Chapter 7: Decoloniality and Decolonisation Leadership Inclusion: Insights from Higher Education Experiences

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Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving higher education landscape, navigating epistemological diversity within decolonial leadership has become a critical challenge. Institutions across the globe, particularly in postcolonial contexts, are tasked with creating environments that reflect the diversity of human knowledge, experiences and perspectives. For post-colonial academic institutions, the historical legacy of whiteness continues to influence leadership structures and institutional dynamics, challenging efforts to decolonise education and leadership practices. This chapter investigates how epistemological diversity in decolonial leadership is manifested in postcolonial institutions, particularly how the historical dominance of whiteness influences leadership styles, decision-making processes, and the overall institutional culture.

Despite concerted efforts to promote inclusivity and equity, many academic institutions remain bound by Eurocentric curricula and leadership practices that marginalise non-Western knowledge systems and experiences. The persistence of these colonial remnants alienates students from diverse backgrounds, often negatively impacting their academic performance and their sense of belonging within the institution. This chapter seeks to explore the ways in which decolonial leadership practices can be integrated and sustained within these environments, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive academic landscape (Mbembe 2016).

The intersection of leadership, diversity, decolonisation and decoloniality offers a rich field of inquiry. This chapter serves as a guide to understanding how these dimensions interact within postcolonial academic institutions.

Chapter focus

Despite the growing discourse around epistemological decoloniality and decolonisation in higher education, meaningful progress remains limited, leaving these ideals as largely unrealised aspirations. The persistent dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems, coupled with the slow pace of institutional reform, hinders the advancement of social justice leadership and true inclusion. Marginalised voices, particularly from the Global South, continue to be underrepresented in academic curricula and decision-making processes, perpetuating inequities. Until higher education institutions commit to more transformative and inclusive frameworks, the goals of epistemological decolonisation and social justice leadership will remain a distant and unachieved dream (Heleta and Chasi 2024; Makhubela 2018).

This chapter explores how epistemological decoloniality, decolonisation and social justice leadership inclusion thinking manifest itself within postcolonial institutional contexts, particularly in higher education. It examines the ways in which epistemic decoloniality and decolonisation thinking aim to challenge and reshape knowledge systems, leadership inclusion, governance and general reforms. Furthermore, the chapter critically engages with how whiteness, as a construct and as a power dynamic, influences the decolonisation and decoloniality dynamics of these leadership practices, shaping the experiences of both individuals and the institution within a diverse higher education landscape.

Through a comprehensive exploration of the literature, the chapter aims to highlight the critical issues that arise from attempts to integrate decolonial leadership inclusion principles into higher education. It will shed light on the challenges of navigating these complexities and provide insight into strategies that can lead to more just and effective decolonised leadership inclusion.

Higher education social justice inclusion leadership framework

A crucial aspect of decolonial leadership in higher education is the inclusion

of the Indigenous leaders, students and employees' cadre within higher education institutions, as they represent an essential component of the transformation agenda. Incorporating their voices and lived experiences into leadership and decision-making processes challenge the dominance of Eurocentric ideologies and aligns with the principles of decoloniality and social justice. The integration of Indigenous leadership into higher education governance is not merely symbolic; it is transformative, allowing the institution to reshape itself by valuing different epistemologies and leadership practices rooted in cultural diversity (Diem and Welton 2020).

Indigenous leaders bring with them unique worldviews that are informed by a deep connection to their communities, cultures and histories. Their leadership styles often emphasise collective well-being, relational accountability and the importance of maintaining reciprocal relationships between institutions and communities. Indigenous students and employees, likewise, embody diverse perspectives that can redefine the academic landscape by broadening the scope of knowledge production and institutional practices.

The role of social justice leadership framework in inclusion and diversity leadership

The Social Justice Leadership Framework (SJLF) provides an instrumental foundation for exploring how leadership in postcolonial institutions can align with the decolonial principles of diversity and inclusiveness. SJLF is a contextually sensitive framework that acknowledges the historical injustices that have shaped higher education institutions. It calls for leadership practices that actively dismantle this legacy by fostering equitable, inclusive and diverse environments where all voices, particularly those of Indigenous groups, are heard and respected (Harris and Patton 2019).

From a neoliberal perspective, social justice is often defined as the pursuit of equitable outcomes through policies and practices that may not necessarily challenge the structures that perpetuate inequality. In contrast, the critical theories that underpin decolonial leadership, including critical race theory, feminist theory and postcolonial theory, emphasise the importance of addressing systemic inequities (Harris and Patton 2019).

These theories focus on the lived experiences of marginalised groups, advocating for leadership that acknowledges and redresses the enduring legacy of colonisation.

SJLF is particularly effective in addressing the inclusion of Indigenous leaders, students and employees, as it encourages a leadership model that goes beyond superficial diversity initiatives. It calls for systemic changes that allow marginalised individuals to exercise genuine agency in shaping institutional policies and practices. By centring Indigenous voices in leadership roles, SJLF fosters a more profound commitment to decolonial principles and the creation of an academic environment that values multiple ways of knowing and respects the sovereignty of indigenous knowledge systems (Baderin and Ssenyonjo 2010; Dixon *et al*. 2011).

The conflation of decolonisation and decoloniality of leadership offering clarity

The terms decolonisation and decoloniality are often used interchangeably in discussions of leadership transformation, particularly within the context of postcolonial institutions such as higher education. However, while these concepts are related and complementary, they differ in focus, scope and purpose. Decolonisation typically refers to the formal process of undoing colonial rule (liberty) and its associated structures, while decoloniality is concerned with dismantling the persistent epistemic and cultural legacy of colonialism that continue to shape power dynamics, knowledge systems and leadership practices. Understanding the nuances between these concepts is essential for leadership within institutions aiming to transform themselves in a genuinely equitable and inclusive manner (Nyoni 2019; Quijano 2000).

Decolonisation of leadership inclusion

Decolonisation as a concept, is rooted in historical and political processes. It refers to the dismantling of colonial institutions, the reclaiming of sovereignty and the restoration of self-governance to colonised nations and peoples. In the context of leadership, decolonisation focuses on removing

colonial power structures and practices from leadership positions and institutions. This might involve the literal transfer of leadership roles from colonial powers to local or Indigenous authorities or the formal integration of previously marginalised groups into decision-making processes.

For example, in postcolonial higher education institutions, decolonisation efforts can be seen in efforts to reform governance structures by incorporating representatives of Indigenous communities or adopting affirmative action policies to increase the representation of racial and ethnic minorities in leadership positions. Decolonisation focuses on who holds power and often operates at the level of formal institutions and policies (Fricker 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

Although essential, decolonisation can sometimes be limited to structural changes without necessarily addressing the deeper, more insidious impacts of colonial ideologies, particularly the colonial mentality that may continue to pervade institutions long after formal colonial rule has ended.

Decoloniality of leadership inclusion

Decoloniality, on the other hand, extends beyond the structural process of decolonisation. It is concerned with the ongoing legacy of coloniality: the ways in which colonial logics, knowledge systems and power relations continue to shape societies, institutions and leadership practices long after the official end of colonial rule. The decoloniality of leadership calls for a fundamental rethinking and transformation of leadership philosophies, practices and frameworks to challenge and dismantle colonial hierarchies, Eurocentric biases and the dominance of Western epistemologies in leadership approaches (Grosfoguel 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

In decolonial leadership, the focus shifts from simply changing who is in charge to transforming how leadership is understood and practiced. This involves a critical examination of the knowledge systems that inform leadership practices, as well as the power dynamics that continue to privilege certain worldviews while marginalising others. Decolonial leadership is about integrating diverse, often marginalised epistemologies, including indigenous knowledge systems, into the leadership process and

creating a space where historically oppressed voices can contribute to decision making in meaningful ways.

For example, decolonial leadership in a university setting would not only involve the appointment of Indigenous leaders, it would also require the integration of indigenous epistemologies into the curriculum, pedagogy and governance of the institution. It would challenge the deep-seated colonial mentality that views western forms of knowledge as superior and create a more inclusive knowledge ecosystem that respects and values multiple ways of knowing.

Table 7.1: Key differences between decolonisation and decoloniality of leadership

	Decolonisation	**Decoloniality**
Focus	Focuses on the removal of colonial structures and the formal transfer of power to local authorities or marginalised groups.	Seeks to challenge and dismantle the deeper, lingering effects of coloniality, including epistemic, cultural and power structures that continue to marginalise non-Western forms of knowledge and leadership**.**
Scope	The topic is primarily concerned with formal political, economic and social structures.	Broader in scope, addressing not only formal structures, but also the cultural and intellectual legacy of colonialism that shape leadership and social relations.
Objectives	To restore sovereignty and create space for self-governance within previously colonised societies.	Seeks to disrupt colonial mentalities and power dynamics, fostering a pluralistic environment where diverse ways of knowing and leading are recognised and respected.
Implications for Leadership	Often means increasing the representation of historically marginalised groups in leadership roles, but may leave colonial mentalities intact.	Focuses on reconfiguring leadership philosophies to embrace and integrate multiple worldviews and challenge hierarchical, Western-dominated leadership structures.

Adapted from: Grosfoguel (2011); Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013); Nyoni (2019); Quijano (2000)

Convergence of decolonisation and decoloniality in inclusion leadership practices

Inclusion leadership in relation to decolonisation and decoloniality refers to leadership practices that actively work to destroy the colonial legacy by fostering equitable representation, participation and empowerment of historically marginalised groups, including Indigenous peoples, in decision-making processes. Although decolonisation and decoloniality offer distinct frameworks, they are deeply intertwined, and effective leadership in postcolonial institutions requires a synthesis of both. Decolonisation provides the political and structural foundation for change, while decoloniality ensures that these changes are substantive and lasting by transforming the cultural and epistemic bases of leadership (Grosfoguel 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Nyoni 2019; Quijano 2000).

For example, decolonising a higher education institution might involve appointing more Indigenous and diverse leaders to positions of power, ensuring equitable representation in decision-making. However, without decoloniality, these leaders may still be constrained by Western paradigms of leadership and governance. Decoloniality ensures that these leaders are empowered to challenge and reshape these paradigms, creating an institution that is not only more representative, but also more equitable and inclusive in its knowledge production, teaching practices and leadership structures.

Invariably, decolonisation addresses formal and structural changes, while decoloniality focuses on the epistemic and cultural transformation needed to ensure that these changes are meaningful and lasting. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for creating leadership models that reflect the values of equity, diversity and social justice in postcolonial contexts.

Historical and contemporary contexts of decolonial leadership

Decolonial leadership, particularly in higher education, is shaped by the enduring legacy of colonialism, which has embedded systemic racism,

Eurocentrism and exclusionary practices in academic institutions. Historically, colonial education systems were designed to propagate European knowledge, values and culture while suppressing indigenous knowledge systems and marginalising non-Western perspectives (Mbembe 2016; Nyoni 2019). This historical context established a power structure that privileged whiteness and European epistemologies, creating a long-standing dominance that continues to influence leadership, curricula, and institutional culture in postcolonial societies (Grosfoguel 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

In contemporary settings, despite postcolonial discourse and efforts aimed at transformation, many higher education institutions still operate within frameworks that reinforce this colonial legacy. White leadership predominates in many universities, particularly in former colonial territories, and this homogeneity extends to decision-making processes, leadership practices and knowledge production. The persistence of Eurocentric curricula and institutional cultures in these settings marginalises other forms of knowledge, particularly those rooted in Indigenous, African and other non-Western traditions. This dominance of whiteness and European epistemologies not only shapes leadership practices, it also reinforces systemic inequities that limit meaningful diversity and inclusiveness (DiAngelo 2011).

The challenge for leadership in postcolonial institutions is to actively dismantle these colonial structures. A decolonial approach to leadership calls for a critical examination of how the dynamics of colonial power continue to manifest itself in institutional practices. Leaders must address the ways in which historically privileged knowledge systems and practices are maintained through policies, curricula and institutional hierarchies. This requires creating spaces for alternative, marginalised knowledge systems to be recognised, valued and integrated into the academic and decision-making frameworks of these institutions (Helfand and Lippin 2002; Makhubela 2018).

In adopting decolonial leadership, it is essential to engage with epistemological diversity, that is, to move beyond a tokenistic inclusion of diverse perspectives toward genuinely incorporating alternative worldviews and knowledge systems into the institutional fabric. This involves questioning the dominance of Western-centric epistemologies

and exploring ways to embed indigenous, African and other marginalised forms of knowledge into curricula and leadership practices. By doing so, decolonial leadership seeks not only to transform leadership structures, but also to challenge and reshape the epistemological paradigms that guide educational institutions (Heleta and Dilraj 2024; Mbembe 2016).

This transformation requires a sustained commitment to equity, inclusion and the rethinking of power relations in academia. Leaders must be intentional in creating policies and practices that foster diverse leadership, promote intercultural dialogue and ensure that historically marginalised groups have equal opportunities to participate in leadership and knowledge creation. By embracing a decolonial framework, higher education institutions can begin to address systemic inequities and foster environments that truly reflect and serve diverse communities and their knowledge systems (Goodman 2001).

Resistance in decolonisation and decoloniality within leadership inclusion

Resistance to decolonisation and decoloniality within leadership inclusion in higher education reflects the ongoing struggle to dismantle the colonial legacy embedded in academic structures and practices. Decolonisation seeks to challenge the dominant Eurocentric narratives, while decoloniality focuses on building inclusive frameworks that acknowledge diverse knowledge systems, especially those marginalised by colonialism. Higher education leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping accessible practical education that equips students with critical skills. However, resistance to decolonial change often manifests itself in the persistence of white privilege, where leadership roles and decision-making powers remain disproportionately in the hands of individuals from historically privileged racial groups. This imbalance reinforces the marginalisation of voices from underrepresented communities, perpetuating a system where access to leadership and academic opportunities is skewed in favour of those benefiting from the remnants of colonial power structures. Consequently, true inclusion in leadership requires an intentional dismantling of both systemic racial inequalities and the deep-rooted privileges associated with whiteness (Kattz 2003; McIntosh 1997).

Leadership as a collective and dynamic endeavour

The concept of leadership, particularly in a decolonial context, must move beyond traditional hierarchical models that concentrate power in the hands of a few individuals. Instead, leadership should be viewed as a collective and dynamic process in which diverse voices are actively involved in decision making and institutional governance. This chapter draws on the growing body of literature that emphasises distributed leadership, which allows the inclusion of multiple perspectives in leadership processes. Such an approach is essential to remove the colonial legacy in leadership practices and to create more inclusive institutions (Abdi 2012).

Diversity in decolonial leadership requires a rethinking of how power is distributed within academic institutions. By embracing distributed leadership models, institutions can promote a more collaborative and inclusive approach to governance, leadership and management, ensuring that the voices of historically marginalised groups are not only heard, but also actively included in shaping the direction of the institution. This shift toward inclusive and collective leadership is critical to advance decolonial goals within postcolonial institutions (Battiste 2013; Makhubela 2018).

Reflections on social justice leadership inclusion

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the academic success of students from diverse backgrounds (Leithwood and Riehl 2005; Reyes and Wagstaff 2005;). In educational contexts focused on advancing social justice, a wide array of leadership theories has emerged under the umbrella of leadership for social justice. These include transformative leadership (Brown 2006; Shields 2003), inclusive leadership (Ryan 2006), critical race leadership (Lopez 2003), critical ecological leadership (Furman and Gruenewald 2004), feminist leadership (Blackmore 1999; Grogan 2002) and communitarian leadership (Shields 2003), addressing cultural, spiritual and advocacy-focused dimensions of leadership.

However, within this diversity leadership framework, whiteness privilege often acts as a form of resistance to inclusion. It reinforces the institutional and systemic dominance that continues to shape the experiences of

marginalised groups, particularly in leadership spaces. Decoloniality, a framework that critiques colonial power structures and advocates for dismantling white dominance, is seen as a threat to the privileges historically granted to whiteness. This resistance to decoloniality reflects the challenges of implementing truly inclusive leadership in educational institutions, where whiteness is embedded in the very structures that govern decision making and policy development (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017).

The process of decolonisation further complicates this dynamic, calling for the restructuring of educational spaces, curricula and leadership practices that continue to reflect colonial legacy. SJLFs offer critical insights into how leaders can challenge these established structures by promoting equity and inclusion. In the context of higher education reform, these frameworks are particularly relevant as they aim to address disparities in access and outcomes for historically marginalised students.

The call for decolonial practices in leadership seeks not only to recognise and disrupt whiteness privilege, but also to create equitable spaces where all students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, can thrive. Social justice leadership in this sense requires a conscious effort to resist the forces of exclusion, while simultaneously advancing decoloniality as a means of fostering greater inclusion and equity in educational reform (DiAngelo 2011).

Evolving theories of social justice leadership

The evolution of social justice leadership reflects a broadening of perspectives in educational administration. Initially, many scholars in the field focused on critical pedagogy, a theoretical framework that explores the role of education in perpetuating or challenging societal inequalities. However, over time, the focus has shifted toward a more inclusive approach that advocates for broader social inclusion and diversity (Ryan and Rottmann 2009). This shift is driven by the increasing recognition of the interconnectedness of various social identities, such as race, gender, class and ability, and the need for a collective movement with a shared vocabulary.

This broadening of social justice discourse, however, has not been without its challenges. Generalisation of social justice leadership risks

diluting the importance of the specific differences that social identities represent. Although it is essential to build collective movements for equity, it is equally critical to avoid standardising social justice leadership to the point where the unique challenges faced by marginalised groups are overlooked (Furman 2012). Effective social justice leadership must strike a delicate balance between generality and specificity, ensuring that the unique needs of different communities are acknowledged and addressed.

Despite the diversity of approaches within social justice leadership, a shared commitment to identifying and addressing disparities in educational outcomes remains central. These disparities disproportionately affect historically marginalised groups, including racial minorities, low-income students and students with disabilities. By focusing on equity in education, social justice leadership seeks to create opportunities for these groups, who have traditionally been underserved and underrepresented in educational settings (Heleta and Dilraj 2024).

Whiteness superiority and power dynamics in higher education leadership inclusion

One of the most significant challenges to advancing social justice leadership in higher education is the entrenched power dynamics that continue to privilege whiteness, particularly in leadership structures. This phenomenon, often referred to as the discourse on whiteness superiority, reflects a complex interplay of historical, social and cultural constructs that have perpetuated the dominance of whiteness in decision making, hiring practices and institutional policies. Scholars such as Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) and Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) have emphasised how these dynamics persist, shaping leadership frameworks in ways that marginalise other groups, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

In South Africa and other African nations, the historical legacy of colonisation and apartheid has left deep scars on the leadership structures of higher education. Even in the post-apartheid era, the core decision-making bodies within many South African universities remain predominantly white, as highlighted by scholars like Lander and Santoro (2017) and Warmington (2020). This persistence of whiteness in leadership

perpetuates systemic inequities, preventing individuals from historically marginalised groups, including Black and Indigenous communities, from accessing positions of power and influence. The SJLF offers a lens to address these deep inequalities by advocating for leadership that actively works to dismantle oppressive systems and promote equity, inclusion and diversity within educational institutions.

The SJLF emphasises the need for leaders to critically reflect on the power structures that sustain inequality and to engage in practices that foster equity and justice for all members of the academic community. In this context, decoloniality, the ongoing process of challenging and dismantling colonial mindsets and practices, plays a vital role in reimagining leadership structures. Decoloniality calls for the active rejection of Eurocentric paradigms, including the privileging of whiteness, in favour of more inclusive, pluralistic and context-specific approaches to leadership and knowledge production. For leadership in African universities, this means recognising and valuing indigenous knowledge systems, African epistemologies and the lived experiences of marginalised groups.

Decolonisation of higher education leadership is not just about diversifying leadership teams, it is also about transforming the values and priorities that guide decision making. Decolonisation seeks to eliminate the residual effects of colonial power structures, including institutional practices that have historically excluded Black and Indigenous individuals from leadership roles. This process involves an active rethinking of curricula, policies and leadership models to create more inclusive and just academic environments. It calls for leadership that is committed to challenging the dominance of whiteness and actively promoting diversity, equity and inclusion.

In the context of higher education institutions, the dynamics of exclusion are particularly pronounced, as these institutions often serve marginalised and underserved populations. Higher education leadership inclusion involves ensuring that leadership structures within these institutions reflect the diversity of the student body and the communities they serve. This includes creating opportunities for marginalised groups to assume leadership roles and influence decision-making processes. By integrating decolonial principles into leadership practices, higher education

institutions can foster more inclusive learning environments that empower students from diverse backgrounds.

For social justice leadership to truly take hold in higher education, particularly in African contexts, it is essential to engage in both decoloniality and decolonisation. This involves not only diversifying leadership teams but also transforming the institutional cultures that sustain the discourse of whiteness superiority. By embracing the SJLF, universities and higher education institutions can begin to dismantle the systemic inequities that have long marginalised diverse perspectives and knowledge systems, creating more equitable and inclusive spaces for all.

Leadership for equity and inclusion: A call to action

The future of social justice leadership in education hinges on its ability to confront and dismantle deeply embedded power structures, particularly those shaped by colonial legacy. Leaders committed to social justice must go beyond surface-level reforms to actively foster inclusive decision-making processes, diversify leadership roles and implement policies that prioritise equity for all students, faculty and staff. This is particularly crucial in postcolonial contexts such as South Africa, where the enduring impact of apartheid continues to influence the landscape of higher education.

Central to this transformation is the concept of decoloniality, which calls for challenging the dominance of Eurocentric values, knowledge systems and power structures that persist in educational institutions. Decoloniality emphasises the need for educational leadership to recognise and uplift indigenous and marginalised knowledge systems, while rejecting the residual effects of colonialism that continue to privilege whiteness and Western epistemologies. For leaders, this means actively questioning the ways in which institutional policies, curricula and leadership practices are shaped by the dynamics of colonial power and working to transform these structures to be more inclusive and just.

Decolonisation is a critical companion to decoloniality in this process, focusing on the practical work of dismantling colonial structures in higher education and ensuring that marginalised communities are meaningfully included in leadership. Decolonisation in educational leadership involves

transforming the ways in which leadership is understood and practiced, ensuring that leadership teams and decision-making bodies reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. This is especially important in higher education institutions, where leadership must be inclusive of the diverse and often underserved populations that these institutions serve. Higher education leadership inclusion is essential to creating equitable pathways for students from marginalised backgrounds to thrive in both educational and professional environments.

The SJLF provides a guiding philosophy for this transformative work, advocating for leadership that actively engages with issues of equity, inclusion and social justice. SJLF calls for leaders to critically examine the power structures within their institutions and to work toward dismantling systems of oppression that disadvantage marginalised groups. Leaders must not only recognise their own privileges, but also work to create environments where all voices, particularly those of historically marginalised individuals, are heard and valued (Goodman 2001).

Transformative leadership, as outlined by Shields (2003), offers a model for this type of leadership, focusing on fostering critical dialogue, advocating for marginalised communities and challenging oppressive systems. Transformative leaders work to bring about systemic change by questioning the status quo and promoting a vision of education that focuses on equity and inclusion. In a decolonial context, transformative leadership requires leaders to actively seek and elevate marginalised perspectives, ensuring that diverse knowledge systems are integrated into the institutional framework.

Similarly, inclusive leadership (Ryan 2006) emphasises the importance of creating spaces where diverse voices are not only heard but also influence decision-making processes. Inclusive leaders work to ensure that the needs of all students, particularly those of historically marginalised groups, are met. In practice, this means diversifying leadership teams, creating policies that promote equity and building an institutional culture that values and uplifts the contributions of all members.

For example, in South African higher education institutions, where access to leadership roles for marginalised communities remains limited, inclusive leadership and decolonisation can work together to create more

equitable structures. Decolonising higher education leadership involves challenging the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge in vocational training and ensuring that leadership reflects the diversity of the student body. This kind of inclusion in leadership ensures that marginalised communities are not only represented, but also have the power to shape the direction of the institution in ways that align with their needs and experiences.

Ultimately, social justice leadership requires a deep and sustained commitment to equity, not just in rhetoric, but in practice. Leaders must be willing to confront their own privileges, challenge institutional norms that sustain inequity and advocate for the systemic changes necessary to create more just and inclusive educational environments. In contexts like South Africa, where the legacy of apartheid continues to shape higher education, this kind of leadership is critical to breaking down the entrenched power dynamics that perpetuate inequity. Through the lens of decoloniality, decolonisation and the SJLF, leaders can drive the meaningful transformation needed to create inclusive and equitable institutions for all (Furman 2012).

Social identities, privilege and whiteness in leadership: A decolonial perspective

The relationship between privilege, social identity and leadership has been the subject of extensive study across disciplines such as sociology, psychology, politics and education (Black and Stone 2005; McIntosh 1992). Social identities, shaped through interactions with the world, profoundly influence how individuals experience privilege and power. In leadership, particularly within educational institutions, these dynamics are deeply rooted and reinforce systems of inequality. Critical social psychology frames identity as a social construction, shaped by both individual experiences and societal structures (Allen and Rosatto 2009). Within this framework, critical pedagogy focuses on the ways in which power and privilege differentiate between the identities of the privileged, those who are seen as 'normal' or 'human' and the oppressed, who are often viewed as 'other' or 'alien' (Tatum 1997). These dynamics are particularly evident in educational leadership, where whiteness continues to be privileged, shaping

the values, policies and practices of institutions.

Scholars like Black and Stone (2005) highlight five core components of privilege. First, privilege is a special advantage, neither common nor universal. Second, it is not earned or achieved through individual effort, but rather granted based on status. Third, privilege is tied to the preferred social status or rank. Fourth, privilege benefits the recipient to the detriment of others. Finally, privilege is often invisible to those who possess it. These components of privilege intersect with social identities such as race, gender, class and ability and are deeply embedded in whiteness, which continues to dominate leadership in many educational settings.

Within this context, the SJLF provides a crucial lens for understanding and addressing the dynamics of privilege and power in leadership. SJLF emphasises the need for leaders to critically engage with their own social identities and privileges, especially those related to whiteness, and to actively work toward dismantling systems of oppression. Leaders who operate from a social justice perspective must recognise the ways in which their identities and privileges influence their leadership practices and decision-making processes (Canli and Demirtaş 2022). This includes acknowledging the historical and systemic advantages that whiteness has conferred, particularly in postcolonial contexts like South Africa (Oplatka 2014).

In South African higher education, the persistence of whiteness in leadership is a direct consequence of the historical legacy of colonisation and apartheid, which have established racial hierarchies and power structures. Despite efforts to diversify leadership, many decision-making bodies in universities and higher education institutions remain predominantly white, perpetuating systemic inequities. These dynamics are not simply about the underrepresentation of marginalised groups; they reflect the continued dominance of Eurocentric values and knowledge systems in educational leadership.

The decoloniality process, the ongoing rejection of colonial mindsets and power structures, offers a framework to challenge the dominance of whiteness in leadership. Decoloniality calls for a rethinking of leadership structures, emphasising the inclusion of marginalised voices and knowledge systems that have historically been excluded from positions of power.

Leaders must critically examine how privilege, particularly white privilege, shapes their institutions and actively work to dismantle these structures. This involves not only diversifying leadership teams, but also transforming the values, policies and practices that have historically privileged whiteness and Eurocentrism (Grosfoguel 2011; Sidhu 2008; Smith 2012).

Decolonisation, in this context, goes beyond representation. It requires a fundamental transformation of the power dynamics that govern educational institutions. In higher education leadership inclusion, decolonisation means ensuring that leadership structures reflect the diversity of the student population, which is often composed of individuals from marginalised communities. Decolonisation in higher education institutions involves creating pathways for Black and Indigenous people to assume leadership roles and influence the direction of the institution in ways that align with the needs and experiences of the communities they serve.

At the heart of decolonial leadership is the recognition that social identities and privilege intersect in complex ways to maintain systems of oppression. Whiteness, as a form of privilege, often operates invisibly, shaping leadership practices in ways that exclude marginalised groups. Leaders who are committed to social justice must be willing to confront these dynamics, acknowledge their own privileges and actively work to create more inclusive and equitable institutions (Verwey and Quayle 2012).

The SJLF provides a roadmap for this work, emphasising the need for leaders to engage in critical self-reflection, challenge institutional norms, and advocate for the systemic changes necessary to create more just educational environments. In the context of South Africa, where the legacy of apartheid continues to shape leadership, this is particularly urgent. Leaders must not only recognise the ways in which whiteness continues to dominate, but also actively work to dismantle these power structures through decolonial and decolonising practices (Furman 2012; Oplatka 2014).

Understanding the relationship between social identities, privilege and leadership is critical to advancing equity and inclusion in education. By embedding the principles of SJLF, decoloniality and decolonisation into leadership practices, institutions can begin to address the systemic inequities that have long privileged whiteness and marginalised other identities. This is particularly important in the inclusion of HE leadership,

where decolonising leadership structures can create more equitable opportunities for marginalised communities and foster a more just and inclusive educational landscape. Furman (2012) sums it up by describing SJLF as the process of changing institutional and organisational structures by actively participating in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining and promoting inherent human rights related to equity, equality and fairness across social, economic, educational and personal spheres (Katz 2003).

The complexity of social identity and privilege

The complexity of social identity reflects the complexities involved in acknowledging and naming privilege. As Curry-Stevens (2007) points out, defining who is privileged can be difficult because focusing on one form of privilege may overshadow other forms of oppression. For example, Fellows and Razack (1998: 335) describe the 'race to innocence' in which individuals overlook their privilege to claim oppression in other areas, deflecting attention from their privileged status.

In South Africa, the historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid has established racial stereotypes and privileges in both public and private spheres. Research by Verwey and Quayle (2012) illustrate the persistence of backstage talk among white Afrikaners about Black South Africans. This form of covert racism perpetuates negative racial stereotypes, often hidden from the public. Separation experienced by privileged individuals leads to ignorance about the realities of more vulnerable communities (Hobgood 2000). This ignorance often manifests itself as arrogance with privileged individuals, if the world works the same for everyone as it does for them.

Many white people, for example, believe themselves to be kind and hardworking, with little awareness of how others, particularly people of colour, may perceive them with distrust or fear (Shahjahan 2011). They may be unaware of their day-to-day privileges or the historical processes that produced these advantages in a society shaped by white supremacy (Hooks 1990).

Fluidity and intersections of privilege and oppression

The concepts of privilege and oppression are deeply intertwined with the complexities of identity. As McIntosh (1997) highlights, these concepts are not fixed, but fluid and contextual, shaped by our multiple intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality and ability. Each person navigates spaces where they may have privilege in some areas and experience oppression in others. For example, a middle-class white woman may experience gender-based discrimination, but still benefit from racial privilege and socioeconomic status, while a working-class Black man may face racial and class oppression, but benefit from male privilege. This fluidity is a core aspect of intersectionality, which posits that oppressive systems are not singular but interact and overlap (Helfand and Lippin 2002).

Razack (1998) reinforced this by pointing out that we are all both privileged and oppressed in different contexts. This nuanced perspective encourages a broader understanding of how power operates, emphasising that privilege is not monolithic, but rather multifaceted, dependent on the particular social setting and the identities at play.

Harding and Whitehead (2013), however, remind us that, while it is important to recognise the plurality of privilege, we must not lose sight of the enduring significance of racial privilege. The danger of pluralising privilege is that it can dilute the focus on race, which has been a foundational axis of oppression in maintaining social hierarchies across time and space. In contexts where multiple forms of privilege and oppression intersect, race still plays a critical role in structuring access to power, resources and opportunities. Even within progressive spaces focused on diversity and inclusion, racial privilege often remains underexamined or overlooked, obscuring the specific ways in which whiteness continues to confer unearned advantages.

In the field of education, scholars have extensively explored how these dynamics manifest themselves. In teacher preparation programmes, for example, Matias and Mackey (2015) discuss how racial privilege shapes the experiences and expectations of teachers, often leaving them ill equipped to address the needs of racially diverse students. Similarly, Allen and

Rossatto (2009) examined how racial privilege in secondary education creates disparate learning environments, benefiting white students, while disadvantaging students of colour. Nurenberg (2011) further investigates these dynamics in secondary education, while Curry-Stevens (2007) and Underiner (2000) focus on adult education settings, highlighting how privilege and oppression play out in the learning experiences of adult students from diverse backgrounds.

The Privilege Identity Exploration Model (Watt 2007) is particularly insightful in this regard. It emphasises that discussions of privilege often trigger strong emotional and cognitive reactions, especially among individuals with unexamined privilege. The model identifies several psychological defences, such as denial, deflection and minimisation, that people use to avoid confronting their own privilege. These barriers can hinder meaningful engagement with the concept of privilege, making it difficult to address the inequities that persist in education and other social contexts. This model provides a framework for understanding why conversations about privilege, particularly racial privilege, are often fraught with resistance and underscores the importance of pushing past these defences to create more equitable learning environments.

Although privilege is undoubtedly complex and multifaceted, it is essential to maintain a clear focus on the specific role that racial privilege plays in perpetuating systemic inequality. Pluralism of privilege should enhance, not obscure our understanding of how race continues to shape access to power and resources, particularly in educational spaces where the legacy of racism and white supremacy persists.

Pedagogy for the privileged: Transforming allies for social justice

The concept of pedagogy for the privileged provides a powerful framework for involving individuals who benefit from systemic privilege in the struggle for social justice. In the context of South African higher education, where the legacy of apartheid and colonialism continues to shape the experiences of students and staff, this pedagogical approach takes on even greater significance. South Africa's historical and social landscape, defined

by racial, economic, and gender inequalities, offers a poignant example of how privilege systems continue to manifest themselves in education. Transformation of privileged individuals into active allies for decolonisation and social justice is necessary and urgent.

South African experience: Decoloniality, leadership, and inclusion

In South Africa, the call for decoloniality and decolonisation of higher education gained widespread attention with movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. These student-led protests highlighted the pervasive nature of colonial and Eurocentric knowledge systems, demanding a shift toward curricula that reflect African epistemologies, indigenous knowledge and a more inclusive representation of marginalised communities. However, despite these significant calls for change, the reality of meaningful inclusion of leadership and epistemological transformation remains largely aspirational.

Decoloniality and pedagogy for the privileged in South Africa

The pedagogy for the privileged is highly relevant within South African higher education, as it addresses the role that privileged groups, particularly white students and faculty, play in perpetuating inequality. A decolonial approach challenges these individuals to interrogate their own positions of privilege in relation to race, wealth and gender. It urges them to move beyond passive acceptance of inequality and take active steps toward supporting the transformation of the university into a more equitable space (Katz 2003).

Decoloniality in this context goes beyond simply altering the curriculum; it requires a rethinking of how knowledge is produced, validated and transmitted. This involves not only dismantling Eurocentric power structures, but also empowering students and scholars from historically marginalised communities. However, without the active engagement of privileged allies, these efforts risk remaining symbolic

rather than substantive. Pedagogy for the privileged encourages privileged individuals to use their position and influence to advocate for decolonial knowledge systems and dismantle oppressive structures within academia.

Leadership and inclusion: Addressing epistemic injustice

One of the key challenges in South Africa is the slow pace at which leadership inclusion reflects the values of decolonisation and social justice. Leadership positions within universities are still predominantly held by individuals who benefit from colonial and apartheid legacy, often leaving out the voices of those who have experienced systemic oppression. A shift in leadership, rooted in decoloniality, would require the elevation of leaders who are committed to addressing the epistemic injustices embedded within the academy.

For privileged allies, social justice leadership means recognising that structural inequalities within universities, be they racial, gendered or economic, are maintained by systemic privilege. It is not enough for allies to remain sympathetic observers; they must take on the responsibility of confronting and dismantling the very systems from which they benefit (Nyoni 2019). This includes pushing for more representative leadership structures and ensuring that decision-making processes are inclusive of historically marginalised voices. South African higher education cannot be viewed as a superficial diversity effort, where the mere presence of marginalised students or staff is enough to indicate progress. True inclusion means creating an environment where all students, particularly those of historically disadvantaged backgrounds, have equal access to resources, opportunities and the ability to influence institutional culture (Nyoni 2019; Heleta and Chasi 2024).

In practice, this could involve reviewing admission policies to ensure greater access for students from underprivileged communities, restructuring the curriculum to reflect African and indigenous perspectives and ensuring that campus spaces are supportive and free of micro-aggressions or systemic barriers to success. Pedagogy for the privileged, when applied in South Africa, encourages privileged students and staff to

reflect on their role in creating an inclusive educational environment. They are asked to question how their presence and actions might reinforce the dominance of Eurocentric and capitalist structures, and to actively work toward dismantling these structures by advocating for decoloniality and inclusion within their spheres of influence (Van Gorder 2007).

Transforming allies for decolonisation and social justice

Transformation of privileged individuals into active allies for decolonisation and social justice is essential for sustainable change in South African universities. This transformation requires a shift in mindset: moving from passive acknowledgment of privilege to active participation in the struggle for justice. For example, a privileged student may start by recognising their positionality, but the goal is for them to become advocates for policy change, curriculum reform and leadership diversity. Pedagogy for the privileged aims to create a deeper sense of responsibility among those who benefit from inequality, pushing them to leverage their advantages to support marginalised groups. In the South African context, this may mean working alongside student movements, participating in institutional reform efforts, or using personal and professional networks to amplify decolonial initiatives.

Theoretical foundations and key principles

Pedagogy for the privileged draws heavily from Paulo Freire's (1972) theory of critical consciousness, which emphasises the need for individuals to become aware of the sociopolitical forces that shape their lives and the lives of others. Freire's work has traditionally focused on the oppressed, arguing that liberation can only come through their awakening and active participation in the dismantling of oppression systems. Curry-Stevens (2007) extends Freire's ideas by applying them to privileged learners, arguing that they must also undergo a process of critical consciousness to recognise how their privilege sustains inequality.

In conjunction with Freire, pedagogy for the privileged is informed

by Mezirow's (1991) *theory of transformative learning*. Mezirow's model suggests that transformative education involves a shift in consciousness, where learners critically assess their assumptions, values and beliefs. This type of learning is essential for privileged individuals, since it challenges their deeply ingrained worldviews, often shaped by unearned advantages. As Curry-Stevens (2007) noted, pedagogy for the privileged emphasises counterhegemonic pedagogy: education that actively disrupts the dominant ideologies that sustain privilege and inequality. It aims to foster transformative learning experiences that not only raise awareness, but also inspire action toward social justice.

One distinction of pedagogy for the privileged is its recognition of the unique needs and challenges faced by privileged learners. Unlike oppressed learners, who may experience the consequences of oppression first-hand, privileged learners are often insulated from these realities, making it harder for them to see the urgency of social justice work. Thus, pedagogy for the privileged requires different supports, such as facilitating emotional resilience in the face of guilt or discomfort and addressing psychological defences such as denial or minimisation of privilege (Watt 2007). These learners must be equipped with the tools to process their own complicity in systems of oppression without disengaging from the work of change.

The role of the privileged in social justice

Freire (1972) famously argued that oppressors cannot lead the charge for liberation. This view suggests that privileged individuals, as benefactors of unequal systems, are too deeply invested in maintaining the status quo to engage in meaningful liberation work. Curry-Stevens (2007), however, contends that this critique oversimplifies the potential role of privileged individuals in social justice movements. She argues that privileged learners must be placed on par with oppressed learners in educational settings, not as leaders of the movement, but as allies who can leverage their privilege to effect systemic change.

Rothenberg and Scully (as cited in Curry-Stevens 2007: 36) further argue that privileged individuals represent a significant 'cadre of potential allies' for social justice. When properly educated and guided, they can use

their relative power and influence to advocate for policies and practices that challenge systemic inequalities. Importantly, this advocacy must involve acting against their own immediate self-interest: privileged individuals must be willing to relinquish the unearned benefits they receive to support the collective good. This process of allyship involves not just understanding one's privilege, but using it to disrupt the very systems that uphold that privilege.

Political and practical implications

Pedagogy for the privileged raises both political and practical questions about the role of privileged individuals in social justice movements. Politically, it confronts the tension between the involvement of the privileged in the liberation work. Should those who benefit from oppressive systems be involved in efforts to dismantle those systems? Critics argue that the privileged may inadvertently re-centre themselves in these movements, thus, reinforcing the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle. However, proponents of privileged pedagogy assert that social justice requires the participation of all members of society, especially those with power and influence, if it is to achieve transformative, systemic change (Evans *et al.* 2000; Fanon 2004).

Practically, privileged pedagogy underscores the importance of engaging privileged individuals as active participants in social justice work, not just passive supporters. This engagement involves educating privileged learners about their complicity in oppressive systems and equipping them with the skills and knowledge to challenge those systems. Privileged individuals, when they recognise their own role in maintaining inequality and choose to act in solidarity with marginalised groups, can be powerful allies in dismantling the structures that uphold privilege and oppression (Makhubela 2018).

By transforming privilege into a tool for justice, privileged pedagogy has the potential to create a larger and more inclusive movement for social change. This approach not only seeks to educate the privileged, but also to empower them to become co-conspirators in the fight for equity, leveraging their advantages to build more just and equitable societies. In doing so, it

disrupts the traditional power dynamics that separate the privileged from the oppressed and fosters a more collaborative, collective effort toward social justice (Katz 2003).

Effectiveness of decolonial leadership

The effectiveness of decolonial leadership is rooted in the idea of challenging and reshaping leadership paradigms that have been shaped by colonialism and Eurocentric ideologies. This framework focuses on deconstructing power structures that have historically marginalised certain groups while reconstructing leadership models that emphasise equity, cultural responsiveness and social justice. Theories of decolonial leadership draw heavily from critical theory, postcolonial thought and decolonial perspectives, calling for the transformation of leadership practices to create inclusive, culturally responsive and socially just environments (Harris and Patton 2019).

At its core, decolonial leadership is about dismantling the colonial legacy in institutions, promoting the inclusion of diverse ways of knowing and empowering marginalised groups. Traditional leadership paradigms, often grounded in hierarchical and Eurocentric models of authority, are challenged in favour of leadership practices that prioritise the well-being, agency and voices of historically disadvantaged communities. The effectiveness of colonial leadership requires the creation of leadership approaches that go beyond mere representation, actively address systemic inequalities and foster respectful and inclusive dialogue that acknowledges diverse ways of knowing and being (Katz 2003; Nyoni 2019).

Decoloniality and decolonisation leadership inclusion strategies

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping the academic success of students of all ages. In educational settings that prioritise social justice, various leadership theories have emerged, each offering a unique perspective on promoting fairness and equity. These approaches, collectively known as leadership for social justice, include transformative leadership, which seeks

to challenge and change oppressive structures; inclusive leadership, which emphasises the participation of all voices; and critical race leadership, which addresses the specific needs and challenges faced by marginalised racial groups. Other models, such as feminist leadership and communitarian leadership, focus on gender equity, community well-being and advocacy. Together, these approaches aim to address the cultural, spiritual and social dimensions of leadership in the pursuit of a more just and equitable educational experience for all students (Hlatshwayo 2024).

However, in navigating this diverse leadership landscape, whiteness privilege often emerges as a significant barrier to true inclusion. This privilege maintains and reinforces the institutional and systemic dominance of white individuals and perspectives, particularly in leadership roles. As a result, efforts to create more inclusive leadership models often encounter resistance, with whiteness acting as a force that seeks to preserve the status quo.

Decoloniality, a theoretical framework that critiques colonial power structures, poses a direct challenge to white privilege. By advocating for the dismantling of these power structures and promoting a more equitable distribution of power, decoloniality threatens the historical advantages that whiteness has provided. This tension between decoloniality and whiteness privilege underscores the difficulty of achieving genuine inclusion in educational leadership, as the very systems governing decision-making and policy development are often rooted in colonial legacy (Heleta and Dilraj 2024).

The process of decolonisation adds another layer of complexity to this dynamic. It calls for a fundamental restructuring of educational spaces, curricula and leadership practices, demanding that these systems move away from colonial legacies and toward more equitable frameworks. SJLFs are instrumental in this process, offering leaders the tools and perspectives needed to confront entrenched structures of exclusion and promote equity and inclusion (Oplatka 2014).

In the context of higher education reform, these leadership frameworks are particularly important. South African higher education institutions often serve students from historically marginalised communities, making the need for inclusive and equitable leadership even more pressing. By

addressing whiteness privilege and promoting decolonial practices, the higher education leadership can work to dismantle the systemic barriers that hinder the success of these students, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their background, could thrive.

Ultimately, the call for decolonial practices in educational leadership is about more than just recognising and disrupting whiteness privilege. It is about creating educational spaces where all students can succeed, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. Social justice leadership, in this context, requires a deliberate effort to resist exclusion and promote decoloniality as a means of fostering greater equity and inclusion within educational reform, particularly in higher education institutions.

The role of decolonial leadership in educational and institutional settings

In educational settings, decolonial leadership plays a critical role in transforming institutions that have historically been sites of colonial oppression. The curriculum, administrative practices and pedagogical approaches used in many educational institutions continue to reflect colonial values and reinforce Eurocentric worldviews. Decolonial leadership in education seeks to address these issues by promoting curricular reform, fostering inclusive pedagogies and challenging the dominant narratives that shape the way knowledge is produced and disseminated.

Decolonial leaders in education also work to ensure that educational spaces are welcoming and affirming for all students, particularly those of marginalised groups. This involves creating policies and practices that support diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as engaging in critical reflection on the ways the colonial legacy continues to influence institutional practices. By promoting a decolonised educational environment, leaders can help dismantle the systems of oppression that have historically excluded and marginalised certain groups of students (Hlatshwayo 2024).

Epistemic strategies to advance decolonial leadership inclusion

The prevailing consensus in the reviewed literature is that the exploration of the diversity of epistemological decolonial leadership in higher education remains in its infancy (Nyoni 2019). Although the importance of decoloniality and decolonisation is increasingly recognised, empirical research remains limited (Lander and Santoro 2017). This highlights the need for further investigation and the understanding of how the inclusion of decolonial leadership manifests and interacts with diverse epistemologies in higher education contexts. Higher education leadership inclusion and decolonisation strategies may include integrating diverse epistemologies into curricula, fostering inclusive governance practices, promoting representation of marginalised groups in decision-making roles, and facilitating dialogues that acknowledge and incorporate indigenous knowledge systems.

The lack of decolonial philosophies, theories and praxis, however, hamper any efforts due to entrenched Eurocentric epistemic violent protocols and processes. Therefore, it is important to conduct thorough research and verify the effectiveness of specific strategies for implementation in various institutional contexts. Keet *et al.* (2017) admit that there is a lack of ease and awkwardness in the present discourses on higher education in South Africa. This awkwardness, Keet *et al.* (2017) suggest, emerges from the complicity of higher education in perpetuating epistemic injustices, leaving the coloniality of knowledge untouched, while adopting the aim of transformation only at the level of rhetorical euphoria.

The concept of epistemological diversity of decolonial leadership is rooted in critical theories, particularly decolonial thought. Challenge traditional leadership models that perpetuate colonial structures and Eurocentric perspectives, advocating for leadership approaches that incorporate diverse worldviews and epistemologies. Decolonial epistemological leadership seeks to reshape how knowledge is produced and managed in higher education institutions by integrating indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western perspectives (Sidhu 2008). Leaders with this approach aim to create inclusive and socially just environments that prioritise cultural

responsiveness, reduce hierarchies and promote equity within institutions.

Quijano's (2000) notion of decoloniality further underscores the transformative potential of this leadership. It involves a complete departure from colonial influences, focusing on empowering indigenous people and incorporating their knowledge into leadership structures. This presents an opportunity for South African higher education institutions to design leadership models that bridge the gap between traditional Westernised systems and indigenous knowledge systems. As Sidhu (2008) notes, decoloniality in knowledge and leadership represents a shift toward a more inclusive and representative model of higher education leadership.

Epistemic decoloniality and decolonisation strategies for higher education leadership inclusion aim to challenge and transform the entrenched colonial legacies within academic institutions, particularly in leadership roles. These strategies advocate for the recognition and inclusion of diverse, marginalised knowledge systems and worldviews, dismantling Eurocentric paradigms that dominate academic governance and knowledge production.

Considering leadership dynamics and effectiveness in diverse cultures

The findings also highlight the importance of understanding the factors that influence leadership dynamics and effectiveness within diverse cultural contexts. Leadership is shaped by the cultural environment in which it operates, and leadership approaches cannot be universal. Theoretical foundations such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (including individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity) provide valuable insights into how cultural values affect leadership styles and effectiveness (Abdi 2012; Heleta and Dilraj 2024).

In diverse contexts, leaders must adapt their strategies to accommodate varying cultural norms and expectations. The cultural intelligence (CQ) framework further emphasises the importance of leaders being culturally aware and adaptable. Effective leadership in a globalised and culturally diverse world requires a strong understanding of cultural differences,

which can impact decision making, power dynamics and team functioning (Lander and Santoro 2017).

In essence, the rise of inclusive leadership reflects a growing recognition of the value of diversity and equity in leadership practices. Inclusive leadership involves creating an environment where all voices, particularly those of historically marginalised groups, are heard and respected. By integrating diverse perspectives, inclusive leaders can foster more equitable and effective teams (Smith 2012). This multidisciplinary approach underscores the need for flexible, culturally sensitive and inclusive leadership practices. Leaders must navigate the complexities of cultural diversity to build effective and equitable leadership models that can thrive in diverse environments.

Postcolonial institutional leadership inclusion experiences and practice

The literature points to a significant ambivalence in efforts to reform leadership within postcolonial higher education institutions (Nyoni 2019; Smith 2012). Many institutions continue to struggle with the persistence of colonial leadership styles and institutional structures. Despite the growing discourse around decoloniality, the shifts in leadership practices have been uneven and often face resistance, creating a challenging environment for transformational change.

This ambivalence arises from the coexistence of decolonial aspirations and the established influence of colonial legacy. Leaders seeking to implement decolonial reforms face complex dynamics, as these institutions often hold onto hierarchical structures, power imbalances and Eurocentric knowledge systems. This resistance underscores the need for critical engagement to navigate these tensions and develop leadership practices that dismantle colonial remnants while fostering inclusive and culturally responsive leadership (Sidhu 2008) which entails diversifying epistemic foundations. It involves incorporating non-Western, indigenous and marginalised knowledge systems into the curriculum, research and decision-making processes of universities. Leadership should actively promote an inclusive intellectual environment that values diverse

epistemologies, moving beyond the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge (Helfand and Lippin 2002).

Epistemic decoloniality, the justice sought through challenging colonial knowledge systems, is vital to this effort. South African universities must, for example, modernise their engagement with indigenous knowledge systems to reshape epistemological production and leadership in higher education. This approach will support the socioeconomic practices of local communities and address the colonial knowledge violence still present in contemporary education (Battiste 2013; Woolman 2001). The need to reconfigure leadership in a way that is inclusive of indigenous knowledge and practices is central to achieving a truly decolonial higher education leadership model. Genuine reforming of leadership pathways could also help to foster leadership inclusion projects. Current leadership trajectories in academia often favour individuals trained in Western epistemologies and leadership styles. A decolonial approach requires revising the hiring, promotion and leadership development processes to ensure that those of marginalised backgrounds are not only included, but also empowered to lead with their own cultural and intellectual frameworks.

Decolonising governance structures and research

Decolonising governance structures and research is a transformative strategy aimed at dismantling colonial traces that continue to shape power dynamics, decision-making processes, and knowledge production. This approach seeks to challenge and rethink the traditional Eurocentric models of governance and research by promoting inclusivity, representation and local knowledge systems, particularly from marginalised and Indigenous communities. In governance, decolonisation involves creating structures that reflect diverse voices, values and perspectives, ensuring equitable participation and leadership. It requires rethinking policies, institutional cultures and decision-making frameworks that often perpetuate inequality (Bogotch 2013).

In research, decolonisation focuses on deconstructing the dominance of Western paradigms, methodologies and knowledge hierarchies. It emphasises the importance of recognising and integrating indigenous

knowledge, lived experiences and diverse worldviews into academic and policy discourse. This strategy fosters collaboration with communities, prioritising research that addresses their specific needs and challenges and ensuring ethical and context-sensitive approaches (Harris and Patton 2019).

Ultimately, decolonising governance structures and research paves the way for a more just, equitable and culturally relevant future.

Conclusion

The experiences of postcolonial decolonial leadership inclusion reform in higher education institutions reveal deep ambivalence and resistance to change. This underscores the challenges of dismantling the colonial legacy in leadership practices and the need for continued critical engagement and transformation (Heleta and Chasi 2024; Makhubela 2018; Nyoni 2019).

Bhambra *et al*. (2020: 513–514) assert that decolonisation as a critical process that involves interrogating, resisting, dismantling and transforming the university, is due to entrenched Eurocentric leadership theories that rebutted indigenous excellences. Decoloniality and decolonisation processes entail deep engagements with how academic institutions have historically contributed to, perpetuated and legitimised global systems of epistemic and systemic violence, inequality and domination. However, the persistent preference for Eurocentric standards, values and practices—often celebrated uncritically—seem to overshadow the transformative efforts aimed at fostering decoloniality and advancing decolonisation. This reflects a broader systemic reluctance to confront and dismantle entrenched structures of epistemic and social injustice, partly due to reliance on entrenched institutionalised whiteness supremacy and conspiracy in the positions of power undermining the paradigm shift.

We proffer that the SJLF imperatives inherent in decolonial work, highlight the need to reimagine and reconstruct institutions of higher learning in ways that centre marginalised knowledge systems and lived experiences. The experiences of postcolonial decolonial leadership inclusion reform in higher education institutions reveal deep ambivalence and resistance to change. This underscores the challenges of dismantling

the colonial legacy in leadership practices and the need for continued critical engagement and transformation. As Bhambra *et al*. (2020: 513–514) assert, decolonisation is a critical process that requires interrogating, resisting, dismantling and transforming the university's structures, which have been shaped by entrenched Eurocentric leadership theories and praxis. These theories, in turn, have long rebutted indigenous excellences, thus, upholding a legacy of exclusion.

Furthermore, this chapter critically engages with how whiteness, as both a construct and a power dynamic, influences the decolonisation and decoloniality dynamics of leadership practices in higher education. This framing emphasises how institutionalised whiteness, supremacy and conspiracy in positions of power undermine efforts to shift the paradigm (Helfand and Lippin 2002). The persistent preference for Eurocentric standards, values and practices, often celebrated uncritically, overshadows transformative efforts aimed at fostering decoloniality and advancing decolonisation (Heleta and Dilraj 2024).

The chapter highlights that decoloniality and decolonisation entail deep engagement with the ways in which academic institutions have historically contributed to, perpetuated and legitimised global systems of violence, inequality and domination. The challenges of navigating these complexities are significant, and efforts to foster inclusion within leadership are met with resistance due to these entrenched structures (Keet *et al*. 2017). However, through the critical exploration of literature, we aimed to shed light on strategies that can lead to more just and effective leadership inclusion practices.

The conscious call reinforces the imperatives of a SJLF inherent in decolonial work, calling for the reimagining and reconstruction of institutions of higher learning. Only through this process can we centre marginalised knowledge systems and lived experiences, ultimately advancing decoloniality and creating more equitable, inclusive leadership practices in the higher education landscapes (Diem and Welton 2020).

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