

Do Women Have to ‘Grow Muscles’ in Order to Successfully Manage Schools? Evidence from Some South African Female School Principals

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KEYWORDS Women Principals. Experiences. Management Strategies. Schools. South Africa

ABSTRACT The study reports on women principals’ management experiences in four schools. Using a feminist lens and school management theories, this paper discusses gender-based experiences of women school principals, and the implications of these for effective management of schools. The inductive analysis offered makes use of data generated from semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis with four women school principals. It reveals that women principals experienced being caught in the middle of having to balance domestic chores (being mothers and wives) and work responsibility (as school principals). It also denotes pervasive gender stereotypes that depict women as care-givers and nurturers, and therefore not suited for management positions. These factors invoked a paradoxical predicament wherein women principals were perpetually torn between asserting their identity as women (feminine) and adopting a masculine attitude (growing muscles) in order to cope with a male orientated field of school management. The conclusion provides strategies on how women principals could be supported in order to enhance their effectiveness in managing schools in South Africa. The researchers recommend that women school principals desist from seeking to ‘grow muscles’. Instead they should seek to grow in who they really are: collaborative, caring, emotionally connected and vigilant towards meeting organisational goals.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on an empirical study that explored how some South African women school principals in one Education Circuit experienced their roles as managers against the background of previous gender inequalities in the country. The South African Constitution advocates the equal treatment of all citizens. Over the past decade, many if not all the arms of government have been working to eradicate the imbalances of the past through affirmative action, and various other policies aimed at enhancing human equality and social justice. The new democratic values filtered through the schooling system as well. The Bill of Rights enshrined in the Constitution Act 108 of 1996, assures equal benefit of the law and declares clearly that: *Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law* (Section 9.1). In 1998, a Gender Equity Task Team was established to redress issues relating to gender inequalities in education. The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996, the Employment of Educators Act No. 76 of 1998, and the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998, and the Gender Equity Act of 1996 paved the way and facilitated the entry of women into a “previ-

ously male domain of educational bureaucracy” (Chisholm 2001: 387) of school management. These Acts prohibit unfair discrimination in employment and ensure that women are equitably represented at all levels of employment. South African women now have full opportunities to become school principals. White Paper on Education and Training (Republic of South Africa 1996) calls for an increase in the number of women in leadership positions in order to counteract authoritarianism, and to ensure that schools are governed in a manner that reflects the ideology of the state.

However, despite these enabling constitutional and policy frameworks, the researchers’ own experiences as well as research findings (such as Shakeshaft 1987; Bennett 1992; Adler et al. 1993; Madlala 2007; Schley and Schratz 2011) seem to show that women in management positions still experience a number of challenges in practice, as compared to their male counterparts. Discrimination based on gender seems to persist. Bennett (1992: 101) has the following to say in this regard:

When a woman takes a management post in what was previously a male domain, whether in primary or secondary school, this perceived

intrusion leaves her exposed and vulnerable. Inevitably she faces challenges to her working styles and leadership based on sex stereotypes and the uneasiness about women in leadership positions.

It therefore seemed to the researchers that women who are seen climbing the ladder of the school management hierarchy are extremely challenged as a result of the past history of patriarchy in society. In order to understand how women in management positions could be supported, research is required to study women principals' experiences of their management roles. This would help unearth the dynamics related to the challenges that women principals encounter. In order to understand the women school principals' management experiences this paper was guided by the following critical questions:

Are women school principals expected to become "masculine" in order to be seen to be managing effectively in this traditionally male dominated school management position?

What are the implications for women principals' identities as women?

How could women principals be supported to effectively manage schools in ways that affirm their identities as females?

Objectives of the Study

This study sought to achieve the following three objectives: first, to determine what types of leaders and managers the selected women were, second, to find out whether or not the women under study changed their ways of leading and managing in order to suit the perceived job requirements of a school principal, and third, to suggest some ways through which women can cope with school principalship.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The Leadership-Management Interface

While the title of this paper refers to women managing schools, the researchers are fully aware of the interrelation between leadership and management. According to the Yin-Yang metaphor (Schley and Schratz 2010: 276) "there is no clear-cut division between management and leadership, and yet their features are distinct. There is no "either-or" but an "as well as". Management carries elements of leadership and vice versa".

The researchers have found Hinterhuber's (2003) (quoted in Schley and Schratz 2010: 277) conceptualisation of leadership and management very helpful in illustrating the interrelation between these two concepts. Hinterhuber viewed the concepts "management" and "leadership" as being characterised by the following attributes respectively:

Management

- ♦ Creative problem solving
- ♦ Working within a paradigm
- ♦ Working within the system
- ♦ Getting "things" and people into motion, methods, techniques, control
- ♦ The human being as support (aid)
- ♦ Attitude of "doing"

Leadership

- ♦ Discovering new possibilities with the capacity to realize them or make them realized
- ♦ Creating a new paradigm
- ♦ Working on the system
- ♦ Enticing and empowering staff to achieve top performances
- ♦ Dignity for the human being (trust)
- ♦ Attitude of "serving"

Judging from the attributes above, there cannot be successful management without leadership and vice versa (Moos 2011). Thus this paper refers to women "managing" schools to mean a combination of their leadership and management roles. The researchers therefore use these terms interchangeably in this paper. In today's world, school principals, men or women, are expected not simply to keep their schools going, but to be "actively engaged as initiators or facilitators of continuous improvements in their schools" (Fullan 2009: 55). This requires a combination of leadership and management.

Feminine and Masculine Theories of Management

For many years approaches to management entrenched a male culture in organisations and ignored women based on the assumption that management is a gender-free zone (Adler et al. 1993; Ozga 1993; Mutekwe et al. 2012). Studies (such as Ayman 1993; Chisholm 2001; Coleman 2001; Mutekwe et al. 2012) highlight the difficulties women in leadership positions experience

as a result of the masculine character that permeates organisations. Greyvenstein (1989) advises women in management and those aspiring to do so to seriously consider the consequences of adopting masculine characteristics, and cautions that women should not take on a male image as this could be devaluing their feminine essence. The main features of a male orientated bureaucratic management approach are hierarchical authority structures with formal chains between the different positions (Bush 1995). Within the school context, power would rest with the principal and his management team. This is in contrast with the radical feminist notion that views masculine power as the root cause of all forms of inequality. Weiner (1994) posits that there are two important concepts within radical feminism. These are “patriarchy” which she describes as historical dominance of men over women, and the “universal political oppression of women” which makes men the oppressors and women the oppressed. However, the complex schooling processes may render this masculine approach ineffective. School principals are leaders of professionals (teachers) who exercise relative authority of expertise in their fields of specialty. So, making decisions which do not involve teachers or at least have their support may be counter-productive as teachers may decide not to implement things that they do not endorse. These dynamics might account for why the current but increasingly threatened autocratic and male orientated management strategies have failed leaving many South African schools dysfunctional.

On the other hand, the collegial management approaches emphasise that power and decision-making should be shared among members of the organisation. Collegial models assume that organisations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion leading to consensus (Bush 2003; Grant 2010). Power is shared among members of the organisation who are thought to have a shared understanding of the aims of the institution. Collegial management approaches are thought to be closely aligned with the core values of femininities such as nurturing, empathy and consciousness of others’ feelings which allow for tolerance of diversity, enhanced participation, involvement and communication (Kganye 2002; Madlala 2007; Msila 2012). However, given the often contested nature of the goals of schooling there is a high possibility of conflict which the collegial model

does not seem to adequately anticipate. According to Bush (1995) critics point out that collegial decision making tends to be slow and cumbersome since participants may have lengthy meetings before reaching a decision. Collegiality though seems to underlie most South African education policies that aspire to achieve human dignity and justice, and given the country’s constitutional democracy, the centrality of managing institutions collegially cannot be overemphasised. However, supporting collegiality could be such a paradox in the South African schooling system which seems to favour masculinity-inclined management approaches in order to contend with the urgency to implement complex policy guidelines in a highly patriarchal society. These dynamics motivated the researchers to seek to investigate whether female principals have to embrace masculine values (grow muscles) in order to effectively manage schools.

Some Highlights of Empirical Evidence

Studies (such as Coleman 2001; Mutekwe et al. 2012) acknowledge the power of masculinity as an institutional force in operation to exclude women. Coleman (1997) states that the recognition of women as having supportive roles and of men as having management roles is a stereotype, which leads women into believing that the public domain is not suitable for them because they have been socialised into the private domain. Despite innovative advances in the South African education system, gender stereotypes and women subordination seems to continue to pose a challenge (Madlala 2007). Some women principals lack the assertiveness to exercise their management abilities, thereby propagating the stereotypes about gender roles in society (Moorosi 2000). Alternatively they may receive little support from male teachers who construct themselves as superior to women and thus having to be the ones who should operate in school management positions. This might lead to fewer women taking on management roles, which in itself results in lack of women role models (Govinden 1999). Coleman (2001) observed that in most cases men would not be willing to mentor women because they think women are not interested in management roles, while women in high positions fail to mentor other women. Women have few or no role models to look up to and are left with men whose styles of management are re-

garded as the model (Greyvenstein 2000; Morojele 2012). Since male mentors are likely to remain the only support system for women in management, this clearly has implications for the perpetuation of the masculine organisational culture in school management.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study was located within the broad frame of qualitative research. Qualitative methods are consistent with feminist values (Holland et al. 1995; Grogan and Simmons 2007). The understanding is that many aspects of women's experiences have not yet been articulated or conceptualised within the social science. The principal focus of the research was to understand the experiences of women principals and how they interpreted the world of work in which they found themselves. This is a feature of a qualitative approach "which places an emphasis on explaining and understanding the unique and particular individual cases rather than the general and the universal" (Cohen et al. 2008: 8). The qualitative approach stresses the importance of the subjective experience of the individual.

Selecting trustworthy data sources involves an awareness of one's assumptions, predispositions and influence on the social situation (McMillan and Schumacher 2001; O'Brien 2011). The researchers selected one Education Circuit on two purposive bases: its accessibility to them as well as the fact that there were schools headed by women principals therein. They then worked with a total of eight participating women principals. The power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for studying a phenomenon in depth (Cohen et al. 2000; Patton 2002; Fogelman and Comber 2007; Kelly 2010).

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews (Cohen et al. 2009) with the women principals in the selected Circuit. They interviewed each woman principal once. Each session lasted for about two hours.

Data were analysed qualitatively (Cohen et al. 2007). Firstly, the data were analysed through an inductive process whereby research findings were allowed to emerge from frequent, dominant and significant events in the raw data (Nieuwenhuis 2007). Thereafter analysis involved identifying broad categories of constructs across the data related to the women principals' experiences and challenges, and this necessitated a line-

by-line reading of the different data sets. The second phase of data analysis involved identifying theoretically and conceptually informed themes across these categories (Grbich 2007; Cresswell 2009). This allowed for explicit themes to emerge, for example, caught in the middle, gender stereotypes and lack of role models, denoting how women principals navigated a patriarchal schooling terrain.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the presentation of findings that follows, the participant school principals are referred to as "Principal A", "Principal B" and so on. The same approach is used to identify the schools.

Caught in the Middle: Balancing Domestic and Work Responsibilities

In this section the discussion centres on the women principals' challenges related to dynamics of balancing domestic and formal work responsibilities (Coleman 1997). Women principals in the study claimed that they are constantly confronted with having to navigate pressing demands to perform domestic chores in their families, as well as their official school management duties. School Principal "A" had the following to say in this regard:

...As a mother first, before you are a professional or a principal, at home you are a mother. I try very hard to separate the two portfolios - the principal of the school and me as a person. When I leave school I have children and a husband that do not deserve to be frustrated by my work problems. It is difficult to be a woman because I must fit in all these roles perfectly at the same time, it is really not easy.

School Principal "B" had the following to say: *We tend to lose focus on our families and concentrate more on school matters. By the time you reach home you are tired, you feel like your husband is ending up doing some of the things that are supposed to be performed by you, for example you were supposed to be in your child's school and you did not attend and your husband ends up attending frequently. You may end up being able to face the challenges you meet at school whereas your family suffers.*

These responses clearly show that the women principals experienced a lot of pressure as they were expected to perform well in career and as mothers and wives, as well as performing well

as school managers. In the Zulu culture women are expected to play a leading role in upbringing children and doing all the household chores (Madlala 2007). Therefore if their husbands had to do what is culturally expected to be performed by them as mothers it becomes a challenge on both parties. The researchers found that this challenge was of course not peculiar to women school principals but to most if not all women teachers. For example, in two cases the principals reported that most of the women teachers had exhausted their Family Responsibility Leave days well before the end of the cycle. Each teacher (school principals included) is granted five days in a three-year cycle. Most principals mentioned that at times they face problems when female educators were on leave because it was difficult to find suitable replacements. In one school the researchers found that a female deputy principal was on maternity leave and she was the only computer teacher in the school. The principal complained that she was experiencing problems as the person acting was inexperienced. There were computer competitions at that time so the deputy principal ended up sacrificing her leave and came back to work. She was therefore caught in the middle between work and family demands. In the first place she had a responsibility of being a mother who had an infant who needed to be nurtured and cared for which cannot be denied. Secondly she was expected to play a contributing role in her career.

In order to cope with such challenges as those reported above, the women principals in the study adopted various management strategies. They adopted an open door policy and the strategy of working together with the other members of the staff and sharing power (Chikoko and Khanare 2012), in order to lessen the pressure of balancing the social expectation of being mothers and school managers. In this connection, School Principal "A" said:

I work with my staff like I work with my family, teamwork is very important as it leads to success. To me, listening and caring for my staff is very important because I get a chance to know what they think.

The women principals created democratic practices in their schools. They listened and allowed other members to be actively involved in the management of the school. They allowed other members of the staff to participate in decision-making and were less dominating towards colleagues (Kganye 2002; Mutekwe et al. 2012).

They indicated that they were empathetic and also firm and fair to their staff members. They claimed that through maintaining the open door policy and the collegial management styles, they were able to establish teamwork and co-operation with the staff and learners. Through co-operation they wanted to ensure harmony at school so that they would encounter lower resistance and build a sense of family (Chikoko and Khanare 2012) where there is trust and respect. To illustrate, School Principal "C" indicated that her school was nominated to enter for the Provincial Excellence Awards whereby they were expected to give evidence on exercising the eleven principles of Batho Pele (People First). She reported that it was a massive and tiring exercise as they had to show evidence of practising each of the eleven principles. To achieve this, members of the staff were divided into eleven groups according to the principles and they worked concurrently as a team. In that way they were able to meet the due date of the competition.

Gender Stereotypes: Men Are the Heads, Women are Mothers

Four women principals in the study reported gender bias in their management of schools. They said that as women they were expected to go an extra mile when executing management duties. Members of the society expected them to behave differently from who they were. For example, some expected them to perform at school the duties that are associated with mothers at home. When the researchers asked them how they managed dealing with such situations, this is how School Principal "C" responded:

Some of the parents expect to get special treatment, to an extent that some of them even ask if there is no tea that is being offered in this school. Some of them will be saying "sisi, eyi manje sisi" and I have to call them to order and say I am not their sisi (sister), I am the school principal, so that we will continue to talk knowing very well that I need to be treated professionally not like a sisi as they say.

Even some teachers also perceived them as mothers. In this regard, School Principal "D" had the following to say:

I must have a big heart to accommodate everyone as a mother and I am supposed to treat them like my own children....

All the women principals felt that while they tried to be in control of their schools some communities did not automatically accept them as principals with authority and power. Patriarchal views, based upon the belief that men are superior to women seemed to still exist, thereby exposing these women managers to all forms of challenges. School Principal "E" reported that there were situations when she was compared to previous male principals of her school.

She said:

Some will even mention that when Mr so and so was here, if this happened, he would solve it this way or that way. At times I feel they think they are issues that I cannot handle. At first I thought it is because of the experience they had at this school that the first and second principals were men. They expect me to behave like a man.

Some of the women principals also felt that when they chaired staff meetings, feelings of insubordination and jealous prevailed. The researchers asked them about some of their experiences of chairing staff meetings and the following were some of the responses:

School Principal "A":

Most women have this problem of seeking to pull other women down. They don't want to see us as women succeeding, but then again, there are some men who don't feel comfortable if they have to work under a woman. It is more discouraging when female colleagues do not support another woman as I thought they are the ones who will be influential to others to respect me.

School Principal "C" reported that in staff meetings teachers would ask many questions that show doubts about her capabilities as a woman principal. She said:

... Sometimes opinions on ability, they are always right and women are wrong. Women are not firm enough; those are some of the things one hears. When issues are discussed in the staff meeting they tend to get angry and overly express themselves and somehow I have a problem with that because they don't challenge males like they do to us.

School Principal "C" added:

May be it is because I was promoted in the same school I was working in and I competed for this post with some of them. Now they want to prove that I was not capable from the beginning. It is really unhealthy.

This non-acceptance of women principals seems to be caused by the stereotype of different roles performed by men and women in society. Consequently this stereotype is seen as an obstacle for women in education management. In the past males have been the only visible managers and when women are now given a chance to manage they seem not to have a space to be themselves.

Another challenge that the school principals identified was teacher indiscipline. Most female principals pointed out that they were expected to understand educators' reasons for not coming to work because they are mothers too, so they know what it is like to have a family problem. In this regard, School Principal "A" had the following to say:

At times I am expected to close my eyes while learners do not have a teacher because I understand where that person comes from. Maybe as a woman because I know that a person is undergoing a divorce and then when that person does some odd things I will be expected to understand and not issue leave forms or warnings.

Despite these challenges the women principals reported that they still respected and listened to the teachers. School Principal "B" said:

I take care and understand my educators' personal problems. To a certain extent, I treat them like how a mother treats her own children at home. We sit down and talk about things and then correct where we can as a family.

Most of the women principals reported that sometimes they adopted half democratic and half autocratic management approaches whereby they allowed staff members to share ideas and be part of the decision making processes while the principal firmly guided the proceedings to achieve the aims and objectives as planned.

Another of what emerged as an asset to the principals was the strategy of making sure they knew their facts so that they would speak from a knowledgeable standpoint. For School Principal "D", studying further made her to be ahead of her staff members. They would not find it easy to unduly challenge her decisions. She explained:

I know the curriculum and policies. When I speak, I speak from a knowledgeable position and I think that is the greatest strength one can have as a manager. I consult if I do not know.

Another strategy the principals reported was one of being exemplary. In this connection, School Principal "C" said:

You need to correct things at school whether it is against your beliefs or personality. But if you want to correct things you need to know how to do that. Be exemplary, so that educators will know that you mean business with teaching and learning.

The responses above indicate that women principals found themselves having to adopt not one, not two but a cocktail of strategies in order to survive as managers. In all cases however, they did not adopt “growing of muscles”.

Lack of Female Role Models: A Case for Feminine Values in School Management

Given the historical background of inequality against women in South Africa which resulted in most of them not being able to be in positions of decision making, the women principals in the study reported that they experienced a shortage of female role models as there were few such principals. They all felt that it was important for them to learn from other women. However, none of them had a female role model or mentor. Studies (such as Mathipha and Tsoka 2000; Mutekwe et al. 2012) also regard the presence of female role models as crucial to the inspiration of both women in management and those aspiring to take that route. The absence of such role models left women with no choice but to have men to look up to. But there were problems related to being mentored by men. Here is what School Principal “B” said she experienced:

I had a problem with a male mentor. He was behaving badly. Each time I asked for his assistance he would want me to pay back by either giving him a lift during principals’ meetings or collect his school circulars now and again. If I didn’t he would not help me. I decided to stop asking for his help as he ended up making negative comments that destroyed our relationship.

But School Principal “F” was of the view that she had to contend with seeking mentorship from male principals because they were the ones who were around her. She said:

From the experience of male principals I network with in the area, I learn from them because they have been in the job for a long time so they know most of the things that are happening in schools. There are times when I feel I need to speak to other principals about certain issues.

Thus the women participants in this study seemed to respond differently to the issue of

mentorship by male principals. Although most experienced male principals are likely to offer some useful mentorship to novice female principals, the absence of female mentors to offer alternative perspectives remains a problem (Mutekwe et al. 2012).

The coping strategy that women principals reported, that of ensuring the understanding of complex matters in managing the school was drawn on experience and continuous learning. Women principals in the study claimed that the feminine quality of intuition and emotion assisted them in being more understanding and successful as school principals.

I think the motherly instinct of being more accommodating; you suck the situation and read into whatever. I think as females we have certain instinct that tells us, the kind of spirit and nature that one has helps us. We become little bit calm in addressing the situation (School Principal “G”).

The data suggests that women principals focus on participatory and collaborative management approaches. They value practices of care and emotional connection with staff members while remaining vigilant of the aims of the organisation. They are likely to work in a co-operative way and use power and authority to empower colleagues (Chikoko and Khanare 2012).

CONCLUSION

The study found that the dynamics of institutional practices and gendered social relationships in schools adversely affected the effectiveness of the female principals. Given the dominant discourses of gender (femininities and masculinities) in their schools the women principals felt that the strategies they employed to manage their schools either affirmed or devalued their social identities as women. For instance, employing more of the authoritarian management strategies necessitated some form of disassociation from the essence of who they are, while they generally felt affirmed by the use of collegial management or coping strategies. The South African Constitution set out to establish a democratic and open society while recognising the injustice on those who suffered in the struggle against the autocratic apartheid government. Accordingly the characteristics of empowerment and honesty affirmed the women principals’ iden-

tities since culturally women are mother figures in the community associated with raising children and teaching them good values.

Collaborative management, care, emotional connection, and vigilance towards meeting organisational goals are some of the outstanding approaches that the female school principals relied upon. As the researchers commenced this study, they proposed that women school managers might have to 'grow muscles' in order to successfully perform their duties as leaders. What seems to emerge is that through collaboration, care of their 'followers', and emotional connection with the same, the school principals did not have to 'grow muscles' as the mainstay of their survival as managers. Through these approaches, the women were firmly anchored in the feminine framework, a way of doing things that resonated with their own identities. In this connection these women can therefore be said to have refused to be what they were not. They refused to succumb to pressures pushing them into the masculine framework. What can be learnt here is that it is possible for women school managers to remain who they naturally are (not that all women are feminine in orientation) and still succeed in their role as leaders. But the women's vigilance seemed to have had some dose of authoritarianism as one of its ingredients. This is evidenced by some of the women's adoption of half authoritarian and half democratic approaches. The main driver behind the women's authoritarian stance seemed to be the influence of patriarchy which came across strongly in some teachers and community members as a conviction that men were the leaders and women were to remain mothers. It seems therefore that the influence of patriarchy cannot be underestimated. This is a practice that has prevailed in many societies of the world for centuries and continues to haunt if not paralyse those communities. Women managers are not likely to succeed by sweeping this practice under the carpet. The researchers think that vigilance, involving pushing for collaborative management and caring for those who may be thinking differently would be the way forward. In addition to affirming female principals' identities as women by virtue of its close association with the core values of femininities this approach also has the potential to assist the women principals to empower the staff. Within such collegial and empowering context, decisions are taken as a collective effort. This

would likely induce commitment on the part of the staff members to implement new ideas (and policies) as they take ownership of the process and the decisions undertaken.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that women school principals desist from seeking to 'grow muscles'. Instead they should seek to grow in who they really are: collaborative, caring, emotionally connected and vigilant towards meeting organisational goals. Further, there seems to be a need for greater capacity building workshops, seminars, forums, formal mentoring programmes and trainings especially for the newly appointed women principals. Training of newly appointed women managers, by experienced and successful women who could provide deeper understandings of the expectations and challenges in the world of school management, is crucial for the success of women managers in South Africa.

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