Leadership Styles of Female Educational Leaders: In Search of a Gender Inclusive Leadership Theory

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ABSTRACT This exploratory case study investigated the perceived leadership styles of Zimbabwean women in primary school governance within the context of extant literature. The specific objective was to establish the female school heads' perceptions of themselves, and their teachers. Another objective was to compare interview data with what literature says about the leadership styles of female educational leaders. Literature was also compared with data from a psychometric instrument. Literature reveals gender differences and similarities in leadership but is not emphatic in describing women's distinct styles. An explicit theory of leadership particularly of females is a far cry. The key question was whether or not these females possessed distinct styles. This study adopted a case study research design. A convenient sample of nine female heads, and forty-five teachers participated. The LBDQ and interview guides were used to collect the data from subordinate teachers and female school heads respectively. The LBDQ results indicated that most female heads displayed task-oriented behaviours. Interviews revealed a relations orientation. The findings further complicate the search for an explicit feminine leadership theory. Implications for educational practice are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Social roles and expectations within our African context demand that men and women perform roles in conformity to their gender (Makura 2011; http://edu.learnsoc.org). This practice has resulted in men and women being acculturated within that context. Today, the leadership and management styles displayed by women and men in organisational settings are an issue that lack consensus (Hall 1996; van Engen and Willemsen 2000; White et al. 2010). Management literature has attempted to show that the controversy in leadership and gender is whether or not men and women lead differently, given that leadership is perceived as a male terrain (Bem 1993; Elms 2006; Ismail and Rasdi 2008; Manwa 2002; White et al. 2010). Hence, the need to investigate the specific leadership styles of females using a multiplicity of research instruments.

Background

It is the intention of this paper to reveal data on a comparison of current practices of women in leadership positions with what literature says of the same using Zimbabwe as a case study. An extensive literature search, by this researcher revealed that studies that address leadership and management styles of women predominantly emanate from Europe, Australia and the Americas (Makura 2011). There was little research on Zimbabwe's female school heads particularly the primary school sector with respect to their leadership and management styles (Chabaya 2006; Makura 2011; Manwa 2002). Because of this apparent dearth of literature, the study sought to investigate on some of Zimbabwe's female school heads and the styles they exhibit in their work places. Notable studies on leadership issues in Zimbabwe using one of the instruments suggested in this study were conducted by Manwa (2002) and Wilson et al. (1990).

Secondly, for a period spanning two decades, this researcher officially visited tens of primary schools and has noted the rarity of females in leadership and management positions. The reasons for the rarity of female school heads in school leadership in Masvingo have been attributed to colonialism, gender stereotype notions/discrimination and women's low self esteem (Chabaya 2006; Dzoro 1997; Makura 2007, 1999). It is for these reasons that the researcher was intrinsically prompted to investigate the leadership and management styles of those few heads in an attempt to explain women capabilities. According to the

feminist theory, women are viewed as equal partners in any organisation and should be accorded opportunity "to tell their story". Girls and women, particularly in Zimbabwe, are perceived as victims of cultural sex stereotyping in homes, schools and formal organisations due to socialisation (Dorsey1989;Mapfumo et al. 2007).

In this context, liberal feminism uses such sex-role stereotyping notions in explaining women's predicament and comparative disadvantage especially in formal organisations. The transference of societal role expectations into formal organisations (Manwa 2002) is also responsible for the continued under representation and (mis)perceptions of females by society. Kenway (1992:6) has aptly demonstrated this scenario by stating that "girls are held to be the docile victims and appropriators of sexist and gendered attitudes arising from sexual stereotypes". Homes and schools, in particular, reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypic notions among girls (mother and nurturer syndrome). School curricula and practices engender similar notions (Bush 2003; Chabaya 2006; Dorsey 1989; Makura 2011). School literature for instance, is replete with graphic representations of the girl child in subordinate positions (Makura 2008; Marira 1991; Oyedeji 1996). Certain school subjects are identified with either the male or feminine gender. Sciences, engineering and technology are associated with males (Kenway 1992; White et al. 2010) while languages are perceived as a women's domain. In school administration, men appear to dominate leadership positions more than the women folk (Coleman 1996; Elms 2006; Ismail and Rasdi 2008; Makura 1999; White et al. 2010).

Given such a background, girls and women are portrayed as having a low self- esteem hence unable to tackle tasks demanding higher intellectual abilities thus reducing "women's ability to make informed choices" (Mapfumo et al. 2007). Since leadership and management have always been viewed as a male domain, it's imperative to establish whether this assumption still holds water. Women actually have the "capacity for aggression, ambition, strength and rationality" (Kenway 1992: 168), traits synonymous with the male gender. On this basis, liberal feminism seeks to alter those aspects of the school curriculum and culture which socialise girls in sex-typed ways by building their self esteem and teaching them assertiveness through counseling (Kenway 1992). It advocates for intervention measures as regards female-male parity.

Leadership and Management styles

Educational leadership is viewed as a process by which someone as a head of an organisation influences subordinate staff towards the accomplishment of educational goals at an educational institution (Makura 2008). This task requires men and women endowed with skills and attributes in educational leadership and management. Many authors have written on leadership and management in formal organisations in general (Bush 2003; Culp and Smith 2005; Fiedler 1967; Reddin 1970; Robbins, 1993; White et al. 2010; Yukl 1989). Others have researched on specific variables on leadership and management in educational organisations (Ismail and Rasdi 2008; Leithwood and Montgomery 1982; Shum and Cheng 1997; Starratt 2004; Van Deventer and Kruger 2005;Yukl 1989). A debate in academic circles is whether men and women lead differently or exhibit similar or different leadership and managerial styles. Some literature claims that that there is a similarity (Kariuki 2004; Park 1997; Vinnicombe 1999) whereas some refute that assertion (Bass 1985; Eagly and Johnson 1990; Kakabadse 1999). Starratt (2004) has for instance focused on the democratic leadership style. This style emphasizes team work, involvement and consensus.

Research seems to agree that the traits and styles possessed and exhibited by a leader are thus gender rooted (Collard 2001; Murphy Eckstat and Parker 1994;White et al. 2010) and that a link between leadership and culture and gender exists (Littrell and Nkomo 2003). The link has been empirically supported (Park 1996). Men, for instance, are said to display direct, task-oriented, analytical and autocratic styles (Jago and Vroom 1982; Korac Korac and Myers 1998; Murphy et al. 1994; Park, 1996) while females display facilitative styles (Fennel 1999; Brunner 1998). Psychometric measures such as the Bem sex role inventory (BSRI) and the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ), among others, have been used successfully to determine leadership behaviours and styles. A study by Turner (1995) revealed that women and old persons were perceived as more communal and less agentic in personality (compared to young adults and males) as measured on the BSRI. In formal organisations, female managers are expected to lead in a more interpersonal and less task-based and more democratic (and less authoritarian) decision making ways than men, by managing through a

consultative and mentoring approach (Martin 2004; Watson and Newby 2005).

Silver (1983) reported that employees discern a pattern in the supervisor's behaviour that tells them what to expect in future interactions. Reviewing literature extensively she reported that the 1956 Ohio University studies provided stakeholders an opportunity to scrutinise leader behaviour patterns in a systematic manner. Two distinct categories of action were described as being akin to attending to the system and the individual (system oriented or person oriented. Silver (1983:126) designated the task dimension-system orientation and the relationship dimension, person orientation. Thus, the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) has been developed to establish and describe leadership behaviours like consideration and initiation structure. Consideration is leadership behaviour focusing on encouraging and supporting subordinates and their relationships (Becker et al. 2002). Initiating structure is a leadership behaviour focusing on task accomplishment with leader supplying necessary direction, coordination and control of task (Becker et al. 2002). Halpin (1957) used the terms initiating structure and consideration. Fiedler (1967) referred to these behaviours as task-oriented and relationship-oriented dimensions.

Bem (1978, 1981) and Korabik (1981) and on the other hand demonstrated that sex role orientation (gender) was a better predictor of leadership behavior than biological sex. Sex role orientation is the degree of femininity, masculinity and androgyny of the leader as measured on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem 1978). In the first of a two-pronged study, male and female students completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) and a modified version of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). Results revealed that the initiating structure leadership style was significantly correlated with the masculine dimension, while a consideration style of leadership was significantly correlated with femininity. The androgynous dimension was highly correlated with both styles. In the second study, the students BSRI instrument scores were used to classify respondents as masculine males, feminine females and androgynous males and females. Follow up verbal group discussions by respondents, revealed that masculine males behaved more stereotypically than other groups. The study recommended that an androgynous orientation was the best leadership style. This has since been confirmed by Park (1997).

In summary, despite the disproportionate numbers between males and females in leadership (skewed in men's favour), literature shows that the leadership style or model a leader adopts, gender and sex are the determinants (Makura 2011). Men and women are said to differ in their actual social behaviour and in the way they are expected to behave in society. Their styles are similar but behaviours differ and are situational. Females display communal (feminine) styles whereas males display competitive (masculine) behaviours. The contingency model of leadership for instance, is often cited as one through which our perception of leader and organisational effectiveness can be enhanced. Literature on gender and leadership also show that leadership is perceived as a masculine enterprise (Chabaya 2006; Manwa 2002; Makura 2008; Silver 1983; Yukl 1989). Consequently, women in leadership positions are said to have adopted agentic styles that are in essence synonymous with the masculine gender. Aggressiveness (Kenway 1992) and independence are illustrative.

People's perceptions and practices have not changed from looking at women through male lenses. This is sharp contrast to women who are said to be emotional and nurturing but display a relationship orientation. Whatever leadership and management style adopted by a school head has implications on variables as staff morale and consequently organisational effectiveness. Hence, a leader could manipulate the school environment, relationship and styles in order to come out with the best leadership style (Hoy and Miskel 2005). So, schools are run by individuals that possess qualities that must transform inputs but at the same time ensuring bureaucratic sustenance.

Statement of the Problem

Apart from being fewer in headship positions, female leaders are said to display leadership and management styles that are different from males (Eagly and Johnson 1990; Kakabadse 1999). Others believe that there is a similarity (Park 1997; Vinnicombe 1999). Furthermore, people's perceptions and practices have not changed from looking at women, through male lenses (Bush 2003; Kariuki 2004; Manwa 2002; Schmidt 1992). This assumption is engendered, in the main, by policy makers and has, therefore, tended to impede the vertical mobility of women in the Zimbabwean education system. So, the inconclusive debate in academic circles is whether men and women lead

differently or exhibit similar or different leadership and managerial styles. Hence the need to specifically investigate, the leadership and management styles exhibited, in this case, by female primary school heads in Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

(a) What does literature say about the leadership and management styles of males and females? Is there a gender difference in the leadership and management styles exhibited by female and male leaders/heads and why?
(b) What leadership styles are exhibited by female Zimbabwe primary school heads as measured on the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) Scale?
(c) How do female primary school heads perceive themselves as educational leaders and managers in Zimbabwe?
(d) What general perceptions are held by Zimbabwean teachers about female primary school heads in leadership and management positions in schools?

Justification of the Study

There are very few published studies on gender and school leadership, particularly for the primary school sector, not only in Zimbabwe, but in Africa as a whole (Makura 2011). It was imperative, therefore, that concerted efforts were invested into research that sought to reveal the nature, attributes and attitudes of personnel therein from an African perspective. The rarity of women in the upper echelons of school administration reflects an underutilisation of a potentially capable resource (Makura 2008). Since the present study sought to reveal the leadership and management styles of an underutilised human resource, it was thus appropriate that the nature of this resource be fully investigated and its nature revealed. Given that this study mainly utilised the qualitative approach, it was hoped that a true picture of women, gender and organisational effectiveness would emerge from the respondents' narrations.

METHODOLOGY

This study generally adopted a case study research design. The case study research method is fundamentally grounded in the interpretive research paradigm. Cohen and Manion (1994) note that the case study researcher studies by observing the characteristics of an individual unit in order to deeply probe and analyse the multifarious phenomena constituting it, with view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which it belongs.

Instruments

The key data collecting instruments that were used were the interview schedule and a psychometric instrument, the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). This 5-point ‡Likert scale questionnaire (with the key: 1=always; 2=often; 3=occasionally; 4=seldom and 5=never) also had an appendage that contained free response questions that required teachers to elaborate on the(ir) perceived strengths and weaknesses of their respective school heads. The LBDQ sought to reveal the magnitude (score) of the Initiating Structure and Consideration dimensions. The bigger score (of the two) reflected the dominant leadership orientation and an inclination by the incumbent towards it. Hence, the main section (rating) of the questionnaire sought to establish the female leadership style/behavior/orientation as perceived by the subordinate teachers (see Table 1 results).

Participants

Forty- five subordinate teachers (5 teachers per school) completed both sections of the LBDQ. The author inferred that each school had an average of five degreed qualified teachers. These were purposively selected in consultation with the respective school heads. Nine female primary school heads were randomly selected interviewed. Interview and questionnaire data were – collected concurrently at each school. Interview data were qualitatively analysed while the questionnaire data was quantitatively analysed. Themes emerging from the interviews were coded and appropriately analysed.

Ethical Issues

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture. Armed with documentary permission, the researcher visited each school, at the rate of two schools per day. Ethical protocols were adhered to. In this vein, all the participants consented to being interviewed as well as respo-

nding to the questionnaire. This was after this researcher explained the purpose of the study to them. All participants signed a researcher designed consent form to protect their identities and the information they supplied against any potential abuse. Such steps are standard research procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceived Leadership Styles of Female Heads as Measured on the LBDQ

Data from the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire was quantitatively analysed and summarised and is depicted in Table. These data were collected from 45 subordinate teachers.

Table 1: Mean scores for LBDQ consideration and initiating structure for female heads

Head (N=9)	Consi- deration (C) Index	Initia- ting Struc- ture (I.S) Index	Orien- tation	Remark
FPSH 1	44.8	46.0	Task	C<I.S
FPSH 2	34.0	43.4	Task	C<I.S
FPSH 3	46.6	45.6	Consideration	C<I.S
FPSH 4	46.4	51.2	Task	C>I.S
FPSH 5	41.0	44.2	Task	C<I.S
FPSH 6	41.2	41.6	Task	C<I.S
FPSH 7	45.8	49.6	Task	C<I.S
FPSH 8	47.2	49.4	Task	C<I.S
FPSH 9	40.6	40.4	Consideration	C>I.S
Mean (N=9)	43.1	45.7	Task orientation	C<I.S
Stnd. Dev.	4.29	3.74		

Data from Table 1 revealed that seven of the female primary school heads were perceived by teachers as displaying task-oriented behaviours as measured on the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire. The Initiating structure score of each of the seven female school heads was higher than the Consideration score (C<I.S). This implies that the majority of Zimbabwean female primary school heads in Masvingo district were perceived as demonstrating task oriented behaviours. This finding is consistent with Kariuki's (2004) observation that Kenyan women principals for instance, exhibited authoritarianism in view of their high-structure-low-consideration leadership style. Kariuki (2004) postulated that such women in leadership risk being perceived as unfeminine and earn labels such as 'social males', 'queen bees', and 'isolates'. White et al. (2010) also described

them as 'gate keepers' whose value systems and networks are based on masculinity. The LBDQ data lend credence to the argument that peoples' perceptions have not changed from looking at women through male lenses (Bush 2003; Kariuki 2004; Manwa 2002; Schmidt 1992). Only two of the heads were placed in the consideration category. Four female primary school heads had both means that were above the group means. Furthermore, five of the nine heads had an Initiating structure score below the group average. These two statistical observations firmly placed the female heads in the task-orientation category. So, as a group, the female primary school heads in Masvingo education district displayed task oriented styles.

Themes Emerging from the Interviews: How Female School Heads Themselves

The process of analysing qualitative data requires analytical craftsmanship and the ability to capture understanding of the data in writing (Henning et al. 2005). This process is done within the confines of the methodological design and other procedures. Themes emerging from the interviews were coded and appropriately analysed. Henning et al. (2005) have postulated that after data transcriptions, qualitative data needs to be 'worked' by being analysed through open coding in order to get a global impression of the content. Open coding is the 'naming and categorizing phenomena through close examination of the data' (Henning et al. 2005: 131). Codes are thereafter discerned to derive coherent meaning form the transcriptions. The codes are translated into categories to enable the researcher to make or create themes. After carefully following this procedure (Henning et al. 2005), this researcher came up with several themes from the interviews with Masvingo district female primary school heads. Through open coding, four key categories emerged from the interview data. Responses from the female heads indicated that they were most likely to perceive themselves thematically as:
(a) Consultative/Collaborative
(b) Instructional leaders
(c) Public relations officers
(d) Compassionate

All the female primary school heads categorically stated that that they perceived themselves as possessing collaborative leadership styles. They consulted (Ismail and Watson 2008;

Martin 2004; Watson and Newby 2005) their staff before taking key decisions. For instance, the following female primary school heads (FPSH) gave these narrations:

FPSH 1: *I believe in collective decision-making …the partnership type of style…… There are different committees led by teachers.*

FPSH 2: *We have discussions. We…we also give them chance to air their views…General discussions and my door is free*

The narrations above illustrate the influence of gender and sex on leadership. Female primary school head 1 (FPSH1) above for instance, firmly supports collective decision-making and subsequently problem-solving. Such an approach defies the hiccups associated with bureaucracy. The female primary school heads thus are, not desirous of the traditional and ineffective style of 'mono decision-making' since they have shown a preference for the collaborative style of leadership. However, White et al. (2010) established that the skills required to be an effective are not necessarily gendered. However, their study concluded that women brought into an organization, creativity, communication and interpersonal skills, authenticity, consistency and focus (p. 657).

Secondly, all the female primary school heads perceived themselves as conscientious and effective instructional leaders among other dimensions, by virtue of focusing on teacher instructional tasks. This question was posed to the female school heads: "*Describe how you spend a typical day at your school?*" All the female school heads interviewed cited (among others) issues related to children learning or teaching as aspects that they were generally preoccupied with. Their daily routines and desires were also most likely to be epitomised within the context of instructional related activities. The following is a narration of respondent FPSH 2.

..we have morning work for the children, I encourage children to get into the classes so that they occupy themselves with morning work.…then I go into some lesson observations and I have a timetable for lesson observations and book inspection

Consequently, the school produced the best district and provincial grade 7 results for 2006. She confirmed this in the following excerpt:

"Oh! The school has done quite well in terms of the grade 7 results. We were number 1 in the district which has about 125 schools and also we, we, we were number 1 in the province which has over 700 schools."

The head expressed her desire to maintain this standard. Moreover, it was claimed by another head that of the five Masvingo city council-run schools, four were run by females and their academic performance was the best. The head, FPSH 1, confirmed

Hmmm…I think they have proved now that women leaders can do it-if not better than the male leaders. Yes. … schools that… …under the responsible authority(Council)… five schools here and we only have a male leader, then, out of five and when it comes to performance, those schools, those 5 schools are always at the top.

Thirdly, an important trait which evidently came out of the interviewees was that the female primary school heads had a good working relationship (Becker et al. 2002) with their respective communities, the staff and superordinates. They reported, particularly, of a symbiotic relationship where they 'related well' with the communities and the communities in turn were 'supportive' of school based activities. Six female school heads (67 %) reported that the community was very supportive of them and the school's activities. Lastly, the interviewed female heads said that they were concerned with the welfare of pupils and subordinate staff. They described themselves as compassionate particularly in handling child abuse and disciplinary issues. In substantiating these sentiments, the following are some selected narrations of the female heads

FPSH1: *I want to find out the background of the child and if I hear that the child is an orphan, no parents. There!....we seem to have feelings for the kids.*

FPSH2: *I'm quite fair and I, I, I feel for other people.*

FPSH5: *We have pupils who are ill…our community is a poor one….the parents have problems looking after their children.*

… as a mother because some teachers bring problems which are…you will be very sympathetic with them

Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) have pointed that female leadership has adopted an "interpersonally-oriented style, defined as a concern with maintaining individual relationships by tending to others' morale and welfare". Marianne Coleman cited in Kydd et al. (2003) echoed these sentiments arguing that women favoured the

people oriented style alongside the collaborative or consultative style. Ismail and Rasdi (2008) observed that women leadership in academia requires initiative, strategy stamina and determination, attributes that are synonymous with a collaborative style.

Teachers' Perceptions

The teachers' responses, on the other hand, revealed that the female primary school heads were perceived predominantly in terms of their leadership styles and behaviours. The content of the responses were analysed and the following are the key descriptors and themes that emerged. Table 2 summarises the teachers' responses.

Table 2: Teacher perceived strengths of female primary school heads

No.	Descriptor	N=45	%
1	Cooperation (consults; liaises; teamwork; united)	13	28.9
2	Transparency in leadership- open; friendly; equality	9	20.0
3	School climate (conducive; equal opportunities)	8	17.8
4	Work ethic (Hardworking; emphasized; goal oriented)	8	17.8
5	Understanding (social/academic needs; receptive; encourages)	7	15.6
6	Academic (Supervises; teaches; high standards; quality work)	6	13.3
7	Communicates	3	6.7
8	Discipline (Fostered)	3	6.7
9	No response	2	4.4

The data summarised in Table 2 shows that the majority (13) of teachers (28.9 %) perceived the female primary school heads as displaying or possessing cooperative leadership styles and behaviours. Key descriptors from the respondents included 'consults'; 'liaises with'; 'team work' and others. The heads also liaised with subordinate staff in the decision making process. It is in this context that Cloete (2007) observed that cooperation was instrumental in the achievement of an agreed goal by a group of people under the leadership of a single leader (supervisor). The descriptors in the above Table serve to confirm White et al. (2010), Ismail and Rasdi (2008) and Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt's (2001) proposition that leadership is gendered and is enacted in a gendered social context. Women leaders were most likely to be perceived and described in feminine terms like cooperation, facilitative, transparency, and encouraging in the running of their schools. Table 2 is a clarion testimony to this assertion.

CONCLUSION

It emerged from this study that the female primary school heads in the Masvingo education district were perceived by teachers as displaying task-oriented behaviours as measured on the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire. The majority of the female primary school heads in this study were perceived as demonstrating task oriented behaviours. The perceptions of the female sample through their personal narrations yielded that the Masvingo female school heads possessed the following strands of leadership: collaborative, instructional leaders, public relations officers and compassionate. These mixed results complicate the search for the 'real' feminine leadership attributes. Hence, the search for a female leadership style theory is as elusive as ever.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study, it is recommended that more research be conducted using various research instruments, particularly psychometric ones. These may offer insights into the leadership styles of females as well as males. Secondly, women should continue to be appointed to leadership positions since they possess appropriate leadership styles according to literature. It may, however, be necessary to conduct workshops and seminars to sensitise them on the various leadership (styles) options on the basis of scientific evidence.

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