

Are You the First Lady? A Demand for Resilient Leadership Practices for Women Leading Selected South African Rural Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the leadership practices of three women school principals in leading schools in rural contexts. Some rural contexts are confronted with challenging circumstances and multiple deprivations that are unique to them. Women school principals experience unfair gendered expectations which demand them to provide exceptional leadership skills and prove to be resilient amid these contextual factors. The aim was to explore how women in rural school leadership cope with the demand of gendered performance and must prove to be resilient, amid the contextual challenges that rural schools face. Embedded within the social role theory, which argues that society has expectations for individuals to comply with actions that are proportionate to their social roles. These roles may be formed based on race, age, religion, or gender, but for this paper, we focused on gender. Couched within the qualitative interpretive paradigm and using phenomenology as the mode of inquiry, and through individual face-to-face interviews, this paper focused on the lived experiences of three rural primary school female principals. Data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed the resilient leadership strategies used by female school principals in rural areas, with an emphasis on the intricate problems brought on by gendered expectations. The paper recommends a comprehensive strategy for dismantling ingrained gender prejudices in educational leadership including implementing gender-sensitization programs, specialized leadership training, promotion of inclusive leadership styles, community engagement, and advocacy for policy changes.

KEYWORDS

Educational leadership; rural; gender; resilience; social role theory.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South African history and experience have shown us that women have the potential to lead and continue to aspire to take up leadership positions. Haile et al. (2016) indicate that there are still pressing issues that women in leadership face. One of these is the elevated expectations that the public has of women's performance when in leadership. This paper focuses on the resilient leadership practices that women principals in rural schools have to display because of the high expectations from different stakeholders. 'Resilience' is defined by Bhamra et al. (2011) and Witmer (2019) as the strength to withstand challenges meant to disrupt a particular process. Rural schools often face unique challenges, characterized by limited resources, remote locations, and a specific set of socioeconomic deprivations (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). Women school principals not only shoulder the responsibilities inherent in their roles but also navigate the complex terrain of gendered expectations. These expectations can be exacerbated when leading schools in rural contexts, which come with their own set of demanding circumstances. To succeed in the practice of leadership, women school principals are compelled by these dynamics to be resilient in their leadership and prove that they are equal to the task.

As Mpofu (2019) asserts, these gendered roles and patriarchal ideologies are directly linked to gender stereotypes and institutional discrimination experienced by women in educational leadership. This leaves women with two choices, either to remain in subordinate positions and be led by men or seize those leadership positions. On one hand, Kulkarni and Mishra (2021) argue that women in leadership are characterised by feminine attributes, such as excellent communication skills, superior negotiating skills, compassion and understanding towards others. On the other hand, Odell (2020) claims that men in leadership are neither branded nor judged based on their gender qualities, and this creates a divide in terms of how the two genders engage in their leadership roles. For women in educational leadership, it demands that they become assertive, forceful, and resilient. In their study on women in leadership, Wells and Fleshman (2020) concur with this view and claim that women who have achieved leadership are forced by society to stamp their authority and make their presence felt to avoid discrimination, inequality, and lack of societal support. The leadership practices of school principals, particularly in rural contexts, have garnered considerable attention in the field of education. Women in educational leadership positions often confront gendered expectations and biases that require them to exhibit resilience and exceptional leadership skills as opposed to their male counterparts. It is against this background that this paper investigated resilient leadership practices of women in rural primary school leadership.

Problem Statement

Societal conventions regard leadership positions as a masculine domain, and everyday women have to constantly prove that they are worthy and suitable for the leadership positions they hold. Haile et al. (2016) attribute this phenomenon to gender stereotyping of women because of their leadership positions. Chance (2022) indicates that women in leadership face the challenge of tokenism and have to consistently prove themselves in their leadership skills.

Although there are other salient factors such as age, race, and marital status, however, these women in leadership may be labelled as gender or affirmative action token appointees, and have to constantly double their leadership efforts, as compared to their male counterparts. Women in school leadership often face the challenge of having their authority questioned and not trusted (Bodalina & Mestry, 2022). The authors further argue that women, particularly those leading schools are frequently exposed and subjected to non-compliance from both their male and female colleagues. It is against this background that this paper investigated resilient leadership practices of primary school women leaders. The purpose was to explore how women in rural school leadership navigate the dual challenges of gendered performance expectations and the contextual complexities that rural schools face.

Research Question

The paper responded to the following question:

How do women in rural school leadership practise resilient leadership?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This paper reviewed literature on the following themes: perceptions of women in rural school leadership, and gendered expectations in education leadership. These themes are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Perceptions about women in rural school leadership

A school leader is arguably the single most impactful factor in the school, because of their primary and secondary influence over all the school's operations and functions (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). Findings from a study by Evans and Pfister (2021) on women in sports leadership indicate that women in leadership positions are subjected to gender stereotyping which often results in leadership fatigue and other emotional challenges. These are the emotional challenges that lead women in leadership to be labeled as lacking in leadership skills (Mollel & Tshabangu, 2014). The authors further state that in rural contexts, women in school leadership still face opposition from patriarchal environments as leadership seems to favour the male gender. As observed by Hill et al., (2016), generally, in a rural context, men are brought up to be rulers and leaders who are assertive and dominating, while the same would demand resilience for women to withstand any opposition. One of the findings in a study by Shah (2023) on navigating gender stereotypes by educational leaders, was that there was a dominance of gender stereotypes that placed school leadership within the masculine realm in a patriarchal environment. The author further found that in rural Pakistan, the educational leadership system is fraught with gender biases which makes female school principals establish their authority through struggling and fighting. Aziz et al., (2017) speculate that these perceptions against women in school leadership may be attributed to culture, background, social status, and gender stereotypes which are discussed in the following section.

Gender stereotypes in school leadership

Women in most societal spheres, and particularly in school leadership are often victims of gender stereotyping as South Africa, a developing country, has a history of patriarchy (Mshweshwe, 2020). The author further states that with its strong patriarchal system, South Africa has social structures that promote women's oppression and exploitation in the public and private sectors. In a Kenyan study on the challenges of women principals, Hockett (2021) found that culture assumes that women are not able to lead schools as well as men, even when they have the same educational qualifications. Hoyt and Burnette (2013) and Kailiti (2018) assert that the gender stereotypes regarding women in school leadership are that they are expected to be graceful, compassionate, and passive while men are expected to be controlling, commanding and strict. According to Lopez and Rugano's (2018) study on educational leadership in post-colonial contexts, one of the deep-rooted stereotypes is that leadership roles are appropriate for men. Although women in school leadership have displayed much commitment to women's emancipation, Mutekwe and Khumalo (2023) argue that women in school leadership are still disadvantaged by the male-controlled hegemonic predispositions which are prevalent in most African rural educational societies. In Tanzania, it was found that gender stereotyping of women in school leadership is common in rural areas. This is confirmed in Mbepera's (2023) study on women leadership in rural Tanzania, that some of the stereotypes included women being relevant for teaching rather than taking up leadership positions and dependent on men to lead.

Ways to mitigate gender stereotypes against women in leadership

One of the ways to mitigate gender stereotyping of women in school leadership is to do away with gendered expectations. Heilman et al. (2024) suggest that some strategies for deterring gender stereotypes in educational leadership include reducing the mere use of gender stereotypes when appointing individuals into school leadership positions. Secondly, this can be achieved through preventing male gendering of positions. Thirdly, by homogenising assessment standards when promoting individuals, and lastly demanding accountability for decisions regarding the appointment of individuals into school leadership positions. These views are corroborated by Lawson et al. (2022), who indicate that in managerial discourses, appointing women into leadership positions constitutes the mitigation of gender stereotypes. Women in school leadership need to be empowered to be resilient. Empowered leaders are likely to make a positive impact in the institutions they lead without being compared to their male counterparts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is underpinned by the social role theory by Eagly and Wood (1991). This theory highlights the causal impact of gender roles from people's beliefs and expectations about the performance and conduct that is appropriate for each gender. It is a sociological and psychological framework that seeks to explain and understand human behavior within the context of societal roles, expectations, and norms. It posits that individuals occupy various social

roles in society, and these roles come with implicit or explicit expectations of how individuals in those roles should behave. These roles are often defined by characteristics such as gender, age, race, or occupation, and they influence how people perceive themselves and others, as well as the behaviors they exhibit. The social role theory offers a lens through which to examine how women in educational leadership practice their leadership skills in response to the societal roles and expectations placed on them because of their gender.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed an interpretive qualitative paradigm using a phenomenological approach as a research design. Leadership practices are lived experiences of these women school principals. Women school principals are faced with a constant struggle to prove to the stakeholders that they are equal to the leadership task by being resilient in their leadership. Data were generated through individual face-to-face interviews with the three women school principals who were from the same rural education circuit. During the interviewing process, participants described their lived experiences while bringing to light the hidden meanings of those experiences through their interpretations (Aguas, 2022). The interviews were made up of open-ended questions which allowed the participants to respond freely to the questions posed to them. To interview the school principals, we obtained permission from the circuit manager as the gatekeeper, and we also obtained ethical clearance from our institution. The three school principals were purposively selected by virtue of their gender, positions and the purpose of this paper. They were the relevant participants to respond to the interview questions.

Table 1.

Profile of the research participants and research sites

Participants and schools	Number of learners in the school	Qualifications	Age	Number of years as a teacher	Number of years as school principal
Principal 1 School 1	345	M.Ed.	43	23	3
Principal 2 School 2	456	B.Ed. Hons, M.Ed. in progress.	45	24	7
Principal 3 School 3	569	M.Ed., PhD in progress	50	28	8

Keys: M.Ed. – Master of Education, B.Ed. Hons – Bachelor of Education Honours, PhD – Doctor of Philosophy

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through thematic analysis, we were able to identify patterns and emerging themes by highlighting similarities, and any interconnectedness and relationships between participants' responses. We employed data triangulation, which is defined by Denzin (2012) using data from different people at various times in different spaces. We ensured the trustworthiness of the

findings through member-checking by soliciting feedback from our participants about the data we had generated.

A brief demographic outlook of the participants and the research sites is provided in Table 1. The three schools are primary schools which are located in one rural education district and have been purposively selected since they are all headed by women principals. It is worth noting that the following pseudonyms are used in this paper to identify participants.

Principal 1 to Principal 3 – P1 to P3

School 1 to School 3 – S1 to S3

FINDINGS

Through the verbatim quotes of the participants, the sections below present the data findings according to the themes as they emerged from the data. The themes are the experiences of women and factors that enable gendered expectations, and they are presented and discussed in the following section.

Experiences of women

The participants were asked to shed light on some of the experiences in their leadership positions, which demanded resilience and how they circumvented those challenges. It can also be observed from the data that women in leadership were always compared to men. For women to survive this comparison, there is a certain level of strength that is required. These were the views shared by the participants:

Among the many things, when I arrived here the school was dilapidated, and I needed to have a turnaround strategy, each time there was a delivery in the school, there would a burglary taking place, of which I learned that was not the case with the previous male principal. P1

The community and the school governing body had made it clear that they wanted a male principal to lead the school, and since I assumed, I have had to constantly prove to them and to myself that I am worthy to be a school principal here. P2

The way things are, I have two choices, either to “man up” or go home. I mean things are not what they seem. Sometimes it is your staff undermining your authority, sometimes it is the governing body expressing their lack of trust on you because of your gender, it is a lot, but I have been soldiering on, it has been eight years now. P3

Emerging from the data is that the strength of women in school leadership is constantly tested. It can also be gleaned from the data that there is always a leadership comparison of women against men. Women in school leadership must survive each day at school owing to the subtle yet constant comparison they endure from their colleagues and stakeholders. The social role theory determines that there are expectations that are placed by society on individuals based on diverse factors. In this instance, gender seems to be the one factor that sets women in leadership against men. Drawing from the data, Heilman and Caleo (2018) assert that this type of behaviour constitutes gender discrimination as it is prescriptive of gender stereotypes

which seem to impose social penalties on women in leadership. Supporting this view is Goyal et al., (2023) who indicate that through these experiences, women in school leadership build up resilience, not only as a strength but as a coping strategy against the unrealistic expectations imposed on them. Resulting from these experiences are physical and psychological health issues for women, which may include an array of mental disorders, depression, and burn-out as a corollary to the gendered expectations placed on them.

Factors that enable gendered expectations

Responding to the question about factors that lead to gendered expectations from the voices of the participants, it emerged that culture and background have a role to play in women in leadership having to display resilient leadership practices to survive the school leadership environment. These were the participants' responses:

The school is situated in a deep rural area, and I do not think they (the community) were ready for a woman principal. You know how important cultural values are in areas like these, according to me, as much as I respect my community, there is just a very thin line between discrimination and practising culture here. P1

...and also, I think it boils down to how we have been socialised as black people, that women are inferior to men, somehow. So, when we get appointed to leadership positions, we have to be strong, even if you are not a strong individual, but you have to be, here, so that you can survive all the stones thrown at you. P2

The only survival tip I use is to just behave like a man, otherwise, I would not be able to command the respect I do. We come from a background that taught us that men are leaders and women are followers, but that is changing. P3

Generally, in developing countries, women, as opposed to men are suppressed through cultural expectations, and society becomes divided into two groups of superiors and subordinates (Kyei, 2019). It can be discerned from the data that a particular leadership strategy needs to be adopted by women in school leadership to survive these gender stereotypes. The researched schools are situated in rural contexts which are commonly notorious for patriarchal tendencies. The insurgence in the appointment rate of women into leadership positions seems to challenge the traditional role of men as the only species capable of leading, particularly in rural contexts. Data reveals that culture, background, and socialisation are enablers of these societal gender expectations. This is in resonance with the social role theory which suggests that each culture, holds expectations for ideals of the male and female species. Such expectations are shaped by the values of society. The survival for women in leadership is the practice of resilience in their leadership strategies.

Lessons learned from resilient leadership practices

Responding to the question about lessons learned in the practice of resilient leadership, it emerged from the data that one has to be a strong individual to survive the gender dynamics in educational leadership. These were the responses from the participants:

In my case it does not have to be times of adversity to be resilient, it is a constant, daily struggle. In my first year as a school principal, I nearly quit. But I have since learned that with collaboration, and emotional intelligence, you survive all these gendered expectations or whatever magic people expect from us. P1

Well in the seven years I have been in this school, I have noticed that even female principals who are in the townships or urban schools have to be strong and resilient in how they lead schools because they are also not trusted as women and there is so much that is expected of them, so, for me it is a women struggle. P2

I have learned that it stems from a certain lack of trust in women as leaders. That is why there are so many unfair expectations in terms of leadership from women managers because society has never groomed or acknowledged women as leaders, but I think, in this day and age, we are slowly winning the battle. P3

The practice of effective resilient leadership in women in school leadership is tightly linked to understanding community leadership and an elevated level of emotional intelligence. Waxman (2022) indicates that resilience is important in developing leadership competence and in raising the energies and level-headedness required to meet the demands of the position and the expectations. The data reveals that for women in school leadership, resilience in school leadership is an ongoing fight. Waxman (2022) further states that while focusing on these unfairly placed demands on them, women in school leadership also need to build balanced and sound professional and collegial relationships. These escalating demands and expectations can be draining and isolating.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings demonstrate the resilient leadership strategies used by women school principals in rural areas, with an emphasis on the intricate problems brought on by gendered expectations. Based on the social role theory, the study used qualitative interpretative approaches to explore the lived experiences of three female principals, exposing a complex interaction between societal and cultural elements that shaped their leadership practice. The data reveals insight into the complicated relationships between societal expectations, cultural values, and the resilient leadership techniques needed to successfully negotiate these intricacies. Stories were told of situations in which women's fortitude proved to be useful in demonstrating their ability when faced with obstacles such as crumbling infrastructure and opposition from the local population. Socialization and cultural norms became significant determinants that required women leaders to adopt tactics to negotiate the complex web of gender preconceptions. To combat cultural gender preconceptions, women must embrace specialized leadership styles, such as "acting like a man." This discussion brings attention to the patriarchal tendencies prevalent in rural contexts, challenging the traditional role of men as the sole leaders.

Data reveals that women in school leadership have always been compared to men and that the expectations placed on women leaders result in stress, possible mental health

problems, and burnout, which affects not just the leaders themselves but also the general efficacy of leadership in rural schools. Gender stereotypes and gender roles are key concepts in social role theory. For this paper, it is these gender stereotypes or beliefs about women that play a role in perpetuating the division of social roles disadvantaging women's effective leadership practice. The participants emphasize the daily challenges of building resilience, highlighting the value of emotional intelligence and teamwork in negotiating gendered norms. The fact that female principals in townships and urban schools experience comparable difficulties, highlights how ubiquitous gender biases are. Unfair expectations stem from a basic reason identified as the lack of trust in women as leaders. Emerging data are consistent with Waxman's (2022) assertion that resilience is essential to the development of leadership competence. The findings of this study shed light on the complex dynamics of gendered expectations in school leadership in this setting by examining how women in rural school leadership conduct resilient leadership. Insights gained from the participants' experiences contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women in educational leadership, paving the way for targeted interventions and systemic changes to foster a more equitable and supportive environment.

In their study on gender and educational leadership, Weinstein et al. (2023) found that gender is the strongest variable related to leadership practice. Resonating with the research findings, the authors further state that the type of challenges women in school leadership endure are linked to their gender identities. School leadership is still a male-dominated terrain, and women are still encountering barriers. Ayyildiz and Banoglu (2024) state that there are structural, cultural, and organisational barriers that continue to prevent women from achieving academic leadership positions within educational contexts. This assertion concurs with the data findings which reveal that women still have to exercise patience coupled with resilience to be successful leaders in this patriarchal environment.

Recommendations and conclusion

The study's conclusions make it imperative to suggest cooperative initiatives aimed at dismantling and reducing ingrained gender prejudices in educational leadership. A holistic strategy is recommended to successfully address these gendered expectations. Primarily, it is essential to establish gender-sensitization programs. These initiatives ought to focus on a range of stakeholders, such as staff members, community leaders, and school governing bodies, while also raising awareness of gender equality and the skills that women bring to leadership positions. Second, initiatives for specialized leadership training are desperately needed. These courses ought to have a strong emphasis on emotional intelligence, resilience, and effective communication to provide women leaders with the tools they need to deal with the complex issues that come with their responsibilities in both urban and rural educational environments.

This entails aggressively advocating for leadership styles that respect diversity and go against established gender stereotypes. Educational environments can become more egalitarian and supportive of women leaders by promoting inclusion. Another important tactic

that comes to light is community engagement. To promote a deeper knowledge of the abilities and contributions of women leaders, local communities must be engaged. Through this involvement, preconceived notions may be dispelled and a more accepting atmosphere that is supportive of women in leadership roles may be established. Finally, it is critical to advocate for policy changes. To bring about systemic change, measures that target gender biases in current policies and advance equal opportunities for women in leadership positions in education are crucial. The recommended strategies provide a comprehensive framework for fostering gender equality, empowering women in educational leadership, and creating more inclusive educational settings.

This research study was limited to a single rural education district in South Africa and the findings could not be generalised to other rural districts in the wider population. Building on the limitations, we recommend further research on resilient leadership practices of women in school leadership, from semi-urban and urban contexts, thus enabling future researchers to explore a more comparative system.

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