

Mentoring and Principal Preparation: The Case of Kwazulu-Natal Women

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this paper was to explore experiences of women primary school principals in relation to mentoring. The research design was qualitative in nature. Women school principals' views, experiences, hopes and fears were described through in-depth interviews. The study was located within KwaZulu Natal Province in South Africa. Data analysis was an on-going process, of identifying key issues and emerging themes. Findings revealed that some women were empowered through the training and mentoring programmes that were offered. Others experienced challenges as no mentoring or assistance was rendered to them on their initial entry into leadership positions. Findings from the research reflected the need for more workshops on mentoring as it helps to develop skills and knowledge for managing effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring and Its Importance

Mentoring provides an effective transition into the areas of uncertainty such as principalship and headship, particularly for women because of their historical background in society. Mentoring is support given to a novice person in a new work environment. It is an induction or coaching that empowers a new person in the organisation or education system. Klinge (2015) saw mentoring as a tool which facilitates the development of employees in an organisation and help them improve their day-to-day performance. Mentoring is just one aspect in the process of induction, coaching and support offered during the transition period of employees at their new workplaces or, as promoted members within the same organisation. Elaborating further the concept of mentoring, Klinge (2015) showed how the process develops on a daily basis, helping the novice leader gain confidence.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

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- ♦ Explore women primary school principals' experiences in relation to mentoring, after their appointments to leadership positions
- ♦ Examine the challenges they faced as novice principals
- ♦ Find out the strategies they used to overcome those challenges

The Literature Review

African societies were immensely patriarchal with the cultural and social structure quite rigid as echoed by one author. The cultural and the social assumption was that women are not in a position to hold managerial positions. Mathur-Helm (2005) observed that in South Africa the women faced dual challenges in attaining top management positions as apartheid regime emphasized racial and gender segregation. This was the situation in other developing countries including Zimbabwe before its independence. Major obstacles to women's access to leadership positions left them in a more challenging situation when exercising their leadership as newly appointed principals, in particular, women school leaders required support in order for them to be effective performers in their day to day duties.

Mentoring, seen as the establishment of personal relationship for the purpose of professional and instructional guidance, has its origin in the Greek literature, in which the use of the term mentor generally referred to a trusted friend,

counselor or teacher (Strong 2009). On another note, Daresh and Plyko (1994) observed that mentoring was a means of peer-support provided by experienced people to their less experienced colleagues. This suggested that the relationship of a mentor and mentee was developed formally or informally as a way of assisting the newly appointed persons in the organisation. Similar observations were articulated in Bynum's (2015) paper on female leaders, where family support and encouragement was valued as equally important and was considered useful informal mentoring. However, in South Africa, Msila and Mtshali (2013) acknowledged that the Advanced Certificate in Education-School Management and Leadership (ACE-SML) initiated by the Department of Education in 2007 focused on improving skills of educational leaders within South African schools. This was the kind of support needed by women entering into leadership positions in schools. Reflecting on Klinge's (2015) framework, mentoring is about leadership development and hence creates opportunities for improved performance.

Strong (2009) contended that mentoring provides the foundation for a lifelong learning process of professional growth. Hence, the paper focused on women school principals' experiences of mentoring, and other forms of support in KwaZulu-Natal. Reflecting on the discussion above, it shows that mentoring focuses more on relationship building so that learning develops in a more natural way. Awaya et al. (2003: 51) viewed mentoring as a "journey to establish and maintain collaborative working relationships between the mentor and mentee". It is a process of building trust and getting to know and understand one another and how things are done at a particular school.

Mentoring as a Strategy for Creating Opportunities for More People to be Leaders

Discussing on leadership and management of schools, Cadwell (2003) noted the importance of capacity building and nurturing learning communities. The emphasis was on improving opportunities for others to lead effectively. Bush et al. (2011) linked good performance and schools learning outcomes to the organisation's contributions towards the development of school leaders. To achieve this the senior management team (SMT) provides leadership with enabling con-

ditions, that promote high quality teaching and learning. Robertson (2009) also acknowledged the need for improving learning opportunities and to develop educational leadership capacity through coaching and mentoring. This is why for instance in South Africa, the Advanced Certificate in Education-School management and leadership programme was launched by the Department of Education for both beginning and aspiring principals. Considering that more women were entering into leadership in schools, providing leadership development programs and support systems such as mentoring equipped the new principal with leadership skills. Msila (2013) referring to the South African context, saw mentoring as a powerful tool for assisting women leaders to be confident in their work as principals. Although many teachers did not view themselves as leaders, their actions as facilitator of students' learning, providing guidance and support for learners, in itself was leadership. If these teachers were not given opportunity to exercise their leadership potentials, learners outcome would be reduced. Improvement of teaching and learning is a result of the leaders' actions, influence, and at times their ability to continuously coach. Hence, to become a better leader the principal needs to be mentored so that he/she will in-turn create opportunities for subordinates to be leaders. In searching for more effective ways of facilitating learning, educational leaders create opportunities for developing others so that they can work collectively towards the achievement of educational goals as mentioned before. Mentoring has been seen as one of the powerful tools in developing new leaders including teachers as leaders. Continuous coaching is needed since through coaching, ideas are not imposed but shared through mutual relationship.

Mentoring as an Activity towards Coaching

While a mentor is an experienced and trusted person who advises and introduces new employees to the culture of an organization, Soanes and Hawker (2006) saw a coach as a bit more difficult to define in that the role that goes with that term is dependent upon the discipline. For instance, the role of a coach in sport would be different from other disciplines such as a leader in school management position. Tolhurst (2010) indicated that a leader as a coach does not tell people what to do and does not claim to know

everything, but views leadership as a collaborative activity that empowers subordinates and develop them to grow. Hence a successful coach needs to create a conducive atmosphere and a climate that is inviting and open to free exchange of ideas. The art of sharing is a motivational skill that stimulates the employee. This suggests that building rapport with the subordinate becomes one of a mentor's role. Mentoring includes being supportive of any ideas that the mentee might have, particularly pertaining to improving performance at work. Stone (2007) highlighted the importance of acknowledging the mentee's ideas, and creating a way of helping the individual to reflect on their weaknesses if any, and move forward. Both the coach and the mentee should work in reciprocity and with autonomy.

METHODOLOGY

The research from which this paper draws was qualitative in nature and data was collected from twenty participants within KwaZulu Natal Province. For the purpose of this paper, five transcripts were analysed. The adoption of a qualitative interpretive methodology allowed the researchers to elicit data directly from participants. Open-ended semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants over a period of six months. Data analysis was an ongoing process. Interviews were introduced with an open dialogue and questions arose naturally during the conversation. Purposive sampling was used to locate the first participant and the other respondents for inclusion in the study were identified using snow-ball sampling. Patton (2015) saw snowball as a technique that identifies participants with rich information about the phenomenon under study. Consent to participate in the study was sought before proceeding with the discussion. The approach that was adopted enabled the researchers to understand the leadership experiences of women, and in particular women's experiences in relation to mentoring.

FINDINGS

While literature revealed that mentoring is an important form of support for beginning teachers and leaders, most of the women in the study from which this paper draws did not receive this kind of support in a formal way. The women principals' experiences varied greatly. However, those

who were pioneers of transformation, who entered leadership roles before the majority, indicated that their promotions were based on experience. This suggests that they did not have formal training or leadership qualifications when they assumed leadership positions. The study showed that the division in terms of who received mentorship and who did not, was a matter of time period. Some of the principals who were recruited after the introduction of the programme Advanced Certificate in Education-School Management and Leadership (ACE-SML) did receive mentoring through attending the programme sessions as noted by one of the participants:

I really benefited from the ACE School leadership programme. It gave me the opportunity to grow and become confident in my work. Sometimes it's not about learning new things, but that assurance that you are doing the right thing motivates you and strengthens you (Principal A).

Principal A appreciated the ACE-SML (School leadership) programme. It was interesting to note that through this programme some women principals felt there was no difference in the ways they led schools from the males, and one young lady, a primary school principal said:

I don't see myself as different from how the men lead in school. She added, we went to the same schools and learnt the same things and hence I don't feel there is any difference. We are guided by the same documents and policies (Principal B).

The ACE programme groomed her and provided her with management skills so much that she felt confident to stand on her own and felt she can do it. Most of the women who enrolled in the ACE-SML (School leadership) programme were younger than those who were appointed without any leadership training but just the teaching experience and long service in school. For the older women school principals some received their mentorship in an informal way as noted by another lady:

I came to this position at the retirement of the previous head. I was born in this township and grew up here. I also did my primary school here. When I was promoted to this position, I used to ask my previous head whatever I was not sure of or anything that I felt I needed advice. She became my mentor, but now I am networked with other women principals. We sup-

port one another. We share ideas and through that, I get to know how to handle some of the challenges. I do not work in isolation (Principal C).

Principals C got her mentorship from the retired head and she gained her confidence from there. Some of the women principals did not have either of the two, the informal mentorship or the ones provided through the ACE-SML (School leadership) programme. This group of women experienced difficulties in adjusting to their new positions. When asked how they managed to cope, one of the senior women in leadership responded this way:

My own experience, no induction-nothing, I do things the way I was brought up, respect the older, even with parents they get all my attention. My secretary sees everybody as important. My human relationship is positive for everyone. My father was a principal (Principal D).

This particular principal felt that her father was her role model. She also acknowledged that her previous principal had groomed her before she was promoted to the headship position. She went further to say that:

I can say, I was mentored by the principal who gave me opportunity to act as an HOD. He demanded to see my schedule before I start school. When I came to this school, I also came as an HOD. I started as head of the foundation phase. It was like I was the mother of the school. However, when I got promotion to the level of principal-ship, the kind of support that I used to have as an HOD did not exist. I even got ill due to the challenges that I faced (Principal D).

Principal D felt that although she had support at the lower level of leadership, she still needed more support at the senior position that she acquired. Another senior woman principal who also got the promotion position without training but just having experience noted that she was one of the first women to be in leadership within the South African schools. Her major challenge was resistance to female leadership and she struggled to cope. She believed that:

Males were not used to be headed by female (Principal E).

She however felt she was fortunate to be at a town school where the Department of Education and Training held workshops to support

newly appointed principals. She felt that the workshops were very good. Her comment was:

Principals within the area were very good. Induction was formally done and we were encouraged to visit other schools to get support. Mentoring was done by a neighbouring school principal but it was informally done (Principal E).

Woman principal E felt that although the mentoring she received was informal her mentor wanted not only one person to grow but other novice principals as well. She mentioned that:

Sometimes you doubt yourself, but if you talk to someone, you know you are right.

She added:

The Circuit inspector was our mentor. She would call resource persons to come and give us lessons (Principal E).

The women acknowledged that mentoring was an important form of support and that it is one of the strong pillars for newly appointed principals. Principal E felt that mentoring gives confidence to the aspiring leaders and empowers both the aspiring and the newly appointed principals.

DISCUSSION

Mentoring as a Form of Empowerment

Principal A was empowered through leadership training and mentoring. She gained such confidence that she felt there was no difference in the way men and women lead. Her argument was that if people go through the same training what is it that should make them different? This shows how much confidence she had with herself in doing the job effectively without further support. Klinge (2015) acknowledged that mentoring helps to improve performance in an organisation. From the research findings it shows that more workshops on mentoring needed to be put in place, in order to develop skills, knowledge and values needed for the purpose of leading and managing schools effectively. Bush et al. (2011) discussing the purpose of ACE (School leadership) programme within the South African context, acknowledged the importance of the programme. The above mentioned authors highlighted that the programme was meant to develop and empower the teachers and principals especially those aspiring to be in educational leadership positions, and the newly appointed ones.

Tolhurst (2010) observed that mentoring is an activity that involves coaching. Someone new to the position needs to be inducted into the system, in order to adjust and be able to fit into the new system. The new appointee needs coaching and mentoring.

Principal B, though she did not mention that mentoring is a powerful tool for improving effectiveness, her comment towards the job is a good reflection of how important it is to be mentored or skilled. Reflecting on principal B's comments, leadership development programmes she attended were designed in such a way that she was well groomed and developed. Principal B's experience suggests that ACE (School leadership) programme managed to bridge the gap as noted by Bush and Oduro (2006: 362) in relation to formal requirement needed for principals to be trained as school managers.

Principal C did not receive formal mentoring but used her retired head to share information and she gained confidence through that. In analyzing the study findings from which this paper was based, it shows that mentoring is an important support system that needs to be taken seriously if effectiveness is to be achieved by the new principals. This was reflected in principals B and D and E's comments. Their comments were quite different but pointed to the same issue of the importance of mentoring. The women's appointments were on the basis of teaching experience and through long service within the field. Although this was perceived as providing a sufficient starting point, it had many flaws. Chawla and Kelloway (2004) found out that there were a lot of uncertainties in school organisation and South Africa was not an exception. Hence mentoring was seen as a way of introducing a person to the organisation's culture. It was and is still an effective strategy for management development, a supporting activity designed to help new comers to come to terms and deal with transitional experiences of becoming a head-teacher. Reciprocity was also required as it provided space for collaboration. Wasonga and Murphy (2010) discussing the concept of coaching, saw it as an effective way to motivate and enhance competencies of the novice principal.

Focusing on principal D's comments, where mentoring was not practiced or implemented, her experience as a new appointee to the position was not an easy one though she had been an HOD for some-time. When she assumed the prin-

cipal-ship post without the support she used to get as an HOD, she felt like she was thrown into the deep end. She did not have the type of confidence that principal B had. Principal B was ready to face challenges and was confident that she could deal with them accordingly. Yet principal D showed no confidence to sustain her work and deal with the challenges she was now facing as a principal. You can only create opportunities for others to learn if you yourself are able to deal with uncertainties. Through principal D's comments of not coping, to the point of getting sick, it is quite clear that the lack of support had serious implications for this principal. Mentoring is a form of peer support which in this case is provided by experienced principals for their less experienced colleagues as echoed by Klinge (2015). This reminds us of Cadwell's (2003) view that leadership is about nurturing the learning communities. For newly appointed principals to be effective in nurturing their own communities, they need to be nurtured and prepared as well.

The experience for the woman principal D was different from both principal A and B. Principal A acknowledged that mentoring is support that involves mere interaction and collaboration with experienced others in one's area or field. This is reflected in her comment when she said "*sometimes you just need that assurance that you are doing the right things*". Principal A felt that having a mentor empowered her to remain confident throughout her work. Once the principal is confident, she/he can easily collaborate with his/her community and start learning together and share ideas. By doing so the principal is able to foster a culture of mentoring to her own community. Strong (2009) saw mentoring as providing the foundation for a lifelong learning process for professional growth. Even Klinge (2015) discussing about learning organisations noted the importance of mentoring as a form of nurturing environments and promoting success in those communities.

Women principals had unique experiences during their transition from being an ordinary teacher or HOD to a principal. While the role of the principal is to ensure that the learner's environment is conducive, they also have the responsibility of making sure that their educational needs are met. This requires the principal to be creative and have skills to generate income. Collaboration provides mechanisms for sharing

ideas and strategizing together to achieve a common goal. Principal C relied on the retired principal for support and she felt empowered by that. She visited neighboring schools and established learning networks with other women principals. These networks enhanced learners' welfare. She also managed to reach out to parents and created connections with business people around the area and community centres for financial support and other resources.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, it shows that mentoring has implications for either success or failure of novice leaders and in this case women school leaders. Through collaboration mentors get to know their mentee's concern, strengths and dilemmas, hence a good mentor would thus adopt a supportive rather than supervisory approach. This kind of approach to mentoring generates confidence in the mentee as he/she would feel respected, understood and supported. It is a way of coaching, grooming and developing someone by providing moral support. When newly appointed principals are mentored, they develop collaborative skills which help them to bring the school community together and work as a team.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that members of an organisation should strategise or put in place mechanisms of grooming their newly appointed members. It is of great importance to orient the new members into the organisation through some form of coaching and mentoring as that gives confidence and encouragement to teachers and school leaders, to take ownership of the school work thereby improving student performance.

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