LEADER GENDER AND SCHOOL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND PROCESSES IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Using an etic strategy, the study investigated the practices and processes characterising a typical working day of two high school principals from Bloemfontein in South Africa. Essentially, the research employed a passive observer strategy to document management practices and processes of two principals (male and female) at their schools. Convenience sampling technique was used to identify the two principals. Document content analysis was used to interrogate the data on the observed verbal and nonverbal cues of the participants. Findings suggest that the female high school principal was approachable, kind and warm while her counterpart was fair, firm and direct in his approach. Principals possess skills to effectively manage despite the daily challenges such as managing staff members, learners and parents. The study encourages particularly women to strive for administrative and leadership positions in disadvantaged South African schools and confront the identified challenges with zest.
Key words: Female principals, manage, challenges, high schools, Bloemfontein.

Introduction

Since South Africa became a democratic country in 1994, it sought to mitigate the legacies of apartheid in the education sector through deliberate reform strategies. Education sector reform initiatives targeted the ethos, systems and procedures in school administration (Steyn, 2003). The gender gap was mitigated by widening access and appointment of blacks and females in school administration. Consequently, the number of male educators and female educators in senior positions increased. Simultaneously, as Ouston (1993:48) submits, "the concern for woman rights in education have led to the conducting of numerous studies documenting how women perform in managerial posts in schools and particular positions of seniority". As part of the broad reform agenda, women and men in education were afforded opportunities to occupy management positions. The new dispensation took upon itself after 1994 to, particularly, emancipate the womenfolk. Resultantly, the number of women employed in the labour force increased significantly. The number of women in school leadership has steadily risen despite the deep seated cultural and structural reservations regarding female leadership.

Interestingly, society portrays women as more caring and nurturing compared to men. This is evident from the way women comparatively manage schools. In studies comparing the management styles and the effectiveness of both male and female managers, women were found to perform better than men on the variables studied (Chapman, 1975; Sherman, 2000; Greyling & Steyn, 2015; Khalil, Iqbal & Khan, 2016; Massry-Herzallah & Arar, 2019). A South African study by Greyling & Steyn (2015) for instance, reported that female school leaders are effective school managers despite having different professional profiles to men. Some Israel studies of the Arab society and education therein (Arar and Abramovitz, 2013; Massry-Herzallah & Arar, 2019) established that female principals were perceived by their subordinate teachers as good at creating pleasant school climates, characterised by sharing, autonomy and good interpersonal relationships. Regrettably, the female principals were said to have poor abilities in handling relations with external bodies. The current study investigated the activities in the typical day of a male and female high school principal from Bloemfontein city in South Africa. This, in the hope of shedding light on the role of a school principal in the post-apartheid era.

Background

South Africa has come a long way since the first democratic elections in 1994. The South African education system for instance, has evolved over the years as evidenced by the progress of the sector. Since the dawn of democracy, there has been a steady increase in the number of women educators and women educators in senior positions. Hence, the country has been praised for its strides towards a gender-neutral society (Kiamba, 2008). Though South Africa has overcome many educational challenges particularly female leadership (Mestry &

Schmidt, 2012; Moorosi, 2010, 2007; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014), the area of women educational leadership remains a grey area. Women underrepresentation in leadership positions at all educational levels appears to be the greatest obstacle (Greyling & Steyn, 2015). Moreover, there are those who still believe that women are less effective than males in leading schools (Nichols and Nichols, 2014) and this presents fertile ground for investigating the experiences of South African female school leaders in comparison to their male counterparts.

On the premise of the foregoing, this research investigated how some male and female high school principals handle daily routine in their managerial positions. Moral, Martín-Romera, Martínez-Valdivia and Olmo-Extremera (2018) have suggested that it is indeed possible to establish the attributes, skills and strategies of successful principals in any context. The management styles women leaders employ, for instance, has previously been investigated with view to establish if these could be the source of some of the challenges (Budworth, & Mann, 2010; Elmuti, Jia & Davis, 2009; Oyeniran, 2018; Showunmi & Kaparou, 2017). On this account, the paper interrogates if the leadership styles pursued by women in managing their schools and the implications thereof, impacts on their perceived career trajectory in leadership positions. Women in educational leadership positions are faced with plethora challenges just as men in similar positions. Hence, we posit that gender or sex should not be an impediment *per se*.

Role and challenges of the principal

The fundamental role of the school principal is, essentially, instructional leadership (Goldring, Grissom, Rubin, Rogers, Neel, & Clark, 2018; Wanzare, & Da Costa, 2001). In addition to curriculum and instruction, principals and their assistants spend time on general school management, student activities, community relations and personnel management (Marshall, & Hooley, 2006). Both, male and female principals perform and share similar duties and experiences. "Women in South Africa have a long history in struggling to free themselves from laws and conditions that have and still hold them back" (DoE, 2002:02). Studies that emphasise the reasons that prevent women from becoming school administrators document several barriers preventing women from moving into formal leadership positions in schools (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014; Moorosi, 2010; Smit, 2017; Steyn, 2003). As alluded to earlier, the teaching profession in South Africa is primarily dominated by women educators.

Typical school principals experience generic triumphs and tribulations at their workplaces irrespective of their gender. And yet female educators find themselves underrepresented in management roles. Van der Westhuizen (1997:541) opines that "many barriers remain which hinder women in the teaching profession from achieving in relation to their male colleagues with regards to promotion posts". Studies have documented that women in education are at a disadvantage and that they are faced with more challenges than men when applying for leadership positions (Rarieya, 2011; Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner and Sabino, 2011; Yahya and Mutarubukwa, 2017). Furthermore, Van der Westhuizen (1997:545) believes that internal or personal barriers impacts on women's lives. Cultural factors (Yahya and Mutarubukwa, 2017), are, in the main, viewed as presenting serious challenges to women. The South African Department of Education (2004:16) identified the following reasons as barriers to women managers in education: Male employees may not accept female manager authority, the acceptance of fellow female employees and friendships between female managers and other employees. A study by Ousten (1993: 49) singled out issues around self-confidence/self-esteem, aspiration levels, family responsibilities and gender diversity and equality as sources of the challenges that form barriers for women from achieving management positions. Another perennial challenge within the South African management landscape is the 'race' issue (Booysen, 2001; Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). Booysen (2001) has noted the 'overrepresentation of white managers and the underrepresentation of black managers' in the top echelons of leadership. Consequently, women leaders suffer a twin evil of being underrepresented by virtue of their race (skin colour) and sex. Booysen (2007) describes black women's race as the primary identification attribute and sex (gender) as a secondary identification categorisation when compared to white women. Hence, her contention that black women relative societal status in relation to leadership and management issues is mediated by the two 'negative' constructs. There also exist, other factors.

Self-confidence/self-esteem

Studies (Gaus, 2011; Parsaloi & Steyn, 2014; Sam, Amartei, Osei-Owusu, & Antobre, 2013).) indicate that women have lower self-confidence than men. According to these researchers, it can viewed that this is one of the reasons that explains why men are more likely to apply for positions that they are sometimes both qualified and not qualified for and why more women only apply for positions in which they are highly qualified. This contributes to why more men are being considered for managerial positions than women.

Aspiration levels

In today's modern times, women are more aspired to achieving at greater levels than during previous years. More women are aspiring for school administration and management position and they believe in their abilities to accomplish this. According to Ousten, (1993:52)

> "studies of women administrators indicate that they do the job differently than men, focusing more on teaching, learning and the children. The more women see other women administrators incorporating the values of teaching, learning and contact with children the more likely women are to decide they are interested in becoming school administrators".

In lending credence to these notions, Moosa and Bhan (2017) demonstrated that female teachers are more inclined to teaching young learners (5 to 9 years) than male teachers. Men are reportedly only keen on managing the Foundation Phase (infant grades) realm. Resultantly, both groups are complicit in perpetuating 'gendered binaries and unequal relations of power' (pg. 366).

Support systems/family commitments and responsibilities

Ousten (1993) is of the opinion that the lack of support systems may form as another barrier for women in managerial positions. It is imperative to have adequate supporting systems in place. Life, and the way we live has evolved over the decades and yet women are still responsible for most of the housework, cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. In modern times, women can have it all and they have found ways to "juggle" both family and work responsibilities (Collins, 2020) as they are driven and aspired to achieve higher levels of self-actualisation.

Managing diversity and gender equality

Campher (2002) states that the main aim of the South African Schools Act of 1996 was to induce a system that would promote democratic change in the community integrating various and diverse school models into one model that should be acceptable to all and grant equal opportunities to all. This Act promotes the diversity of cultures and languages as well as the right of the learner's parents and educators. It was also promulgated to promote redress and equity (Motala, Porteus, & Tshoane, 2002) after years of retrogressive apartheid education policies and practices. No wonder that the DoE (2002) consequently observed that there were more women than men in the educational system in South Africa. Unfortunately, research continues to suggest that the probability of men becoming heads and making it to senior leadership level is greater than that of women. On average, of the 84% black principals in 2012 in South Africa, only 36% were females, and of these, 19% were secondary school principals, this stemming from apartheid inertia (Willis, 2015).

Gender and race discrimination

Despite the relative absence of women in educational leadership roles, researchers have paid some attention to gender issues in leadership (Grogan, 2011; Makura, 2012; Minehart., Foldy., Long., & Weller 2020). Grogan (2011) for instance, argues that "the literature that identifies as gender research is almost entirely research on women in administration". Khumalo (2006) opines that the "department of education produced policies to address gender equity in the work-place. Amongst others the Employment Equity Act (No 55 of 1998) and Administrative action were passed at the aim of giving more women the opportunities of being appointed to top management. The National Gender Equity Task Team released a report that provided for the insurance that all those finding themselves amongst groups that were previously disadvantaged or discriminated against including women would be considered for promotional opportunities (Wolpe, Quinlan, & Martinez,1997). The Department of Education (Republic of South Africa) (2002) boldly identified the following reasons as barriers to women managers in education; male employees may not accept female manager authority, the acceptance of fellow female employees (subordinates) and friendships between female managers and other employees.

Intrinsic barriers

Intrinsic barriers are also referred to as internal barriers. They influence the lives of women and are generally regarded as the "so-called "lacks" or "inequalities" which are within women because of their femaleness (Madlala, 2007). These barriers are deeply ingrained in the traditional and stereotype attitudes of the society about feminine characteristics. These internal barriers can be classified into gender socialisation, sex stereotypes and multiple roles (Madlala, 2007; Parsaloi, & Steyn, 2014; Showunmi, & Kaparou, 2017; Oyeniran, 2018). Madlala (2007) states that "internal barriers are the attitudes, behaviours and aspirations of women". These refer to fact that women have been socialised in peculiar ways which leads them to exhibit psychological characteristics. Some women often internalise the negative stereotypes that others hold about them concerning

their roles and abilities causing them to underperform and in such a way they cause their own barriers to advancement.

Theoretical Framework

The current research study adopted liberal feminism as a lens of analysis. Hesse-Biber (2012) avers that liberal feminism believes that women are suppressed in contemporary society because they suffer from endemic discrimination. Hooks as quoted by Becks-Moody (2004), believes that "a central problem with feminist discourse has been our inability to arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is" (pg. 51). To Hooks, a consensus regarding a generic definition is lacking though feminists strive to improve the lives of women socially, economically, and politically. In contributing to the debate, Hesse-Biber (2012) submit that liberal feminism seeks no special privileges for women but demands that women receive equal consideration without discrimination based on their sex. Scott and Usher (1996) underscore this notion arguing that "since the 1960's liberal feminism has been the relationship between liberalism and feminism which has underpinned the unequal opportunities prevalent in areas of education and social policy" (pg. 121). It was within this context that we sought to demonstrate that liberal feminism assists us in appreciating that the challenges faced by women as high school principals are structural and can be overcome. By using liberal feminism, the researchers view liberal feminism from the viewpoint of the study participant (high school principals) and the barriers that prevent or disadvantage women in leadership positions. By using liberal feminism as a theoretical framework, the research study suggest that women and men are to be treated as equals and should access equal opportunities. The discrimination and prejudiced attitudes towards women present as only one of the vast challenges against women in leadership roles. Thus, we used liberal feminism to illustrate the interface of gender and the constructions of challenges faced by some female high school principals from the Bloemfontein (Mangaung) area in South Africa.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What practices and processes characterise a working day of male and female school managers in South Africa?
2. How does gender routine contribute to the challenges faced by male and female principals?

Methodology

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010) the purpose of a research design is to specify a plan for generating empirical evidence that will be used to answer the research questions". The research design describes who will be studied, the observed participants who will be participating in the study and where and when the study will be conducted. The research adopted a qualitative research design. The study falls under the descriptive interpretative paradigm. A qualitative methodology was the most suitable approach for this study as it provided the researcher with an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those participating in the study and provides the researcher with an insider's perspective. The first step was to identify experienced managers from potential schools.

Participants and setting

Data relevant to the study was collected from the principals (managers) using structured observations, required for a qualitative research design. A sample of two high school principals was selected from two high schools in Bloemfontein. Both are situated in a disadvantaged urban township context. One was under the management of a female principal and the other managed by a male principal. The sample was selected using the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling was viewed as the most appropriate since the researchers knows beforehand who the participants are. It ensures that a specific universe is adequately represented in the final sample (Robinson, 2014). The researcher will ultimately get a deeper understanding of how the studied phenomena constructs meaning. The selection of two high schools from Bloemfontein in the Free State province on the bases of convenience and the disadvantaged contexts (apartheid legacy) that the schools are in.

Instrument

In this study the researcher implemented observational techniques involving the observer as a passive participant. According to Maree (2013)" the researcher gets into a situation, focusing mainly on his or her role as observer in the situation. The researcher looks at patterns of behaviour in a particular community to understand the assumptions, values and beliefs of the participants. The researcher remains uninvolved and does not influence the dynamics of the setting" (pg. 85). The researcher visited the participating schools and school principals and

observed various activities as it occurred on a daily basis. The researcher attempted to address research questions by identifying the specific routine characterising the day in the life of male and women high school principals from Bloemfontein.

Procedure
After securing permission to conduct data from the Free State Department of Education and the respective schools participating in the study the researcher set out to investigate the routine of male and female high school principals in their leadership positions. The process of collecting relevant data was done in one week.

Data presentation and analysis
Brief descriptions of the schools are given prior to the observations that took place at each of the respective schools.

Description of School A
The school has one female manager/principal and one deputy manager, two Heads of Departments, two secretaries and 20 educators again excluding additional staff members. Four of the school's educators are male and 16 are female. The school has a total of 590 learners.

Description of School B
The school has one manager, a deputy manager, four Heads of Departments, two secretaries and a total of 34 educators of which 26 are female and eight are male excluding additional staff members. The school has a total of 805 learners.
Education processes and practices characterising leader routine at School A and B

Description of school A's manager
The principal from school A gives the impression that she is very approachable, kind, warm and understanding. She communicates easily with members of her staff as she does this every morning before the school day starts.

Description of school B's manager
The principal of school B is firm but fair in the way he manages the school, learners and his subordinates. His approach is direct and provides everyone with equal opportunities. He appears to be good delegator and provides for his responsibilities toward the development of the school. The principal does seem to need more assistance when planning activities involving extra activities and would benefit from an assistant to assist him with these.

Observations of routine at school A
The first impression was that the learners from school A were many and appeared to come from disadvantaged backgrounds (judging by their dress code). The administration office was busy, filled with activity and this seemed to be the norm at the school especially on a Monday morning. The Monday morning rush seemed to calm as soon as the school bell rang for the weekly assembly. The school has two secretaries who the researcher observed to be rushed, busy and not coping as well as they should be during the first day of the week.

My first impression of the principal was that she was easy to approach as she made me feel welcomed by introducing me to some of the school staff members and inviting me into her office. The school formally starts at 7:30 a.m. every morning and starts at 7:00 a.m. for all staff members. The subordinates gather in the staffroom where the principal opens with a prayer. The researcher observed that religious beliefs play an important role in how the school is managed its duties and on its daily activities. During the half hour before the school day formally starts, the principal also discusses important instructional matters (Goldring, Grissom, Rubin, Rogers, Neel, & Clark, 2018) concerning the activities for the week with her subordinates. The school bell rings at 7:30a.m and the entire school gathers in the school hall for the weekly assembly During this assembly, a scripture is read by the principal or an educator. After this solemn session, feedback, on sporting and cultural activities that took place during the previous weekend is given. Sports and cultural activities play an important role in this school. This confirms that the fundamental role of the school principal is instructional leadership (Goldring, *et al*, 2018; Wanzare, & Da Costa, 2001).

On the second day of my observations the rushed atmosphere in the administration office from the previous morning was no more. The principal informed me on the activities for the day and provided the researcher with a

desk which viewed the entire administrative office, where I could conduct and record my observations from. The researcher presented the principal with a list of questions ranging from personal questions to professional questions.

During the week of observations, the researcher observed an instance of learner misconduct, involving two grade 11 learners. A disagreement between the two learners had escalated into a physical encounter. The learners had been brought down to the principals by the class teacher who informed the principal of transpired. After this, the principal dismissed the educator to return to her classroom while she would handle the matter. The researcher observed that the principal was firm in her approach towards resolving the issue between the learners, standing he ground and talking to the learners with a calm tone. This approach defies gender (Makura, 2012; Minehart *et al,* 2020).

During the week of further observations, the researcher observed how the principal included subordinates in decision making while organising the school's annual fund raiser. The different suggestions from subordinates were considered and various responsibilities for specific activities were delegated among all staff members. Thus, the researcher observed the way the school principal interacts with her staff members (Khalil, Iqbal & Khan, 2016; Massry-Herzallah & Arar, 2019) not only in matters concerning social events but also matters regarding academic achievements and improvements. On the last day of observations, Friday, the researcher had gathered enough research material for the research study. The researcher thanked the school principal and the educators for the opportunity to work with the school and promised them a copy of the research findings and recommendations after the research for the study has been published.

Observations at school B
The first impression was that the children attending this school were few and seemed to be from privileged homes and backgrounds as they were neatly dressed. The school displayed a studious environment. The administration office had a warm and welcoming atmosphere and was relatively quiet in comparison to that of school A. The day seemed to be off to a good start. The researcher met with the school's principal where a brief introduction took place but had been interrupted by a situation involving misunderstanding between two pupils from the school. The researcher observed the principal dealing with the matter by being firm but fair in his approach towards resolving the issue between the learners. After conducting that part of the observation, the researcher was informed that the school principal would only be present at the school until the Wednesday as he had a prior travel arrangement to attend a seminar in New Zealand and was scheduled to leave the following morning. The researcher met the principal in his office to inform him of the purpose and objectives of the research study.

The meeting with the principal was cut short as the principal was called always to deal with something regarding his traveling plans for later that week. The researcher observed that the principal had many different things going on, during the first day of the observations. These included, attending to teachers and parents. The observer finally got to sit down and have a one on one meeting with the principal but only until later that day.

For the remaining period, the researcher would observe how the deputy principal of the school managed the school on behalf of the principal. It seems that the principal of school B was distracted more and needed more assistance from his deputy principal and secretaries. On the first day of the observations the staff members gathered in the staffroom fifteen minutes before the school bell rang. The morning scripture was read by one of the educators and a prayer conducted by another educator. The researcher observed that religious views play an important part in the activities of the school. The school week starts off by assembling all the learners in the school square where the first assembly of the week takes place. The school gathers in the square for ten minutes every morning during the week.

The researcher was provided a seat in the principal's office which was linked to the secretaries' office. This was enough as the researcher had aimed to observe situations only involving school, learner and staff management. The communication structure in the school seemed to be in place as educators presented their problems to the Heads of Department first before going to the principal. The principal delegates his responsibilities to his subordinates by informing them of their exact duty while taking their other duties towards the school into consideration. Subordinates are also accorded the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns. The deputy principal manages most of the duties concerning the management of the school in the absence of the principal.

Comparison of the two managers

From the observations is can be concluded that women in managerial positions run or manage their schools just as well as men do. Both schools place a great deal of value on religious beliefs. Both managers were firm, fair and employ a participative approach in the way they manage their schools. Both managers handle conflict between learners and conflict situations between educators in a firm but fair approach. Principal A for instance, has occupied the management role for the past five years and Principal B for the past ten years. This indicated that the two managers are experienced in the field of school management, and yet, they both are still experienced similar routine and daily challenges in their position as school principals. We got the impression that both leaders use the participatory and human oriented styles. Hence the tranquil atmosphere characterising the studied schools. This observation is at variance with the findings of Madlala (2007), Parsaloi and Steyn, 2014, Showunmi, & Kaparou, 2017 and Oyeniran (2018) who saw gender and social construction as impediments.

Conclusion

In summary the study sought to investigate school management practices and processes at two high school principals in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The study findings showed that the studied principals experienced similar encounters as school managers irrespective of their gender. These include setting daily plans, debriefing staff and attending to requests and challenges brought to the office. Thus, the experiences and challenges of male and female principals cut across gender. Gender routine is gender neutral in our submission. Moreover, any barriers that retard women's progress in management for instance, were not immediately observed. Both principals adopted what we viewed as human oriented leadership styles though in our observations, the female principal had a slight edge. Such practices appeared to positively impact on school processes. Our observations did not reveal any gender discrimination or manifestation of cultural and societal factors impeding the principals' duties and responsibilities.

Implications for educational leadership

Despite the challenges facing female and male high school principals, the study encourages more women to pursue a career as school leadership and other school leadership positions. Gender does not appear to be an impediment in the execution of principals' duties. The Departments of Education may also be able to formally implement (or sustain) training and mentoring programmes for women school principals in their localities. The need to change people's attitudes towards females in leadership positions particularly, should be an ongoing activity in schools. School principals should sustain or consider forming local leadership networks that share experiences and subsequently mitigate potential work-related challenges.

Acknowledgement

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