

Female Principals' Experiences in the Governance of Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools in South Africa. The argument is presented that little has been documented about the experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools in South Africa. Apart from a literature review on female leadership in schools, the paper reports on a study in which empirical investigation was used to obtain information from female principals about their experiences in the governance of rural schools in South Africa. The findings indicated that female principals experience problems such as sexism, discipline and absenteeism among teachers and learners. The study further revealed that some female principals lacked school governance skills. Consequently, the study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for female principals to be given necessary training so that they can have working knowledge of school governance activities.

INTRODUCTION

There are literally hundreds of books, journal articles, and stand-alone reports on the subject of female leadership in schools (Mdluli 2002; Zwane 2003; Applebaum et al. 2013; Bartling 2013; Dahlvig 2013; Parsaloi et al. 2013; Sandberg 2013; Gosselin et al. 2014; Bosch 2015). Whereas such studies are available in South Africa and in the developed and developing countries, there are no major studies available that specifically deal with the experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools in South Africa. This paper therefore focuses on the experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools in South Africa.

In April 1994, the political power in South Africa shifted from the White minority government to one elected by all South Africans (South Africa 1996). The significant feature of the new democracy was the place it accorded the women, envisaging a society in which there would be equality between men and women (Albertyn 2003). Duma (2015) affirms that section 9 of the South African Bill of Rights declares that no unfair discrimination should take place on the grounds of gender. This section of the Bill of Rights emphasises the equality of all South Africans and paves way for gender parity in job allocation and job distribution. South Africa has a strong legal framework in respect of gender equality and women's rights. Nevertheless, on the ground of discriminatory practices, social norms and persistent stereotypes often shape

inequitable access to opportunities, resources and power for women (Bosch 2015). Public education is part of the new dispensation, but inequities from the past still remain; one of these inequities is the low percentage of women who serve as school principals (South Africa 2015). The Minister of Basic Education recently announced that men continue to dominate school principal positions despite an overwhelming number of women in the education sector as there are only 8210 female principals and 14337 male principals appointed in permanent posts in South Africa (Motshekga 2015). This is a cause for concern, particularly because women constitute the majority in the education sector. This concern is also shared by Pali Lehohla, Statistician General that while education is taken as an enabler, disappointingly women are not enabled by their education status. It is argued that the proportion of women with tertiary education who are employed is almost 10 percentage points lower than that of males with the same level of education and furthermore, women with tertiary education earn around eighty two percentages (82%) of what their male counterparts earn (South Africa 2015).

Entrenched socio-cultural stereotypes against women are dominant in public education in South Africa (Lumby and Azaola 2011; Applebaum et al. 2013). There are some people who still believe that women are incapable of leading schools, hence women's rights and leadership authority to power are grossly undermined. Bosch (2015) posits that female principals are

expected to work twice as hard as males to have their competence recognised in the workplace. In rural areas women in leadership positions are victims of these cultural stereotypes, consequently the aim of this paper was to investigate and probe the experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools in South Africa.

Objectives of the Study

There is now a considerable amount of international and comparative literature on gender equality which includes many arguments supporting it (Sandberg 2013; Collard and Reynolds 2015; Schumaker and Sommers 2015). Hobbie et al. (2011) maintain that around the globe, gender equality has made huge strides over the last few decades. This includes South Africa and its new democracy that promotes the equality of all. While South Africa has recorded great strides in the quest for women empowerment and gender equality, there is still persistent inequality between women and men (Bosch 2015). The problem is compounded by the continuing practices of patriarchy and sexism. Women and men buy into the patriarchal status quo which is entrenched in culture.

The researcher, having worked in rural schools as a principal and currently as a university senior lecturer, visiting schools to lend support to the university student teachers, perceives that female principals have difficult experiences in the governance of rural schools. Some males in senior positions act as barriers to the progression of females as they despise to see women in higher positions than they are. Dahlvig (2013) asserts that there is a possible existence of prejudice against female principals which encourages lack of support from teachers. Bosch (2015) contends that some stakeholders in rural schools have different observations and perceptions about female principals. For instance some teachers and parents feel that female principals do not possess leadership traits. The perceptions highlighted warrant an exploration of the of female principals' experiences in the governance of rural schools in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

To address the research problem, both literature study and empirical investigation based on quantitative research design were undertaken.

Literature Review

The researcher consulted literature which is relevant to the topic. This was done to provide a critical synthesis of what has already been written on the topic.

Quantitative Research Paradigm

A survey to gather questionnaire-based data in a real-life setting was used in the study. The research design included the delimitation of the field of survey, the selection of respondents, the research instruments, a pilot study, the administration of the questionnaires, and the processing of data.

Population and Sampling

The researcher used a self-administered questionnaire to gather data. A random sample of 150 rural schools managed by female principals in KwaZulu Natal Midlands Cluster's two districts, namely Sisonke and Ugu was chosen. This method was favoured for its simplicity, unbiased nature, and its closeness to fulfilling the major assumption of probability, namely that each element in the population stands an equal chance of being selected (Macmillan and Schumacher 2006; Kumar 2014). For ethical reasons, permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the relevant district offices.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used as research instrument. This quantitative methodology was chosen in the light of the purpose of the study, the kind of information that was required and the available resources. As Kumar (2014) maintains that questionnaires permit anonymity, preclude possible interviewer biases and permit a respondent sufficient time to consider answers before actually answering. Data provided by questionnaires can be more easily analysed and interpreted than the data obtained from verbal responses and lastly, questionnaires can elicit information that cannot be obtained in other methods. The researcher believed that this kind of survey would lead to some truths about experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools in South Africa and it would provide information on whether certain gener-

alisations presented in the literature were also true for this population.

Format of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 consisted of questions, which focussed on the biographic and general information. This section provided the researcher with an understanding and knowledge of the respondents. Section 2 had closed questions focusing on the experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree*. Section 3 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein respondents were asked to write down the problems they encounter in the governance of rural schools. Sections 4 consisted also of open-ended questions, wherein female principals had to suggest ways that can improve their performance in the governance of rural schools.

Administration of the Questionnaires

The researcher conducted a pilot study in three schools in Ugu and Sisonke districts. The schools were part of the general population from which the sample was drawn, but not part of the sample itself. No inherent weaknesses were discovered in the questionnaires and the data solicited confirmed the questionnaires' validity and reliability, consequently there was no need to modify the questionnaires. Since the questionnaires were self administered, the sample population responses were 150 (100%).

Data Processing

After all the questionnaires had been collected, the important task was then to reduce the mass of data obtained to a format suitable for analysis. The respondents' responses were coded and frequency distributions were generated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General and Biographical Profile of the Respondents

When the item of female principals' academic qualification was analysed, it was realised that

all the respondents had fully completed the information regarding general and biographical data.

Table 1 indicated that a high proportion of female principals (70%) in rural schools had undergraduate college qualifications and very few were university graduates. This shows that the education level of the female principals in rural schools is comparatively low. This may adversely affect school governance activities as most grounding in school management concepts and skills are accessed through university education. Success in the execution of principals' duties is determined by the extent to which they are educated (Duma 2015).

Table 1: Respondents' academic qualifications

<i>Respondents' academic qualifications</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
M +3	105	70
M+ 4	33	22
M+5 and above	12	8
Total	150	100

Table 2 indicated that a majority of the respondents (62%) have been principals for less than ten years. This means that despite the establishment of the new South African Constitution in 1996 which committed South Africa to the creation of a society based on democratic and non- sexist values, female teachers have made no significant gains in obtaining managerial positions in schools. National and international researchers have identified prejudice towards female leadership and gender stereotyping as likely explanations for the continued barriers women experience in workforce (Bosch 2015; Collard and Reynolds 2015).

Table 2: Respondents' experience as principals

<i>Experience in years</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
0 – 5	44	29
6-10	50	33
11-15	34	23
16 and above	22	15
Total	150	100

Female Principals' Experiences in the Governance of Rural Schools

In Table 3 female principals were required to indicate their experiences in the governance of

Table 3: Female principals' experiences in the governance of rural schools

<i>Items</i>		<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
The appointment of a female principal constitutes a serious challenge to male teachers	N	30	62	31	27	150
	%	20	41	21	18	100
Female principals are clustered in the patriarchal culture where decisions are taken by their male counterparts	N	28	60	62	0	150
	%	19	40	41	0	100
Female principals manage sex biased schools	N	23	68	44	15	150
	%	15	45	30	10	100
Female principals lack assertiveness	N	60	69	15	6	150
	%	40	46	10	4	100
Females have fewer chances of promotion than males with comparable education qualification and experience	N	23	68	44	15	150
	%	15	45	30	10	100

rural schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree*.

The Appointment of a Female Principal Constitutes a Serious Challenge to Male Teachers

Table 3 revealed that more than half of the respondents (61%) indicated that they agreed with the statement that the appointment of a female principal constitutes a serious challenge to male teachers. The significance of the findings is that respondents might have the feeling that male teachers are of the opinion that school governance activities entail duties that female principals can hardly cope with. Bosch (2015) observes that patriarchy in the South African education system is still prevalent. Women are perceived as empathetic and compassionate, while males are viewed as dominant and assertive. Although the Employment Equity Act passed in 1998 created the space for females to redress gender equality in education profession, nevertheless females are still deterred from ascending the promotion ladder (South Africa 1998).

Female Principals Are Clustered in the Patriarchal Culture Where Decisions Are Taken by Their Male Counterparts

As it is shown in Table 3, more than half of the respondents (59%) agreed that female principals are clustered in the patriarchal culture where decisions are taken by their male counter-

parts. This high percentage of respondents once again confirmed that many female principals are blocked by cultural barriers to perform efficiently and perfectly. Patriarchal culture tends to overlook the strength that female principals have as it oppresses females. Sandberg (2013) asserts that management in schools is perceived by both genders as fundamentally a male role. This results in schools having organisational barriers which are in favour of males.

Female Principals Manage Sex Biased Schools

Table 3 revealed that a majority of the respondents (60%) indicated that female principals manage sex biased schools. The crux of the matter is that female principals often find themselves at a disadvantage in schools as general rules are those of males. In most schools the interests of females are sub-ordinated to those of males. Female principals are sometimes denied the back-up that a male colleague would receive, in terms of advice and suggestions from colleagues. The work environment is skewed to male domination, as the staff members keep on anticipating male leadership. Bosch (2015) reiterates that women's rights and leadership authority to power are undermined and these are as a result of influence of some culturally and social related factors which perpetuate gender inequality in South African schools.

Female Principals Lack Assertiveness

Once again, Table 3 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (86%) indicated that

female principals lack assertiveness. Chiloane-Tsoka (2012) states that South Africa as a patriarchal society still embodies an understanding of masculine and feminine gender attitudes and behaviour that make women less suitable for leadership positions. This is confirmed by Bosch (2015) as she posits that the South African patriarchal society views males as analytical and assertive, while females are perceived as caring and communal. Because of these misconceptions some female teachers have a commonly held set of negative perceptions of being a principal. Reasons based on these perceptions, included principals had to be tough, the work was time-consuming and it created feelings of isolation and loneliness (Bosch 2015). The significance of these findings is that female principals lack confidence in themselves as school managers.

Females Have Fewer Chances of Promotion Than Males with Comparable Education Qualification and Experience

In conclusion, Table 3 revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated females have fewer chances of promotion than males with comparable education qualification and experience. It is argued that the proportion of women with tertiary education who are employed is lower than that of males with the same level of education and furthermore, women with tertiary education earn around eighty two percentages (82%) of what their male counterparts earn (South Africa 2015). Oplatka and Lazarouwt (2006) concur with Bosch (2015) as they posit that women have trouble being perceived as leadership material, even if they have requisite academic qualifications. When it comes to appointing leaders, their academic qualifications are largely ignored. This exclusion holds women back as they try to climb the promotion ladder.

In this study it is argued that the professional profile of the female principals is not the same as that of their male counterparts. Female principals are expected to work twice as hard as males to have their competence recognised in the workplace (Sandberg 2013; Bosch 2015). In this study it was also made known that people have different expectations about female principals. Such expectations include stereotypical roles that males and females adopt in top management. Collard and Reynolds (2015) assert that some males in senior positions act as barriers to the

progression of females. This assertion was confirmed by Schumaker and Sommers (2015) as they maintain that there is a possible existence of prejudice against female principals. In this study it was also observed that patriarchy in the South African education system is still prevalent. Women are perceived as empathetic and compassionate, while males are viewed as dominant and assertive (Lumby and Azaola 2011; Bosch 2015).

Since this paper intended to explore the experiences of female principals in the governance of rural schools in South Africa, in conclusion, respondents had to cite problems they encounter in the governance of rural schools and these problems are summed up as the following:

- ♦ They are required to imitate their male counterparts,
- ♦ They encounter challenges when dealing with male disciplinary hearings,
- ♦ Delegating duties to male educators is problematic,
- ♦ Local communities have different perceptions of female leaders,
- ♦ They find working in the patriarchal society very difficult.

CONCLUSION

The study has established that there are many challenges facing female principals in the governance of rural schools. There is no doubt that female competence in these schools has not been recognised. The study also highlighted the gender discriminatory practices which are common in most schools and in the community at large. Such practices have a restrictive effect on female principals. Due to current challenges facing women leaders, some women are even reluctant to take on leadership roles in education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ♦ Schools should seek to improve the quality of female leadership by creating awareness, understanding, and appreciation of different management styles. This can be achieved through training, self-reflection, and various feedback mechanisms.
- ♦ Explicit targets to improve gender balance and action plans must be included in the overarching gender strategy of schools

- ♦ Gender issues must be an integral part of internal and external evaluation of schools.
- ♦ Female principals with teaching duties should be provided with additional support staff.
- ♦ Clear job descriptions should be provided to female principals to perform their duties effectively.
- ♦ Stereotypes that exist against female principals should be addressed. Communities should be made aware that leadership does not depend on gender.

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