'For all, by all, with all': Directors and programme planners as co-creators of racism-critical organisational development in adult education. A case study at the German Volkshochschule

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Abstract

This article analyses how directors and programme planners at the German Volkshochschule (adult education centre) support racism-critical organisational development. The data is interpreted with qualitative content analysis and based on five interviews conducted with directors and programme planners within one Volkshochschule. In order to research the potential avenues of support, the article employs a theoretical framework based on racism-critical leadership approaches. We argue that, through an interplay of leadership characteristics and leadership actions, two forms of support empirically emerge within the case: (1) an organisational guiding principle of education for all, by all, and with all, and (2) a community-driven programme planning, challenging the programme planning table by supporting communities to co-create their own learning pathways. The findings indicate the central role of directors and programme planners in racism-critical organisational development processes and underscore the necessity of continuous organisational self-critique to address racism.

Keywords: racism-critical organisational development, racism, Volkshochschule, German adult education centre, critical leadership

Introduction

Adult education facilitates the accompaniment of lifelong learning processes in flexible learning environments. The flexibility of adult education becomes increasingly important when it comes to maintaining democratic conditions and dismantling racist ideologies (Heinemann, 2023). Heinemann (2023) notes in this regard that

> adult education has the potential to make a significant contribution to maintaining democratic conditions. Not only in the sense that it can help to address educational inequalities even in adulthood, but also by creating spaces for encounter and social negotiations. (p. 358; authors' own translation[3])

However, Heinemann (2023), referencing Mojab (2011), indicates that alongside its democratising potential, adult education also runs the risk of being part of the reproduction of hegemonic injustices, including racial exclusions (Danquah 2023; Hanson & Fletcher, 2021). As Cervero and Wilson (1999) suggest, this risk arises because adult education and its organisations are influenced by a societal environment shaped by power relations. It is therefore important to address the ambivalence between the reproduction and deconstruction of social injustice within adult education organisations so they may contribute '[…] to a more just, equitable life for all people' (p. 5). The focus on racism in this paper addresses the lived realities faced by racialised people. For instance, findings from a study by the DeZIM-Institute (2025) indicate that 63 per cent of Black[4] women and 62 per cent of Black men report encountering subtle forms of discrimination in Germany.

To address this phenomenon, a power-critical approach to adult education research could be adopted. As proposed by Heinemann and Ortner (2018), this entails integrating perspectives critical of racism and hegemony into both conceptual frameworks of adult educational and empirical research. In accordance with the understanding of a racism-critical perspective on educational questions as outlined by Mecheril (2021), the objective is to get

> […] to the bottom of pathways, locations and opportunities underpinning the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of *race* categories […], categories that are often unintentionally called up by the actors involved, and also [to investigate] questions of whether and how effectiveness of racial thinking can be changed. (p. 46)

Racism-criticism thus describes the ongoing possibility of seeking ways to deal with injustice specifically caused by racism. Central to this approach is the need for ongoing reflexivity to avoid inadvertently reinforcing the very racial categories it aims to deconstruct (Machold, 2011). Moreover, racism-criticism considers perspectives for change in organisational structures and educational practices (Heinemann, 2018; Leiprecht et al., 2011). Utilising racism-critical perspectives as a heuristic framework enables the visibility of paths for organisational self-critique and shifts attention to possibilities for change within organisations (Danquah & Egetenmeyer, 2025). Thus, organisational development draws upon critical organisational studies (Fenwick, 2001; Mojab & Gorman, 2003) and is concerned with the introduction of more equitable organisational practices. Consequently, organisational development is presented in this contribution as a non-linear process, reflecting its etymological roots (derived from the Old French *desvoleper*: *to unwrap*), with a critical potential to unravel power structures, rather than as a phase model (Danquah & Egetenmeyer, 2025).

Various research contributions in adult education analyse possibilities for shaping more equitable organisational development: Human resource management (Fenwick, 2004), programme planning (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Kuhlen & Egetenmeyer, 2022; Sprung, 2017), and the strategic orientation of organisations (Heinemann, 2018; Öztürk & Reiter, 2017). Moreover, leading staff, such as directors and programme planners, are highlighted as important components of racism-critical change processes, as their actions, skills, and abilities serve as guiding principles for organisational structures and their members (Bernhard-Skala & Lattke, 2020; Morrison et al., 2007). Hence, this article focuses on the potential of leading staff to support racism-critical organisational development processes. The analysis of these possibilities takes place in the field of German *Volkshochschulen* (*VHS,* adult education centres). For more than 100 years, *VHS* have been and continue to be important adult education providers in Germany (approx. 900 centres, providing 285.920 courses in 2021; Lux, 2023). In addition, the *VHS* is a key player with regard to the German 'integration programme' and is one of the main organisations providing 'integration courses' for migrants and refugees (they offer 5.309.577 teaching hours in the area of language courses; Lux, 2023). The importance of the *VHS* also reflects itself in the variety of research focusing on the nexus of *VHS*, migration, and adult education (Dominnik-Bindi, 2024; Käpplinger, 2020; Martin et al., 2021; Thomsen & Weilage, 2023). As the *VHS* is partly state-subsidised and has an educational mandate regulated at different federal state levels (Muders & Martin, 2021), they have a public responsibility to ensure education for all: '[…] Volkshochschulen […] have set themselves the goal […] to be an important component in reducing discrimination […] in the overall social change' (Heinemann, 2018, p. 14; authors' own translation).

The aim of this paper aligns with this demand. The article analyses social exclusions, particularly those based on *race*, within organisations, and enables spaces for racism-critical organisational development on the organisational, programme, and staff level through leading *VHS* staff such as directors and programme planners. Therefore, this article is based on the following research question:

- How do directors and programme planners at the *Volkshochschule* support racism-critical organisational development?

This paper examines the potential for the leading staffs' support by establishing a theoretical framework covering leadership characteristics as well as actions and their interplay. The analysis of this interplay is based on five semi-structured interviews with leading staff within one *VHS* analysed with qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). The central findings argue that directors can influence the strategic orientation and vision of the *VHS* at the organisational level and thereby initiate racism-critical guiding principles and actions. Moreover, programme planners can enhance the agency of racialised groups through challenging the programme planning table (Cervero & Wilson, 2001) and making communities into co-creators of their own learning pathways. Based on these findings, the necessity of ongoing racism-critical organisational self-critique is discussed.

Conceptual frame of racism[5] and *race*[6]

As the deconstruction of racism is highlighted in this paper, this chapter focuses on the definition of racism and how it is used throughout the paper. The concept of racism is employed in reference to Hall (2018), Miles (1991), and Delgado et al. (2017). Racism is

defined as a system of meaning that structures and classifies the world in a specific manner. It operates on the principle of Othering (Said, 2003), which involves the construction of a less valued Other and the concurrent construction of the self (Hall, 2018). This process establishes supposed categories of differentiation, based on e.g. somatic characteristics, and solidifies them as natural, meaning they are '[…] not objective, inherent or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather *races* are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient' (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 9). In addition, Delgado et al. (2017) argue that 'people with common origin share certain physical traits […]. But these constitute only an extremely small portion of their genetic endowment […] and have little or nothing to do with […] personality, intelligence, and moral behaviour' (p. 9). They continue arguing that *race* and racism are thus social products of thoughts and relations (Delgado et al., 2017). Expanding on the social construct of *race*, Miles uses the term 'racialisation' (Miles, 1991, p. 99) to describe the construction of *race*, where 'biological' characteristics are incorporated into social constructs that are transferred to groups of people (Hall, 2018; Miles, 1991). In this article, we build upon the conception of *race* as a social construct. We argue in line with Delgado et al. (2017) that, since racism represents a human-constructed and historically developed fantasy about groups of people, the fantasy's deconstruction consequently lies with the creators themselves – humans and their established organisations, structures, and politics (Danquah & Egetenmeyer, 2025).

Leadership in the context of racism-critical organisational development

The implementation of organisational reflection processes can facilitate the initiation of internal change within adult education providers. Self-critical reflection processes are crucial for the identification and dismantling of racial exclusions that may be perpetuated by organisational structures (Ray, 2019). A racism-critical perspective on organisational development presents an opportunity to disrupt the repetition of racism. The ideas that lead to racism can thus be questioned and relearned, as referenced by Mecheril et al. (2022), enabling individual and collective articulations of knowledge to initiate organisational perspectives of change. In this endeavour, leading staff can act as a steering and enabling moment, and they can constitute a central component of the implementation of a racism-critical strategic orientation within adult education organisations (Bernhard-Skala & Lattke, 2020; Welton et al., 2018). In their two-year qualitative study, Ahmed et al. (2006) researched the implementation and effects of diversity concepts in adult education organisations in England, with a particular focus on *race*. The study involved 140 in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observation sessions across 47 different education providers. This comprehensive research represents one of the most extensive qualitative studies of diversity work with a focus on *race* in adult education. Consequently, the study remains a crucial reference to understand adult education, leadership, and diversity, particularly in addressing *race* and racism. In their study, Ahmed et al. (2006) indicate the pivotal role of leading staff in enabling organisational change processes. They conclude:

> A repeated assertion in our interviews was that having leaders who are committed to diversity is crucial to the success of integrating diversity. [...] Rather it is just to say that the commitment of those in leadership positions might have a greater effect on 'what happens' than the commitment of staff who inhabit less senior positions within organisations. (Ahmed et al., 2006, p. 114)

Furthermore, Ahmed et al. (2006) accentuate that, in addition to commitment, leadership actions are crucial for the implementation of racism-critical organisational development. This paper builds upon this idea, establishing a theoretical framework which combines leadership characteristics and leadership actions on three different levels.

Leadership characteristics

In their 2006 study, Ahmed et al. underscore the significance of leaders' *commitment* as a pivotal characteristic in facilitating organisational change. Building on this finding, a detailed re-examination of their results was undertaken to determine additional leadership characteristics relevant to supporting racism-critical organisational development. This analysis identified three further characteristics: *knowledge*, *communication skills*, and *a reflective attitude*.

Knowledge

Ahmed et al. (2006) emphasise the importance of social knowledge, which involves an understanding of how experiences of inequality have shaped present circumstances. Furthermore, the authors argue that racism-critical work requires the application of specific '[…] forms of knowledge, skill and understanding. While experience of inequality is important, such experience also has to be translated into a wider understanding of inequalities and how they structure the social world' (Ahmed et al., 2006, p. 48). Thus, the findings of Ahmed et al. (2006) indicate the significance of both a comprehensive understanding of the concept of racism and a broad social knowledge base for advancing racism-critical organisational development.

Communication skills

In the context of communication skills, the focus is on the proximity of leaders to their staff, learners, and the communities. This closeness enables a sense of being *in touch* with their constituents; leaders have – in order to support racism-critical organisational development – '[…] a specific style of leadership, based on being 'proximate' or 'in touch' with different groups within organisations […]' (Ahmed et al., 2006, p. 116). As a result, leaders become accessible to organisational members and the learning communities, listen to them, and provide them with the opportunity to articulate experiences of racism or uncertainties in dealing with racist situations (Ahmed et al., 2006). This is followed by the idea of leadership '[…] as a form for 'speaking to' rather than 'speaking about' […]' (Ahmed et al., 2006, p. 125). Additionally, the approach of 'speaking to', as proposed by Sheared (1994), enables the visibility of perspectives held by racialised groups and could facilitate the disruption and rethinking of hegemonic organisational narratives.

Reflective attitude

Ahmed et al.'s (2006) findings emphasise the significance of self-reflection and thus, of seeing '[…] issues from other points of view' (p. 48). Consequently, racism-critical leadership also entails the recognition of the necessity to engage with and comprehend the experiences of racialised people. To achieve this, Ahmed et al. (2006) additionally state that this '[…] connection [with racialised people] must be worked at reflexively' (p. 56). Theoretical considerations put forth by Mecheril et al. (2022) complement Ahmed et al.'s argumentation by advocating a *position reflexivity (Positionsreflexivität)* (Mecheril

et al., 2022), which can result in a '[…] reflection on one's position within social relations' (Mecheril et al., 2022, p. 284; authors' own translation). Therefore, a reflective attitude both engages with the perspectives of others, especially racialised people, and reflects one's own social position and its implications (Danquah & Egetenmeyer, 2025). This reflective attitude can be pertinent to individual thinking and organisational routines and practices.

Commitment

Ahmed et al.'s (2006) research results also demonstrate that those leaders who have a strong commitment are important for more equitable organisational change processes. Ahmed et al. (2006) argue that commitment is linked to the idea of being able to positively influence social change. This assumption is then accompanied by challenging organisational structures and practices, and asking '[…] what organisations are for, what […] they do and how they work' (Ahmed et al., 2006, p. 115). However, in order to implement change, '[…] commitment can be 'read' as an action' (Ahmed et al., 2006, p. 118) initiating change on different organisational levels.

Leadership actions

In line with Ahmed et al. (2006), change is made through action. Therefore, this chapter follows a multi-level approach to adult educational organisations (Egetenmeyer et al., 2019) and develops Ahmed et al.'s (2006) call for action further. Areas on which leading staff has influence include the *organisational* level (Heinemann, 2018), *programme* level (Bernhard-Skala & Lattke, 2020; Kuhlen & Egetenmeyer, 2022), and *staff* level (Fenwick, 2004).

Organisational level

Leadership can take action related to the organisation's strategic orientation in order to implement initiatives that include the mission statement (Endrias & Weiß, 2018), public relations, and the complaint system. Additionally, leadership can evaluate and monitor racism-critical measures, formulate goals based on a critical analysis of access barriers (Öztürk & Reiter, 2017), and establish a network to recruit underrepresented employees and participants within the organisation. On the organisational level, leading staff utilise the resources available to them to dismantle racialised exclusions, with the aim to implement racism-critical changes in organisational structures in a sustainable manner (Ahmed et al., 2006; Heinemann, 2018; Öztürk & Reiter, 2017; Zech et al., 2010).

Programme level

Racial inequities also manifest themselves on the programme level (Heinemann, 2015). In order to build a more equitable programme, critical reflections can be seen as a prerequisite (Sork, 2010) for 'negotiating interests in relationships of power' (Cervero & Wilson, 2006, p. 5). Asking questions such as: 'Who is allowed at the table? Who is being heard and who is being ignored? Which voices silence other voices during the planning process?' (Daffron & Caffarella, 2021, p. 18) becomes a part of programme planning to foster 'active and sustained participation in planning of those most affected' (Daffron & Caffarella, 2021, p. 18). Therefore, employing a critical programme planning approach entails listening and building relationships. Programme planning thus becomes a space to 'provide opportunities to examine and foster community and societal change' (Daffron &

Caffarella, 2021, p. 24). Interactive and adjusting models of programme planning following this lead include values and norms as well as different voices at the planning table (Fleige et al., 2019; Gieseke, 2003; Hippel & Käpplinger, 2017). For instance, networking of programme planners in specific communities can contribute to trust building and to addressing barriers of participation for racialised people in adult education programmes (Ahmed et al., 2006; Burnette, 2010; Heinemann, 2015).

In addition, especially during the process of needs assessment, Sork (2005) argues that this assessment can be powerful if it is conducted critically, which also involves focussing the needs of communities to make adult education more accessible and counteract the complex power dynamics hindering a more just society because they '[…] typically favour the already privileged […]' (p. 424).

Staff level

As leading staff is responsible for staff selection and coordination, they can address the underrepresentation of racialised groups, for example among course facilitators and programme planners (Sprung, 2016). To mitigate this, leaders rely on less biased presumptions during the process of recruiting new staff (Öztürk & Reiter, 2017). Subsequently, professional development opportunities can facilitate the questioning of work practices, organisational routines, and staff perspectives.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between leadership characteristics and leadership actions. In the context of racism-critical organisational development, leadership characteristics are to be understood as framework and fundamental orientation of leadership actions. Change processes result from the interaction of both: characteristics and actions.

Figure 1. Leadership characteristics and levels of leadership action in racism-critical organisational development. Source: authors' own illustration
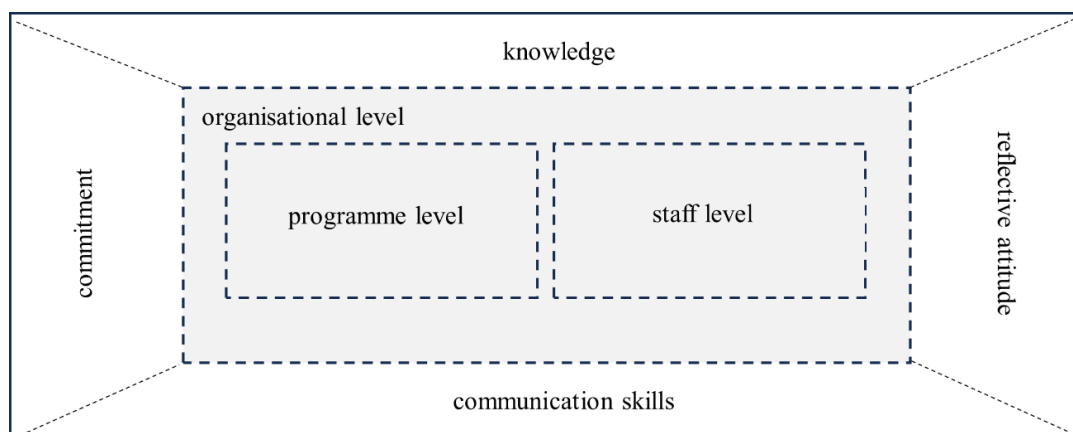
The leadership characteristics: *knowledge, communication skills, reflective attitude,* and *commitment*, and the levels of leadership actions*: organisation, programme,* and *staff*, are used as heuristic for analysing the interview data.

Methodology

The article's research interest lies in analysing support possibilities for racism-critical organisational development provided by directors and programme planners in the context

of the *Volkshochschule* (*VHS*). For this analysis, one *VHS* was selected as a single case (referred to as *Case VHS* in this paper). Publicly available sources about the selected *VHS* (articles in the magazine dis.kurs, online presence, and course programme of the *VHS*), indicated the advanced presence of racism-critical organisational development initiatives within the *VHS*. This led to the choice of this *Case VHS* for the analysis.

A total of eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in June/July and November/December 2023 with employees of the *Case VHS*, including both those with and without leadership responsibilities, as well as individuals from the immediate environment of the *Case VHS*. Out of the eighteen, five interviews were selected for this contribution, comprising employees with leadership responsibilities and the power to shape organisational decision making; they are referred to as leaders and leading staff in this paper. The interview sample includes the current and former director of the *Case VHS* and three programme planners. Notwithstanding the change in director of the *Case VHS*, the contributions of the former director remain pertinent, given the pivotal role he*she played in facilitating organisational changes at the *Case VHS*. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and took place in person. The average interview duration was 107:06 minutes. The audio files are available as complete transcriptions created in accordance with the content-semantic rules set out by Dresing and Pehl (2018).

The coding of the data material is based on qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). Thus, the interview data is coded according to the seven main categories of the research heuristic: *Knowledge, communication skills, commitment, reflective attitude, organisational level, programme level,* and *staff level*. The following codes result from the deductive-inductive fine coding and are assigned to the seven main categories (see Table 1).

Table 1. Deductive-inductive fine coding (authors' own illustration)

Main category	Subcategories
Knowledge	Social knowledge (inductive)
	Knowledge about racism (deductive)
Communication skills	Negotiation skills (deductive)
	Proximity to staff and communities (deductive)
Commitment	Willingness to implement (inductive)
	Sense of responsibility (deductive)
	Hope (deductive)
Reflexive attitude	Willingness to learn (inductive)
	Reflection on one's own speaking position (inductive)
	Empathic understanding (deductive)
	Questioning the familiar (inductive)
Organisational level	Strategic orientation (deductive)
	Financing (deductive)
	Networking (deductive)
	Controlling (deductive)
Programme level	Programme planning and development (deductive)
	Needs assessment (deductive)

Staff level	Qualification and continuing training (deductive)
	Internal communication (inductive)
	Staff structure (deductive)

Subsequently, axial coding, in accordance with Strauss and Corbin (2010), is conducted to establish connections between the categories of the four leadership characteristics and the three levels of leadership action.[7] The axial coding results in the illustration of potential forms of support for racism-critical organisational development in the *Case VHS* by directors and programme planners and are further elaborated on in the next Chapter.

Forms of directors' and programme planners' support in racism-critical organisational development at the German *Volkshochschule*

The analysis of the interview data indicates that forms of support for racism-critical organisational development at the *Case VHS* emerge through the integration of leadership actions and characteristics. The effectiveness of this interaction is reflected in two central results: (1) A guiding principle at the organisational level articulated by the director of the *Case VHS*: *Education for all, by all, with all,* and (2) a community-driven programme planning. Both the guiding principle and the programme planning serve as exemplary means of shaping racism-critical organisational development, emphasising the pivotal role of directors and programme planners as framing and mediating co-creators.

'Education for all, by all, with all' as a guiding principle

At the organisational level, leading staff play a central role in shaping the strategic orientation (Zech et al., 2010), steering the long-term goals of the *VHS* through their influence. Within the framework of organisational development against racism, they can realign existing guiding principles in conjunction with their leadership characteristics, thereby mitigating racial barriers to educational access as the interview with the current director of the *Case VHS* (B8) indicates. The director also seems to be aware of the necessity to adapt the shared self-perception of the *VHS*, which is expressed as 'Education for all' (Deutscher Volkshochschulverband, DVV, n. d.):

> […] This 'education for all' is somewhat a self-perception of the Volkshochschulen. However, I would say it's not entirely complete. [...] We are trying to expand this: education for all, by all. [...] In the @neighborhood of the *Case VHS*@[8], there are approximately 380.000 individuals who have such diverse biographies, experiences, positions, social positions, that it is impossible and unrealistic for us to cater to everyone. This means that to achieve this, it must be expanded to include BY ALL and perhaps in the long term, WITH ALL. (B8, 17-21; authors' own translation)

The director of the *Case VHS* perceives the current status quo of the organisational self-perception 'Education for all' (DVV, n.d.), as in need of transformation because '[…] it's not entirely complete' (B8, 17). To genuinely provide educational opportunities *for* all, the director expands the idea to include *by all* and *with all*. This reflective stance promotes the participation of adults, who often 'struggle to participate in social […] decisions affecting them' (Heaney, 1996, p. 5).

By adding *by all* and *with all,* the director advocates a multi-perspective, collaborative approach to adult education. This approach attempts to ensure that voices affected by structural discrimination such as racism are included in the decision-making

process regarding their learning pathways, as well as recognising and respecting their 'diverse biographies, experiences, and […] social positions' (B8, 21; authors' own translation). Distinguishing between the terms *by all* and *with all*, the director emphasises different levels of engagement; however, both aim to include e.g. racialised voices in the *VHS* structures. Following the director's idea *by all*, the *VHS* is understood as a 'platform' (B8, 103) that provides resources for representatives of different marginalised groups, enabling them to create their own learning experiences according to their needs (B8, 103). Subsequently, the idea of *with all* embodies the director's long-term vision: an approach that acknowledges the diversity within these groups and thus aspires to give every perspective touched by structural discrimination the chance to create their own learning experiences rather than including merely a few representative viewpoints (B8, 28). This vision represents a participatory approach indicating a long-term goal, as the director acknowledges his*herself: 'That's a bit of the long-term vision […] *with* all – over the next ten to fifteen years' (B8, 31; 33; authors' own translation).

In conclusion, the extended guiding principle challenges the organisational self-perception and issues an invitation to co-creation through the addition of *by all, with all*; at the same time renegotiating the power position attributed to the *Case VHS* in shaping learning experiences (Cervero & Wilson, 2006). Consequently, in the director's guiding principle, the *Case VHS* becomes a platform providing the necessary resources for participants to create their own learning offers matching their diverse needs.

In addition to the reflective potential articulated by the director of the *Case VHS* through the guiding principle, leadership demands organisational action (Ahmed et al., 2006) to implement racism-critical change processes:

> But this is […] one of my visions, that we truly open ourselves as an institution. [...] Opening ourselves means to me, this education for all, by all. And for that, we have to try things, do things. (B8, 63; authors' own translation)

The director's willingness to put the guiding principle into action is evident in his*her emphasis on 'doing and trying', which indicates his*her commitment to change (Ahmed et al., 2006). He*She perceives the search for new perspectives that counter racial exclusions as a collective process of search and movement. By using the inclusive pronoun 'we', the director portrays a communal unity, attributing responsibility for a collective learning journey to all members within the organisation.

It is evident that the director supports the initiation of structural-organisational development and sees the role of the *Case VHS* as becoming a place of learning for all, by all, and with all. To achieve this goal, the director draws on his*her knowledge, reflective attitude, and commitment to act as co-creator of racism-critical organisational development. He*She also facilitates training opportunities for staff (B8, 118; B18, 47) and initiates leadership forums to address racist incidents (B8, 128; B4, 157; B18, 43), involving both planning and administrative staff.

Challenging the planning table – Communities as co-creators of their own learning pathways

This section focuses on the interplay of leadership characteristics and actions at the programme level. This includes both the programme area with a focus on Afro-diasporic topics and its programme planner (B13), and the initiative for overarching programme planning initiated by the former *VHS* director (B2).

From the ground up: Black people and people of African descent creating their learning pathways

With the establishment of a programme area developed by Black people for Black people, financial and physical resources were made available by the city government (B13, 76) after long negotiations to ensure a sustained response to the needs of Black people. This organisational structural change emerged out of a decolonial educational project led by members of the Black community, demanding education about and the renaming of colonial street names in the neighbourhood of the *Case VHS*. The former director of the *Case VHS* responded to the need of a sustainable incorporation of the Black community's initiative by supporting the establishment of a programme area permanently addressing the needs of Black communities (B2, 67). The implementation of a programme area focused on Afro-diasporic and Black people's needs challenges the power relations that programme planning processes entail (Cervero & Wilson, 2006): While the programme planner in this case only oversees the programme area, its concrete courses are significantly co-planned by various communities of Black people. In order to collaborate with representatives of these communities, according to the interviewee, a proximity to the community is expected.

> B13: [...] And then, during the conversations, you also get / What kind of problems there are? Both in the shelters, but also with (...) asylum-related questions and psychological questions. You get that, but you have to be a part of the community.
> I: [...] How are you part of the community then?
> B13: You communicate with them, you become friends eventually [...] A Nigerian coordinator calls it 'touch'. You have to feel it. [...] they call it touch, meaning, you feel it. [...] Yes, touch, feel the people. (B13, 53-55; authors' own translation)

Building trust through the programme planner's proximity to the community enables the support of communities assessing their own needs. The opportunity to 'touch and feel people' (B13, 55), to empathise with their circumstances (Ahmed et al., 2006), transcends a rational understanding of their concerns, opens up possibilities for empathetic understanding, and supports community building.

However, it is important to note that needs may vary between and within communities, and that there is a risk of homogenising needs (Kuhlen, 2021; Spivak, 2008):

> [...] Do we have ONE Black community? [...] But that doesn't mean that we have some kind of community in all areas, and that we also have the same way of life and work or [a] common cultural part [...]. (B13, 58, 64; authors' own translation)

The programme planner demonstrates an awareness of intersectional struggles by acknowledging the existence of multiple Black life realities and questioning the uniformity of the Black community, while emphasising the overlapping forms of discrimination within (Crenshaw, 1989/2019; Hanson & Fletcher, 2021). The interviewee suggests that, while being Black may unify the Black community, experiences with racism may be shaped by differences in lifestyle, work, or culture (B13, 64). This intersectional perspective informs programme planning, as seen in the programme planner's emphasis on flexibility to address learners' needs at the intersection of *race*, gender, and legal status, referring to Black refugee women (B13, 16). Due to their precarious legal status, issues of class — such as unstable contracts and 'unjust working hours' (B13, 43; authors' own translation) — intersect, making standardised, long-term programme planning, typically practiced within the *VHS* framework, challenging (B13,

14-16): 'And they want our events on the weekends because they work too. […] That means it's often on Saturdays or late afternoons, which are not regular working hours [in the *VHS*]' (B13, 43; authors' own translation). The interplay of leadership characteristics and action is indicated here: the programme planner not only demonstrates intersectional awareness, but also applies this knowledge by adapting the course schedule to the demanded needs as flexibly as the standardised framework permits.

Subsequently, his*her intersectional approach also reflects in the selection of course content together with Black refugee women:

> Sometimes ideas come up during the courses from different participants. […] In the course [...] for example [...] 'midwife'. Then questions arise. [...] okay, we can also do nutrition, [so] there will be a course […]. So, we don't do it as a fixed event because it's [in the programme], but we plan it bit by bit [...] (B13, 14-16; authors' own translation).

Through the iterative, collaborative approach, learners can articulate emerging needs, as illustrated by participants who recognise the importance of nutrition during the 'midwife' course. By distributing decision-making power in content planning, Black refugee women are able to take control over their own learning pathways (Daffron & Caffarella, 2021; Sork, 2005).

To make the needs of racialised people visible, the programme planner adapts his*her work schedules to the needs of the communities, extends his*her availability beyond regular working hours (B13, 39), and is present in community locations (B13, 53).

In addition, the programme planner rethinks traditional *VHS* staffing structures by hiring *coordinators* as intermediaries between the communities and the *Case VHS*. '[The coordinators] do it as freelancers [...]. I decided not to have a permanent assistant' (B13, 31; authors' own translation). By allocating financial resources originally intended for a personal assistant to multiple coordinators from the communities (B13, 31) 'having the same experience' (B13, 29; authors' own translation), the programme planner enables the needs of racialised communities at various intersections to be addressed not as *speaking for* communities, but as *speaking with* communities (Ahmed et al., 2006; Spivak, 1994), giving communities the autonomy to decide on the programme offered:

> [...] the coordinators [...] also reach out to women. They don't just discuss it when they come to us, but they also discuss it with the women, the important areas as well. [...] Because they know them, they come from the same background. And yes, then we have intensive conversations with the respective women who coordinate, and we just facilitate it like that. (B13, 26; authors' own translation)

The coordinators are thus in contact with their own communities to identify needs and, together with the programme planner, other participants, and course facilitators, to design courses and to adapt them dynamically to the needs of the communities:

> At the beginning of the semester [we have] a conference semester. 'What do we want? What are you interested in?' [...] Then we discuss this with our course facilitators, but also with the participants. Then we plan roughly [...] what we are going to focus on in the different areas. And then we start. And it's important for us not only to plan what's officially there, but also to plan on short notice. (B13, 13-14; authors' own translation)

In line with Cervero and Wilson (2006) the programme planner not only involves the learners in their prospective programmes but also supports the creation of an ongoing interactive planning process.

From racialised learners to course facilitators

The inclusion of racialised groups in the form of a community-driven programme planning is also evident in other areas within the *Case VHS*. For example, through an overarching programming (B5, 79-82) in which racialised participants in German language courses are not limited to the deficit position assigned to them as German learners due to their lack of German language skills (B2, 26; Heinemann, 2015).

The overarching programme recognises learners' skills and abilities beyond the German language and enables them to pass on these skills as course facilitators, as the former director states: 'And suddenly they were addressed with their competence, which no one had seen before' (B2, 106; authors' own translation). In this context, the German language deficits often criticised are irrelevant; non-German languages are even welcomed: 'We thought about all this linguicism, the barrier of language, and we said: God, you can teach courses in any language you want [...]' (B2, 106; authors' own translation). The former director's understanding of the mechanisms of racialisation processes, which often manifest subtly in the devaluation of certain languages (Dirim, 2010), creates space for the recognition of migrant-specific skills, such as non-hegemonic languages (Heinemann, 2015). It allows racialised groups of people previously not reached by the *Case VHS* – due to its monolingual courses – to participate in the core *Case VHS* programme and not only in 'integration' and German courses. It also addresses the need for the racialised German-learning community to be recognised for their abilities by becoming course facilitators.

The analysis of the ways in which leading staff supports racism-critical organisational development within the *Case VHS* shows that their strong commitment, knowledge, communication skills, and reflective attitudes create spaces for alternative narratives and actions to find their way into the organisation. These spaces allow for instance the equitable inclusion of racialised communities in the strategic orientation of the organisation and programme planning.

Conclusion

By combining leadership characteristics – *knowledge, communication skills, reflective attitude, commitment* – and levels of leadership action – *organisation, programme, staff* – this paper identifies ways for directors and programme planners to support racism-critical organisational development within the *Case VHS*. The findings serve as exemplary means to emphasise the pivotal role of directors and programme planners in racism-critical organisational development as framing and mediating co-creators, interconnecting their leadership characteristics and actions. The findings also underscore that the collaboration with racialised groups is essential to achieve the goal *education for all*. By articulating self-critical guiding principles, such as *education for all, by all, with all*, VHS directors can elevate racialised groups as active participants and co-creators of their own learning journey through e.g. community-driven programme planning. In this context, critical leadership can play a key role in fostering community building, creating flexible and ad hoc learning spaces tailored to the specific needs of the communities. The findings suggest that within these spaces, the role of the programme planner transforms from primarily designing the programme to serving as a moderator who facilitates the framework conditions necessary to support the community's learning pathways. This redefined role requires the programme planner to take a step back; symbolically, he*she might stand behind the planning table, enabling the community to take the lead in shaping their educational experiences.

This process entails building trust between the *VHS* and (potential) participants. In the *Case VHS*, trust is cultivated through genuinely listening and creating a platform that gives space to the articulated struggles of racialised communities. However, continual reflection is necessary to consider which voices within the communities have the possibility to create their learning pathways and which struggles may remain unaddressed despite the community-driven setting.

Moreover, programme planning occurs within a given institutional and societal context (Cervero & Wilson, 2006); thus, the *Case VHS* also acts in response to its unique social context. Situated in a neighbourhood with a rich history of decolonial community activism, the *Case VHS'*s development of a programme area dedicated to Black people and people of African descent emerged from this long-standing tradition. Although this particular context shapes the case, the findings primarily focus on support strategies, offering insights into potential pathways directors and programme planners can reflect on to foster racism-critical organisational development, and not to adopt, but rather to critically adapt the derived ideas to their respective contexts. Future research could further examine interdependences between the context of adult education organisations and their enabling and constraining potential to implement racism-critical initiatives within adult education organisations.

Additionally, focusing solely on the organisational vision and programme planning neither prevents the reproduction of racism within the organisation nor ensures a racism-critical environment. An exclusive focus on directors and programme planners could also risk disengagement from racism-critical organisational development among other staff (Ahmed et al., 2006). It may also overlook other crucial areas fostering change, such as complaint systems or public relations. However, as these areas are rooted in the overarching organisational vision of the director, this paper prioritised analysing the director's guiding principle as part of his*her vision and the core activity of the *VHS* – programme planning. Additionally, the guiding principle 'education for all, by all, with all' could even lead beyond a sole change within the single *Case VHS* and impact its border institutional context, such as e.g. other *VHS* or umbrella organisations.

Moreover, it is vital for adult education providers to engage in an organisational development process that appeals to the responsibility of all staff members and prioritises an ongoing review of organisational structures and processes. This means to continually seek organisational spaces within institutional and structural contexts, to develop and test strategies, and to constantly explore trajectories for change. Racism-critical organisational development is thus a non-linear, complex unravelling process of organisational self-critique that reflexively addresses dynamics of racialisation and continually seeks to navigate through their entanglements.

Notes

[1]   Author contribution: Literature analysis, development of the research question and objectives, development of the data collection instrument, conducting the data collection, preparation and interpretation of data, development of the concept and argumentation of the paper, drafting of the manuscript.

[2]   Author contribution: Supervision of the dissertation and the paper, support in developing the research question, the data collection process, the interpretation of data, and the concept of the paper, feedback on the argumentation and the manuscript.

[3]   The quotes with the addition 'authors' own translation' have been translated from German to English with the help of DeepL.

[4]   'Since 'Black' is not a colour but rather a political designation and a self-chosen identity, it is capitalized' (Chebu, 2016, p. 35; authors' own translation). In this article, reference to Black people is made, among others, to address a specific form of racism, namely anti-Black racism.

5   We acknowledge that racism is invariably grounded in an understanding of racism as a multifaceted phenomenon. As Aikins et al. (2021/2024) argue: 'A discussion and analysis of racism that fails to differentiate between its various manifestations risks rendering invisible the group-specific and context-related expressions of different forms of racism' (p. 38). Therefore, we use the term 'racism' as multifaceted construct effecting various groups of people, appearing in different forms and advanced by divers historically rooted narratives (see also 'racism without races'; Hall, 2018).

6   The italicised spelling of *race* in this contribution is employed to underscore its social construction.

7   For the combination of Qualitative Content Analysis and Grounded Theory, refer to Mayring (2008).

8   Following Meyermann and Porzelts (2014) anonymisation guidelines, the original interview phrases were replaced by pseudonyms indicated by the use of the symbol '@' (e.g., @pseudonym@).

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