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Female School Principals in Canada and South Africa: An Overview

Abstract

Worldwide, the issue of women in school principal positions is being discussed. Discussions on this matter include, among other things, the underrepresentation and promotion opportunities of female principals, stereotyping, culture and education and competencies of women. Several studies have shown that women do not have to stand back for their male counterparts. This paper deals with the perspectives of female school principals in Canada and South Africa. The study was employed in the interpretivist paradigm, and as it aimed to explore different aspects of the leadership of female school principals, a qualitative approach was used as a vehicle to come to understand the central phenomenon shared by the 12 participating female school principals in the two countries. They were interviewed by means of semi-structured interviews through which aspects with regard to their position as school principals were revealed. The case studies showed that female principals can be regarded as effective principals.

Keywords: female, principals, leadership, schools

Introduction

Poor socio-economic conditions, violence and the conversation around equity do not seem to be confined to one continent only. That schools are influenced by these aspects is a reality. That is why Hargreaves (2019, p. 17) suggests that ethical leadership is important: "It's about creating and fighting for a positive educational and ethical environment together that removes ethical dilemmas between serving the child and complying with the system that are neither necessary nor desirable". Hargreaves and Fullan (2013, p. 36) further highlight the importance of professional capital: "Professional capital requires attention not only to political and societal investments in education but also to leadership actions and educator needs, contributions, and career stages". Following these statements, the issue of female principalship comes to the fore. Debates about female principals often ensue, especially when underrepresentation, stereotyping and their ability to act as principal are discussed. This paper focuses on these factors with regard to female school principals in Canada and South Africa. The paper commences with an overview of leadership of school principals in Canada and South Africa, followed by the methodology, discussion of results and conclusion.

School principal leadership

It is well known that the circumstances in which principals have to perform their daily work constantly fluctuate. For instance, the needs and demands in schools in a First Nations community, suburban Calgary or inner-city Toronto ask for a different

approach from principals. At the same time, township schools in South Africa, which are mostly situated in poor socio-economic circumstances, place pressure on the principals to provide the best teaching and learning with the minimum funds, a lack of resources and poor infrastructure at their disposal. Thus, whether it is Canada or South Africa under discussion, the basic challenges remain the same. Hargreaves (2019, p. 17) postulates that recent research literature identifies a number of changes influencing the work of principals in Canada. These changes are grouped in categories and address 1) school regulation changes, 2) pedagogical changes, 3) budgetary cuts, 4) changes in parents' perceptions regarding their role in education, 5) social changes, 6) demographic changes, 7) the marketisation of education, and 8) technological advancement. The question that often arises is how capable and prepared school principals, especially female principals, are to address challenges.

Male versus female school principals

Traditionally, school leadership is associated with male leaders. Historically, men come from a tradition of being dominant, and women have been subjected to this domination (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). In addition, women were seen as mothers and were not regarded as having sufficient knowledge in the academic world. According to Eagly and Carli (2007), women find themselves in what they call a “double bond”. Society expects women to portray common traits such as kindness, warmth, gentleness and concern for others, along with the assertive qualities, such as determination, guidance and confidence, that are expected of leaders. However, women have become empowered and have learnt how to balance their personal and professional responsibilities. Yet, gender bias still manifests itself in the system of patriarchy (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). It is therefore no surprise that worldwide, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions. According to Carter and Silva (2010), three explanations are given as to why women are underrepresented in high-level leadership positions in Canada: the human capital difference; gender differences; and prejudice and discrimination against female leaders. It seems that women have less human capital investment in education, training and work experience than men.

Although it is the 21st century, the belief that “women take care and men take charge” still exists. Men are stereotyped with characteristics such as confidence, assertiveness, independence, rationality and decisiveness, whereas women are stereotyped with communal characteristics such as concern for others, sensitivity, warmth, helpfulness and nurturance. In South Africa, it is no different. Grant (2008) reports that in rural communities, women are still seen as weak and have very little credibility as leaders. On the other hand, men are seen as strong and are, therefore, associated with leadership. For this reason, women do not think they are able to act as leaders. Research conducted by Mestry and Schmidt (2012) revealed that negative bias, sexist generalisations and stereotypical myths continue to inhibit the effective application of duties and responsibilities by female principals in South African schools. According to Davids (2018, p. 160), women are underrepresented as female principals in South Africa because it is believed that women and men lead and manage differently.

Current studies on female principals include those of Steyn (2018), in which she focuses on the success of female principals in difficult circumstances. Botha's

(2018) research on female principals focuses on transformation and how schools can transform with the help of the community. In another study, Davids (2018) sheds more light on how female principals understand and perceive their identity, values and social or cultural contexts and how these affect their leadership. Netshitangani (2018) supports the issue of gender preference with regard to the appointment of principals but maintains that context plays an important role. The study also indicates that women are competent and confident in the leadership role, as opposed to what is assumed by stereotyping. However, little research is focused on how female principals experience community stereotyping and how they could maintain themselves in mixed-gender schools.

Appointment of school principals

It is evident that the appointment of school principals differs in Canada and South Africa. In Canada, all principals require formal education, which much include a Bachelor of Education degree and a Master's degree. In addition, all principals must have been a teacher instructing within a school or district setting for a minimum of five years. This five-year period of practical experience as a teacher is critical to the role of principal, as it provides them with the time needed to develop pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning that will enhance their instructional as well as evaluative leadership abilities. Canadian principals also require a minimum of three qualifications in the following four areas: primary, junior, intermediate and senior education. Coupled with the aforementioned, all current principals must have completed a certified Principal's Qualification Program (PQP) Part I and Part II. This PQP training also involves an internship. Prior to becoming a principal, one must be promoted to the position of vice-principal. In effect, he or she must be successful in this position, with a recommendation from his or her principal and superintendent of education. To be considered for the principal leadership role, the vice-principal must also have a successful employee evaluation conducted by his or her supervising principal and superintendent of education. In South Africa, the situation is different. To be appointed as the principal of a school, the minimum requirement is a REQV14 qualification (matric plus a four-year qualification and seven years' teaching experience). A prospective principal has to be registered at the South African Council for Educators. "Going through the ranks" (that is, acting as department head or deputy principal) is not necessary. Although some essential experience and skills may be of benefit to the candidate, it is not compulsory. In principle, any good teacher can thus become the principal of a school.

With the above in mind, the question often arises as to whether women are truly capable of handling the day-to-day challenges of principalship.

Methodology

The study was employed in the interpretivist paradigm. As the study aimed to explore different aspects of the leadership of female school principals, a qualitative approach was used as a vehicle to come to understand the central phenomenon shared by the female school principals (cf. Creswell, 2014, p. 16). A case study design was followed in order to gather in-depth data from female school principals for the purpose of learning more about the unknown aspects of their leadership (cf.

Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 100). Using purposive sampling to gain a multifaceted perspective on female school principals' leadership, a sample of 12 female school principals in two countries – South Africa and Canada – were selected. To generate data, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with female principals of secondary schools. Open-ended questions were asked to elicit the views and opinions of the principals (cf. Creswell, 2014, p. 181). Thematic analysis was conducted to uncover prominent themes. The data of each female school principal in each country were analysed first, followed by a cross-case analysis that allowed for generalisations across diverse contexts.

Results and discussion

Canada is seen as a developed country and South Africa as a developing country. Nevertheless, the female principals revealed similar characteristics, skills and viewpoints.

Support

Although domestic duties are primarily associated with being female, the principals' spouses unconditionally assumed these duties in support of their wives' responsibilities regarding principalship. In some cases, the spouses even gave up their work, thus providing the opportunity for their wives to become school principals. In both countries, it seems that the spouses had no problem with women being seen as breadwinners. With regard to the support from the staff, management teams and governing bodies of the schools, it was clear that the female principals were fully supported, even by their male colleagues. In fact, the female principals' peers (that is, the male principals) went out of their way to provide advice, motivation and support to them.

Acceptance

When it comes to the acceptance of women as school principals, the results showed a significant difference between Canada and South Africa. It was clear that the female principals in Canada were unconditionally accepted as principals; it seems that both women and men are equally recognised as leaders. However, when it comes to South Africa, there is a deviation, especially with regard to parents, as the fathers were sceptical towards women as principals. This could possibly be attributed to the South African context, tradition and education. Principals are still strictly associated with a "man's world". The female principals acknowledged that they had to carefully consider every word before engaging in conversation with men.

Proficiency

It was clear that the female principals in both Canada and South Africa were fully qualified to act as principals. Of note, however, was the fact that the female principals in South Africa improved themselves academically with the aim of leading and managing their schools more effectively. Most of the principals obtained a postgraduate degree (an honours degree, especially with a view to legal matters, or

a master's degree in education) and a further qualification in education and management (Advanced Certificate in Education).

The female principals in this study were distributed across primary and secondary schools, some in mixed-gender schools and others in girls' schools. When they were asked whether they could adapt to a mixed school, there was no hesitation in their answers. They pointed out that as human beings, they could act as principal in any circumstances, whether in a remote, rural mixed school or a modern, urban mixed school. However, they acknowledged that they might have to adapt their management style, as a girls' school has specific characteristics that do not necessarily apply in a mixed school. It is important, however, to remember that to act as principal, particular basic skills, knowledge and attitudes are important.

Women becoming school principals

The female principals in this study were clear about why they had become principals. They agreed that female principals should become principals for factual reasons because it is not an easy task in a predominantly male world. The female principals acknowledged the role of mentorship, development and exposure in leadership positions provided by preparatory workshops and their principals. In most cases, the principals under which they had served were excellent examples of how a principal should behave, make decisions and solve problems. This made it easier for the women to accept the offer to act as principal.

Findings

The findings in this study regarding Canadian and South African female principals are not unique, but noteworthy. The perception that only male principals are mandated has faded, as female principals have become increasingly prominent. It is no longer about "female" or "male" principals, but rather about *effective leadership*. In addition, the question arises whether principals can lead in *any* circumstances, whether in an urban or a rural school and mixed, boys' or girls' schools. As leadership, especially effective and successful leadership in schools, is being scrutinised worldwide, gender is no longer important. A good leader, whether male or female, is imperative when change, challenges, diversity, inclusivity and excellent academic performance are relevant. Schools have to invest in professional capital rather than the preference for a male or a female principal. This is especially important for schools that are performing poorly or have poor economic conditions. According to Naidoo and Perumal (2014), the main challenge experienced by female principals is that in most cases, they are employed in low-performing or dysfunctional schools with a corrupt culture.

Although the above is noted, it still seems as if female principals have to work harder to prove themselves in a man's world, especially in South Africa. This statement corresponds to the claim made by Kanjere, Thaba and Teffo (2011) that there is a general impression that women are not good leaders. In this modern age, there are people who still believe that women are incapable of leading. Women in leadership positions are adversely affected by prejudice because most men are firm custodians of culture. As South Africa is characterised by diversity, culture and tradition play a very important role, especially with regard to the empowerment of women. Female leaders often start with a backlog due to a long lack of exposure to

leadership. Many studies have shown that most men oppose women in leadership. The attitude of people, especially men, will therefore first have to change, and a paradigm shift about the competence of women needs to be made. In addition, women need to develop more self-confidence to apply for leadership positions. Because of the imprinted idea that women belong at home, women do not believe in themselves.

Female principals seem to be blessed with a sixth sense that comes in handy in their role as principal. A sixth sense is advantageous, especially for problem solving and the appointment of staff members. Women usually use their intuition to make the final choice. It plays an important role in how they sum up, handle and control a situation. Female principals have a “softer” approach when guidance and management are involved, which often leads to better collaboration. In addition, the typical “mother figure” attribute contributes to their accessibility, which often leads to trust, compassion and openness. These characteristics lead to a good balance between task orientation and human orientation.

A good support network is of the utmost importance for any leader in a leadership position. By setting up the right network, any leader can make a success and lead and manage effectively. However, in both countries, this network needs to be expanded to the Department of Education and services such as psychologists or counsellors who can assist principals. Many female principals refuse to ask for help, as they fear it might be seen as a weakness.

Conclusion

This study showed that women are more readily appointed as principals in both Canada and South Africa. Yet, there is a hesitancy to appoint women as principals in mixed schools, especially in high-performing urban schools in South Africa. As culture and tradition fade and change in ethnic groups, women will have the confidence to apply for school principal positions. After all, effective and successful leadership matters, regardless of gender.

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