinds of materials, visuals, and activities I use in my classroom, have an impact on how students feel about themselves. Because of courageous conversations with my husband, my actions have changed. I know my

husband is not the only minority within our board who is choosing to engage others in such dialogues, and it is my sentiment that the number of conversations taking place within my school board about White privilege is on the rise. I contend that if enough individuals initiate courageous conversations within a school board, especially with those responsible for hiring administrators, improved career advancement opportunities for minorities can result over time.

Having formal **support networks** in place to assist minority teachers in their quest for career advancement and dismantling of White privilege can also be vital. In Ontario, there is an organization called the Ontario Network Alliance of Black School Educators (ONABSE), and my school board district does have a Black Educators Network (BEN) whose objective is to optimize the educational experiences of Black educators, students, parents, and community partners. Its website offers resources, as well as information on events and initiatives, including engagement sessions. *Voices of Black Educators: An Experiential Report* conducted by Turner Consulting Group for the ONABSE in 2015, recommended that “school boards should create and support Black employee networks which would be useful to provide support and help individuals to succeed and advance within the organization” (p. 64). As a Black teaching colleague explained to me, BEN is powerful because it “gives you access to a group of people who will vouch for you when you are seeking a position of leadership.” Socializing with other members of the network can also serve as a mechanism for spreading information about upcoming leadership initiatives, or opportunities to join new committees, that will provide experiences that are looked on favorably during promotional interviews.

Establishing a formal network that has a name and a constitution raises the profile of the group and legitimizes the initiatives they undertake within the school board. BEN is now seen as a partner to the school board with co-sponsored events, such as an annual Equity Conference, that are promoted on the board's internal website. By organizing and leading such events, educators who are members of BEN create their own opportunities to gain valuable career advancement experiences.

Interestingly, in addition to a network for Black educators, my school district also has formal networks for other groups of marginalized educators, such as Aboriginal educators. A fellow administrator, who happens to be Black, commented to my husband that he should start an Asian Educators Network within our school board, too. This is now something that he is seriously considering as a means of supporting the career advancement of fellow Asians. When those without privilege reach a critical mass, they can formally come together to support each other and put forward a unified voice to challenge the assumptions of White privilege.

Christopher Emdin (2016) states, “the reality is that we privilege people who look and act like us, and perceive those who don't as different and, frequently, inferior” (p. 19). I am glad that my husband is working from within the education system to dismantle this privilege that negatively impacts career advancement opportunities for minorities. He is refusing to change who he is just to “fit in.” He is speaking out, and calling attention to privilege by asking questions that challenge the thinking of other educational leaders within his school board. I hope that he, and other members of the Asian community, also establish a more formal support network that can help to

improve the promotional chances of its members. Using these tools to dismantle White privilege from within the education system has been the path of action that “fits” for my husband. He strives to bring about a greater appreciation of the complex cultural dimensions, including ethnic speech patterns, that are reflected by the teaching staff within the board—the same teachers who, paradoxically, strive each day to ensure that the diversity of student voices represented in their classrooms and schools are heard and honored. Perhaps then, the White privilege I see preventing the career advancement of certain educators can begin to crumble, and the faces I see in the senior administration team of my school board will begin to change.

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