

DEVELOPING FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS

Brigitte Smit

University of South Africa
smitb@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

What can we learn from female leadership scholars that can be appropriated in the South Africa educational context? Little research is conducted to trace the qualities that characterise a feminine approach to leadership in contrast to the characteristics of the traditional approach of control, hierarchy, authority and division of labour. This conceptual article draws theoretically on relational leadership as a feminine approach to educational leadership. I argue that educational leadership in disadvantaged settings in South African schools requires strengthened collaboration and development, particularly for female school leadership. Such collaboration and development is possible through relational leadership.

Keywords: gender; female leaders; relational leadership; development

INTRODUCTION

Theoretically, this research draws on feminist theory of relational leadership (Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012; Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011), which differs from the leadership found in the pure bureaucratic form and the pure relational form by being both role-based and reciprocal. It is beyond the scope of this research to interrogate feminism as a grand theory, given the narrow focus of relational leadership, which is conceptualised in this piece. Arar (2012: 641) in this context argues that ‘female leaders tend to bring an instructional focus to leadership, include spiritual dimensions in their work, and strive to achieve a balance between the personal and



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the professional'. Furthermore, women seek to promote leadership for equity and social justice, spiritual leadership, balanced leadership and relational leadership (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011). Relational leadership builds on Follett's (1949) concept of reciprocal control, a form of control that is not coercive but rather 'a coordinating of all functions, that is, a collective self-control' (Follett 1949: 226). Follett also observed organisations in which 'we find responsibility for management shot all through a business [and] some degree of authority all along the line [such that] leadership can be exercised by many people besides the top executive' (1949: 183). Rather than vesting authority in one person over another based on his or her position in the hierarchy, authority is shared. The core characteristic of relational leadership is the embedding of authority into each role, based on the knowledge associated with it. The place of relational leadership varies because people have used the term in different ways.

FEMINISM AND RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

To date, little research is conducted on a feminine approach, such as relational leadership in educational leadership studies. Most research focuses on the traditional approach of educational leadership, specifically on control, hierarchy, authority and division of labour. This article offers a new-found leadership approach, namely relational leadership, specifically in the context of the disadvantaged school. As a preface to this article, I take my prompt from Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011: 6), who argue that 'much of the research about leadership has been critiqued for the absence of women in educational leadership studies. Studies, conducted only with men, have been generalised to all leaders without identifying them as single gender studies, which implies that research on educational leadership presents a biased interpretation, which leans strongly towards the views of men.' That said, a great deal of empirical research in educational leadership is restricted by positivist research frameworks that neglect to offer a vibrant and multi-dimensional description of relational leadership from a feminist perspective in a context of disadvantaged schools (Young and Lopez 2005: 340). I propose an alternative theoretical perspective of a feminist relational leadership, which offers the potential to strengthen the knowledge base around female educational leadership. The research question that guides this research is: What can relational leadership offer to enhance leadership practices in disadvantaged schools in the South African context?

An emerging trend in female leadership theories is the relational perspective and approach (Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012). Uhl-Bien (2006; 2007; 2011a; 2011b) wrote extensively on this topic, and explained that the term 'relational leadership' is quite new, although the concept of relation-oriented behaviour is not so new in leadership studies (Uhl-Bien 2006: 654). Carol Gilligan, in 1982, in her well known text, *In a different voice*, proposed, somewhat provocatively, that females value relationships

more than males. This resulted in further research on female approaches to leadership with documented relational aspects, evidenced in communication styles, teamwork, collaboration and community connection (Shakeshaft 2006: 506). Earlier writings on relational leadership (Regan and Brooks 1995) offer insights into how female school leaders transformed their understanding of school leadership. These leaders were insiders and resisted the traditional administrative behaviour as modelled by their male counterparts (Smit 2013). In their research, Regan and Brooks (1995) developed relational leadership as a theory based on empirical data sourced from 11 women, who resisted socialisation into the prevailing male dominant culture (Regan and Brooks 1995: xi). These accounts of their practice were described as relational as opposed to controlling. Leadership as relational influence can be performed by anyone; it is not a person or a place or a thing, instead it is a verb: 'leadership is the action of influence; it is relation, and it does not exist by itself' (Schmuck and Schmuck 1992, cited by Regan & Brooks 1995: xi). A new language that is relational is offered, including concepts such as care, vision, collaboration, courage and intuition, which are seen to be feminist attributes of leadership. While these concepts are not new in the vocabulary, they are given new conceptualisations for the practice of relational leadership (Smit 2013).

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS

Attributes of relational leadership differ greatly from the traditional administrative language of control, hierarchy, authority and division of labour, often associated with a male dominated leadership style. While relational and traditional language is at opposite ends, it does not mean that relational language is only meant for female school leaders. Instead it is meant for men and women. What is educative is that the 'increased presence of women administrators, as well as [the] emerging feminist scholarship in this field, is an outcome to the widening acceptance of the idea of leadership as relational' (Regan and Brooks 1995: xi). The place of relational leadership in the framework varies because people have used the term in different ways. One definition proposed is that of relational leadership as 'a process of role-based reciprocal interrelating' (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011: 6) between workers and managers to negotiate the work that is to be done. In contrast, the other definition by Uhl-Bien (2006: 655) distinguishes relational leadership as 'a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e., evolving social order) and change (e.g., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, and ideologies) are constructed and produced'. The first definition implies that leadership exists in independent individuals who interrelate across different hierarchical positions. The second locates leadership in a jointly constructed but disembodied process, not in individuals. Uhl-Bien (2006) proposes a relational leadership theory as an approach

that can encompass both individuated and connected perspectives by explaining both the emergence of leadership relationships (drawing on traditional individuated views that focus on the nature of the relationship, such as Leader-Member Exchange), and the relational dynamics of organising, which includes various constructionist views of leadership.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) also investigated the concept of relational leadership based on research conducted with female leaders in educational contexts. They remarked that relational leadership is about being in relationships with others in a horizontal rather than a hierarchical sense (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011: 6). Stated differently, relations produce power in a flattened organisational structure. 'Leaders who develop coherence around shared values are likely to deepen the sense of community with an organization – a sense of being in relationship with others who are striving for the same goals' (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011: 47). Achieving goals usually takes place with and through others and power is conceptualised differently, emphasising that the power of everyone should be expanded. Given the male dominance of power, women often would express their discomfort with power and deny their own power. What has changed is the language in use about power, from power *with* rather than power *over* (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011: 7). This signals a relational approach to power in the work of female leaders. Power is conceptualised by women as something that is shared and therefore they seek to expand everyone's power (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011). In fact, the term 'relational' has been used to refer to quite distinct understandings of leadership, each with different ontological and epistemological assumptions that result in quite distinct approaches to conducting research on this topic (Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012). As such, relational leadership does more than draw upon expertise and leadership from participants throughout the organisation. It is a process of reciprocal interrelating through which the expertise held by different participants interpenetrates, creating a more holistic perspective that is integrative rather than additive. Relational leadership requires facilitating the interpenetration of expertise, which in turn requires the skills to build relationships among others, creating a safe space in which they can reciprocally interrelate with one another.

Relational leadership in the context of female leadership demands an in-depth exploration and understanding, since leadership and gender could be narrowly viewed as a 'men-are-autocratic/women-are-nurturing dichotomy' (Arms 2006: 359). The emphasis in this article is not on such a dichotomy: instead it traces the qualities that characterise a feminine approach to leadership in contrast to the more traditional approach. In the context of the South African educational landscape, this article argues for a new way of looking at leadership that is anchored in the development of women school leaders. Such leaders bring a spiritual dimension to their work and strive to achieve a balance between the personal and the professional (Arar 2012). Moreover, relational leadership (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011: 8)

implies 'being in relation and sharing power with others'. This assumes leading in a caring manner, and seeing the world differently, with vision, with care and with collaboration. In this regard, research by Van der Vyver, Van der Westhuizen and Meyer (2014) proposes that care in leadership requires personal development plans for school leaders. Contrariwise, relational leadership and associated care are an inherent trend, and does not have to be formally developed. Leadership is conducted with a moral code of conduct, and followers are empowered to achieve (Russell 2003). Such leadership can enrich school life and create a multiplier effect for the entire school community. No doubt, this takes extraordinary courage and resilience to work beyond the boundaries of what is commonly considered to be 'school'.

DISCUSSION

The argument here draws purposively on a relational epistemology, meaning that 'all the systems of knowledge are built on relationships' (Wilson 2008, cited by Chilisa 2012). Also, a relational axiology is built on the concept of relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation and rights and regulations during the research process (Chilisa 2012: 22). Pagano (1990: 135, cited by Regan & Brooks 1995: 64) reminds us appropriately that 'we make ourselves known to ourselves by making ourselves known to each other'. Given that educational training is dominated by male thinking, managerial positions are mostly understood from that perspective. Relational knowing (Hollingsworth 1992: 386) that draws on feminist attributes may shed light on a different way of leading in schools, particularly in disadvantaged schools. Not many texts speak of such relational leadership in disadvantaged schools, specifically on the African continent. 'Disadvantaged' can be understood as follows according to Van der Vyver, Van der Westhuizen and Meyer (2014: 62): 'In a democratic South Africa many schools still bear the scars of apartheid, even 20 years after the first democratic election. In rural areas, mainly populated by black African people, poverty prevails and schools still suffer despite efforts of the government to provide funding.' This is supported by research conducted by Moletsane (2012: 1), who asserted that 'almost two decades after the demise of apartheid, rural communities in South Africa are still plagued by seemingly insurmountable challenges, with no change in sight for those who need it most, especially those who live, work and learn in rural, informal and other marginalised communities'. Therefore, inquiries into the experiences of female leaders from a relational perspective are critical to advancing new contextual understandings of leadership in such challenging settings. The challenge is to find the language and the words to articulate experiences on the one hand, and on the other, to make these contextual understandings accessible and acceptable for the academic community and a male-dominated leadership discourse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: THEORY AND DESIGN

Theoretically, according to Werhane and Painter-Morland (2011: 36), leadership is an interactive, dynamic, and mutually interrelational process between leaders and managers, where each participant contributes to the vision and progress towards change. The most effective leaders will be those who are not only visionary, but those who are used to working with a diverse population collaboratively rather than in a traditional leadership-follower dynamic. The question remains, though: Will this relational way of knowing in educational settings be positively received by those in power? Research conducted by Sherman-Newcomb (2014: 208) uncovered that ‘women actually embraced and strove to be relational leaders [and they] revealed their attempt to push traditional leadership paradigms outside of traditional masculine styles of leadership’.

Understanding female educational leaders in South Africa remains largely un-researched and hence, relational methodologies for empirical inquiries should prove helpful in uncovering how female leaders negotiate their roles in disadvantaged school communities. Also, leadership scholarship has largely been quantitative in orientation, grounded in the objectivist and positivist paradigm (Klenke 2008). However, qualitative design types, such as narrative inquiries (Clandinin 2013) and ethnographies (Carspecken 1996) are slowly edging their way into leadership studies (Smit 2013). Such qualitative inquiries can offer ‘opportunities to explore leadership phenomena in significant depth, longitudinally, and answer “why” questions about leadership as opposed to “how” and “what” type of questions as might be answered by quantitative research’ (Klenke 2008: 5). The call for future research is for methodical, in-depth qualitative accounts, together with longitudinal ethnographic observations from a feminist perspective to shed light on what happens on the ground in disadvantaged schools led by female leaders. Such empirical work will reveal how nuanced, diverse and complex the various educational landscapes are and that there is no single answer as to how to lead schools in such contexts.

CONCLUSION

The topic of relational female leadership fits comfortably in a relational epistemology and empirical research should be qualitative to elicit experiences of school leaders in disadvantaged school settings. This article contributes theoretically to developing important research in female leadership studies that seeks to draw attention to the limitations of dominant male perspectives. Therefore, I contend that what is needed is future research that makes visible female school leadership experiences that occur in various educational landscapes. The time has come to unleash the power of a caring purpose and relational leadership for education in order to create the kind of schools children deserve.

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