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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Structural and Cultural Barriers to Ethnic Minority Leadership in UK and Canadian Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Despite decades of policy attention to equality, diversity, and inclusion, ethnic minorities remain persistently underrepresented in senior leadership positions across educational institutions in the United Kingdom and Canada. This paper develops a critical conceptual analysis of the structural and cultural forces that sustain this leadership gap. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in educational leadership, organisational sociology, and critical race studies, the paper argues that underrepresentation cannot be explained solely through individual deficits or pipeline shortages. Instead, it reflects the interaction of institutional practices, cultural norms of leadership legitimacy, and historically embedded power relations that continue to privilege whiteness as the unspoken standard of authority. Synthesising evidence from leadership research, policy analyses, and comparative education studies, the paper advances a multi-level framework that explains how recruitment systems, promotion criteria, informal networks, and leadership cultures jointly reproduce exclusion, even within institutions that publicly endorse equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles. The contribution of the paper lies in reframing ethnic minority underrepresentation as a systemic governance problem rather than a diversity compliance issue. The analysis concludes by identifying implications for leadership theory and institutional reform, arguing that meaningful progress requires a shift from representational metrics to structural transformation.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic minority leadership, educational leadership, equity diversity and inclusion, institutional racism, UK and Canada

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions in the United Kingdom and Canada occupy a distinctive moral and social position. They are widely regarded as sites where merit, fairness, and social mobility should prevail, and where leadership is expected to reflect principles of equality, openness, and public accountability. Universities, colleges, and school systems routinely articulate

commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion through strategic plans, governance frameworks, and public statements (Universities Canada, 2024). These commitments are often presented as evidence of progressive institutional cultures and forward-looking leadership. Yet, despite this sustained policy attention, senior leadership structures across both national contexts remain overwhelmingly homogeneous (Nottingham Trent University, 2025).

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that ethnic minorities are significantly underrepresented in senior educational leadership roles, including professorial appointments, executive management positions, headships, and governance boards (NFER, 2025; Government of Canada, 2024). This pattern persists even in institutions serving highly diverse student populations and operating within multicultural societies. The persistence of this leadership gap has prompted growing scholarly concern, particularly as it appears resistant to conventional policy interventions and diversity initiatives (Government of the United Kingdom, 2025). The disjuncture between institutional rhetoric and leadership outcomes suggests that surface-level commitments alone are insufficient to address deeply embedded inequalities (Belonging Effect, 2025a).

Much of the existing research has focused on documenting disparities, offering valuable statistical insights into who occupies leadership roles and who does not. While this body of work has been essential in establishing the scale of the problem, descriptive accounts provide only partial explanations. Less attention has been paid to the institutional processes and cultural assumptions that shape leadership selection and legitimacy. As a result, underrepresentation is often framed as a pipeline issue, an aspiration deficit, or a problem of individual preparedness, rather than as a systemic outcome produced within organisations themselves (BERA, 2025).

This paper proceeds from the premise that leadership is not a neutral or purely technical function. Leadership roles are socially constructed positions that carry implicit expectations about authority, credibility, and suitability. These expectations are shaped by historical patterns of power, professional norms, and cultural values that continue to influence contemporary institutions. In educational settings, leadership has long been associated with particular modes of speech, behaviour, and professional trajectory that align closely with White, middle-class, and often masculine identities (Belonging Effect, 2025b). Such associations are rarely articulated explicitly, yet they exert a powerful influence over recruitment, promotion, and informal endorsement.

Structural arrangements within educational institutions further compound these cultural dynamics. Recruitment and promotion processes are frequently characterised by opaque criteria, informal sponsorship, and reliance on prior leadership experience that itself reflects unequal access to opportunity (Government of Canada, 2024). Performance metrics, governance structures, and decision-making hierarchies often privilege forms of capital that are unevenly distributed across racial and ethnic lines (Government of the United Kingdom, 2025). These mechanisms operate in ways that appear procedurally fair, while producing systematically unequal outcomes (NFER, 2025).

This paper advances a conceptual analysis of ethnic minority underrepresentation in educational leadership across the United Kingdom and Canada, focusing on the interaction between structural barriers and cultural constructions of leadership legitimacy. Rather than treating exclusion as an unintended consequence of flawed implementation, the paper argues that underrepresentation is better understood as an institutional pattern reproduced through everyday practices and assumptions. Through a critical synthesis of leadership theory, organisational research, and race scholarship, the analysis reframes leadership inequality as a governance issue that demands structural and cultural transformation, not merely enhanced diversity compliance (Universities Canada, 2024; Nottingham Trent University, 2025).

Ethnic Minority Leadership and the Limits of Representation

Research on ethnic minority leadership in education has expanded considerably over the past two decades, particularly in response to growing policy concern around equality and inclusion. Much of this scholarship has focused on mapping patterns of representation, identifying disparities between the demographic composition of student bodies and that of leadership teams. These studies have been instrumental in establishing that leadership inequality is neither anecdotal nor isolated. Statistical evidence from both the United Kingdom and Canada consistently shows that ethnic minority staff remain clustered in junior and middle-level roles, while senior leadership positions continue to be dominated by White incumbents (Government of Canada, 2024; Universities Canada, 2024; Government of the United Kingdom, 2025).

While this representational focus has played an important agenda-setting role, it has also shaped the way the problem is conceptualised. Leadership inequality is frequently framed as a numerical deficit, encouraging solutions that prioritise increasing visibility or improving participation rates. Such approaches often assume that leadership systems are fundamentally fair and that exclusion occurs primarily because ethnic minority staff have not yet progressed far enough through institutional pipelines. This assumption has been widely critiqued within critical leadership and organisational scholarship (Henry et al., 2023; Advance HE, 2025a).

A growing body of work argues that representation alone offers an incomplete account of inequality. Descriptive parity does not necessarily translate into equitable power, influence, or institutional change. Scholars have highlighted how diversity initiatives can coexist with deeply unequal leadership cultures, allowing institutions to claim progress while leaving dominant norms untouched (Henry et al., 2023; Nottingham Trent University, 2025). In this context, representation risks becoming symbolic, functioning as evidence of compliance rather than transformation (House of Commons Library, 2025).

The emphasis on numbers also tends to obscure how leadership standards are produced and maintained. Leadership criteria are often presented as objective, merit-based, and universally applicable. In practice, these criteria reflect historically situated assumptions about authority, competence, and professionalism. Research in educational leadership demonstrates that senior roles frequently reward career trajectories characterised by uninterrupted progression, informal sponsorship, and cultural familiarity with elite institutional spaces (NFER, 2025). Such trajectories are less accessible to ethnic minority staff, not because of individual inadequacy, but because of cumulative structural disadvantage (Government of Canada, 2024; Henry et al., 2023).

Another limitation of representational thinking lies in its tendency to individualise responsibility. When leadership diversity is framed primarily as an outcome issue, attention shifts towards the behaviour, motivation, or preparedness of ethnic minority staff. Leadership development programmes, mentoring schemes, and confidence-building initiatives are often proposed as corrective measures. Although these interventions may offer valuable support, they risk implying that exclusion stems from deficits within individuals rather than from institutional arrangements that shape opportunity (Advance HE, 2025b; Universities Canada, 2024).

Critical scholars have drawn attention to the performative dimensions of diversity work. Equality policies, audits, and charters frequently produce extensive documentation, yet their impact on leadership composition remains modest. The presence of diversity language within institutional discourse does not necessarily signal redistribution of power. In some cases, diversity initiatives may even deflect scrutiny away from entrenched hierarchies by projecting an image of progressiveness (House of Commons Library, 2025; Nottingham Trent University, 2025).

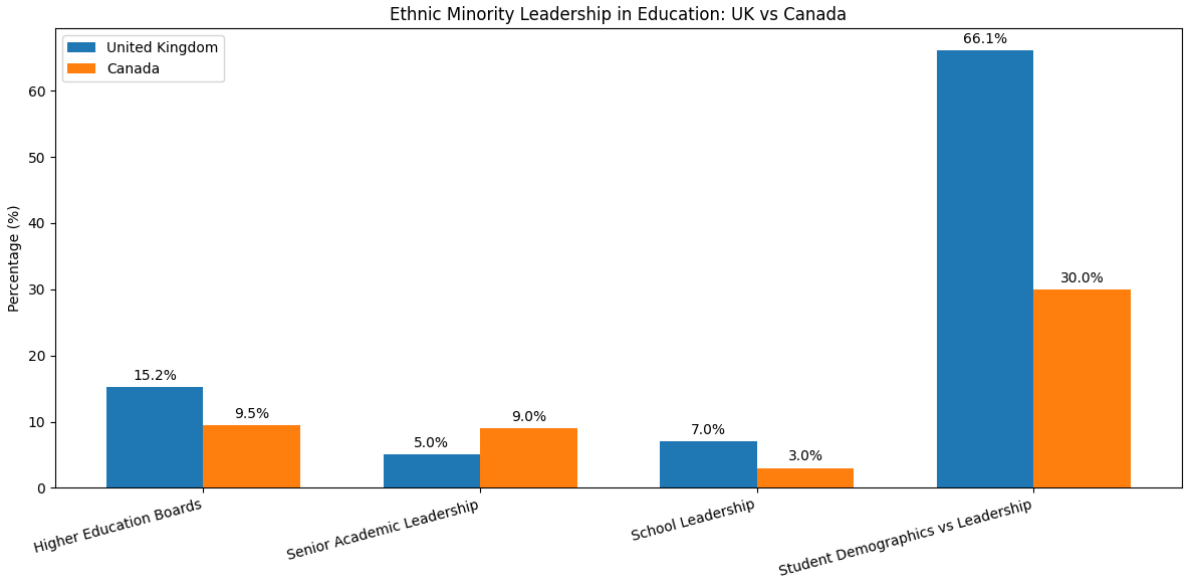
Table 1 and Figure 1 compare ethnic minority leadership representation in education across the UK and Canada.

Table 1: Ethnic Minority Leadership in Education (UK vs Canada)

Dimension	United Kingdom	Canada
Representation in Senior Roles	Ethnic minorities underrepresented in senior academic and leadership roles despite diverse student populations (Government of the United Kingdom, 2025).	Ethnic minorities underrepresented in senior university and public education leadership roles (Government of Canada, 2024).
Higher Education Boards	15.2% of university board members are from ethnic minority backgrounds (Advance HE, 2024).	Fewer than 10% of university leaders identify as racialized (Universities Canada, 2024).
Senior Academic Leadership	Senior academic roles remain predominantly White despite diverse student populations (NFER, 2025).	Under 10% of senior academic leaders are racialized (Universities Canada, 2024).
School Leadership	Only ~7% of headteachers are from ethnic minorities, compared to ~15% of teachers (Government of the United Kingdom, 2025).	Principals remain overwhelmingly White despite increasing diversity among teachers (Government of Canada, 2024).
Student Demographics vs Leadership	Chinese students have a 66.1% entry rate to higher education vs 29.8% for White students (UCAS, 2024).	Over 30% of postsecondary students identify as racialized, yet leadership remains unrepresentative (Statistics Canada, 2024).
Policy Frameworks	Equality Act 2010 and institutional EDI strategies guide diversity efforts (House of Commons Library, 2025).	Employment Equity Act and institutional diversity charters guide inclusion (Government of Canada, 2024).
Pipeline Challenges	Progression barriers include informal sponsorship and cultural fit biases (NFER, 2025).	Similar barriers exist, with additional challenges in bilingual and regional contexts (Advance HE, 2025).

Diversity Initiatives	Advance HE's 'Diversifying Leadership' and Race Equality Charter (Advance HE, 2025).	Universities Canada's EDI Action Plan and federal equity audits (Government of Canada, 2024).
Critiques of Representation	Representation often symbolic; limited impact on institutional power structures (Nottingham Trent University, 2025).	Diversity language present, but leadership change remains slow (House of Commons Library, 2025).

Figure 1: Ethnic Minority Leadership Representation in Education across the UK and Canada.



A more robust understanding of ethnic minority underrepresentation requires moving beyond representational metrics towards an examination of how leadership itself is constructed. This involves interrogating who defines leadership standards, whose experiences are recognised as credible, and which forms of knowledge are valued within decision-making processes. Representation should therefore be treated as an outcome of institutional design rather than as the primary site of intervention (Henry et al., 2023; Universities Canada, 2024).

This paper adopts such a perspective, arguing that leadership inequality persists not because institutions fail to measure diversity, but because they fail to question the cultural and structural foundations upon which leadership legitimacy rests (Advance HE, 2025).

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS IN LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS

Leadership pathways within educational institutions are shaped by formal structures that appear neutral on the surface yet consistently generate unequal outcomes. Recruitment systems, promotion frameworks, performance metrics, and governance arrangements collectively define how authority is accessed and exercised. Although these mechanisms are often presented as merit-based, their operation reflects historically embedded assumptions about value, competence, and leadership readiness (Mirza & Warwick, 2024).

Recruitment into senior educational leadership roles frequently relies on criteria that privilege continuity, institutional familiarity, and prior access to leadership opportunities. Experience requirements tend to favour candidates who have followed uninterrupted career trajectories within established networks, often shaped through informal sponsorship and early endorsement. Such pathways are unevenly distributed, particularly in systems where ethnic minority staff encounter barriers at earlier stages of progression. Leadership selection processes therefore reward accumulated advantage rather than potential or capability alone (Diversity Institute, 2024; Advance HE, 2025).

Promotion frameworks reinforce this pattern. In higher education, advancement is often tied to research income generation, publication volume, and international visibility. These indicators are not evenly attainable across disciplines or roles, nor are they immune to bias. Scholars engaged in teaching-focused, community-oriented, or equity-driven work frequently operate outside the most highly rewarded

institutional circuits. Evidence suggests that ethnic minority academics are disproportionately represented in such roles, which limits their alignment with conventional promotion benchmarks (Brophy, 2025a; Brophy, 2025b; Nottingham Trent University, 2025). Leadership potential becomes narrowly defined through metrics that privilege particular forms of institutional capital.

Governance structures further entrench exclusion. Decision-making bodies within educational institutions remain strikingly homogenous, particularly at senior levels. The composition of selection panels and executive committees shapes not only outcomes but also the criteria through which candidates are evaluated. Research on organisational behaviour demonstrates that familiarity and perceived similarity influence judgments of competence and trustworthiness. When leadership remains demographically narrow, the likelihood of reproducing similar leadership profiles increases (Universities Canada, 2024; Advance HE, 2025).

Transparency represents another structural challenge. Leadership appointments are often characterised by opaque processes in which informal conversations, reputational cues, and internal endorsements carry significant weight. Formal job descriptions may coexist with informal expectations that are difficult to access or decode for those outside dominant networks. Ethnic minority staff frequently report uncertainty around leadership expectations, limited access to insider knowledge, and exclusion from informal spaces where leadership trajectories are shaped (National Education Union, 2018).

Structural barriers also emerge through risk management practices. Senior appointments are commonly framed as high-stakes decisions, encouraging selectors to prioritise perceived safety and predictability. Familiar leadership profiles may be interpreted as lower risk, particularly in environments facing regulatory pressure or reputational scrutiny. This dynamic disadvantage candidate whose leadership styles, communication patterns, or professional histories diverge from established norms, regardless of competence (McInnis, 2025; Diversity Institute, 2024).

Importantly, these structural mechanisms do not depend on overt discrimination. Inequality is reproduced through routine procedures that are widely regarded as reasonable and defensible. Appeals to merit, excellence, and institutional fit provide powerful legitimating narratives that mask unequal effects. Over time, these processes accumulate, producing leadership stratification that appears natural rather than constructed (Universities Canada, 2024; Universities UK, 2024).

Understanding ethnic minority underrepresentation therefore requires attention to how leadership pathways are organised and governed. Structural reform demands more than expanded access to development opportunities. It requires scrutiny of recruitment criteria, evaluation metrics, decision-making authority, and the distribution of institutional risk. Without such interrogation, leadership pathways will continue to reward those already positioned closest to power, while exclusion remains formally invisible yet materially persistent (Diversity Institute, 2024; Advance HE, 2025).

CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF LEADERSHIP LEGITIMACY

Beyond formal structures, leadership inequality is sustained through cultural understandings of credibility and authority. Leadership is not only about competence but also about symbolic status, shaped through shared assumptions, professional norms, and historical narratives (Nottingham Trent University, 2025). These cultural dimensions influence recognition of leadership potential long before formal selection processes begin.

In both the UK and Canada, leadership legitimacy has been closely tied to dominant identities and behaviours. Authority is often linked to communication styles, interpersonal conduct, and self-presentation that align with majority cultural expectations. These tacit standards operate as unspoken benchmarks against which individuals are assessed (Chiu, Wong, Murray, Horsburgh, & Copsey-Blake, 2025). Leadership presence is frequently conflated with confidence expressed in familiar ways, ease within elite institutional spaces, and alignment with prevailing professional cultures.

Ethnic minority staff often encounter misalignment between these norms and their lived experiences. Divergence from dominant expectations may be interpreted as lack of fit, while conformity can produce contradictory judgments, perceived as inauthentic or overly assertive. Such double binds are well documented in organisational research and create additional cognitive and emotional labour for ethnic minority leaders (Advance HE, 2025).

Cultural legitimacy is also shaped through narratives of leadership success, which valorise linear progression, uninterrupted advancement, and individual achievement. These narratives marginalise alternative pathways such as community engagement or careers shaped by structural constraints. Ethnic minority staff, more likely to experience career interruptions or concentrated service burdens, find these experiences rarely recognised as leadership capital (National Governance Association, 2024).

Informal socialisation reinforces cultural norms. Leadership identities are cultivated through networks, committees, and informal interactions where values and expectations are transmitted. Access to these spaces is uneven, with ethnic minority staff reporting exclusion from informal conversations, limited sponsorship, and reduced visibility in influential circles (Dods Diversity, 2025).

Organisational silence further entrenches exclusion. Discussions of race, power, and inequality are often avoided, framed as divisive. This silence sustains the illusion of neutrality while preventing critical examination of how leadership norms privilege certain groups. When exclusion is not named, it becomes normalised, making cultural change difficult to initiate

(NFER, 2025).

Cultural constructions of legitimacy interact with broader societal narratives. Historical associations between authority, whiteness, and professionalism continue to shape perceptions within educational institutions, reinforced through media, policy discourse, and professional socialisation (Advance HE, 2025).

Addressing underrepresentation requires cultural as well as structural reform. Institutions must disrupt dominant leadership narratives, expand recognition of diverse practices, and question long-held assumptions about authority and excellence. Without confronting how legitimacy is culturally produced, structural reforms risk being absorbed into existing norms, leaving exclusion intact (Nottingham Trent University, 2025).

REFRAMING EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION AS INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives have become a prominent feature of educational governance in both the United Kingdom and Canada. Strategic plans, charters, training programmes, and reporting frameworks signal institutional commitment to fairness and representation. Despite this visible activity, leadership demographics have changed slowly, if at all. This persistent gap raises questions about how EDI is understood, implemented, and positioned within institutional power structures (Advance HE, 2025; Universities Canada, 2024).

A central limitation of many EDI approaches lies in their framing. Diversity is often treated as a supplementary concern rather than as a core governance issue. Responsibility for change is frequently delegated to committees, specialist roles, or time-limited projects that operate alongside, rather than within, decision-making hierarchies. As a result, EDI work can become disconnected from the processes that shape leadership selection, resource allocation, and organisational direction (UKRI, 2025).

Institutional narratives surrounding EDI also tend to emphasise compliance and reputational assurance. Audits, benchmarks, and action plans generate evidence of engagement, yet they do not necessarily alter how authority is exercised. In some cases, the production of diversity documentation substitutes for deeper interrogation of leadership norms and power relations. This dynamic allows institutions to demonstrate responsiveness while maintaining continuity in leadership cultures (Homes England, 2025).

Another challenge arises from the individualisation of responsibility. Leadership development programmes aimed at ethnic minority staff are often presented as solutions to underrepresentation. While such initiatives may offer valuable support, they risk implying that exclusion results from skill gaps, confidence deficits, or insufficient preparation. Structural and cultural barriers remain largely unaddressed when the burden of change is placed on those already marginalised (Grant Thornton, 2025).

Reframing EDI as institutional transformation requires a shift in analytical focus. Leadership inequality must be understood as an outcome of organisational design rather than as a failure of participation. This perspective redirects attention towards how leadership criteria are defined, who participates in decision-making, and which forms of contribution are valued. Transformation involves altering the conditions under which leadership legitimacy is constructed, not simply widening access to existing pathways (Advance HE, 2025).

Governance plays a critical role in this reframing. Boards, executive teams, and senior leaders shape institutional priorities through formal authority and symbolic influence. Without explicit accountability at these levels, EDI initiatives risk remaining peripheral. Embedding equity into governance requires transparent leadership selection processes, diverse decision-making bodies, and clear consequences for persistent inequality. Accountability mechanisms must extend beyond aspiration towards measurable structural change (UKRI, 2025).

Cultural transformation is equally essential. Institutions must create space for sustained dialogue about race, power, and leadership without retreating into defensiveness or silence. This involves recognising how historical privilege continues to shape contemporary norms and being willing to disrupt familiar leadership narratives. Valuing diverse leadership practices requires collective engagement, not isolated interventions (Hoath & French, 2025).

Reframing EDI in this way positions leadership diversity as integral to institutional effectiveness rather than as an optional moral add-on. Educational institutions operate within increasingly complex social environments, serving diverse communities and navigating competing demands. Leadership that reflects a range of experiences and perspectives enhances decision-making, legitimacy, and trust (Universities Canada, 2024).

Meaningful progress therefore depends on treating EDI as a process of institutional reorientation. Without structural accountability and cultural change, diversity initiatives will continue to generate activity without altering outcomes. Transformative leadership equity demands not only new policies, but new ways of understanding power, authority, and organisational responsibility (Advance HE, 2025).

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP THEORY AND RESEARCH

The analysis presented in this paper carries important implications for how educational leadership is theorised and studied. Much of the dominant leadership literature continues to prioritise individual traits, competencies, and behaviours, often abstracted from organisational context. While such approaches have generated useful insights, they offer limited explanatory power when applied to persistent patterns of racialised exclusion. Leadership inequality cannot be adequately understood without attention to the institutional

environments in which leadership is produced, recognised, and sustained (Naim, 2025).

One implication concerns the need to move beyond universalist models of leadership. Traditional leadership theories often assume that effective leadership attributes are culturally neutral and transferable across contexts. This assumption obscures how leadership norms are shaped by historical power relations and social hierarchies. Leadership research that neglects race risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to explain, particularly when whiteness remains an unexamined reference point for authority and legitimacy. Greater engagement with critical race scholarship can enrich leadership theory by foregrounding questions of power, belonging, and recognition (Zamora Liu, Terrell Shockley, Curry, & Conley, 2025).

Another implication relates to the level of analysis adopted in leadership research. Individual-focused studies tend to locate responsibility for progression at the level of aspiration, resilience, or skill development. Such framings divert attention away from organisational structures that regulate access to opportunity. Future research would benefit from a stronger emphasis on institutional and governance-level analysis, examining how recruitment systems, evaluation criteria, and decision-making processes shape leadership outcomes over time. Longitudinal approaches are particularly valuable in tracing how exclusion is reproduced across career stages (Aseefa, 2025).

Methodologically, the findings point to the importance of qualitative and interpretive research. Quantitative data remains essential for identifying disparities, yet it often fails to capture the lived experiences and everyday practices through which inequality is sustained. Ethnographic studies, narrative inquiry, and in-depth interviews can illuminate the informal interactions, silences, and micro-level judgments that shape leadership legitimacy. Such approaches allow researchers to examine not only who becomes a leader, but how leadership is recognised and contested within institutions (Kundu, 2025).

Comparative research also warrants further development. Similar patterns of ethnic minority underrepresentation appear across national contexts with differing policy frameworks and educational structures. Comparative studies can help identify which aspects of leadership inequality are context-specific and which reflect broader organisational dynamics. Research that compares institutions rather than individuals may be particularly instructive in highlighting how governance models influence inclusion (Norfolk Research School, 2025).

The analysis also raises questions about the relationship between leadership research and practice. Scholars play a role in shaping how leadership problems are framed and which solutions are legitimised. Research that reinforces deficit narratives risks narrowing the scope of institutional response. By contrast, scholarship that foregrounds structural and cultural dynamics can support more transformative forms of intervention. This places a responsibility on leadership researchers to engage critically with the assumptions embedded in their theoretical frameworks (Zamora Liu et al., 2025).

Overall, the implications extend beyond ethnic minority leadership alone. Rethinking leadership through a structural and cultural lens offers opportunities to address multiple forms of inequality that intersect with race, including gender, class, and disability. Leadership theory that takes institutional power seriously is better equipped to respond to the complexity of contemporary educational environments (Naim, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the persistent underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in educational leadership across the United Kingdom and Canada through a structural and cultural lens. Rather than treating leadership inequality as a temporary imbalance or a problem of individual progression, the analysis has argued that exclusion is produced and sustained within institutional systems themselves. Leadership pathways, selection practices, and cultural norms interact in ways that consistently advantage certain groups while marginalising others, even within organisations that publicly commit to equity and inclusion.

Attention has been directed towards the limits of representational approaches that prioritise numerical diversity without interrogating how leadership legitimacy is constructed. Although visibility matters, representation alone cannot account for the durability of leadership homogeneity. Structural arrangements such as recruitment criteria, promotion metrics, and governance composition continue to reward accumulated advantage and institutional familiarity. These mechanisms operate alongside cultural expectations that associate authority with particular identities, behaviours, and professional narratives. Together, they create conditions in which exclusion becomes normalised and difficult to challenge.

The paper has also highlighted the constraints of prevailing EDI frameworks when they are positioned as peripheral or compliance driven initiatives. Diversity policies and leadership development programmes may generate activity and documentation, yet they rarely disrupt the underlying logics through which leadership is defined and recognised. Reframing EDI as a matter of institutional transformation shifts responsibility away from individual adaptation and towards organisational accountability. Such a shift requires sustained engagement with power, governance, and cultural change rather than reliance on symbolic gestures.

From a theoretical perspective, the analysis contributes to educational leadership scholarship by foregrounding race as a central dimension of leadership production rather than as an ancillary concern. Leadership theory that remains detached from questions of institutional power risks reinforcing exclusion through silence or abstraction. Integrating structural and cultural analysis offers a more robust foundation for understanding why leadership inequality persists across diverse contexts and policy environments.

Implications extend beyond the specific focus on ethnic minority leadership. The patterns identified in this paper reflect broader challenges within educational governance, where claims of meritocracy coexist with entrenched hierarchies. Institutions that fail to address these contradictions risk undermining their legitimacy, particularly in societies marked by demographic change and heightened expectations of fairness.

Progress towards more inclusive educational leadership will not emerge through incremental adjustments alone. Meaningful change depends on willingness to question how leadership is imagined, evaluated, and authorised. Educational institutions that engage critically with these foundations are better positioned to develop leadership structures that reflect both the diversity and the complexity of the communities they serve.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed meaningfully to the development of this study and the preparation of the manuscript. The study was conceptualised and designed by M.A.T. The development of the conceptual framework was carried out by M.A.T and K.O.O., who also contributed to the primary drafting of the manuscript. All authors collaborated in drafting, revising, and approving the final manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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