

The Challenges Faced by Female Primary School Heads: The Zimbabwean Experience

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Abstract

While the affirmative action policy of females has been hailed as a milestone in their emancipation, few insights exist as regards women's challenges in leadership. Current research shows that female primary school heads face unique challenges in their substantive positions. A sample of nineteen female primary school heads in the Masvingo province of Zimbabwe responded to a questaview seeking their perceptions of their work related challenges. This study was part of a larger study on females and school leadership. Data was subjected to discourse analysis. Results showed that organisational factors, culture, women's personalities and colonial legacies are obstacles challenging the effectiveness of females in school administration. Specifically, shortage of financial and material resources and teachers' negative attitudes towards female primary school heads were cited as the major impediments to effective school administration. The study implores governments to continue appointing more women to school leadership positions despite the identified challenges. Further results are discussed and implications for educational practice, management and administration highlighted.

Key words: female heads, primary schools, obstacles/challenges, questaview, perceptions, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The turn of the new millennium has witnessed invigorated women participation in educational leadership. Their pronounced representation and participation has brought with it challenges they have to grapple with in positions of authority like primary school leadership. Challenges or obstacles which women face in breaking into school administration are well-documented (Hennig & Jardin, 1977; Zirkel & Gluckerman, 1984; Swiderski, 1988; Mauer, 1994; Thomas, 1997). These challenges include attitudinal, and institutional and social/cultural obstacles. Women are also said to be absent in the upper echelons of organisations as well as specific professions like technical and commercial sectors (Evetts, 2000; UNICEF, 1995). While the bulk of the research on women in educational administration concentrates on underrepresentation of, and obstacles faced by, women in educational administration, fewer studies have provided limited insights into the nature of the problems women face in administering schools efficiently and effectively (Ortiz, 1979; Stockard, 1979).

Background

This study sought to reveal the specific problems confronting some female primary school heads in Zimbabwe as they strive to administer their schools efficiently and effectively. It has previously been noted that leadership strategies vary considerably and they depend on the level of the heads effectiveness and situational attributes (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Fiedler, 1967). In a review of 18 studies, Leithwood and Montgomery (1982) observed that the problems leaders confront could best be considered symptoms of more fundamental problems as yet uncovered. They delineated five clusters of problems confronting schools heads as being related to teachers, the

principal, those occupying the role of principal, district level administration and the community (parents included).

Perhaps Marshall (1985), Johnstone (1986), Dorsey (1989), Irby and Brown (1995) and Hudson and Rea (1996) were correct when they found a link between gender and administrative problems. Marshall (1985)'s study was very explicit when it propounded that because women chose a career post viewed by society as a male domain (principalship) they tended to introduce a deviant pattern in that role since it is viewed as a challenge to sex-roles stereotypes. Stigmas are thus attached to females in this position a problem with which they also have to cope. A later study by Dorsey (1989), argued that the problems females face were partially rooted in "the pattern of gender socialization and belief systems". Dorsey (1989) went further to state that apart from the prejudice and discrimination against women, women themselves develop lower self-esteem that may suppress their achievement motive.

Stemming from the negative societal perceptions, leadership is perceived and portrayed as a masculine construct based on masculine values (Manwa, 2002; Schein, 1994). In the case of Zimbabwe, men dominate in leadership positions while women play a subservient role in most areas of endeavour (Dorsey, 1989; Gordon, 1996). Peoples' perceptions have thus been attuned to associate leadership with males (Manwa, 2002; Pounder & Coleman, 2002; Gordon, 1994). This conceptualisation of males as leaders or managers (the masculinisation of gender) has resulted in contemporary management theory being criticized for being based on masculine values and concepts (Watson & Newby, 2005).

A related challenge confronting any administrator relates to role conflict (Mutopa, Shumba, A, Shumba, J, Maphosa, & Mubika, 2006; Hoy & Miskel, 1991). Bureaucratic expectations and one's social agenda may be incompatible. A female head may, for example, be expected to take her sick child, who is attending school at the school she is heading, to hospital during working hours. She may also be required to discipline the same child for deviant behaviour. Her role as principal and parent may cause conflict. Which of the two takes precedence? The roles of parent, principal and spouse may thus produce conflict for a given administrator (Hoy & Miskel, 1991).

Mutopa *et al* (2006) showed the negative effects of the dual role of managing school affairs and teaching among Zimbabwean school heads. Teachers perceived the heads as ineffective practitioners since they were mainly engrossed in administrative duties. As such school heads faced problems that militated on their performance (Mutopa *et al* 2006). Their study did not delineate the school heads by gender. The head's personality could also be a determining factor. Wolman and Frank cited in Marshall (1985), identified isolation, frustration and ineffectiveness as potential sources, not only of administrative ineptitude but also stress. On promotion, some women are invariably detached and uprooted from their families and this may impact on their administrative prowess as well.

Affirmative action policies, while being hailed as a milestone towards women's emancipation, have brought with them some problems. Renihan (1997) argue that women are appointed to administrative positions when they least expect it. Marshall (1985) cites an example of a scenario of a frustrated female head. Her boss angered a Mrs. Bennis when it was made known to her that her elevation from a classroom teacher to primary school head had been done to meet affirmative action pressures. She was unhappy in her new career for she felt like an outcast among her

contemporaries. This may be due to the fact that such administrators are normally inadequately prepared for the post and the demands of that office (Amodeo & Emislie, 1985).

The scenarios presented above are compounded by the fact that most school heads are untrained in school administration on assumption of that leadership role (Renihan, 1997, Gwarinda, 1995, Motsamai, 1994, Ozga, 1993, Dennison & Laws, 1990, Makara, 1985 Marshall, 1985). School heads are, in essence, "senior teachers" who ran schools without pre-service training in headship hence do not possess requisite skills in, for example, supervision, accounting, time-tabling, administration management, and curriculum organization (Gwarinda, 1995; Motsamai, 1994). For them to cope, they resorted to the "sink or swim" principle. Motsamai (1994) study did not however include gender as a variable in the analysis. Because school heads in Zimbabwe run similar schools, one could probably deduce that administrative problems cut across gender.

While the preceding accounts relate problems of heads to their gender roles, as well as policy and institutional aspects, other studies catalogue administrative problems of a general nature, (Batchler, 1981; Stromquist, 1989; Renihan, 1997). Human and material resources (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982) and administrative time (Renihan, 1997) are perceived as inadequate at schools. Furthermore, school heads do not allocate adequate time to curricular leadership supervision and teaching because they tend to be bogged down by incidentals or unexpected activities.

An equally perplexing issue is what has been referred to as multiple expectations (Renihan, 1997). Various interest groups as teachers, groups, the community etc, tend to present a conflict of interest to a school head. The head invariably has to weigh each demand and ultimately all groups may never have their own way.

Method

The researcher adopted a qualitative research design for this study. This study falls under the descriptive interpretive paradigm (Henning., van Rensburg & Smit 2005). Such a study is an alternative to experimental and co-relational research because it is interactive and naturalistic (and views reality as multilayered, interactive and a shared social experience interpreted by individuals (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993:372). As such discourse analysis was the *modus operandi* in this research.

Neuman (1997) also singled out interpretive science as one of three approaches through which our perception of the world could be enhanced particularly through observation, measuring and understanding. Reality construction occurs in situated interactions in the natural setting. Such inquiry aims to tap the subjectivity of individual experience (Hall, 1996). This phenomenological philosophy or inquiry investigates the experiences and events in a group of people such as school heads, asking them to narrate their “lived” experiences. This results in the development of generalisations, principles or theories that have a universal validity (Behr, 1983; Best & Khan, 1993).

Participants and setting

A sample of nineteen female primary school heads was selected from three districts of Masvingo province (Chivi, Masvingo and Zaka). The sample was selected using the cluster sampling method. Clustering was viewed as appropriate since the districts possess comparable characteristics like having schools that are headed by females, use the same national syllabi and are administered by a centralised bureaucracy. The choice of the Masvingo province was informed by convenience. It was hoped and assumed that this representative sample would enable us to make generalizations about the study area.

Instrument

The sample responded to a four part questaview. The key segment had four structured questions seeking to establish the heads' perceptions of the obstacles they confront in their substantive positions or simply after assuming leadership positions. Part one of the questaview sought the biodata of the respondents like age, sex, qualifications, teaching experience etc.

Procedure

After securing permission to collect data from the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, the investigator went to investigate problems that female primary school heads faced or encountered in their substantive positions (administer questaview). This exercise lasted a week.

Data analysis

The content of the problems from the questaview was summarised using emerging themes. Below is a tabular presentation of responses to the major question.

Table 1: Problems Faced by Female Primary School Heads in School Administration and Management.

PROBLEM	RESPONSES	
	Frequency (N=19)	%
1. Negative attitudes of teachers	8	42.1
2. Lack of resources (a) financial resources	5	26.3
(b) material resources	4	21.1
3. Lack of community support	7	36.8
4. Lack of transport to main centers	2	10.5
5. Role conflict (administration and teaching)	1	“
6. No executive power to use school funds	1	“
7. Tribalism	1	5.3
8. Abuse	1	“
9. Thefts at school	1	“
10. Family commitments	1	5.3
11. Allocating resources	1	“
12. Heading small, non-prestigious school	1	“
13. High fees paid by pupils	1	“

From the above Table it can be clearly seen that the greatest source of problems confronting female primary school heads in Zimbabwe were the subordinate teachers or staff. This was confirmed by 8 (42%) of the female primary school heads. The source of the problems was not gender-specific

according to part of the data. Female primary school heads get problems from all teachers irrespective of their gender. The Zimbabwean male primary school teacher for instance was said to display negative attitudes through non-cooperation with the head in official activities. Other teachers verbally abused the female heads. The female primary school heads attributed this scenario to the nature of the Zimbabwean culture, which is highly patriarchal. As such, women were not readily being accepted as leaders, a confirmation of studies by Dorsey (1989) and Marshal (1985). Some teachers, particularly the old, experienced and lesser qualified were said to envy headship, hence applied all sorts tactics to frustrate the efforts of the dedicated and unassuming female head. Other female primary school heads mentioned that teachers connive with, not only other lazy teachers, but also the community. In the process, they were alleged to demonstrate halfhearted commitment to the profession.

The second problem cited was lack of financial (26.3%) and material resources (21.1%). (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). Financial resources (funds) appeared to be in short supply rather than the physical or material resources. Money is needed for infrastructural development and the provision of services. Parents compounded the problem by failing to paying school fees on time. Evidence obtained from this study also showed that the material resources that were in short supply included classrooms, space, books, uniforms, accommodation and human resources.

Thirdly, in commenting on their relationship with the community, 36.8% of the primary school heads reported that they were at variance with the surrounding community. They indicated that parents tended to be uncooperative. These reported that some parents had negative attitudes towards them. It was said that some of these parents had been grappling with the reality that "a woman was heading their school". Female school leadership is a recent phenomenon, particularly in Zimbabwe.

It was revealed that parents, in an unholy matrimony with some teachers have been resisting female leadership. Tactics used included deliberately not paying school fees, transferring children to male-headed schools, and refusing to attend school meetings. Some parents even had the audacity to tell the heads that they were unwelcome! In the final analysis, these female primary school heads had a tough time in creating environments conducive to learning.

The fourth matter of concern revealed by 2 or 10.5% of the respondents was the lack of transport to main centres. School heads generally require transport for attending meetings, collecting purchased items and visiting other places. School business may be severely curtailed by a defective and unreliable transport system. This challenge was cited by Rural based school heads mainly.

Nine other problems were cited by individual school heads (5.3%). One school head reported that she had a role conflict, by trying to maintain a balance between instructional and administrative duties. Yet one complained that she had no executive authority to use school funds. Another female head leading a big rural school cited a rather disturbing problem, namely tribalism. The head bemoaned the fact that her surname was synonymous with one of the minority tribes there. Since the school was located in an area dominated by a majority tribe, the head reported that some locals "could not swallow the idea of having their school run by a foreigner" let alone a woman. Her desire to see the school grow big was therefore, being hampered by the community. For the record, the particular head reported that she actually belonged to the same tribe as the locals, save for her surname.

Another rural female primary school head reported an equally worrying problem. In her effort to improve the financial and material base of the school, she normally visits philanthropists' offices in some towns to source or lobby for donations. However, some of her hosts, who happened to be men,

misconstrued her intentions and status by making suggestive comments and offers which, were in her opinion, morally and professionally weird. Another female primary head bemoaned that she was heading a small non-prestigious school. The school was small in terms of pupil enrolment and staff.

A problem that one would have expected female primary heads to complain vigorously about was the negative impact of a promotion on family life as they indicated in the rated items. The school head argued that she was "*married to a distant husband*". She had to make numerous trips in an effort to maintain the family bond but the economic cost was phenomenal in the process. The last three significant problems relate to the distribution of school resources. These were (a) allocating resources, e.g. teaching material, accommodation and other things (b) incessant thefts of school property, including money. The final but a closely related problem to the above was (c) the high fees paid by pupils. In Zimbabwe, education has been tuition free since independence. At the beginning of 1999, however, new regulations were put in place to charge some fees to all pupils. It was this development that appeared to worry the particular school head.

Problems before entering school administration

Two free response questions sought to solicit information from the female primary school heads on whether women face any problems in their endeavour to enter into school administration. Colonialism was cited as having played a role in the advancement of women. Overt colonial practices and policies discriminated against the education of girls and women. One rural based school head gave a classic epitome of the ripple effects of colonialism when she said:

Long ago, during the colonial era...women could not accrue the number of years to be recognised as experienced, for each time they gave birth they had to resign and rejoin the service as a new appointee.

Because uninterrupted or continuous teaching experience was the prerequisite for advancement into headship, these women teachers found themselves 'lacking experience' hence they were sidelined

when opportunities did arise in the eighties and nineties. My late mother, Agnes, was one such victim. She began her teaching career in 1958 and for the eleven years that followed, she was on and off work as she had to sire her six children. Official records later revealed that she had “begun working” as a teacher in 1970 (her last born was in 1969). She retired in 2002 but never saw the door of school administration despite her massive teaching experience. It is the effect of this culture of marginalisation and oppression of the women folk that has persisted to this day. Thus, female school heads that begun working as teachers before Independence were perceived as inexperienced, prompting the post colonial state to embark on the promulgation of gender equity policies such as affirmative action.

Problems Related to the Head's Character

The most significant weakness the female primary school heads stated was that they were too soft, shy and patient when dealing with staff and pupils. Thirteen (68.2%) of the school heads cited this. They agreed that women were naturally soft and motherly. Given that in school administration they deal with diverse characters, some of these people take advantage and cause further problems for them. The second weakness cited by seven of the female primary school heads related to their fear of male staff members. The seven female primary school heads tended to fear the old and more experienced members of their staff who happened to be men. They feared delegating tasks, let alone discipline these teachers.

A third problem related to the school heads' leadership behaviour. Six of the female primary school heads stated that they were short-tempered. They did not tolerate lazy teachers. They were very open in pointing out errors. In essence, some subordinate staff did not take this up in good spirit, hence friction ensued. To the school heads, openness bred animosity, an aspect that did not cultivate a favourable school climate. Another problem cited by six (31.6%) of the female primary school

heads related to poor time management (Renihan, 1997). There were delays in implementing school plans as well as allocating time to routine administrative duties. This perhaps stem from their unpreparedness for the office (Amodeo & Emislie, 1985; Gwarinda, 1985).

The fifth problem was stated by five of the respondents was poor financial management. The school heads said that they did not have any training in the handling of school funds. Any shortages of such funds, deliberate or otherwise, could result in summary dismissal from the service. In assessing their relationship with the community, four of the female primary school heads reported, as the sixth notable reason that they had failed to cultivate collaborative links with the community. One reason given was that the community itself was indifferent to their authority hence the decision to "go it alone". Probably stemming from this problem, an equal proportion of the female primary school heads also reported that they were not self-motivated. They lacked perseverance due to some unfavourable factors at their work places, according to their explanations. These factors tended to demotivate and placed undue stress on them.

Three problems were ranked in seventh position. Firstly, three (15.8%) of the female primary school heads, reported that gossiping and keeping grudges were their main weaknesses. Gossiping smacks of a weak character. In school administration it becomes dangerous and is unethical. A similar proportion of teachers confirmed in their questionnaire that female primary school heads tended to act on rumours. Secondly, it was the problem of the clash of administrative and instructional roles, an observation revealed by Mutopa *et al* (2006) and (Hoy & Miskel, 1991). Last but not least, three of the female primary school heads reported that their heavy teaching loads and family commitments were adversely affecting their administrative duties. One widowed female primary school head lamented: "*As a widow, I have commitments. I also have to encourage teachers to work hard*". In this case, family commitments negatively affected administrative effectiveness.

Conclusion

In summary, the analysis revealed that female primary school administrators face unique obstacles in their substantive posts in school administration. Organisational factors, colonial legacy and 'the self' were cited. Subordinate teachers posed the single biggest threat to the effectiveness of the female heads. Male teachers were uncooperative and non-supportive. Shortage of funds and materials like books and equipment also affected the schools. The surrounding community was reportedly uncooperative. Other problems mentioned included, lack of power to use school funds by female heads, a conflict of administrative and instructional roles and shortage of transport. Minor, but nevertheless important problems cited included tribalism, verbal abuse, heading of small non-prestigious schools, and high fees paid by pupils and the effects of colonialism.

Finally, the female primary school heads caused problems for themselves by virtue of their personalities. They reported that they were shy to effect decisions and plans. They also feared the old and experienced male teachers. Other problems they caused for themselves included: poor time management, poor financial management, poor links with the community, lack of self-motivation, gossiping, and the clash of administrative and instructional duties. These problems were likely to adversely affect the effectiveness of the female primary school heads in Zimbabwe.

Recommendations

Despite the challenges female school heads face, the study implores governments to continue appointing more women to school leadership positions. This stems from the rarity of females in leadership positions. Concerted effort should also be invested in attempts to change peoples'

attitudes towards females in leadership positions. Perhaps workshops and the print and electronic media could play this role. Such efforts might enhance the administrative aptitude and impact positively on pupil academic performance in the long run.

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