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## Female principals leading at disadvantaged schools in Johannesburg, South Africa

**Bhaigiavathie Naidoo and Juliet Perumal**

### Abstract

South African democracy precipitated many changes and excavated many dormant issues, one of which was equity in the workplace. This extended into the sphere of education - a sector in which women were rarely seen in leadership positions. Following the implementation of several redress policies, women have managed to penetrate the gender equity barrier and assume leadership positions in schools. This article reports on a study that investigated how female principals experience leadership at schools in disadvantaged communities in the Gauteng East District, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Nesting itself within a qualitative research paradigm, the study explored ways in which women principals navigate gender and cultural challenges and highlights how stereotypes shape their leadership styles. Observations, field notes and semi-structured interviews were used to elicit data. These findings provide insight into the following themes: leadership styles; the principal as a curriculum leader; socio-economic profile of the school community and its impact on curriculum; balancing family and school responsibilities; and stakeholder participation and support.

### Keywords

Disadvantaged communities, female principals, leadership, South Africa

### Introduction and background

Prior to 1994, education departments in South Africa subscribed to apartheid policies such as those enshrined in The Bantu Education Act No. 47 of 1953 and the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. These policies legitimised the unequal allocation of infrastructural and financial resources amongst different racial groups and genders and ran parallel with traditional gender stereotypes, which supported race, culture and ethnic discrimination against women (Mahlase, 1997) Women remained in subordinate positions as teachers in schools whilst these policies provided fertile grounds for men to aspire to positions of leadership (Kiamba, 2008).

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In line with the Bill of Rights and the Constitution of South Africa, The Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 was enacted to achieve equity in the workplace through the implementation of affirmative action by 'promoting the employment and promotion of individuals from previously disadvantaged backgrounds' (Government Gazette, 1996, No. 17678). Although there have been notable policy efforts to address these imbalances; in practice only a small number of women have currently been appointed to leadership positions in the education sector.

Statistics obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education in December 2012 showed that in the Gauteng Province (where the research was conducted) only 727 of the 2164 employees occupying principal posts were women (Reynecke, 2012). Those women who had managed to shatter the glass ceiling face many challenges and demands in leadership, requiring them to possess a range of attributes and skills to deal with these challenges (Smith, 2008: 13).

South Africa is referred to as a rainbow nation because it comprises a mosaic of cultures, backgrounds and communities. There are communities that are economically privileged and those that are disadvantaged. The experiences of female principals exercising leadership in the contexts of different schools are therefore themselves also different.

The following questions guided this minor Masters in Education (Naidoo, 2013):

- What are the challenges facing women principals in leadership positions?
- How does leading a school in a disadvantaged community affect curriculum leadership?
- What leadership styles do these principals adopt?
- How does the position of being a female leader affect their personal and family lives?

## **Literature review**

Despite an increase in the number of studies conducted on women in school leadership, there is awareness that these studies have gained the attention of a limited audience only (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011: 26). Klein et al. (2007: 103–105) maintain that the dearth of consistent and similar information on women's formal leadership positions is challenging and therefore women are, de facto, the best source of insight about their experiences. This dearth of research on women in leadership stems from women's experiences being reported through an androcentric/male-dominated lens.

For years women have been excluded from public presence, economically exploited and forced into motherhood. Culturally, family responsibilities remained the preoccupation of women whilst men sought paid work. As women began to climb the corporate and government ladders, striking a balance between family life and leadership roles became a problem. Van der Westhuizen (1997:545) asserts that because of their gender the internal and external challenges that women encounter are often misconstrued as women's ineptitude to assume leadership positions.

Although there are convincing grounds for equal representation of women in leadership, progress towards achieving this goal has been slow. There is often scepticism as to whether women are indeed, 'leadership material'. The observation was made at the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, that women were significantly marginalised in most government ranks (BPA:1995).

Prior to 1994, gender discrimination was also evident in the South African education sector. Different subject specialisations offered to teachers, salary scales of educators and the dismissal of married women or women who intended to marry characterised discrimination in the teaching profession. The profession therefore became problematic with regard to gender equality. Jansen

(2007:4) contended that South African women were still struggling to come to terms with their identity in communities. The suitability of women as leaders has often been questioned, because Southern African society is traditionally patriarchal. In her address to the September 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, Dr Dlamini-Zuma lamented: 'Women in South Africa are definitely not free. The majority live . . . as effective minors subject to the authority of a male relative' She was herself a minor, answerable to all men in the family, including her sons.

Stereotypical cultural expectations and prejudicial beliefs have restricted women's opportunities to lead. Kanjere (2008:2) quotes a Northern Sotho proverb, 'Tsa etwa ke ya tshadi pele di wela leopeng'. The English translation reads: 'if a leader is a woman, disaster is bound to happen'. If a woman assumes leadership in a community that propagates such a belief, she is already prejudiced before assuming that leadership.

Furthermore, the effects of Apartheid on education cannot be ignored. The Apartheid legislated Bantu Education Act of 1954 discriminated against the appointment of women to management positions. Gardiner, Enomoto and Grogan (in Klein et al. 2007: 116) claim that race coupled with gender contributed to women's under-representation in leadership positions in Nigeria and South Africa. Chisholm (2001: 391) suggests that women's lack of confidence in their ability to lead stems from race and gender issues. This has been exacerbated by the resistance women experience in having their power respected and accepted. Bratton et al. (2004: 191) agree that women leaders are often criticised by their subordinates because of patriarchal stereotypes. These views predispose women into thinking that they are incompetent to assume leadership positions. According to Snyder and Tadesse (1995: 44) the progress of women into leadership and management positions was previously deterred not for lack of ambition or motivation but because of family commitments and preconceived social expectations. They surmise that there is a pessimistic anticipation for women who aspire to leadership positions. Women therefore have the added burden of dispelling this anticipation in addition to proving their capability as effective leaders.

Feminist consciousness has given rise to criticism of gender discrimination. Feminist theorists campaign for female rights and have denounced patriarchy, stereotyping, unequal pay and oppression. Feminist theorists and activists have vigorously promoted social justice for women by exposing how race, class, ethnicity and age disenfranchise women (Perumal, 2007). For example, radical feminist theory attributes women's oppression to the patriarchal system; socialist feminist theory attributes economic and power benefits amassed by men as the reason why women were classified as working class. Cultural feminism supports feminine morality and values as advantageous to society (Soudien et al., 1999: 457). These theories support agitation for deep structural and cultural changes as a means of dismantling the system of patriarchal oppression.

According to Camerer (2000: 12), 'those women who break through the glass ceiling have succeeded either because someone gave them the opportunity to test their abilities, or they were courageous, or visionary, or took a view that they will redefine who they are in society'. She reaffirms that for women to reach top positions they have to be determined, dedicated, endure challenges and have a good network structure. Kanjere (2008: 5) states that if women leaders are empowered they can strengthen the lives of their communities through the ideal of *ubuntu* (an Nguni Bantu term which can be roughly translated as 'human kindness').

Earley and Weindling (2004) contend that in assuming leadership positions women tend to subscribe to horizontal relational leadership postures that are laced with the wellbeing of their staff and students. Many women learn different leadership styles by being curriculum coaches and instructors and also from their knowledge of teaching. Oplatka (2006) advises that curriculum leaders must also be able to shift leadership styles to accommodate different situations.

**Table 1.** Biographical details of participants.

School*	Participant*	Age	Race	Marital status
Daffodil (High)	Annah	40	Black	Single
Zinniah (High)	Busisiwe	47	Black	Single
Sunflower (Primary)	Cynthia	60	Black	Married

\*Pseudonyms have been used for the schools and the principals.

## Research methodology

A qualitative research methodology, which is exploratory and descriptive, was used to understand the meaning the participants made of their world and their experiences (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997: 3). Purposive sampling facilitated the identification of appropriate participants and events. The three participants were female principals of schools in disadvantaged communities: two were principals at high schools and one was principal of a primary school. Table 1 summarises their biographical details.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews, observations and field notes. The interviews were conducted at the school sites, after school hours over a period of three months. The interviews elicited information on the participants' biographical information, their conceptions of leadership and curriculum and their experiences of leading in disadvantaged communities. An observation schedule was used to shadow principals, with a minimum of three hours spent on each observation. This involved observing and documenting morning briefings, one management meeting and one staff meeting. The data were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis, which is helpful in making sense of social and cultural discourses and attendant power dynamics.

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Education's Ethics Committee; the Provincial Department of Education; and the director of the schools' district office.

## Research contexts

The schools in this research are located in disadvantaged communities. According to Herselman, a disadvantaged group or community is characterised by a lack of resources, and the barriers that it faces. These barriers may vary from group to group. Rural areas are often categorised as disadvantaged because they have the same deprivation characteristics as disadvantaged communities (Herselman, 2003: 950).

People from disadvantaged communities invariably lack the means to meet their basic needs, such as sufficient food to maintain good health, a healthy place to live and affordable services; and they suffer from not being treated with dignity and respect. Meece and Eccles (2010: 318) maintain that individuals in these communities are subjected to weak social systems, have no or only poor role models, and few or no opportunities to improve themselves. Educational attainment in such communities is influenced by socio-cultural factors such as ethnicity, economic status, and parental education. The term 'disadvantaged' was previously associated with economic factors such as unemployment and income (Perumal 2009); recently, however, it has also been used as an indicator of people's confidence levels in terms of their ability to participate effectively and efficiently in society (Price-Robertson, 2011: 10–11).

The sites where the research was conducted bear testimony to what characterises disadvantaged communities. Informal settlements and low cost houses surround Daffodil High. Houses in the community do not have electricity. Although the main road is tarred, the roads leading from the school to the learners' homes are rutted and potholed and, in many instances, not much wider than footpaths. It is difficult for vehicles to use these roads and so residents walk long distances to access public transport. The roads are strewn with rubbish. Youths and adults are a common sight on the roads, denoting unemployment in the area. The makeshift houses are typically built from material such as metal sheets, old timber, cardboard, plastic and car doors. Stones, pumpkins and tyres are generally placed on top of the roofs to hold them down. On rainy days, water drips through holes and partitions, making habitation extremely uncomfortable. These buildings accommodate up to sixteen family members in one small room. There is seldom enough food and families rely on food parcels and second-hand clothes from social services and religious organisations. Daffodil High is sandwiched between three taverns with the result that learners are tempted to consume liquor, although many are under the legal age to do so. Illegal drugs are also a major problem in the area. Police often burn down 'dagga'(marijuana) plants, but are largely unsuccessful in combating the problem.

Daffodil High also experienced challenges within the school. The municipality often disconnects the electricity because of unpaid bills. Grass behind the classrooms was uncut; the toilets reeked of urine and learners used them as smoking hideouts. Broken windows were a common sight. There was insufficient furniture for teachers and learners. The school desks had holes and some were broken. In some classes learners sat on oil drums, paint tins or their school bags. The floors had holes and the chalkboards were devoid of a writing surface. The ceilings in four of the classrooms were hanging loose, posing a safety threat to learners.

Zinniah High is situated in a rural area bordering Mpumalanga and Gauteng Provinces. It is a small community located a considerable distance from the nearest town, with only one road into the township. The community is plagued by homelessness, hunger, unemployment, substance abuse and illiteracy. Residents live in informal and low cost houses and the community lacks proper transport. Access to electricity is a luxury and the social grant that the majority of the residents receive is eagerly awaited every month. The area has one community centre, but lacks recreational facilities. There is no library for learners to access reading material.

Many learners come from child-headed families. Learners rely heavily on the school nutrition programme and often the meal they have at school is the only meal for the day. Livestock roams the streets. Men are usually seen walking aimlessly or standing around, chatting. Members of the community are often in need of health care and social assistance. Many are single parents or guardians. Zinniah High is constructed of brick and mortar and also has mobile classrooms. Two classrooms were burnt during a storm; others were in need of repair.

Sunflower Primary is located in a marginally economically better-off area. The roads around the school are tarred and there is access to the local transport. However, houses are old and dilapidated. Substance abuse, HIV/Aids and unemployment are rife. Two taverns are located on the same road as the school and so children are exposed to alcohol at an early age. The teenage pregnancy rate is high. Young mothers often leave their children in the care of their grandmothers, who themselves are in need of medical and frail care. There are also many child-headed families. Government social grants are the only source of income. Learners are also on the school's nutrition programme.

## Data analysis

### *Exercising various leadership style*

Earley and Weindling (2004) maintain that female leadership tends to be interactive, relational and predisposed to power-sharing, learning-focused, authentic and moral. Generally, women leaders prefer a horizontal style of leading, which favours an ethic of communication and information sharing through networks or webs; and women use power to strengthen relationships. Their maternal skills are often used to support, encourage and protect their learners.

The three principals claimed that they employ many leadership styles; and that the style chosen was dependent on the context and situation in which they found themselves, as suggested in the following excerpts:

I'm using all styles of leadership. It depends upon the situation if there are matters that need democratic vision, I consult with the SMT but in cases of emergency, I apply an autocratic leadership style. (Annah)

... you cannot say you adhere to only one leadership style you are a democratic leader, at the end of the day there are situations that wants you to be an autocratic leader when you give instructions. (Busisiwe)

It's a combination... but still democracy. (Cynthia)

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) contend that there is either a subtle or an obvious leadership style that women may employ in their routine, which may be different to that of men. Busisiwe and Annah said that policy compliance necessitates an autocratic leadership style. Late arrival of teachers, teaching and attending to class on time were non-negotiable requirements. These principals led by ensuring that they were punctual in arriving for all school activities. This bears testimony to O'Sullivan and West-Burnham's statement that learner-centred leaders lead by example (2011: 46). Busisiwe emerged as being very stern but she indicated that her teachers and staff are welcome to discuss any issue with her: 'Always when you need my assistance my office door is open, come and ask'.

An invitational transformative leadership style was evident during the staff meetings and briefings. The leaders provided stimulating environments and emphasised vision building and established commitment to agreed goals. Such a leadership style is used to empower staff members to lead and be responsible. It was one method of empowering the schools' stakeholders. Busisiwe also employed a laissez-faire style of leadership by entrusting teachers to run with projects. The necessary resources were made available, but reporting back was necessary.

Cynthia exercised an ethical leadership style. She exhibited humaneness and compassion toward her learners and community. This leadership style of the principals empowered their stakeholders and encouraged collaboration and dialogue.

A strong moral and spiritual Christian ethic characterised all the principals' leadership. Cynthia said that cultural sensitivity was predominant at her school and prayer was an important part of the school's culture. Cynthia began the school day with hymn singing at assembly and quoted inspirational Biblical scriptures. This supports the claim by Klein et al. that women principals of African descent usually include a spiritual aspect in their leadership (Klein et al., 2007: 116). Busisiwe talked about being prayerful and reminded learners that [when] '... you are a prayerful person, you keep on praying'. She indicated that she is a Christian and she prays very hard and is very involved in her local church. She also encourages learners to pray before their examinations. The

attributes of these participants align with the view of Cranwell-Ward et al. (2002: 243) who state that inspiration is drawn from spirituality. Eagly and Carli (2007) agree that women are perceived to be more religious and empathetic towards the less fortunate than men.

Like Busisiwe, Annah is also an active member in her church. She indicated that her father was a priest and was very supportive of her schooling. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011: 14) observed that women leaders use their personal strengths and their spirituality to understand the 'world' of others.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) also found that women principals relate spirituality to the way they model behaviour and inspire others. It helps them to explore others' worlds because the lives of children are directed to the social context in which they develop, not just the school. Watching children develop is motivational for women principals.

These principals also displayed nurturing in their association with learners. For example, during the matriculation camp Annah approached local companies to supply toiletries for the girls. Similarly, Busisiwe decided to stay over in the matriculation camp of 2011 with her learners to ensure that feminine hygiene and the health needs of the learners were catered for. Like Annah, she also took the initiative to approach local companies to secure toiletries for her learners. Furthermore, she ensured that surplus from the school nutrition programme was sent to child-headed homes and homes where parents were unemployed. During this study she was observed on the road in the morning, urging learners to get to school punctually. This observation confirms that the gender context of the workplace does make a difference in leadership styles as Klein et al. (2007: 116) contended. They claimed that women tend to prefer relational leadership and take a more personal interest in the workplace than men. Women are also more inclined to engage in one-to-one contact.

Traditionally, women are expected to nurture and provide nourishment for children. This emerged as a strength rather than a weakness amongst the participants. In October 2011, when a tornado struck the area where Daffodil High is located, Annah took it upon herself to establish if learners from her school were accounted for and took a roll call of all learners affected in the area. This is consistent with the tenets of cultural feminism, which recognises that women lead by their caring and ethical nature.

Cynthia showed concern for her learners and their well-being. This was observed during the shadowing component of the research when she enquired if learners had food to eat at home; she reminded learners to thank God for the food they eat; and she enquired about the health of their grandmothers.

### *The principal as a curriculum leader*

According to Cornbleth curriculum is a product of social activity that is influenced by contextual factors inside and outside the classroom (Cornbleth, 1990). Content and learning activities in the curriculum must be related and have significance for learners and teachers. Glatthorn et al. (2006) state that the initial step in curriculum leadership is to acquire an in-depth understanding of the norms, patterns and structures that hinder or make curriculum change possible. In this context, the school governing body, made up of teachers, parents and co-opted members with specific skills and expertise, can provide help to the school. Van der Mescht and Tyala (2008) maintained that curriculum leadership must include the entire school community in a shared vision.

Cunningham and Cordeiro (2003: 218–219) stated that curriculum is 'the school's philosophy, what a curriculum looks like and putting the vision into practice'. The three principals' understanding of curriculum was biased towards academic programmes, syllabus completion and school-based assessment. Cynthia responded by saying '... first you got to understand the curriculum and

department knowledge on child psychology and then know how the child learns . . . you can plan your curriculum until you reach the optimum'. In her view curriculum leadership translates to implementing whatever new techniques are learnt and brought to the institution, whereas curriculum management is about managing what is already planned. In order to manage the curriculum she found it necessary to attend courses, she discussed issues with the School Management Team (SMT) and felt she needed to be knowledgeable about national curriculum issues. This conception of curriculum aligns with the claim by Glatthorn et al. that curriculum leaders must acquaint themselves with the structures, content, discourses and hierarchies in curriculum (Glatthorn et al., 2006: 258).

According to Annah, curriculum management entailed ensuring that there were pace-setters and a management plan to monitor syllabus completion and workloads per educator, according to national departmental policy. She elaborated that it was about strategies to curb teacher absenteeism. Annah maintained that a curriculum leader is one who develops others, and exposes educators to new methods in curriculum and gives others an opportunity to lead. This was observed in the morning briefing, in which teachers responsible for various aspects of the curriculum were required to present short reports. For example, a member of the SMT reported that the noise level during change of lessons was extremely high. She suggested that teachers, instead of learners, should move from class to class. This was discussed, there was a vote on the suggestion, and, having been accepted, it was implemented. Annah also gave support staff the opportunity to report on pertinent issues. For example, a member of the maintenance staff reported the frustration the cleaning staff experienced during the weekends. He said that such opportunities to speak made them feel part of the school. Duignan (2006) claimed that curriculum leadership involves issues of communication and consultation and so an emphasis on interpersonal skills, relationships and teamwork is necessary, because they have an effect on the curriculum.

The Curriculum Management Model (CMM) is a management tool that was introduced in the Gauteng East District by the District Director in 2009 to monitor and track syllabus completion and school-based assessment. It has levels of monitoring, development and support built into it so that different levels of management can ascertain how much of the curriculum had been covered and the level of competency per grade and per class. The participants relied heavily on the CMM to inform their curriculum leadership.

Each participant indicated some notion of curriculum leadership. Although the participants performed other curriculum leadership roles such as collaboration, convening developmental workshops, managing learner welfare and resolving conflict at their schools, only one of the participants considered this as being part of curriculum leadership. For example, one of the participants said, 'I just tell them that we are here for the learners we are not here to make friends or to be a family'. In making this strong statement she had performed the curriculum leadership role of ensuring the value and behaviour required to perform the task of teaching within the school context.

Furthermore, paying attention to belief systems and values (for instance, initiation of boys of Zinniah High), encouraging positive behaviour and initiatives (community involvement in cultivating flowers at Daffodil High), and catering for basic needs (ensuring nutrition for learners at home at Sunflower Primary) also constitute curriculum leadership. Joseph (2011: 141) contends that the curriculum is affected by influences from outside the school and encompasses all the activities within the school that supports the holistic development of the learners. Curriculum leadership involves all stakeholders of the school.

### *Socio-economic context*

The social stigma associated with disadvantaged communities has manifested itself in these schools. When asked the question what makes this a disadvantaged community, Annah replied, 'I would think it is the standard of living, around here. We got people who are staying in shacks, and those people staying in Reconstruction and Development Projects and the level of education . . .'. Busisiwe classified the community as disadvantaged because most of the parents were illiterate. She stated that 'the community is not enlightened. We had a problem with these classes, so the contractor decided to bring skilled workers . . . but, he was rebuked and told, 'you can't bring people here, you know we're not working!'" In elaborating the situation Busisiwe said that unemployment was so rife that the community would seize any opportunity to find paid work. This confirms the view of Mayer (2003: 3) that people see themselves as disadvantaged when they are refused access to autonomy, incentives, self-respect and responsibility, a community of support, health, education, information, employment, capital and support systems.

When Cynthia was asked if Sunflower Primary is located in a disadvantaged community she replied that because there is a shopping complex and a taxi rank close to the school, she would not label the community as disadvantaged. In retrospect she said ' . . . but unemployment makes it a disadvantaged area'. She indicated that learners lived in shacks, and did not receive support at home and were left in the care of their grandmothers; hence the change in her response.

The reality of schools for located in disadvantaged communities is that they have to contend with a challenging external environment. Busisiwe said that these conditions have a negative impact on the curriculum because they do not contribute to academic stimulation, and do not support the aspirations of learners. Ornstein et al. suggested that a balance between the school, home and broader society would encourage the moral growth of a child. The school must commit to a higher purpose in addition to promoting academic grades (Ornstein et al., 2007: 188, 235).

Busisiwe said that parents are unaware of their children's whereabouts; they did not know when their children wrote examinations or what time they needed to go to school. This is because some parents were employed as domestic workers and miners away from home. They remained at their places of work and only came home once a month. There was little parental support, monitoring and motivation. Locating parents for their signatures and consent on school related matters was a major challenge in these communities.

Annah related an incident when she had to drive to the neighbouring township in search of a Grade 12 learner who missed her examination, only to discover that the learner had no taxi fare to attend school. Annah telephoned the examination section of the district office to report the absence of the learner from the examinations. She then secured a doctor's note so that the learner could write the supplementary examination. The principal had informed the parent, but the parent did not understand the seriousness of the situation.

Cynthia is of the opinion that introducing sex education into the curriculum will help in educating the community about HIV/Aids and teenage pregnancy, topics of particular relevance given that teenage pregnancy is highly prevalent in the Sunflower Primary community.

Annah believed that the community must inform the curriculum needs of the school. If learners were encouraged to take subjects such as woodwork and other technical subjects they could acquire the necessary skills for job creation and improve their standard of living. Furthermore, Annah mentioned that subjects such as entrepreneurship and agriculture would be beneficial because the community spends a large sum of money on flowers for funerals. Learners could engage in the cultivation and sale of these flowers: she stated further that she was excited about

a joint initiative between the community and the school, where the community could use the school grounds to plant flowers for such occasions. This corroborates the view of Crow et al. (1996: 12) that a principal's leadership has a profound impact on learner achievement in schools located in low socio-economic areas with high learner numbers. Knowing the community in which the school is based, their social customs and the families of the learners can help with curriculum planning and leadership. Gray (2009) notes that while there are no conclusive research that disadvantaged communities affect achievement and improvement it is a contributory factor.

### *Stakeholder participation*

The term stakeholder can be defined as to someone who has vested interest in something or an important connection to something and is affected by its success or failure. In the context of schools, stakeholders comprise parents and the community, teachers, learners, School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and the education department officials. The South African Parliament passed the South African Schools Act (SASA) in 1996, which regulated the establishment of SGBs: stakeholder participation and involvement is crucial in addressing the needs of the school. With the dawn of South African democracy, citizens have a say in how the government responds to school management and teaching and learning.

The participants agreed that stakeholder participation was almost absent in the 1970s and 1980s. Annah said that during her schooling period the involvement of stakeholders was not as visible as it is now. She added that, 'Yes, we did have school committees, but they had no legal status. Parents were doing it out of free will and they had the passion to help their children'. Busisiwe said that 'there was no support at all to an extent that I cannot tell you who the inspector of the school was. The welfare of learners was relegated to the duty of the school'. During their schooling, between 1970 and 1993, the participants also recalled that school parent committees were not legitimised. During Apartheid, education departments were racially divided. The government was solely responsible for the administration and resource allocation of schools. Parents belonged to parent committees, but did not have the power to influence decisions of the school their children attended.

South African democracy heralded opportunities to constitute a unified national system of education. With transformation many challenges arose which schools could not deal with effectively on their own. A need for a broader and more integrated approach to schooling developed, which included connecting the school to its community and other stakeholders in order to improve teaching and learning (Witten 2009: 18). This saw the development of school policies, which were guided by the Constitution. SGBs were vested with decision-making powers, which included the formulation of policies for admissions language and school fees (Christie 2008: 123). SGBs are crucial because they are very influential in curriculum implementation and maintenance, as well as in maintaining discipline. They provide the channel for articulating parental concerns and soliciting the support of the parents and community (Busher and Harris 2000: 96).

From the interviews it emerged that getting parents involved in the schooling of their children was a huge challenge because it was a new practice. Christie contended that disadvantaged schools are least supported because poverty is rife rendering poor people powerless to voice their opinions (Christie, 2008: 101). Annah remarked that at Daffodil High the parents' level of education is the reason for this: '... if you can see their level when they attend meetings, they agree to everything... but they don't commit themselves to what they have agreed upon'. She further explained that at meetings parents listen attentively and agree to

suggestions and plans; however when their help was needed, they were absent. Annah cited an example where unemployed parents agreed that they would be on the road in the morning to urge learners to get to school on time. Only the SGB chairperson and one member of the SGB did this, for one week only. This supports the view of Cunningham and Cordeiro that parents who are not proficient in the official school language will expect the school to have full control and influence over their children's schooling (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003: 101).

At Zinniah High, attendance at parents' meetings was also very poor, as was reported to be the case elsewhere by Lupton (2004: 13). When asked how the principal communicated with parents regarding memoranda, Busisiwe said, 'you don't give them memos to read you read for them and explain the meaning'. If their children get homework the parents cannot help because the level of parental literacy is low. Parents refused to volunteer their services at school; as Busisiwe said, '... they'll tell you that... we cannot just come to school without getting anything. They expect that their children will come out of the school being better whereas they don't give support to their children'. Efforts by their children to study were thwarted: 'parents say, switch off the light, we don't have money for electricity'. The socio-economic status of parents in these communities influences the level of interest they show in the education of their children. Hunger and lack of clothing and basic amenities outweigh the benefits of schooling and learning. These characteristics support Kamper's (2008: 3) observation that poverty is a challenge because learners are often hungry, are not properly clothed, do not have parental support or proper study facilities, and lack motivation to study.

Conley (2003:198) claims that the school is influenced by contextual factors and is reliant on the support of parents and members of the SGB. Parents of Zinniah High joined the SGB in the hope that they could benefit from the schools' funds. When they learned that the South African Schools Act did not service such an expectation, they became disinterested and eventually resigned as members. When schools are allocated funds by the government, the government controls the manner in which funds must be used. This indicates that parents, community and the school did not share the same meanings, beliefs and norms.

Cynthia declared that the caregivers of learners at Sunflower Primary School were left in the foster care of their old grandmothers or relatives whilst their mothers spent their time in a neighbouring settlement. The grandmothers had assumed the added responsibility as caregivers, in spite of their own need for medical attention. Cynthia explained that they were prepared to assume additional responsibility because they receive foster care grants for these children. This supports Kamper's (2008:2) observations that parents in disadvantaged communities 'are often in need of health or other social care, have low educational qualifications or are illiterate and are often single or act as substitute parents'. The principal indicated that girls became pregnant as early as Grade 8 and she assumed that the father could be a learner himself. The under-age parenting phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Davidoff and Lazarus (2002:5), that there are many mothers who do not marry their children's fathers and the children are therefore left with their grandparents. These unconventional familial arrangements often leave school management in a state of paralysis because parental support to the school is minimal if not non-existent.

Two principals recalled that parents had assumed the principal was a male and were astonished to discover that the leadership was in the hands of a female. Busisiwe indicated that the chairperson of the SGB remarked, 'For Zinniah High to be a successful school, a male is needed, a female cannot do anything with that school'. At Daffodil High a parent exclaimed, 'oh that woman was the principal... no things have changed, gone are those days by when you are looking for a principal,

you will get a huge man'. This also confirms reports elsewhere (Beeka, 2008: 161) regarding patriarchal societies equating authority and leadership with men.

### *Community involvement*

All three participants commented on the negative effect that the community has on curriculum. Drug abuse at Daffodil High had become so rampant that teachers could not distinguish the drug peddlers from the drug users. Efforts to rehabilitate learners who abuse drugs were futile because they returned to an environment in which drug abuse was prevalent. Annah stated that parents were stressed about drug abuse; and she regretted that the active involvement of social workers was almost non-existent.

The community in which Zinniah High is located was still steeped in the traditional custom of sending boys to initiation schools. Traditionally, boys from the African cultural groups of Ndebele, Pedi and Xhosa are taken into the mountain schools where they are circumcised and initiated into manhood by traditional masters. Up until 2010, over half the boys enrolled for Grade 12 examinations could miss an entire school term in order to attend initiation school. The principal said, 'looking at this area most of the time they don't take education seriously, what they take serious is their culture like taking the boys to the initiation school'. She further indicated that families would save huge amounts of money to use for the purchase of furniture and clothing for their sons' transition to manhood, rather than invest in their daughters' education. Busisiwe said that the community ignores the fact that if it invests in children's education, the skills that are acquired could benefit the community.

Cynthia lamented the fact that community involvement at Sunflower Primary was negligible: one of the reasons suggested to explain this was that the caregivers were elderly citizens. Cynthia indicated that whilst they were in the process of understanding policies, they could not actively contribute to the decisions of the school. The parents felt that they were too old to participate in the running of the school.

### *Co-operation of staff*

The data showed that all three participants experienced some resistance from their school staff. The degree of resistance varied from open defiance to subtle non-compliance. At Daffodil High one Head of Department did not attend a Saturday planning meeting. Annah recounted the incident, 'I don't know if Mr March (pseudonym) is defiant or what, but on Saturday he didn't come, he didn't say a word'. Annah decided not to pursue the issue, for the sake of harmony, but noted his behaviour. Busisiwe said she felt demoralised by the gossiping at Zinniah High, but tried to channel this negative behaviour by expressing her commitment to the vision of the school through her duties and responsibilities as a principal. Initially, she experienced extreme resistance from her SMT who distanced themselves from decisions taken at management meetings and discussed these issues outside the meetings with other teachers. She had to call a special meeting to address the need to work as an SMT instead of a school management gang.

Cynthia indicated that at Sunflower Primary resistance was also evident. She stated, 'as educators sometimes you have this pull-down syndrome just to make you stress a bit'. From the observation of one staff meeting it became evident that the staff did not take the principal seriously. Whenever the principal started to talk a staff member would interrupt her. Although she remained calm, her facial expression revealed her exasperation. During this meeting the male deputy

principal insisted that the meeting should not proceed in the absence of two male teachers. He expressed his wish to go out and look for them. With much urging from the principal he stayed in the meeting, but he challenged the principal on every turn. During the meeting, male staff in particular were disrespectful towards the principal. They were verbose, ignored professional protocol and openly challenged her. The staff's behaviour supports Greyvenstein's (2000: 31) claim that females in leadership face disturbing resistance in the form of insubordination and sabotage.

All the participants experienced feelings of isolation. At Daffodil High, Annah initially experienced this because she was a newcomer and she was trying to institute new management systems. The staff were accustomed to early departure from school and late submission of learners' assessment and thus were resentful when she implemented a policy that required them to adhere to formal timeframes. At Zinniah High, Busisiwe felt alone in SMT meetings; she also found herself alone in the mornings when monitoring learner punctuality. At Sunflower Primary staff tried to intimidate Cynthia. She was expected to respond to problems of communication and submission and nobody was willing to accept responsibility for negligence regarding the submission of work. According to Daresh and Arrowsmith (2003: 95), heads of schools can feel very alone if they do not form associations with key stakeholders of their institutions.

### *Balancing family and work*

In order to ascertain if women principals are able to balance family responsibilities and work they were asked: 'how does your professional roles and responsibilities impact on your family, and on you?' Annah responded:

I don't consult a husband who says you must attend this or you cannot do that so I'm independent I can do anything I want. When I wake up in the morning water is ready, they are so supportive . . . if I got to do things like my involvement in the church; at school; and in the community I'll run around. When I said to my sisters to look for a person to do ironing for me they said no you can bring your ironing to us and save that money. You are taking care of our mother, paying the medical aid.

She has the support of her sisters and mother with whom she could leave her children for the entire day, to attend work or church. Her position had brought many benefits to her family, one of which was providing medical aid for her mother. Her siblings were prepared to go to the extent that they would do anything to make her life comfortable. Being the only female in her family to have matriculated, to have a stable job and a house in the suburbs has made her family proud of her. However, she indicated that her time spent with her children was minimal.

Busisiwe also did not have a husband to answer to: she had the support of her mother and sister. Holding a leadership position in a school does have a negative effect on her family life. There were occasions when her son came home from university to visit for the weekend, but she could not spend time with him because of school related meetings and commitments. This confirms Van der Westhuizen's contention that striking a balance between family life and leadership roles becomes controversial when women ascend to higher positions (Van der Westhuizen, 1997: 545). Annah's and Busisiwe's responses indicate that they perceive husbands as restrictive, refuting Bryson's statement that women were dependent on their husbands or fathers for a livelihood (Bryson, 2003: 240–241).

Cynthia had a husband who was understanding and knew what was expected of her, although she said that there were times when there were problems at home that had an effect on her role at

school. She said that ‘the vast amount of work that needs to be done at school, impacts on my family life, sometimes I’ve got to knock off late to cover up the work, but I do make arrangements. . . . The family, they feel sometimes neglected’. She has a daughter who is left to attend to the duties normally expected of her at home.

The negative effects of climbing the career ladder also included the loss of friends. Annah confided that, ‘the people I schooled with, the neighbours, my peers unfortunately I’m the only one in my own street who managed to get a matric, go to university and they just moved themselves away from me. I ended up not having friends’.

The option of sacrificing family life in favour of work can be interpreted as woman principals refusing to be judged as incompetent or failing to succeed. Failure to succeed would mean propagating the perception that women are less competent than men to hold leadership positions. Women principals in this study were virtually absent mothers to their children, ultimately going against the social and cultural expectation of women being relegated to particular roles such as child rearing and performing household chores (Kolb et al., 2010: 7). Regardless of their challenges, these principals still managed to create a way forward in their careers: one of the reasons why they remain steadfast is because they have drawn on inspiration and support from family and their religious beliefs.

Interestingly, teaching was not the preferred career choice for any of the participants. The prospect of a bursary enticed two of them to take teaching as an alternative career option; and Cynthia had worked in the private sector first and became a teacher after she studied as an Adult Based Education and Trainer.

All the participants were motivated to enter the teaching profession and to aspire to leadership positions by female mentors. As Busisiwe recalled:

I was inspired by my friend . . . she was a principal at Sun Secondary School (pseudonym). She was the first Black principal . . . she was telling me about her challenges, I was saying, I can handle such challenges.

Annah also that confided:

. . . what inspired me to be a principal, there was this . . . film . . . *Iyzo, Iyzo* . . . this school was in tatters . . . There were no systems in place. Drugs. Learners were raped during the day in the school premises. Until Nambita came and she just put order to the school and the school became the best school in the township . . . you know female teachers can make it. I can make it as well in the township. . . . and I just told myself that one day I will be principal and practice what I have seen and it’s working.

Finally, Cynthia reminisced that:

. . . our pervious deputy encouraged us to learn, to improve our qualifications. She would tell us go to this meeting, go, it will empower you.

In addition, the principals had a strong internal motivation and believed that they had what it takes to make a good principal.

## **Conclusion**

Although there has been some progress in South Africa, more still needs to be done in order to redress gender equality in school leadership. This study has highlighted the fact that more

emphasis is being placed on the roles and responsibilities of principals, in accordance with the South African Schools Act. There is negligence in acknowledging that the curriculum has many ramifications in the day-day operations of the school. Women as leaders are creating environments in their schools where inclusive curriculum implementation is becoming a reality. They have displayed positive female attributes associated with child rearing, nurturing, compassion and spirituality, all of which promote social empowerment.

This study revealed that females in leadership positions in disadvantaged school communities face similar challenges. The principals rely on their own spiritual, ethical moral and maternal values to help them in their role as leaders. Although for the most part they subscribed to a relational, inclusive and compassionate leadership style, they had no qualms about adopting an autocratic style to ensure the effective and efficient management of their schools. The participants encouraged and involved their staff and stakeholders in discussions and decision-making, although support did not manifest itself tangibly.

The key finding that emerged from the study is that social expectations of women need to change. Women should be appraised by what they can do, not by their gender. Women should not be pressured into choosing between work and home: with encouragement and support they can accomplish both. This study revealed that women principals will continue to experience challenges from multiple frontiers for as long as society denies them the support and continues to stereotype them. That the participants view their challenges as room for improvement indicates that they have the confidence that they can succeed and lead confidently and competently in demanding education contexts.

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