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Mentoring and Principal Preparation: Kwazulu-Natal Women Speak

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ABSTRACT Mentoring is increasingly seen as an effective way of helping people develop in their professional careers. The new national initiative, the Advance Certificate in Education (ACE) (School Leadership) introduced in South Africa aims to support, nurture and empower educational leaders to lead and manage learning environments effectively. ACE further provides the principals with the opportunity to lead and manage schools effectively in a time of great changes, challenges and opportunities. South African Schools have been organized in a hierarchical manner that generally place more men in educational leadership roles. Efforts to redress some of the inequalities and imbalances in educational leadership positions are in place, more women are entering leadership roles that have been preserved and occupied by men. Effective preparation and development of these new leaders is important and makes a difference. The purpose of this paper is to explore experiences of women primary school principals in

relation to mentoring. The research design is qualitative. Women principals' views, experiences, hopes and fears are described through in-depths interviews. The study is located within KwaZulu Natal Province in South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to locate the initial principal who then identified the next participant for inclusion. Hence, snowball sampling technique is the key sampling technique that is used to locate participants. Data analysis is an on-going process, of identifying themes. The paper will contribute not only, to our understanding of the importance of mentoring support systems in education, but provides new ways of thinking about mentoring in schools. In addition to specific training, principals are in a position to live up to their potential as school managers when the school environment supports and nurture their efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Brief background on mentoring and its importance within the South African context

Mentoring, seen as the establishment of personal relationship for the purpose of professional and instructional guidance, has its origin in the Greek literature, (Strong 2009), in which the use of the term mentor was generally referred to a trusted friend, counselor or teacher. In South Africa, Msila and Mtshali (2013) acknowledged that (ACE-SML) initiated by the Department of Education in 2007 focused on improving skills of educational leaders within South African schools. Mentoring means peer-support which is provided by experienced people for their less experienced colleagues, (Daresh 1994). It is the kind of support needed by women entering into leadership positions in schools. In South Africa the women faced dual challenges in attaining top management positions as apartheid regime emphasized racial and gender segregation, (Muathur-Helm, 2005). This was the situation in other developing countries including Zimbabwe before its independence. African societies were immensely patriarchal with the cultural and social structure quite rigid as echoed by one author, "Leadership position in this sense, 'belong: to male members of the society and woman should refrain from attempting to attain this kind of position" (Oplatka, 2006:612). The cultural and the social assumption is that women are not strong enough to hold managerial positions. One wonders whether this kind of position is supposed to be viewed from a physical energy approach to power in order to lead effectively. However, women are currently entering into leadership roles that traditionally have been occupied by men.

Major obstacles to women's access to leadership positions leave them in a more challenging situation when exercising their leadership. As newly appointed principals, women school leaders require support in order for them to be effective performers in their day to day duties. Mentoring provides an effective transition into the areas of uncertainty such as principal-ship and headship particularly for women because of their historical background in society. Strong, (2009) suggests that mentoring provides the foundation for a lifelong learning process of professional growth. Hence, the paper focuses on women school principals' experiences of mentoring, and other forms of support in KwaZulu-Natal. Mentoring is just one aspect in the process of induction, systems of support during transition period of employees at their new workplace or as promoted members within the same organisation. It is an art of enabling without guiding, exploring without dictating and getting the aspiring principal to see things from a positive perspective (Pocklington and Weindling, 1996). Attention should be more on relationship building so that the learning develops in a more natural way. Awaya, McEwan, Heyler, Linsky, Lum and Wakukawa (2003:51) view 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 that school. 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.

Mentoring as a strategy for creating opportunities for more people to be leaders

It is easy to pose this question: why should there be more leaders in one organization? Educational leaders have many different qualities, but would want to achieve the same goal of improving learning outcomes. This can only be possible if the senior management team (SMT) provides leadership with conditions that enable high quality teaching and learning. Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi (2011:31) observed that "high quality leadership makes significant difference to school improvement and learning outcomes". This is why for instance in South Africa, the programme Advanced Certificate in Education: School leadership was launched by the Department of Education for both beginning and aspiring principals. Although many teachers do

not view themselves as leaders, their actions as facilitator of students' learning, providing guidance and support for learners, is in itself leadership. If these teachers are not given opportunity to exercise their leadership potentials, learners outcome will be reduced. Improvement of learning and teaching is a result of the leaders' actions, influence, and at times their ability to continuously coach. Cadwell, (2003:26) indicates that "Educational leadership" is "the capacity to nurture a learning community". It is not about the position one holds, but instead, the actions taken to improve opportunities for learning. It is about building capacity for others to lead. Providing leadership development programs and support systems such as mentoring equips the new principal, who is part of the SMT. 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. Robertson (2009) acknowledged the need for improving learning opportunities and to develop educational leadership capacity through coaching and mentoring. 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. 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. 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 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), a coach is 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 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 conducive atmosphere, and show 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 the mentor's role. Mentoring includes being

supportive of any ideas that the mentee might have, particularly pertaining to improving the work. Stone (2007) believes that, acknowledging the strength in the mentee's ideas is important, and advises that it is equally vital to develop a strategy of helping the individual to see the weaknesses if any, and move forward. Both the coach and the mentee work in reciprocity and with autonomy. In South Africa, mentoring is seen as a powerful tool for improving the leadership skills and affords newly appointed principals opportunities for peer learning, coaching and networking (Walker and Dimmock 2006; Msila 2011).

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. Snow-ball sampling technique is an approach for locating "information-rich informants" (Patton 2002:237). These are participants with knowledgeable information regarding the phenomenon under study. Consent to participate in the study was sought before proceeding with the discussion. The approach used 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 ACE (school leadership) did receive mentoring through attending the programme sessions as noted by one of the participant:

‘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 (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.(principals B)

The ACE programme groomed her and provided her with management skills so much that she felt confident to stand on her own and feel she can do it. Most of the women who enrolled in the ACE (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 what -ever I was not sure of or anything that I felt needed advice. She became my mentor, but now I am networked with other women principals. We support 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 principal did not have either of the two, the informal mentorship or the ones provided through the ACE 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, 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 she had her father as a role model. She also acknowledged her previous principal to have groomed her before she was promoted to 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. (principals D)

Principal D felt that although she had support at the lower level, 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 acknowledged 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 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 neighbouring school but it was informally done (principal E)

This woman principal 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. My mentor told me that once you deviate, you have problems.

She added:

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 mentoring gives confidence to the aspiring leaders and empowers both the aspiring and the newly appointed principals.

DISCUSSION

Mentoring as a form of empowerment

Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi (2011) discussing the purpose of ACE (School leadership) programme within the South African context, acknowledged the importance of the programme. They indicating 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. From the research findings it shows that more workshops on mentoring need to

be put in place, since the purpose is to develop skills, knowledge and values needed for the purpose of leading and managing schools effectively.

In analyzing the study findings from which this paper is based, it shows that mentoring is an important support system that needs to be taken seriously if effectiveness is to be achieved from the new principals. This is reflected in principals B and D's comments. Their comments are quite different but point to the same issue of the importance of mentoring. 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. 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 her 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 that for instance Bush and Oduro (2006:362) noted in relation to formal requirement needed for principals to be trained as school managers. The women's appointments were on the basis of teaching experience and through long service within the field. Although this was perceived as providing sufficient starting point, it had many flaws. Chawla and Kelloway (2004) found that there are a lot of uncertainties in school organisation and South Africa is not an exclusion. Hence mentoring is seen as a way of introducing a person to the organisation's culture. It is 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 or in the case of South Africa, a principal. Reciprocity is also required as it provides 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 nor implemented, her experience as a new appointee to the position was not an easy one though she had been an HOD for some-time enjoying the position. When she assumed the principal-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 confident that she could deal with them accordingly. Yet principal D showed no confidence to sustain her 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 is provided by experienced principals for their less experienced colleagues (Daresh and Playko 1994). 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 that 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 through out her work. Once the principals is confident, she/he can easily collaborate with his/her community and start learning together and sharing ideas. By so doing 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 Murakami Ramalho, Garza and Merchant (2010) in their study on principals noted that successful school principal emphasized the importance of nurturing environments and involving the community in schools activities.

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 the learner environment is conducive, they also have the responsibility of making sure 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. When newly appointed principals are mentored, they develop collaborative skills which help them to bring the school community together and work as a team. Through team work, members are encouraged to participate and the end result is taking ownership of the school work thereby improving student performance. From the findings, it shows that mentoring has implications for either success or failure of women leaders.

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