

Female Education Leaders Redressing Injustices in Disadvantaged Rural Schools

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Abstract

The expectation for schools and the education system to act as agents of change are extremely high within the demanding South African context. Female educational leaders face a double challenge. Not only are they required to deal with the effects of a post colonial and post Apartheid society, but they also face the challenge of an entrenched patriarchal society. This study investigated the role of female education leaders as instructional leaders in disadvantaged rural school communities; with particular reference to schools in the Historical Schools Restoration Project (HSRP). In light of the historical significance and geographical location of the participating schools, the aim of this study was to explore the instructional leadership styles and practices adopted by female education leaders in their attempts to promote social redress in disadvantaged school communities. This qualitative study was guided by critical feminist insights. The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The interpretation of power, the connection between transformational leadership and instructional leadership as well as the ability to redress social injustices through directed instructional leadership are the main themes that emerged from this study.

1. Introduction

In 2014, South Africa celebrated twenty years of democracy and whilst significant gains have been made in many areas of the daily-lived experience of South Africans, the proverbial hangover of Apartheid haunts the country. In a country eager for transformation and economic development, enormous pressure and demands are placed on the education system. These demands range from social transformation and integration to a firm call for high education standards and academic results. Within this context, demanding policy development and political pressure, lies a sector of schools, often forgotten. These are the schools located in disadvantaged, rural communities in South Africa. Of particular significance is that they form part of the Historical Schools Restoration Project (HSRP). The HSRP was established in 2008, and seeks to address the physical and educational needs of the schools which “contributed richly to the education of Black

South Africans prior to the negative impact of Bantu Education” [1]. Furthermore, the HSRP aims “to revitalize the rich heritage of the historical schools and transform them into sustainable and inspirational African institutions of educational and cultural excellence” [2].

2. Research context and methodology

The schools that participated in this study are part of the initial nine schools in the pilot project of the HSRP. Situated in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Province and the Eastern Cape Province, all of the schools were established by missionary organisations; these included the American Board of Missionaries and those from the Methodist, Anglican and Catholic Churches. The oldest of the schools was founded in 1846 and the youngest, founded in 1923, is ninety one years old. The system of Bantu Education (Act No. 47 of 1953) institutionalised racism in the South African school system by willfully providing a grossly inferior education system to black children. Bantu education resulted in these schools losing their independence and being taken over by the Education Department of the Apartheid Government. The governance and the funding of the schools were realigned in 1994 when the first democratic elections took place in South Africa. Of the five schools in the study, one is governed as an Independent School receiving a partial financial state subsidy while the other four fall under the respective national and provincial education authorities.

Besides the positioning of this study within the HSRP, the study presents two unique features. Firstly, and from a historical perspective, many of the leaders of South Africa’s liberation struggle are on the alumni roll of some of the schools. These include Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, (the father of former president Thabo Mbeki), Robert Sobukwe, Rev. Seth Mokitimi, Chief Albert Luthuli, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Nkosana Dlamini-Zuma. The most iconic of all is Nelson Mandela, the leader of South Africa’s struggle for political freedom, Nobel Peace Prize winner and the first democratically elected president of South Africa. The second unique feature relates to the focus of the study. This study sets out to investigate the practices of female educational leaders in rural disadvantaged communities.

This was a qualitative research study that was nested within critical feminist methodologies. Feminist research methodologies, with due acknowledgement of the gendered nature of social experience, seeks to investigate and understand the social reality and lived experience of females [3]. In order to describe and understand the instructional leadership styles of female educational leaders in disadvantaged school communities, data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations. This enabled the critique of the social and educational realities of the instructional leadership practices in the schools.

The semi structured interviews were conducted with the school principals and with female members of the School Management Team (SMT). These were intended to provide insights into the approach adopted by female educational leaders with regards to curriculum leadership, structures and implementation

The focus groups comprised members of the SMT and members of the teaching staff. Equity of representation in terms of gender and years of teaching experience was achieved and the questions were purposefully open ended.

Observations took the form of two approaches. The first was in the form of a general observation of school culture and school atmosphere, while the second was achieved by attending and observing staff meetings. The professional interaction of the principal was observed with particular focus on attitudes towards, and discussions around the curriculum and instructional leadership.

3. Theoretical framework: A critical feminist perspective

Within the educational leadership discourse, feminism challenges the concepts of patriarchal ideology and gender “socialisation” [4]. Wandia states that “feminism is the social and political struggle against all forms of patriarchal oppression”, and adds that, “it challenges the status quo by seeking equality between men and woman” [5]. Whilst acknowledging the multiplicity of feminist perspectives, critical feminist educational leadership mostly rejects a reductionist gender binary perspective [6]. Rather, critical feminist educational leadership is understood as a complex social engagement with due consideration to the principles of social justice, the “notion of emotionality as part of joint action or collective feeling”, “representational justice”, the role of power and the contextual nature of leadership practices [7 and 8]. The concepts of a ‘collective feeling’ and ‘representational justice’ manifested in the

instructional leadership practices of the participants in the study. It is these concepts that informed this study.

3.1 The difference between a feminine approach and a feminist approach to educational leadership

A distinction is drawn between a *Feminine Approach* to leadership and a *Feminist Approach* to leadership within a school context. A Feminine Approach to leadership, on the one hand, suggests that female leaders display a “high propensity to exhibit interpersonal orientated behaviours” [9]. This style of leadership is associated with an approach to decision making that is more participatory than autocratic. Contributing to the concept of a feminine approach to leadership, Feather records that feminine leadership traits include being warm, selfless, kind, nurturing and passive [10].

A Feminist Approach to leadership, on the other hand, differs in that it is not a dichotomous documentation of the ways in which females lead differently to men. It is rather a deeper, more profound paradigm, mindset and fundamental point of departure in one’s approach to educational leadership. The Feminist Approach to educational leadership presents a re-conceptualisation of educational leadership. Grogan and Shakeshaft record that educational leaders who adopt a feminist approach to leadership “pay attention to relational leadership, leadership for social justice, spiritual leadership, leadership for learning and balanced leadership” [11].

4. Discussion and findings

The existence of disadvantaged communities is a universal phenomenon as is the knowledge that poverty is no respecter of geography, race or ethnicity. In South Africa, however, the historical impact of colonisation and Apartheid has created a present day reality of accentuated poverty associated with race. Considering poverty, education and the geographical distribution of disadvantaged communities, one finds that 90% of disadvantaged schools are located in townships. These schools are typically characterised by “unkempt premises, rundown buildings, damaged and inadequate furniture, poor water management facilities, substandard toilet and sanitation facilities” [12].

Whilst research has been conducted on disadvantaged schools in urban areas, a silence exists insofar as the leadership styles of female educational leaders and their approaches to instructional leadership in disadvantaged communities in the rural areas of South Africa.

4.1 Leadership styles

The silences relating to leadership styles are borne out in the daily interactions of the participants with teachers and learners. It was found that the participants exhibited a combination of both a feminine approach to educational leadership as well as a feminist approach to educational leadership.

The feminine approach to educational leadership is illustrated through the words of the principal of Corner Hill College. She states, “...and, relationships, the building of meaningful relationships are an important part of my work as the principal. People respond far better to support and encouragement than they do to rigid structures and long sets of rules, it works for me!”.

Referring to the social justice aspect of a feminist approach to educational leadership, a member of the SMT of Spring Valley College commented that “...the work that we do in this school is more than just book work, it is an opportunity for a change and something better for the future of the learners”.

4.2 Interpretation of power

The second of these ‘silences’ relates to the interpretation of power by female education leaders in disadvantaged communities. In social organisations where different people play different roles, role power exists. It exists in order for the organisation to function. In cases where the roles are formally defined, they represent “a legitimate authority granted to people playing those roles” [13]. Furthermore, role power and resource power are closely related and Bacon argues that, “People gain power to lead and influence others not only through their roles, but also through the resources they control” [14]. In light of this, studies of leadership and indeed instructional leadership have not been exempt from power relations. Chisholm notes that when associated with gender socialisation, power relations will influence curriculum choices and the impact overall performance at school [15].

The female school leaders in this study do not align themselves with role or resource power [16]. They typically abandon hierarchical power structures and favour a distributed and collegial approach to leadership. Thus, their approach to instructional leadership is characterised by the adoption of a ‘power through’ approach and the establishment of amicable inter-personal relationships. There was little evidence of a reliance on positional or role power. These findings represent the notion of ‘relational power’ in Grogan and Shakeshaft’s interpretation of the feminist approach to leadership. Here relational power is essentially concerned with leading by being alongside another. The term, ‘leading alongside’ suggests that female educational

leaders “enact this relational leadership using decision making strategies that allow them to really hear the input from others [17]. Relational leadership is further exemplified by building strong relationships through collaboration.

4.3 Emotional intelligence and social intelligence

The data indicated that female education leaders presented a preference for a more collegial and team based approach to educational leadership. This characterises a feminine approach to educational leadership. However, the task of instructional leadership in disadvantaged school communities required additional skills. The lack of physical resources, the ever present reminder of socio-economic maladies and teachers with insufficient curriculum knowledge required that their approach to instructional leadership be supplemented with high levels of emotional intelligence (EQ) and social intelligence (SQ). EQ, the ability to manage emotions, starts with the ability to recognise and understand emotions, thus preventing “emotional hijackings” [18]. Noting a key factor of their leadership role as “creators and sustainers of hope”, participants reported their realisation of the importance of their own emotional state as an antidote for despair and despondence when leading in disadvantaged education contexts.

Whilst all school leaders are required to manage and maintain their own emotions, it is argued that female educational leaders in disadvantaged contexts are often presented with unique circumstances. The realities of the socio-economic circumstances of the schools they lead often place an additional burden on their emotional state. Reporting on research conducted on the experiences of female school leaders in Zimbabwe, Zikhali and Perumal record that the plight of children, the intensification of emotional labour, work overload and unrealistic expectations resulted in emotions of sadness, worry and concern for the principals in this study [19].

Exercising social intelligence featured as a necessary ingredient and identifying feature in the instructional leadership mix of female leaders in the study. Clawson argues that, “If EQ is the ability to manage emotions, then social quotient (SQ) has to do with recognising and managing the emotions in interpersonal relationships” [20]. SQ was most notably exhibited in the leaders dealing with her staff members on matters of curriculum implementation and change. The SQ skills required included a heightened ability to listen, display empathy, to visibly care, and so portray a further and deeper level of relational leadership.

4.4 Transformational leadership and instructional leadership

The data illustrates a notable connection between transformational leadership and instructional leadership. The study revealed the acknowledgement by female principals that instructional leadership and curriculum development is a shared enterprise. This point of departure firmly suggests a transformational leadership style as described by DuBrin in that transformational leaders are those who, “practice empowerment by involving team members in decision-making” [21], those who “enhance their interpersonal relationships” [22] and those who “enlist followers in the change process” [23]. Furthermore, it introduces the management of change as an essential ingredient in the recipe of effective school leadership.

Curriculum development and implementation is essentially a process of dealing with change. Fullan contends that “only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reform that leads to sustainable improvement in student achievement” [24]. If one accepts that curriculum development is a process of change, it follows then that instructional leadership is most successful within a leadership paradigm where education leaders are able to initiate and lead change. It is the transformational leadership paradigm that “is characterized by the ability to bring about significant change” [25]. An example of the change that female instructional leaders initiated and managed is outlined in section 4.6 below.

Whilst female education leaders embraced change in their schools, the data revealed that they were motivated by a deeper calling, one which indicated a determination to better the lives of the learners and so redress the injustices of the past. Not only did the female education leaders lead change and collaboratively manage the instructional leadership processes in their school, but they regarded their position of leadership as one with a higher *spiritual* calling. Reflecting on that which drives and sustains her, the principal of Corner Hill College recorded that “...it is from deep within. Ja, it is a very, very deep conviction. It is also part of our faith”, she adds “It’s been something that has burned within me”. This comment suggests that there exists a tangible alignment with the soul of the school, the learners and the broader community.

With reference to Grogan and Shakeshaft’s representation of what constitutes a feminist approach to leadership, spiritual leadership is regarded as an identifiable feature of this approach to leadership. Evidence of spiritual leadership was found to be present in three of the participants of this study. In support of spiritual leadership, the principal of Spring Valley College explained that “...one part

of our mission statement is that we would bring our faith into who we are in what we do in this school”. Bellingham and Meek posit that connectedness is an indicator of spiritual leadership. They contend further that “in a connected community, one would see high performing teams in which there would be lively debate and discussion of new ideas” [26]. Furthermore, a connected community is characterised by a ‘vision that taps into people’s deepest aspirations’ [27].

4.5 Instructional leadership and redressing injustices

Within the historical context of rural South African Schools and the socio-economic realities of disadvantaged school communities, social conditions, social improvement and social redress present as dominant themes. Rural communities, in particular, view education as a vehicle to an improvement in living conditions, a greater degree of financial security and indeed as the catalyst to redressing historical and current social injustices. The data indicated that female education leaders acquired an internalised grasp of the liberating power of education. This notion was articulated by the principal of Amanzi College, she states, “... *but in the main here at Amanzi College we prioritise education, it is our core business and it is our focus and the corner stone of the existence of this institution*”. The actions, attitudes of the female education leaders in the study, together with a sincere belief in the school, the staff and indeed the learners serve as a powerful force to mitigate against a sense of hopelessness and transform despair into opportunity.

Transformational leadership implies change and improvement. To transform through instructional leadership requires an internal grasp of the liberating power of education. This is often manifested through passion and determination. The energy and passion of one of the principals interviewed is clearly displayed in the opening words of her interview. She enthusiastically said, “*Thanks so much Graeme, it’s a pleasure for us to welcome you to our glorious college. Thank you very much and we want to participate in this process and inform you about our glorious college here.*” She went on to say, “*This is a school in the area, the rural area of KZN. It’s a school that has, that is known for producing quality results from its inception. We are like an oasis in the desert. If you look, the area around us is very rural and, but [Amanzi] College has been there as a background of hope to the people of this area.*”

Complimenting passion and determination, intelligence, planning and thought are essential ingredients in the instructional leadership mix. Davies and Brighthouse contend that successful school

leadership requires intelligence and passion [28]. They argue that “successful leaders themselves hold values that encompass an abiding belief in social equity – that all children and young people are entitled to the best teaching by the best teachers” [29]. Commenting on the notion that effective schools address inequalities, Mandy articulated that “... effective schools are that they address in their own small way, the inequalities. I like that! You know, I can say that apart from excellent results, whatever, you know, we are effective, it is about making that significant and long lasting difference, it is with the immediate bridge between existing kids and opportunities ...” Together with intelligence, passion and determination, this statement illustrates the direct link between instructional leadership and social redress.

The strong link between instructional leadership and social redress emerges as a significant theme in this study. This link is manifested through the philosophy of education presented by the school leader as well as the ultimate desired outcome of the learner’s school experience. The principal of *Ubuntu College* stated that, “Curriculum delivery is to prepare children to flourish at tertiary institutions in South Africa.” She added, “So our emphasis remains on building human capacity.” Following a similar theme the principal at Cornerhill College noted that “... or entrepreneurial, that is the other thing that we really emphasise. We say to we are not producing employees, we are producing employers! Ja, we are not producing followers, we are producing leaders. They don’t all rise to the level, but I think for them to think that way is a good start.” These comments suggest that effective instructional leadership can bring about social justice in that good education creates the opportunity for access to tertiary education. It is argued that competitive access to the job market and to tertiary education provides not only hope, but a genuine avenue away from poverty and directly redresses social injustices of the past.

4.6 Innovative instructional leadership

Examples of innovative instructional leadership practices were evident in three of the schools in the study. Perhaps the most notable is the ‘8 to 8’ programme at Amanzi College. In her description of the programme, the principal outlined the programme in the following way, “We’ve got the programme we call it 8 to 8. We start at 8 in the morning and finish up at 8 in the evening to ensure that we complete our syllabus in time and give learners ample time to revise and tell us about their concerns and their problem areas. So then we’ll have a very good time to revisit such areas.”

The structure of the ‘8-8’ programme represents innovation and the success which can be achieved by including the respective stake holders. Describing the programme further, the principal of Amanzi College noted, “here at [Amanzi] College, we’ve got that open kind of policy that if we acknowledge that somebody’s good in a particular area, we invite that person to come and assist learners here at school”. Members of the community contribute time and expertise to the programme and add positively to learners’ academic achievements. However, the involvement of community members in any aspect of school life in disadvantaged communities is not commonly experienced. Reporting on research conducted in disadvantaged communities in urban contexts, Naidoo and Perumal indicate that parents and stake holder involvement is extremely difficult to achieve [30].

The 8 to 8 programme was not only initiated by the principal, but it was her passion and determination that sustained the programme. The programme together with a professed focus on teaching and learning has resulted in a marked improvement in academic achievement. We contend that good academic results are regarded as a gateway to employment and possible entry into tertiary education. Both avenues serve to reduce poverty. It is argued therefore that effective instructional leadership acts as an agent of change in the struggle to redressing social injustices. In this way school leaders have at their disposal the power of knowledge and skills which can be employed as tools to achieve social redress.

5. Conclusion

A clear understanding of the broader political and socio-economic context of schools in disadvantaged school communities created conditions fertile for enacting an alternative paradigm of educational leadership. The participants displayed the characteristics of both a feminine approach as well as a feminist approach to leadership. The first of the feminine characteristics revealed a view of power as being relational. In addition, female school leaders displayed high levels of emotional and social intelligence. The disadvantaged contexts of the schools in the study presented additional and somewhat unique emotional challenges for educational leaders. Spiritual leadership and the associated connectedness with the school and the learners presented as a notable characteristic of a feminist approach to leadership. A collection of the characteristics recorded is encapsulated by the presence of a firm social justice agenda. A passion for education and the power that it possesses to transform both individuals and communities is fully comprehended and displayed in the instructional leadership practices of the participants.

Furthermore, the integration of transformational and instructional leadership practices, together with the ability to lead curriculum change created a learning environment in which academic achievement and success were realised. The matric pass rate in 2013 at Amanzi College was 97.9% with a 98% Bachelor Degree exemption rate. This, in turn, provided opportunities for admission to tertiary institutions and adult employment. The findings of this study illustrated how female educational leaders in disadvantaged communities have, through their actions and attitudes, served as agents of redress and have promoted social justice within their schools.

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