GENDERED LEADERSHIP STEREOTYPES IN DISADVANTAGED RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Within rural contexts where patriarchal traditions and perspectives of leadership exist, the role of the school principal is typically associated with stereotypical male leadership traits. This study investigated traditional stereotypical views of leadership and how these might manifest in the leadership of schools in disadvantaged rural communities. The aim of this qualitative study was to determine if the gender specific stereotypical view of leadership existed in the Historical Schools which formed part of this study. Whilst there were some stereotypical leadership practices, the study found notable exceptions. The exceptions were specifically found with respect to a gender stereotypical view of spiritual and servant leadership.

Keywords: gender stereotyping, educational leadership, disadvantaged school communities, servant leadership, spiritual leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, Historical Schools Restoration Project.

1 INTRODUCTION

The literature is replete with theories and opinions of what makes a good leader [1]. Considering educational leadership, the literature is dominated by the experiences and perspectives of men. Describing the leaders modelled in educational leadership, Lumby and Coleman as cited by Bush describe this scenario as the "white, male, middle class norm" [2]. This suggests that there is an inherent bias in the manner in which leadership and educational leadership in particular are understood and interpreted. Furthermore, the notable silence of women's voices in leadership theory and indeed educational leadership theory suggests that our knowledge of educational leadership theory is incomplete. It is not surprising then that generalised assumptions have emerged which has resulted in the stereotyping of leadership according to gender. Furthermore, "despite the fact that many researchers have found that there are few differences in the innate abilities of male and female managers stereotypes persist that portray women as less capable leaders than men" [3].

2 RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

This paper emerges from a larger SANPAD (South African Netherlands Partnership for Alternatives in Development) project titled: *Women leading in Disadvantaged School Communities*. This study aimed to investigate how women educational leaders navigate the challenges of leading in disadvantaged school communities. It is within this context that the study seeks to determine if a gender specific stereotypical view of leadership exists in the schools involved in this study. Naidoo and Perumal remind us that "despite an increase in the number of studies conducted on women in school leadership, there is an awareness that these studies have only gained the attention of a limited audience" [4]. In this regard, this paper will serve two ends. Firstly to broaden the awareness of the role that women leaders play in schools, and secondly, to consider any gender specific stereotypical views of leadership that may emerge.

This was a qualitative research study where findings are drawn from the experiences of the participants and their interpretation of leadership in their respective school context [5]. The data for this study were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This helped to provide a nuanced understanding of the type and style of leadership in the schools.

The semi structured interviews were conducted with the school principals and with members of the School Management Team (SMT). These were intended to provide insights into the approaches to educational leadership, curriculum design and implementation. Mirroring this purpose, the focus groups comprised members of the SMT and the teaching staff. The sample aimed to achieve equity of representation based on the criteria of the participants' gender and years of teaching experience. The

questions were purposefully open ended. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants and the schools.

3   RESEARCH SITES FOR THIS STUDY

The schools in this study are located in disadvantaged rural contexts in South Africa. Here disadvantaged is defined as, "something which causes one to be in an unfavourable position", and, "underprivileged socially" [6]. The rural setting of each of the schools are disadvantaged in that they are deprived of some basic necessities including, adequate housing and sanitation, access to adequate infrastructure, medical facilities and education [7]. In addition, a unique feature of the schools is that they were all founded by missionary organisations and form part of the Historical schools Restoration Project (HSRP).

Established in 2008, the HSRP seeks to address the physical and educational needs of nine schools which "contributed richly to the education of Black South Africans prior to the negative impact of Bantu Education" [8]. In addition, the stated aim of the HSRP is "to revitalize the rich heritage of the historical schools and transform them into sustainable and inspirational African institutions of educational and cultural excellence" [9]. [The] "hope for education in South Africa" as stated by Ndungane, is found in the educational renewal projects that have and are occurring in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions" [10]. The manifestation of this 'hope' is realised by the contribution of the HSRP to the secondary schools identified for renewal and through these endeavours to not only "abandon the colonial constraints that our history seems to have imposed on our educational thinking", but to "lead the way for real comprehensive educational transformation in our country" [11].

Table 1 provides a summary of the biographical details of the schools in this study as well as the participants in the study. The names of the schools and the participants are represented as pseudonyms.

Table 1: Biographical Details of the Schools and Participants in the Study.

SCHOOL	YEAR FOUNDED	FOUNDING MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION	GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT	PARTICIPANT AND DESIGNATION	GENDER
Amanzi College	1846	American Board of Missionaries	Amanzimtoti, Kwa-Zulu Natal	Jack (Principal)	M
Amanzi College				Peter	M
Amanzi College				Alice	F
Spring Valley College	1869	American Board of Missionaries	Inanda, Kwa-Zulu Natal	Susan Principal	F
Hope Town School	1855	Methodist	Fort Beaufort, Eastern Cape	Alfred (Principal)	M
Rolling Hills College	1586	St Matthew's Mission (Anglican)	Keiskammashoek, Eastern Cape	Mildred Deputy Principal	F
Ubuntu College	1923	Benedictine (Catholic)	Vryheid (Eastern Cape)	Janet (Principal)	F

[12]

4   LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1   Gender stereotyping

Unlike the term 'sex', which is an anatomical designation based on biology [13], the term 'gender' possesses a far broader meaning. Wood records that, "gender is a social, symbolic construct that

varies across cultures, over time and within a given culture and in relation to other gender" [14]. Furthermore, gender refers to the "identities, roles activities, feelings, and so forth that society associates with being male or female" [15]. Furthermore, gender is socially constructed and as such society 'teaches' one to perform a specific gendered role. Emerging from the distinction presented above, society has attributed stereotypical styles of leadership to men and women.

Accounts of historical events, wars and ideological conquests profoundly present the masculine leader. The stereotypical male leader is defined as "emotionally detached, objective and assertive, committed and hardworking" [16]. Conversely, "women leaders are seen as more egalitarian and less authoritarian than men" [17]. Corroborating this view, Hoyt states that women lead in a "more democratic, or participative, manner than men" [18]. Whilst there may be certain observable differences in male and female leadership styles, conceptions of leadership, that place men and women in distinctly separate camps, adopting a reductionist, dichotomous approach to leadership is problematic.

4.2   Gender and leadership styles

The literature is replete with leadership theory and research on leadership styles. Attracting much attention is the narrative which considers the transactional versus transformational leadership style. While on the one hand, transactional leadership behaviours are "characterised by the use of contingencies to reinforce desirable behaviour" [19], transformational leadership, on the other hand, is a "leadership that facilitates the redefinition of people's vision and mission, a renewal of their commitment and the restructuring of their systems for goal accomplishment" [20]. From an educational leadership perspective, Bush explains that transactional leadership is exercised by principals offering teachers and other stakeholders rewards or inducements [21]. By contrast, in schools led by transformational leadership practices, principals seek to motivate and improve the commitment of teachers through building a common vision, providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualised support and demonstrating high performance expectations [22].

Eagly, Johannesen & van Engen posit that women "favour a transformational style" [23]. Corroborating and adding to this generalisation, Yoder argues that women may favour a transformational leadership style because it may "allow them to avoid the overly masculine impression they [men] can produce by exercising hierarchical control and engaging in narrowly agentic leader behaviour" [24]. Reporting on the style that is most commonly adopted by men, and acknowledging that there is less data available, Eagly *et al* (2003) record that the transactional leadership style is more common [25]. Whilst there a multiple leadership styles to consider, the discussion in this paper will be confined to transactional and transformational leadership styles.

4.3   Spiritual leadership

Bush records that spiritual leadership is one of the terms that have also been used to describe values-based leadership [26]. Similarly, identifying approaches to leadership which can be categorised as 'moral', West-Burnham asserts that "many leaders possess what might be called 'higher order' perspectives" and that "these might be represented by a particular religious affiliation" [27] Supporting this view, Wood records that 52% of England's head teachers stated that they were "inspired or supported in their leadership by some kind of spiritual power" [28], [29].

4.4   Servant leadership

Greenleaf defines servant leadership as commencing with a natural feeling to serve others. He adds that subsequent to the desire to serve first, is a conscious choice is which "brings one to aspire to lead" [30]. He posits further that 'the difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" [31]. Furthermore, a distinguishing characteristic of servant leadership is that it brings the needs of others to the centre [32] and it "makes the growth of those served its objective" [33].

Reynolds [34] contends that the term 'servant – leader' has created a paradox. Eicher-Catt asserts that "the concept of *servant* is typically associated with subjugation whereas the concept of *leader* is often associated with domination" [35]. Extending the argument, Eicher-Catt contends that subjugation is typically gendered as feminine and domination is aligned with a stereotypical masculine approach to leadership [36]. The paradoxical notion of servant leadership presents with challenges from a stereotypical gendered perspective.

5   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1   Male and female gender stereotyping

The findings of the study were partly inconsistent with the literature with regards to the stereotypical view of masculine leadership. Explaining his leadership style, Alfred, the principal of an underperforming school, made reference to structures he had put in place to control staff and learners. The extracts from the interview illustrate that his approach to leadership was largely manifested by the manner in which he addressed problems. In this example the problem concerned high levels of staff and learner absenteeism.

> …one of the major problems that I noticed here is, was the non-attendance, absenteeism at school. I said " this is going to create a problem for you [meaning himself] because it, it says a lot about your leadership and, and your management because it means that you were unable to manage them". ……it means that one of them didn't come to work for a whole month, for a whole term actually. I gave them some policies regarding leave management and all that so everyone must be able to know if I'm doing this, this is what's expected of me.

Further in the interview, it was revealed that there was a strong attempt at centralising control. The following excerpt represents both an attempt by the principal engage collaboratively with members of staff as well as a response which suggests the reason for their reaction.

> You know we, we are in that transition period now and most of the things we are going to change. I asked them, "guys are there any values that will put in place that we are going to work towards?" And they said "no, there are not". And even if you look to that mission statement and that vision statement they've been here for about 4 to 5 years. So I said to them "We'll have to revisit that". But you know, what I noticed here is that there's no team work in a way. So I am going to have to do things my way and most of the work myself.

This lack of 'team work' was further illustrated by an attempt to use one of the church's buildings for school assemblies and gatherings. The principal reported as follows:

> … there's a chapel right here. But there are no good relations between the Reverend and the staff because they feel that the reverent is always saying bad things about them, which in a way are true. Yeah, but I said to them " I want, unity because we can use this church to our advantage… rather than using that as, a place for assembly for us, we can simply use the chapel and it will create that feel to the learners you know.

The leadership style displayed by Alfred presents as one characterised by a strong desire to control and manage. As such, it is aligned with the stereotypical masculine approach to leadership, one in which authority; control and dominance are most prevalent. In addition, it supports the theory that men are more inclined to adopt a transactional approach to leadership. In this regard, power and authority rests with the leader (the school principal) and this authority arises "from their positions as formal leaders of their institutions" [37].

Whilst the presence of mistrust in institutions is not necessarily a feature of stereotypical masculine leadership, it emerges as a significant element in this instance. It is acknowledged that the problems experienced at Hope Town School are likely to be complex and that these cannot be attributed to a single factor. However, effective school leadership has the power and influence to address and overcome many of the difficulties being experienced. The approach to leadership at Amanzi College, a school in a very similar rural and socio-economic position, is a source of hope and optimism.

By contrast to the previous school reported on, Amanzi College presents a different interpretation of stereotypical gendered leadership. The principal, Jack, and a School Management Team (SMT) comprised of both men and women, lead Amanzi College which is also located in a disadvantaged rural community. As similar as the schools are geographically and socio-economically, is as dissimilar as they are from a leadership perspective.

Responding to a question about his approach to leadership, Jack responded as follows:

> …as much as the principal is the head and I'm not the helm of the institution but I work collaboratively with other managers, the deputy principal and HOD as well as many other stake holders and the role players, including parents, they are also assisting in the school getting the quality results.

.. we have regular SMT meetings which is a high decision making structure in the institution. That is where we listen and take stock of views and ideas that are being suggested by our managers here. And then the principal, as the head of the institution, I then articulate decisions that are taken collectively, centrally at an SMT level.

My leadership style, it varies depending on situations. But I will say that I am a democratic leader. I believe in consultation but as I'm saying, at times you need to be firm and put your foot on the ground …

Jack's collaborative leadership style is acknowledged by Alice, the Deputy Principal of Amanzi College. She made the following observations:

...we have a lot of trust at this school. The principal consults with us and we collaborate when it comes to making choices, decisions for the school. I feel that my opinion is important and that I am part of leading this school.

Contributing to the discourse of leadership at Amanzi College, the participants responded as follows when presented with a question that explored the making of unpopular or difficult decisions.

Jack:

But unpopular decision you take them when you are protecting quality teaching and learning. You need to conscientise and make them aware. We are not doing extraordinary things you know, but we are the basics. We just follow the policies of the Department of Education. At no stage were the policy saying on Fridays people must go home at 12:00 or on the eve of a certain day people must leave at 10:00. There are certain expectations and if we are always thinking about teaching and learning, making that a priority, then the difficult decisions can be made.

Peter:... sometimes it is difficult, but I think we as the SMT, we trust one another and I think that the staff and the learners trust us also. They know we are trying our best to do the right thing for the learners. But here at [Amanzi] we are ok because there is good communication. I am happy!

The study established that the collaborative, democratic and consultative leadership style of principal of Amanzi College tended more towards a female stereotype of leadership.

5.1.1   A comparison of academic achievements

The academic results of the two schools reveal stark differences in academic performance in the National Senior Certificate (NSC). (The NSC is awarded to learners at the end of Grade 12, their final year of formal schooling). Of the 11 learners who wrote the NSC exams in 2013 at Hope Town School, 81.8 % passed, of which 0% were awarded a Bachelor Degree Pass. By comparison, the 242 learners that wrote the NSC at Amanzi College, 97.9% passed, of 98% achieved a Bachelor Degree Pass. Despite the almost identical socio-economic disadvantage of the two schools, the difference in academic achievement is significant.

The above two narratives examined the leadership style of two male principals. Although the sizes of the school differed, each participant is the principal of a Historic School, which serves the needs of a disadvantaged, rural community. The findings reveal that the leadership style adopted by the two men was significantly different. Alfred, regarded power and control as important and his style could be primarily described as transactional. On the other hand, Jack adopted a transformational style, one which may be closely aligned with a stereotypically female leadership style.

5.2   Gendered leadership and service

The second theme investigates the relationship between gendered leadership and the element of service reflected in that leadership. Responding to questions regarding their leadership style, some of the participants mentioned notions of service to the community in their role as leader.

Peter: They put every effort in order to make sure that this African child is being served and they go out there to serve the community. It is this sense of serving more than just working. I would say we have that.

Janet:

So we deliberately don't serve the 'better' people. There are schools where they can get good education so we deliberately don't serve them. We serve this community, these people need us to give them an education and a future. I firmly believe that this is what we are called to do.

[We interpret the participant's reference to the "better people" as meaning those who have greater income and who are advantaged from a socio-economic perspective.]

Mildred:

I am motivated by a deep and, sincere need, a desire to serve the learners and this community. I believe that I am call to do so. My greatest pleasure is that I am able to make a difference, a real difference here …. Look around (points towards the outer perimeters of the school), the need is great… It is just who I am … [pause] … yes, that's it, that's me …

There is a likely connection between the notion of service and the historical nature and missionary influence unique to the schools in this study. Nonetheless, it is a theme worthy of consideration within the gendered leadership discourse. Placing the resolute statements of Peter, Janet and Mildred into leadership theory, all participants reflect the presence of 'servant leadership' as a component of their leadership style. These, as described by Spears are 'other orientated' and include listening, empathizing, serving and practicing stewardship [38].

Servant leadership is identified by two elements. The first is the leaders' genuine desire and concern for others [39], and the second is that servant leaders have a high moral focus which is congruent with the focus on the needs of followers [40]. Servant leadership, which is positioned within the feminist approach to leadership, is evident in the responses above. Grogan and Shakeshaft [41] explain that servant leadership is a component of leadership for social justice which is characteristic of a feminist approach to leadership. The data reveals two significant findings. The first is that there is no absolute gender bias with regards to servant leadership; both men and women are able to be servant leaders. Secondly, by virtue of its location within the paradigm of a feminist approach to leadership, servant leadership is more typically associated with a stereotypical female style of leadership.

5.3 Gendered leadership and spiritual leadership

The final theme identified the relationship between gendered leadership and spiritual leadership. Three participants described their leadership being underpinned by their spiritual conviction. Furthermore, two participants regarded themselves as the spiritual leaders of their school.

Peter:

I would say also that our serving the community is because of the school we are … we are a Christian, mission school. I, we the teacher [has] to serve the school in a spiritual and academic way.

Susan:

… but I see my role first and foremost as being up there with her as a spiritual leader of the school and I would hope that in any succession plan that the school has that that would be really important because I don't know how you can uphold…

Mildred:

….but it does come from a Christian conviction. It's been something that has burned… and, so that is where it comes from. I have always had a heart to make a difference. I feel that this must go further, I see part of my role … a big part … is to be a leader that must also lead spiritually.

The responses above are closely aligned with Hyatt's representation of spiritual leadership. He states that, "spiritual leadership is characterized by great generosity" [42]. Not only do leaders gain strength from their faith, but it provides an intrinsic source of motivation and purpose. Spiritual leadership inspires one to lead, as argued by West-Burnham [43]. Grogan and Shakeshaft [44] record that spiritual leadership is one of the defining characteristics of a feminine approach to leadership. Considering spiritual leadership qualities, the data revealed that there is no absolute gender stereotyping present, both men and women can provide spiritual leadership. In addition, the data suggests that spiritual leadership presents more commonly in the stereotypical female style of leadership.

6   CONCLUSION

The findings of this study challenge the traditionally held views of leadership in rural communities. Dominated by patriarchal traditions and customs, very specific gender roles are typically performed, not only within the community, but in the context of stereotypical gender leadership practices. There exists a generalization that leadership is the domain of men and that men in rural communities lead in an agentic manner [45]. Whilst some schools presented with stereotypical gendered leadership, there were a number of notable exceptions. These exceptions presented a leaning towards a feminist approach to leadership and are examples of an androgynous approach to educational leadership. Furthermore, these findings unlock patriarchal and gender stereotypes by citing approaches to educational leadership that are context based and that differ from widely held traditional views.

The study revealed that there is indeed an alternative voice which challenges the commonly held views of stereotypical gender leadership. The study thus found that a stereotypical interpretation of leadership based on gender to be problematic in that it presents male leadership and female leadership from two distinct and different paradigms. Furthermore, this study revealed that spiritual leadership and service are leadership qualities that both men and women possess. Within this exegesis "androgynous individuals embody qualities that Western culture considers both masculine and feminine" and in this way, "androgynous men and women are both nurturing and assertive" [46]. Located within the context of this study, androgynous men and women are found in rural disadvantaged school communities.

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