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Author(s): Pontso Moorosi

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# **South African female principals' career paths: understanding the gender gap in secondary school management**

**Pontso Moorosi**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article reports on data from a larger scale study exploring female principals' experiences of their career route to the principalship of secondary schools in South Africa. To understand these experiences, the study used an analytical framework that identifies three phases principals go through on their career route, namely: anticipation, acquisition and performance. The framework suggests that women experience more obstacles than men on their career route and their experiences are influenced by personal, organisational and social factors. These factors manifest in social practices within and outside schools and affect women across the three phases of the career route. Central to these experiences, is the underlying male norm of who is more appropriate for secondary school principalship.

**KEY WORDS** *career paths, social practices, gender, principalship, participation*

## **Introduction**

Many studies undertaken to establish reasons for gender discrepancy in secondary school management reveal the different factors affecting the participation of women. For example internationally, Coleman (2005) and Blackmore et al (2006) demonstrate the continuing preference for male leadership, which mostly manifests at the level of appointment. In South Africa, Mahlase (1997) investigated the position and experiences of black women teachers and highlighted race, culture and ethnicity as issues affecting and defining experiences of women teachers in general and women managers in particular. Mahlase concluded that black women teachers were deeply affected by State controls and the patriarchal relations built into Bantu education; lack of uniform policy and cultural stereotypes that appeared to be working against women's appointment and promotion. In the *Gender Equity Task Team Report*, Wolpe et al (1997) show how different policy provisions in the democratic era were intended to address issues of gender in education management in order to achieve gender equity. However, the extent to which these policy intentions were put in place and achieved is beyond the scope of this paper, but is explored elsewhere (see Moorosi, 2006). More recent studies in South Africa, such as that of Chisholm (2001), Greyvenstein (2000), Mathipa and Tsoka (2000) and Van Deventer and van der Westhuizen (2000) shifted the focus from the impact of the apartheid regime and addressed the subject from an organisational perspective and explored barriers that women in management still have to overcome even in the post-apartheid period.

What is evident from all these studies is that although gender discrimination is not a direct result of apartheid, the former cannot be divorced from the historical and traditional issues of race and ethnicity that bear huge and different cultural impositions on

women managers and women aspirants to management. Research in South Africa has so far largely attributed problems of gender disparity in education management to barriers at the level of access (e.g. Mathipa and Tsoka, 2001); ignoring the preceding phase of preparation and focusing minimally on the performance phase (e.g. Chisholm, 2001). This paper locates dialogue on women and secondary school principalship within the broader context of their career paths. This holistic approach is premised on the notion that the gender disparity problem in education management is multifaceted; hence it requires a multifaceted approach.

Previous research has established that a comprehensive approach to gender inequality is necessary in the South African context due to the complexity of the problem (see Greyvenstein, 2000). In this context, women are theoretically recognized to have equal rights and equal access to employment and promotion. To illustrate, the Bill of Rights (1996) guarantees all citizens equal treatment while the Employment Equity Act (1998) guarantees equal opportunity to employment and promotion. However, the reality is that women and men do not have an equal playing field, hence women do not benefit equitably from equal opportunity interventions. The law does not address the stereotypes and subtle practices of discrimination suffered by women in the work place and at home. Findings from this study are used as evidence for the assertion that women face discrimination at the level of preparation, access into principalship as well as after employment as newly appointed secondary school principals.

## **The career path model of analysis**

To pursue the argument made in this paper, the “management route model”<sup>1</sup> adapted from Van Eck et al (1996), is utilised as an analytical framework to interrogate the nature of gender inequality in women principals’ career paths. This model identifies three phases that determine the career path to education management, and in each phase in which women encounter more obstacles than men. The first phase is the anticipation phase, which prepares women for management. In this phase, the focus is on the development of knowledge and skills that are needed for a management position. The acquisition of qualifications, training and workshops, as well as participation in informal networks is viewed as playing a crucial role at the personal level to prepare women for acquiring management positions. At the organisational level, opportunities to act in management and to attend important meetings prepare women for the actual managerial function but the argument is that male managers have distributed these opportunities to the benefit of other men.

The second phase is the acquisition phase, which focuses on access and entry into management positions. This is the phase at which women are actively seeking appointment in principalship. Job application skills and the ambitions of the candidates are therefore very important in this phase as are informal networks and support from sponsors. The acquisition phase is the phase at which policy is most active, but it is also

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<sup>1</sup> The management route model has been used before as a framework for analysing gender in education management policies. See Moorosi (2006).

the phase at which most discrimination takes place (see Coleman, 2005; Blackmore et al 2006). The male normative model of school management, which results from the fact that most principalship positions of secondary schools are held by men, sabotages women since the latter's suitability and acceptability are likely to be assessed according to male attributes. The clarity of the selection criteria and procedure backed up by national policy and regulations advancing women's chances to be appointed in management positions therefore play a crucial role in this phase. Training and sensitisation, for those who participate in the appointment process such as school governing body members and some district officials, is equally important.

The third phase is the performance phase where the actual management function is performed. In this phase, the emphasis is placed on the fact that the under-representation of women in management positions is a problem even for women who have attained these positions.

Van Eck et al (1996) established that within the management route women's experiences are influenced by personal, organisational and social factors. These factors were also identified by Cubillo and Brown (2003) as categories of analysis that show the different levels at which women's participation in education management is affected. In Cubillo and Brown's framing, the personal (micro) level, is where women grapple with internal issues such as professional experiences, aspirations, ambitions and confidence - what Tallerico (2000) calls the 'individual agency'. When women lack this agency, they are perceived as lacking the self-esteem they need in order to take charge of their professional lives. At the organisational (meso) level, the hierarchical structures and cultures in terms of gendered stereotypes about who can and cannot be a school manager block women's participation in management. The gendered practices influenced by cultural norms and belief systems are played out at the social (macro) level within the school and outside the school context. This context is informed by cultural discourses favouring the masculine image of management that continuously disadvantage women.

This analytical framework highlights the complexity of factors that ultimately determine the status of women in education management. In this framework, women teachers' observed lack of upward mobility is attributed to the interplay of factors at the personal, social and organisational level. Personal and organisational factors are influenced by the gendered social norms such as how the division of work and the management qualities of men and women are perceived (see also Ely and Meyerson, 2000). These influences happen across the three phases of the principals' career route and affect negatively, the participation of women in school principalship.

## **Methodology**

The analysis in this paper is based on the findings of a larger study that explored the experiences of women secondary school principals on their route to principalship. Twenty-eight (28) women principals participated in the study together with 10 provincial Department of Education (DoE) officials (circuit managers) and 10 school governing body (SGB) chairpersons. Participants were purposively selected to include female

secondary school principals who were appointed after 1994<sup>2</sup> and school governing body chairpersons and circuit managers who have participated in the appointment of school principals. To select the women principal participants, a questionnaire was sent to all women principals of secondary schools in the province according to the information provided by the DoE. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather biographical details and to establish whether the women principals would be willing to participate in the study. On the basis of their availability and willingness to participate in the study, 28 women principals comprising two white, two Indian and 24 African were finally selected. As the centre of the focus, women principals were asked to narrate their detailed experiences on their career path leading to the principalship. The school governing body chairpersons and circuit managers were asked questions on their observations, practices and perspectives with regard to the appointment and participation of women in secondary school principalship. The study was located in one of the nine provinces in South Africa and all participants were spread across the various provincial districts.

This analysis is framed within a qualitative feminist approach that put women principals' experiences at the centre in trying to understand the complexity of the challenges they face in their career route. While feminist researchers do not always agree on what constitutes feminist research methodology, there is commonality on the commitment to changing the position of women in society. According to Lather (1995), this commitment explicitly reflects women's own personal experiences of subjugation within a male dominated society and should allow women to speak out and discuss their experiences in their own words. The study therefore used semi-structured interviews with all participants and used thick data quotes with pseudonyms (to protect the identity of participants) to reflect the actual participant voices as an attempt to overcome the patriarchal voices of those who have dominated the field of education management thus far. The framework model of analysis enabled the organization of findings into three broad themes: (i) preparation, (ii) access and (iii) performance.

## **The anticipation**

Women principals in the study started their careers with teaching, as happens with principals of all schools in South Africa. The initial teacher training qualification, which is either in the form of a certificate, diploma or degree in education, is the starting point for entry into the teaching profession and for subsequent entry into the principalship. Gupton and Slick (1996) identify preparation as a pre-requisite for ascending to top management positions in education, even though this does not guarantee attaining the position itself. This preparation essentially means, amongst others, having the necessary credentials and qualifications for these top positions and, to a large extent, having the necessary experience.

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<sup>2</sup> 1994 signifies the beginning of the transformation period. The purpose was to establish whether women appointed after this period actually benefited from the transformation initiatives.

## Training for principalship

The women principal participants' academic credentials ranged from a professional diploma in teaching to a university degree. There was a great deal of emphasis on the acquisition of a degree as a requirement for the principalship which is arguably the reason that 25 of the 28 participants were holding at least a university undergraduate degree at the time of the interview. However, the district officials verified that a university degree was not an official national requirement for the principalship. There has never been a formal entry qualification into the principalship in South Africa, except for a general teaching qualification. This is not only the case for South Africa, but for all other African countries and beyond as noted by Bush and Oduro (2006). These authors indicate that in Africa, principals are often appointed on the basis of a successful record as teachers. In South Africa, the newly proposed national entry qualification into principalship, in the form of the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) in School Leadership, was in its pilot phase when this paper was written. A successful pilot phase might signal the first official academic requirement for school principalship in the country.

The women principals' emphasis on qualifications did not include training in education management. Only seven women principals had a formal qualification in education management, acquired *after* attaining one of the middle management positions (head of department or deputy principalship) and in some cases (albeit few), the principalship position. Four of the women principal participants were registered for a formal qualification in education management at the time when the study was conducted. Clearly for these women the qualification was not playing a preparatory role.

The type of training cited as preparation for some women principals was received on the job, offered by the Department of Education (DoE). This training was in the form of workshops lasting between a day and two weeks for different participants and was provided after the appointment into a middle management position which in turn worked as preparatory training for the principalship. The overall usefulness and impact of this type of training is often questionable. McLennan (2000), for example, identifies it as short and "often poorly organised and irrelevant" (p.305). However, evidence in the study suggests that women principals benefited from this kind of training as reflected in following extract:

*I did go for two weeks training when I was an HOD ... it was sort of an orientation for the post. It also helped me because what we were taught during those two weeks ... was about the whole management of the school, so it helped me when I started acting as a principal because most of the things I already knew about from my HOD post (Lungi).*

A significant finding with regard to training as preparation was that none of the women principal participants had training in management before they considered applying for management positions. Equally significant is that those women who received some form of training from the department found it useful. Most participants decided to pursue a qualification in management after they were appointed into a middle management

position and in most cases after attaining the principalship itself. Only 25percent had this qualification when they attained the principalship. Thus, in the anticipation phase, training played a reversed role and did not prepare women for the principalship. The need for training as preparation for the principalship is supported by many authors in education leadership and management (see Bush and Jackson 2002; Tekleselassie 2002; Mestry and Singh, 2007). Mathibe (2007) argues that appointing candidates without a qualification in leadership and management to the highest office in a school essentially places school management in the hands of technically unqualified personnel.

Women principals cited reasons including the lack of aspiration to become principals for not getting training in management. This was reflected in statements such as:

*... It wasn't in my ambition to become a principal (Hally).*

For others the lack of aspiration was as a result of their late exposure to management, which made secondary school principalship invisible as a promotion prospect for women teachers. The absence of role models was particularly mentioned:

*I was trained as a high school teacher and during that time it was only males that were regarded as principals ... of high schools (Lungi).*

It has been argued (see Van eck et al, 1996 and Mclay and Brown, 2001) that management training builds confidence as it is only once women have developed this confidence that they actively seek promotion. While training is essential for all school management aspirants regardless of gender, women would particularly benefit from training that addresses gendered issues that they face. However, in order for women to actively pursue training, principalship has to become visible to them as a career option.

### **Prior management experience**

Further evidence from the women principals' accounts suggested that experience in middle management played an essential preparatory role. This preparation through experience appeared to have been a significant personal factor that boosted the confidence of women to apply for the principalship when the posts became vacant, even though it was something they never aspired to before. Only two women principals had the ambition to become principals before they got promoted into junior management positions and a majority never aspired to become principals until they were exposed to the actual management at the lower levels. While the progression from HoD to deputy principal to principal appears to be the normal route of promotion, the significant factor is that this preparation happened mostly by default for women principals in this study as most of them never set out to become principals.

However, the exposure they got from these roles prepared them for the principalship as illustrated by the following responses:

*Exposure to the work at school prepared me for the principalship. I think I got exposed because the principal used to delegate almost everything to me. .. He used to sleep in the office. He was very old (Fundi).*

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*... I don't know whether I was unfortunate or what because I usually did most of the principal's work even before I became a principal. The principals would give me everything to do. The first principal ... said he knew I had good handwriting and I am very neat. And so I had to do everything. The next principal when I came into the school would also ask me to do things for him, and so me too because I also wanted to show that I could do things I would say oh yes I will do it and I ended up doing everything. So I got no difficulty when I was promoted because I was familiar with most of the things (Thandi).*

It is evident from Thandi's experience that on-the-job-preparation was focused largely on administrative work, rather than on broader professional experience needed for promotion. Consistent with the women in Grogan's study (1996), Thandi was highly valued for her good handwriting and ability to organise (files) and yet she was actually doing more than that. Her experiences appeared to have prepared her and bolstered her confidence to apply for the principalship post when it became vacant. For many women principals, preparation through experience had been indirect and unintended and it was only realised and appreciated as preparation when it was time to apply for the principalship. For others it was purely by accident as the following extract shows:

*... I think the opportunity came when I was the HOD and the principal died, so automatically I was the only person in management, so I had to take over and run the school (Lungi).*

Significantly, Lungi was already exposed to management through being head of department. It is therefore evident that in addition to being a confidence booster, exposure to management made women visible as possible candidates for the principalship even in areas where women principals of secondary schools have not been seen before.

Besides being cajoled into doing the work for the male principals, some women were requested by the school principals to assist as follows:

*When I was still a teacher, the principal recommended me to be his first assistant. And then as the time went by, he used to ask me to attend meetings as he was committed somewhere (Sile).*

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*When I came to this school, the principal made me his first assistant for reasons I do not know. But the process then was not subsidised. So I just worked as a deputy principal unpaid, for many many years ... And I had no problem when I became a principal (Thully).*



This assistantship became an indirect form of preparation long before women could have the opportunity to operate as official middle managers in the schools. Significantly, an informal mentorship process also occurred during this period of ‘internship’. Perhaps there were some good apprenticeship intentions behind some of the women principal predecessors’ actions even though it happened in an ad hoc manner. It is evident that women’s personal experiences of exposure although mostly by default rather than design, played a significant role in their preparation. Women also benefitted from informal mentorship from their predecessors in some cases, or their colleagues in others. But through these relationships women were encouraged to participate in management and to apply for the principalship when the posts were advertised. This would clearly strengthen the argument for organised networking and formalised mentorship programmes both in the anticipation and acquisition phases. Gold (1996) established that women need to be encouraged to participate in management positions. Without this encouragement and agency many women may never discover their potential.

The issues raised in this section illustrate a direct link of the anticipation phase to the subsequent acquisition phase. The evident anticipatory socialisation (Van Eck et al, 1996) which happened even in the absence of the desirable training, made women visible as potential candidates for the principalship. With this preparation, which also served to build confidence women recognized themselves as potential candidates for the principalship.

## **The acquisition**

Accessing the principalship is noted as the most problematic stage in the career route, particularly for women. This is arguably so because most women do not have sufficient exposure and preparation for management positions and because of the “innate preference” for male appointments in leadership (Coleman, 2005). This masculine norm of leadership and management does not work in favour of women thereby making it difficult to close the gender gap in secondary school management.

### **Selection: the hidden criteria**

There are many different deciding factors determining the ultimate appointment of school principals. The notion of leadership as a male arena continues to dominate the mentalities of those responsible for hiring school principals and women are systematically disadvantaged while men continue to be advantaged. In the acquisition phase, the male norm of a secondary school principals manifests in the unspoken criteria used for selection.

### ***Principalship is for ‘strong men’***

Although the participants in the study had actually been successful in accessing the positions, some of them had experienced direct discrimination in their earlier attempts to apply for the principalship. In some instances the discrimination was as blatant as in the following extract:

*... in one of the schools they even told me that I was good but unfortunately they were looking for a man. So they couldn't take me (Lindi).*

While this kind of discrimination might have prevented *Lindi* from getting the principalship earlier, evidence from district officials show that women continue to experience the same prejudicial attitudes from the selection committees as the following extracts reflect:

*... when it comes to the principal, they want a man. They have so many excuses to make that they need a strong man. And I just don't know what they mean when they say "strong" (DoE official).*

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*... we try to speak to the governing bodies but as I have said that sometimes you find that people talk about the need for a strong man (DoE official).*

While it could be assumed that the male norm of a school principal was mostly prevalent in the rural areas due to the dominance of traditional leadership in those areas, gendered discrimination was also experienced by women principals in the urban schools where in one case a very junior male colleague was appointed instead of the female candidate who qualified. It remains unclear how the strength (whether it means strong in authority or strong in discipline) is measured as a selection criteria. But it is clear that women are disadvantaged in communities where this strength is linked to a male stereotype and where such highly gendered perceptions still reign. These prejudicial views held by many of those who have the responsibility to appoint principals seem to be affecting women more at the entry level, acting as gate keeping criteria that bar many women from accessing the position of principal in secondary schools. This is clearly influenced by the cultural attitude towards women and what their role is in society.

### ***Experience and familiarity***

Another set of criteria given serious consideration in the interviews relates to experience in management. Earlier research noted the problematic nature of experience as a requirement for the principalship in the context where women have not been given the opportunity to act as managers. Experience in management is explicitly spelt out as a selection criterion and women in this study mostly had the required managerial experience acquired from lower level management positions. However, this experience becomes more complex as it is linked to familiarity of candidates to the school community and to some extent to the age of candidates. The older the candidate, the longer the years of experience (mostly in teaching) and the higher the likelihood that they would have served in the school. A district official categorically stated that:

*Appointment is influenced by qualification, experience and locality (DoE official).*

And another one said:

*The use of phrases such as “son of the soil” or “local breed” prevail in these instances where they want to decide in advance that they want a local person whom they claim understands the schools better (DoE official).*

A school governing body perspective also confirmed this view and, in this case, it had worked to the advantage of the woman principal who also happened to be a participant in the study:

*We couldn't ask for anyone better than Miss Dladla. No one could be more suitable to run this school. She has been here for a long time and she knows this community very well (SGB).*

In this case familiarity worked to the advantage of Miss Dladla and to the advantage of the majority of women principal participants who got in-house promotion to principalship. While it may be necessary to acknowledge the significance of familiarity with context and community as a base for trust, internal promotion can also be biased to suit particular sexist interests that could potentially sabotage women particularly when linked to a strong male individual.

Familiarity with the school community played a major role in enhancing the women's employability into the principalship. While this practice may appear gender neutral on the surface, it is in fact gendered in the sense that women who spend a long time in any one school tend to be associated with certain caring and nurturing roles. This makes it difficult for them to be associated with leadership roles, thereby denying them the management experience required for promotion. Hence, it takes longer for them to get promotion. Madikizela's findings (2009) attest to this. In her study women took considerably longer than their male counterparts to get promotion in education management.

Thus, a preference for males and familiarity of individuals to the school community appeared to be prevalent as unspoken criteria for selection. These prejudicial practices were enacted context of the affirmative action policy which is precisely meant to give preference to suitable and qualifying women candidates. These biased selection practices also occurred under the pretext of employing the best candidate for the job, which on the contrary, can undermine policy efforts to bring about gender parity in education management. The literature on gender and management suggests that gender has a huge impact on women's access and entry into positions of top management of schools (see for example Coleman, 2005; Blackmore, et al 2006). This is because women are still discriminated against and lack administrative preparation for the positions on the basis of their gender despite equal and to some extent preferential treatment policies put in place. These findings reveal gendered perceptions with regard to women's entry into the principalship and the complexity of the barriers to women's broader participation in education management. Gendered cultural factors impact substantially on the implementation of anti-discriminatory mandate of the law. The notions of 'strong man' and 'a son of the soil' may not be directly related to the law or policy guiding the appointment of school principals, but they are serious cultural issues that affect the

implementation of anti-discriminatory policies that need to be addressed in order to improve the situation of women in the management of schools.

While the preferred male perception of a school principal limited women's chances to promotion, the latter's participation was further limited by family responsibilities at the personal level. Most participants mentioned they could not seek promotion earlier because they had family commitments.

## **The performance**

The performance phase was focused on factors that impede women principals from performing their management functions after appointment. In this phase, women have cracked the vertical glass ceiling, but there are still many other horizontal glass barriers (Ely and Meyerson, 2000) around them that negatively affect their performance in management even after they have accessed the positions. Amongst these barriers is the negative attitude from colleagues and the community which have a bearing on how women principals carry out their management functions. Lack of institutional and professional support also leaves women at a loss in the field they are not familiar with, while they are simultaneously expected to negotiate a balance between their work and family lives.

### **Traditional and cultural attitudes**

The women principals participants made clear that chiselling through the glass ceiling did not necessarily mean that their problems were over. A clear link between the performance and acquisition phases was established when members of some communities are not able to influence the selection process, take out their dissatisfaction on the candidate after appointment. The extract below illustrates:

*... They visited me several times saying "you woman leave this school we need a male here", "this is a big school we need man, a strong man in this school not a woman like you" (Nandi).*

This extract reflects the traditional stereotypical attitudes held by the communities against women as principals of large (co-educational) secondary schools. Clearly not all women would be able to survive this kind of treatment and *Nandi* forcefully states that she stayed because:

*... I wanted to prove to them I can do it.*

A significant number of women principals were subjected to insubordination from their male and female colleagues who would not accept their authority. One participant was told bluntly by one of the male staff "*I cannot be headed by a woman*". For other women principals their male staff would clearly defy their authority and yet would respond positively to the authority of the male deputy principals as reflected below:

*Sometimes when we have a meeting I explain a point and they would just oppose me openly. And I will stress and explain and they will say I am not explaining clearly and when I ask another man to explain the same thing they would say they understand (Fundi).*

Women were further subjected to lack of respect from the broader community and even from female and other principal colleagues. One woman principal was referred to as a “girl” by the community because of her single marital status while another was called a “child” by other principals in a meeting because she was considered young. Women principal participants had varied experiences some not as direct and intimidating as Nandi’s above, but they overall had to work extra hard to earn the respect and acceptability in the schools and in the community as reflected in Sindi’s case below:

*When I began as a principal ... there was a tendency to look down upon the school because it was headed by a woman. When I took over the school was in tartars and then I started looking for funds to renovate the school. That is when they realised that a woman is really somebody who is working (Sindi).*

Some studies (such as Chisholm, 2001) suggest that most women who cannot stand the lack of support accompanied by disrespectful attitudes tend to leave the educational organizations in the same numbers in which they enter thus counteracting transformation efforts to bring more women in positions of leadership. What further plays out in this section is the lack of acceptance for women as principals within the broader community area, which continues to display (as also seen in the acquisition phase) chauvinistic cultural and traditional stereotypes about women as leaders.

### **Professional and family support**

Women principals further indicated lack of professional and institutional support which included limited induction training.

*...we didn’t receive any courses. I haven’t gone for any courses for management. I think you just learn on the job (Shervanni).*

Other women principals had attended induction training offered by the DoE while others never got the invitation and others missed the dates. Women principals had the biggest complaints with regard to general support from the district offices, which were also backed by district officials themselves. The latter felt that the district was not doing enough to help women adapt to “*these hostile environments that are dominated by men*” (one of them articulated). There were different levels of support offered by different regions and districts. While this reflects some discrepancies within the department, which could have similar bearings on men and women principals’ performance alike, women tend to suffer more when they also have to be fighting for acceptance from the wider school community.

The support women received was important in that it influenced their job satisfaction, which could have positive implications for retaining women principals to ensure

sustainable equity. The more support women principals got from the stakeholders, the more they seemed comfortable with principalship. Some women who experienced problems after their appointment seemed to have lost the love for principalship. Asked whether they would consider the principalship again given a chance, some of their responses, such as the following, were very strong:

*... Being a principal is hell (Fundi). ... I need to get out (Xoli).*

However, not all women hated the principalship. Many still enjoyed what they were doing in spite of all the hardships they had encountered and were still encountering. Other responses reflected mixed opinions citing stress and administrative work overload, which reduced classroom time that would otherwise be preferred. But job satisfaction was measured against the achievements and success against the odds.

These findings revealed stark differences and some experiences of women that could potentially have a negative impact on how they perform and on the long-term effect on retention of women principals in secondary schools. On the issue of support, some women principals did receive institutional support and were also part of some informal networks as shown below:

*I drew the support from the staff and from the neighbouring principals. When I was promoted the lady at the neighbouring school was also promoted. So we would go out and get information from other people, but mainly from the staff (Lizie).*

Lizie's networking happened in the rural context and the other 'lady' referred to was also a participant in this study. In another context, Molly was a principal of a large urban technical high school and she mentioned a principals' club that she joined. Other women principals however, decried the absence of these networks where they could learn from their peers and strengthen their experiences as reflected below:

*I envy that such a thing (informal networking) existed ... I just dream of a day where women managers in rural areas can come up clearly and state situations as they are (Thandi).*

There was clearly no consistency with regard to networking and where it happened it was informal and women principals initiated their own participation. Networking has been identified as a useful tool for the progress of women leaders and those aspiring to leadership positions. Quinlan (1999) states that networking with other women leader peers, provides the necessary emotional, psychological and social support that is vital for survival in male dominated field of secondary school leadership.

Another significant issue to women principals' performance related to family and domestic responsibilities. It needs to be emphasised that women principals' performance was also complicated by the overburdening domestic obligation to which they did not receive support. This significant difference in this case was seen between women of

younger generations who still had children and those of older generations with no children. The former were largely still expected to perform the role of mother and traditional wife in addition to their professional responsibilities. These women principals relied heavily on support from other family members such as mothers and sibling sisters as well as domestic helpers, but noticeably less from spouses. The older generation had fewer domestic responsibilities and received more support from spouses. This notion is explored in detail elsewhere (Moorosi, 2007) but it is a significant issue in women's performance in management that cannot be overemphasised. The problem in this phase is with women who are already in the position. They may have shattered the glass ceiling in terms of gaining access into the positions, but the barriers to performance still persist and are 'insidious' (Ely and Meyerson, 2000) and manifest in different ways.

While the preferred male image of a school principal affected women's participation in management, the latter also grappled with personal issues across the three phases. Arguably, these personal issues were also influenced by the social expectations that dictate the roles of women and men. It is evident that women still face a great deal of challenges to advancement that may not necessarily be faced by men. Earlier research indicates that women enter and leave management in the same numbers they enter because of lack of institutional and professional support (see Van Eck et al, 1996 and Chisholm, 2001). As Meyerson and Fletcher (1999) put it, the barriers to advancement are not just above women, but they are all around them within the structures of the organisations and their cultures.

### **Understanding the career route: A discussion**

In trying to understand the challenges faced by women on their career route to the principalship, this paper has identified some factors affecting women's overall participation in education management. These factors manifest at many different levels making the problem more complex. In the case of the studied women principals their inexperience and lack of exposure to management was informed by their own agency and the larger context of historical and cultural norms and social expectations of the roles played by men and women in society. Arguably, their experiences were a result of the impositions of traditional male hegemony at the social or macro levels and the patriarchal culture and climate within schools as organisations (Cubillo and Brown, 2003). While gendered social practices occur externally, they indirectly and directly affect women's agency to take the initiative to participate in the principalship because they suggest what can and cannot be done by women, making the route to the principalship a highly complex experience for women.

The personal factors were more prominent in the anticipation phase yet they also affect women across the three phases of their career route. The apparent lack of self confidence about women's participation in management seemed to diminish as women got more acquainted with what is involved in the actual management of schools which in this case was their experiences of prior management. Gupton and Slick (1996) warn women against perpetuating their own glass ceiling by not believing in themselves and their potential to do well in leadership positions. This is the individual agency that suggests an

intrinsic factor affecting women's progress and leading to their ultimate under-representation in education management. Blackmore (1999) and Cubillo and Brown (2003) argue that this so-called lack of confidence in women is a mere fear of the unknown since management has traditionally been coined as male territory to which women had no access. This is arguably why most women felt more comfortable to go for the principalship after they had performed some management function and had overcome the fear of the unknown territory.

A clear pattern emerged where male predecessors informally gave opportunity to women juniors to act on their behalf, contradicting earlier research where opportunities existed mostly for men. This practice bolstered women's confidence as it suggested a significant amount of trust from women principals' predecessors. While other researchers such as Capasso and Daresh, (2001) problematised the notion of men mentoring women, Quinlan suggests that to advance their careers, women may often need to be "actively sold and legitimated" (1999:32) by senior men who understand the field (of management) better. The problematic nature of cross-gender mentorship and the inherent assumption of senior (more experienced) to junior (less experienced) relationship, is beyond the scope of this paper, but it can be concluded here that this informal mentoring played a significant role in the anticipation and acquisition phases, without which women may not have discovered their capabilities. Mentoring was however, remarkably role in the performance phase. Mentoring was however, remarkable less in the performance phase.

Networking is identified as an essential component of women's participation in management in all three phases (Van Eck et al, 1996), but is significantly lacking in women principals' experiences. Gardiner et al (2000) argue that women have been marginalised from networking because the processes of belonging are highly exclusive and male dominated. For women in this study networking with peers was not available as a form of preparation but was available for some after appointment. Van Eck et al (1996) suggest that participation in networks and support from mentors enable women teachers to acquire a higher profile and provide the support and opportunities that are essential for promotion to top management positions. These are regarded as useful forms of preparation support for aspiring and practising principals and women are sabotaged by not being part of them.

The progression of women in management was further inhibited by the notion of 'the best candidate for the job', which has been established in earlier research. And in the case of the women principals in South Africa there are implicit and explicit determinants for the best candidate. The school governing body perspective of a strong man is the most overt discriminatory practice in the process of employment that is done in the auspices of getting the best candidate for the job. Blackmore et al (2006) have problematised the gendered nature of this notion and argued that it is riddled with biases and prejudices that disadvantage women. It is not as gender neutral as it may surface because it ignores gender dimensions underpinning employment into senior school management. According to Blackmore et al, the 'best candidate for the job' is based on 'merit' and the latter is a social construct that "reflects the experiences of those already in the job and those who define it" (2006:311), in this case men. This notion assumes that gender has nothing to do



with who typically gets the principalship (Tallerico, 2000) while affirmative action policy recognises prejudiced treatment and suggests that women must be given preference where they qualify<sup>3</sup>. In the absence of this affirmation, best candidate for the job becomes accepted as normality while women candidates are being sabotaged by requirements for the need for a strong man. Thus, the gendered factors at the organizational level manifest through normalised institutional culture and employment practices that defy policy suggestions. The various institutional cultures and practices affect women across the three phases since they suggest what is more suitable for which gender group in the school setting.

Social barriers in the form of broader cultural expectations in terms of the sex role stereotypes, political, traditional and historical influences are even more problematic because they are so deeply rooted in the society and in the institutional cultures and are therefore not easy to eradicate. Blackmore (1989) posits that, at a specific historical moment, traditional patterns of behaviour prescribe certain roles to which men and women conform to differing degrees, and that is why, for example, women's centrality to child rearing and family is not greatly challenged in practice and forms part of women's identity, values and needs, regardless of the role women currently play economically and in the field of management. However, the reality of women principals in South Africa and in other contexts as well, is complex and needs to be tackled within the cultural discourses that inform them.

## **Conclusion**

This article has revealed that women's experiences are often compromised by the traditional cultural value systems and structural arrangements within the schools that are often less favourable to women. The participants highlight the gendered circumstances in which they work. Instead of devoting their emotional and intellectual energies to the actual management job, women continue to fight against the sexist cultural attitudes from their communities and school environments. The interplay between the social and organisational levels becomes glaring where the social norms and beliefs appear to be informing what happens in the school context, perpetuating the reproduction of a continued male domination in the management of a field occupied mostly by women. As one of the district officials remarked; "the whole system needs to be altered", this alteration needs to start with the attitudes and mindsets of community members in the wider contexts within which schools operate.

The article also revealed that the career journeys to the principalship are often unplanned and particularly complex for women. While on the one hand policy is quite advanced in South Africa, questions probing the gendered attitudes, cultural and social norms that put these policies into practice are not always asked on the other. Efforts are made at the level of acquisition to make entry into the principalship accessible to women, however, there is not sufficient effort put into creating a pool of potential women candidates as well as in supporting the women who have broken through the glass ceiling in order to

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<sup>3</sup> This is dealt with in more detail elsewhere (Moorosi, 2006).

ensure sustainable equity. It has been established that policy efforts are not enough on their own to eradicate the deeply embedded cultural social practices, but these policies are a starting point to the commitment to slowly uproot these insidious social practices.

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