

ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' REFLECTIONS ON ASSUMING LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Joyce T. Zikhali, Juliet Perumal

University of Johannesburg (SOUTH AFRICA)

Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of female school principals in Zimbabwe who have been appointed to positions of school leadership. The aim of the study was to explore their levels of readiness to assume leadership positions. A multiple case study was adopted and views on preparation for school leadership as outlined by Rhodes, Brundrett, and Nevill [1] provided theoretical support for the study. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of twelve female school principals. The data were presented using narrative vignettes and these vignettes were analysed using critical discourse analysis. The study revealed that all the heads were appointed to leadership positions on the strength of their teaching experience as senior teachers. On appointment, only a few were psychologically ready to take up posts as school leaders. The study recommends that Zimbabwe adopts a national qualification programme for the preparation of prospective school leaders; and provide in-service training to practicing teachers before they are appointed to leadership positions.

Keywords: Leadership, work experience, career mobility experiences, female Zimbabwean school principals.

1 A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF WOMEN'S PROMOTIONAL PROSPECTS

The world over, societies have witnessed a radical change of attitudes towards professions especially those previously stereotyped along gendered lines. Fulcher & Scott [2] explain that women in different professions have broken the glass ceiling and established themselves as leaders. The metaphor of the glass ceiling refers to a situation where women have high aspirations but are prevented from fulfilling these because of invisible barriers such as societal attitudes and stereotyping (Hughes and Kroeler) [3] and (Naidoo & Perumal) [4]. Catalyst (in Hughes & Kroeler), [3] confirms the existence of glass ceilings by citing many challenges such as lack of mentors, networking, and experience that women in professions faced (Perumal) [5]. Furthermore, Carli College & Eagley [6] note that females have not only filled positions of leadership but have occupied even those positions which are highly visible.

Consistent with the world trend to appoint more women to positions of leadership countries instituted Affirmative Action Policies. For example South Africa instituted The Employment Equity 55 of 1998 to achieve equity in the workplace through affirmative action (Naidoo and Perumal) [4]. Also, in 1992 the Zimbabwean Government introduced the Affirmative Action Policy. This policy encouraged all female professionals with relevant qualifications and experience to apply for leadership posts (Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango) [7]. The policy was further supported by the 1999 Nziramasanga Commission which called for a redress on the issue of gender equity [8]. This call for change led many Zimbabwean female teachers to apply for promotion to educational leadership positions. It is under this premise that the study investigated female school principals' experiences specially their level of preparedness to take up such leadership posts.

2 PREPARATION AND TRAINING OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Rhodes et al. [1] point out that different countries use different criteria for choosing school principals. They note that countries such as England, France, Malta, Scotland and the United States of America have introduced mandatory leadership programmes for aspiring school principals. They cite The National Professional Qualification for Headship which was adopted in England in 1997 for improving the readiness of prospective school principals for effective leadership as one such preparatory programme. Rhodes et al. [1] say that such programmes embraced aspects on the core

understandings of strategic leadership, the leadership of learning, the management of human and financial resources and the management of external relations.

On the other hand, Rhodes et al [1] note that other countries depended solely on prospective heads' teaching experience and thus school principals were selected on the strength of their experience and obtained their training for school leadership on the job. Zimbabwe is one such country that does not have mandatory school leadership programmes. School principals are selected from the existing pool of experienced senior teachers (Makura) [9]. The question that emerges then is does experience alone without 'formal' training on leadership establish a solid anchor that prepared them to take up posts as school leaders and to perform all the roles expected of a leader confidently? This was the prime question for this paper. In order to answer that question, this paper explored the types of work related experience which prepared the school principals to face challenges of school leadership and then analysed the extent to which these prepared them to take up leadership as school principals.

3 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted a multiple case study design and employed in-depth interviews as a data collection method. In-depth interviews were adopted on the basis that they are highly participatory in nature [9] and also on their strength as powerful tools to collect the heads' perceptions and experiences. The study was based on theories on leadership preparation especially views by Rhodes, Brundrett & Nevill [1] and Wildy & Clarke [10].

A purposive sample of twelve females in positions of school leadership who voluntarily conceded to participating in the study were interviewed. Four participants were from a rural area while eight were from an urban area. This mixture of schools in rural and urban areas facilitated exploration into whether the participants' experiences were context specific.

This study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret the data. Responses from the interviews conducted were presented as summaries and narratives. Direct quotations were employed so as to give credibility to the themes that emerged.

4 REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCES THAT PREPARED FEMALE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN ZIMBABWE

The data which informed the understanding of how work experiences prepared female school heads for leadership were based on the demographic questions which were posed to the participants. The questions required the participants to reflect and explain how they were appointed to positions as heads of schools. All twelve participants indicated that their teaching experience was the key determinant to their being appointed to the positions. This finding contradicts that by the Institute of International Parking [11] which indicates lack of experience as a major hindrance to the professional advancement of women.

However, other factors expedited promotion to leadership and these were individual and context specific. For example, one of the school principals found herself in a situation of being in an over-staffed school. She being the last person to have been deployed at that school had to leave the school. It was then that she was tasked by the regional office to open a school in a resettlement area. Although she was a senior teacher, she had no induction into school leadership so on opening a new school she had to find her way out.

Two Teachers-in-Charge (TICs) and two deputies said they were promoted to leadership positions on the basis of both experience and their expertise in teaching. Their classes always excelled academically. One TIC said that she was appointed to the position to replace another TIC who had died in a car accident. She was unanimously appointed by the education committee to assume the post, as she was the best teacher in the Infant's Department. The other circumstances which led to female promotion were their qualifications and the encouragement from spouses. A good number of these school principals indicated that they were influenced by their husbands to accept positions as heads of schools.

One school principal alleged that she had been appointed primarily on the strength of her religious affiliation since the school was church-owned and secondly, on the basis of her qualifications as a degree holder. She believed that her husband's influence might have initiated the appointment.

All the participants had academic qualifications which ranged from Bachelors to Masters Degrees in Educational Management. This suggested that the women used education as a tool to empower themselves. Rhodes et al. [1] contend that programmes which equip teachers for leadership were essential since these capacitated them with expertise in conceptualising strategic leadership, the leadership of learning the management of human and financial resources and the management of external relations. Such knowledge is essential because school leadership has become a specialist occupation, which required special preparation necessary for dealing with the complexities of the school contexts in the twenty-first century and for a smooth transition to leadership (Zikhali & Perumal) [12].

In this study, one of the Teachers-In-Charge (TIC) who had been appointed said, *“There was no proper hand-over or take-over, I didn’t know where to start and where to end”*. Her experience confirm an observation by Makura [9] that on appointment to leadership positions, school principals in Zimbabwe adopted ad hoc survival tactics or the ‘sink and swim’ principle.

All the heads in the study commented that they had on the job training. However, the way the “on the job training” was done varied depending on individuals and circumstances. Common to all, however, was the exposure to leadership and administrative duties. Some of the participants said that their superiors at their previous schools encouraged them in different ways for example by giving them office duties so that they were socialised into leadership. Most of the heads said that when they became school deputies, their school principals were supportive and often asked them to relieve them of their duties when they were on leave. These are some of the comments which the participants made: *“During his absence, the head would ask me to look after the whole school, to go through the schemes of work and check all records. I was prepared for the job though I was not thinking I would get a post as head”*. Another one said, *“I had the feel of the job”*. Yet another said, *“The moment I was appointed to tell you the truth, I was not prepared because I was not looking forward to this. I thought I was going to take my place as deputy”*. This last disclosure was expressed by a good number of the heads who thought that although they could do the leadership duties, they had no confidence as leaders. One of them commented: *“I was not prepared. I thought I would just be a teacher and never thought I would be TIC though I had done a Bachelor of Education Administration Degree. I did not actually want to lead”*. The above excerpts imply that the participants were prepared to work but only as subordinates as the final accountability would lie with their superiors.

On the issue of on the job training, another participant said that *“when one of the administrators goes on leave, one has to take up the post so I was prepared for that”*. Two scenarios emerge regarding the extent to which work experience prepared the school principals for instructional school leadership. In the first scenario, some school principals felt that exposure to leadership roles prepared them for instructional school leadership yet others felt the exact opposite. Ponjuan, Conley & Trower [13] assert that newcomers’ adjustment includes not only learning about the tasks but gaining confidence. Perumal [14] adds that self-efficacy was related to job performance and that most females faced challenges about validation from their peers and organisations.

There was overwhelming evidence from this current study that most of the school principals received some form of training after being appointed to their posts although it was by far inadequate. For example, some said that on appointment *“we had a refresher course for two days. We were staff developed for two days ... It gave us the courage to go and face the new situation”*. Others said that they held workshops where they were trained on what to do, especially on how to supervise teachers. One of the school principals remarked, *“We had orientation. I was lucky. By that time I still remember we went to a certain school where we were trained. We were taught about leadership and financial issues, we were taught about how to lead a school, managing schools. We had many orientations”*.

As mentioned earlier, lack of leadership training prior to assumption of posts as school principals is not peculiar to Zimbabwe. Bush & Oduro [15] comment that this is the common trend throughout Africa adding that in such countries appointment is usually based on one’s successful record as a teacher. Wildy & Clarke [10] observe that in countries such as Australia, school principals are exposed to induction courses and short training sessions after appointment on the assumption that good teachers can automatically be transformed to good school leaders even without prior training as school principals.

Another way of orientation noted in this Zimbabwean study was through the use of clusters or local supervisory team. One of the heads said that she was aided greatly by this exchange programme whereby a team of local school principals would visit each other’s school to share ideas on leadership improvement skills. The head commented that currently the use of such clusters seems to be

inoperative in most parts of Masvingo. Briggs, Bush & Middlewood [16] highlight the usefulness of such structured visits to colleagues' schools on instructional leadership. They say that in England they have regionally organised groups which are facilitated by trained personnel and which focus on the immediate needs of the leaders. Wildy & Clarke [10] highlight the need for collaborative work in leadership and say that school principals cannot work single handedly when it came to school leadership considering the plethora of challenges they encounter.

The participants in this study identified a number of skills which they benefitted from their experience in different capacities as classroom practitioners, as TICs, Heads of Departments, and so forth. The principals learned to accept individuals as different and accept them as they are. They said experience gave them the courage and confidence to lead other people and to listen to other people and to develop good leadership skills. The following are some of the comments they made: *"I now feel empowered as a woman; I now have the courage to represent the group with confidence; I now know that not only men can lead; my achievements have moulded me as a leader and I feel humbled"*.

They also said that they learned to weigh risks and find ways of dealing with problems especially since they had been exposed to many challenges and activities in the work place, in the community, in the Ministry and colleges. They said their experiences gave them a fighting spirit, that of hard work so as to prove that nothing is impossible if one works hard. One of the participants said: *"I have seen a lot, I have seen the thins and thicks of the profession"* (sic). Of importance are the participants' concepts whereby they say that the challenges they encountered had groomed them and moulded them into being leaders and administrators of substance. Briggs, Bush & Middlewood [16] classifies such leadership exposure as middle management and argues that most countries, which do not train school leaders, resort to the use of such leadership roles in their preparation for school leadership.

5 CONCLUSIONS

All the participants of this study were appointed to positions of leadership on the strength of their teaching experience and expertise. However, the experiences which the female school principals narrated suggested that lack of training for them as administrators and leaders caused some challenges for them. For example, some were not psychologically ready to assume school leadership roles and responsibilities. Most were prepared to take up school leadership under the auspices of a male school head thus perpetuating the stereotype of male as natural leaders. They all maintained that their exposure to positions of authority played a big role in moulding them as leaders. All participants confirmed that they learned the ropes of the trade in action.

From the findings above, it can be concluded that seniority and teaching experience played a big role in preparing female school principals for school leadership. However, in some cases, these aspects do not seem to prepare some of the school principals adequately for school leadership and that this was attributed mainly to cultural stereotypes. It is therefore recommended that the government should institute programmes which award qualifications for headship to prepare female principals to assume the challenging posts as leaders with minimum problems. This would assist in building confidence in the leaders so that they have faith in themselves and it would also help them to avoid culture shock when they finally assume positions of leadership. There should be further research to explore gendered leadership trajectories and how these could be accommodated to enhance effective school leadership. Teachers' colleges and universities, which train teachers, should offer courses that equip students fully on leadership roles, its challenges and opportunities. Lastly, women should be encouraged to actively assist each other through networking and collaboration.

REFERENCES

- [1] Rhodes, C., M. Brundrett, and A. Nevill. "Just the Ticket? The National Professional Qualification and The Transition to Headship in the East England." *Educational Review* 61, No. 4 (2009): 449-468.
- [2] Fulcher, J. & J. Scott. [2003]. *Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Hughes, M. & C. J. Kroeler. [2005]. *Sociology: The Core*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- [4] Naidoo, B. & Perumal, J.C. 2014. Female principals leading at disadvantaged schools in Johannesburg, South Africa. IICE-2014 Proceedings. Ireland International Conference on Education. Ireland, Dublin. Shoniregun, C.A. & Akmayeva, G.A. (Eds.) pp. 62-67. ISBN. 978-1-908320-23-0.

- [5] Perumal, J.C. Identity, Diversity and Teaching for Social Justice. European University Studies, Series 11: Education. 2007. Peter Lang Publishers, Switzerland. ISBN 978-3-03910-872-5; ISSN 0531-7398; US ISBN 978-0-8204-8047-9. No. of pages: 404.
- [6] Carli, L. L., W. College, and A. H. Eagley. (2001). "Gender Hierarchy and Leadership: An Introduction." *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 629-636.
- [7] Chabaya, O., Rembe, S., & Wadesango, N. (2009). The Persistence of Gender Inequalities in Zimbabwe: Factors that Impede the Advancement of Women into Leadership Positions in Primary Schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 29, 235-251.
- [8] Commission, N. (1999). Report of the Presidential Commission of Enquiry into Education and Training in Zimbabwe. Harare: Government Printers.
- [9] Makura, H. (2009). The Challenges faced by Female Primary Primary School Principals: The Zimbabwean Experience. www.emasa.co.za/files/emasa2009/13 downloaded 10 May 2010.
- [10] Wildy, H. & Clarke, S. "Charting an Arid Landscape: The Preparation of Novice Primary Principals in Western Australia." *School Leadership and Management* 28, No. 5 (2008): 469-487.
- [11] Institute, International Parking. (2009) "An examination of Career Paths and Professional Challenges of Women in Management Positions in Major Universities and College Transportation."
- [12] Zikhali, J.T. & Perumal, J.C. (2014). Exploring emotional experiences of female Zimbabwean school heads in disadvantaged school contexts. IICE 2014 Proceedigs. Ireland International Conference on Education. Ireland, Dublin. Shoniregun, C.A. & Akamayewa, G.A. (eds.) pp. 219-224. ISBN 978 1 908320230.
- [13] Ponjuan, L., V. M. Conley & C. Trower. (2011). "Career Stage Differences In Pre-Tenure Track Faculty Perceptions of Professional and Personal Relations with Colleagues." *Journal of Higher Education* 82 (3), 319-347.
- [14] Perumal, J.C Bodies as Objects of Pedagogic Power Relations. *Gender and Education*. January 2012. Vol 24.1. pp. 57-71. ISSN: 1360-0516. Published in August 2011. Taylor & Francis.
- [15] Bush, T. & G. Oduro. (2006). "New Principals in Africa: Preparation, Induction and Practice." *Journal of Educational Research* .44 (4), 359-375.
- [16] Briggs, A. R. J., T. Bush, & D. (2006). Middlewood. "from Emmersion to Establishment. The Challenges Facing New School Principals and the Role of "New Visions" in Resolving them." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 36 (2), 257-276.