

LEADING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: EXPERIENCES OF FIRST WOMEN OF COLOR PRINCIPAL LEADERS IN HISTORICALLY ‘WHITE’ SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Thanks to an apartheid regime, South Africa was demarcated according to race classifications of ‘white’, ‘coloured’, Indian and ‘black’. Race classifications determined where one lived, went to school, and the possibilities to pursue higher education. For women of color in South Africa interested in a post-schooling education, the state availed bursaries to pursue teaching (and nursing) to control and limit their careers. The backdrop to separate and segregated living and learning for each racially classified group was to socialise amongst themselves, school themselves and obtain careers deemed sufficiently fit by an apartheid government. The transition from apartheid to a more inclusive and less segregated society has been slow and particularly evident in school leadership. This article reports on an empirical case study of the first seven ‘coloured’ women principals who assumed leadership positions in historically ‘white’ led schools. The study locates itself in the broader Cape Town area of South Africa two decades into the country’s democracy. It has a qualitative research design and uses a case study method for data collection. Following ethics approval, semi-structured interviews served as data collection instruments. Data were analysed thematically, and the findings provided insights into leadership in historically ‘white’ schools in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: School leadership, ‘coloured’ women, women of color principals, transformational change.

1. Introduction and background

The apartheid regime in South Africa (1948-1990) legislated race classifications to create political and socioeconomic power following colonisation by the British Empire. Classifications of ‘white’, ‘coloured’, ‘black’ and Indian enforced separation and segregation between racialised groups. Every aspect of daily life was controlled, determining where people lived, went to school, and where students could pursue post-schooling opportunities. The democratic government continued race categorisations to redress the past. However, equity redress is complex as it assumes that the experiences of individuals in a particular race (and gender) category have the same experiences for all in the category (Mare, 2011). Consequently, it overlooks the successes individuals experience in particular race-gender groups. Women of color is not a common phrase used in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead, there are separated race-gender categorisations of ‘coloured’, ‘black African’ and Indian that may carry derogatory meanings from the apartheid era (Jansen & Walters, 2020). The article contributes toward filling the theoretical void of women of color principal leaders (living with the marker of ‘coloured’) in schools in South Africa.

2. Critical race feminism

Successes of ‘coloured’ women are sparsely reported in South Africa (Kenny & Davids, 2022). We wanted to hear about the lived experiences of the first women of color categorised as ‘coloured’ in leadership positions at historically ‘white’ primary schools. Much of what has been written about women of color not only portrays them as problematic but, often, these views are written by authors who are either ‘white’ females or males (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). We drew on the writings of Lugones & Spelman (1983), who argue that women of color need to own their stories and should not be authored by another who knows very little about their daily lives. We wanted to bring to the attention that not all literature about ‘coloured’ women needs to be slanderous and derogatory and that there are individuals

living with the ‘coloured’ categorisation that have been successful in schools, though under challenging circumstances.

There are few studies about women principals in South Africa (Davids, 2018; Khumalo, 2021; Mestry & Schmidt, 2012). While Davids (2018), for example, focuses on the complexities of the leadership identities of principals and how it manifests in a school environment, Khumalo (2021) turns attention to the challenges women face as school principals. We wanted a better understanding of the strengths the women of color principals brought to the schools. We also wanted to know more about how they navigated and strengthened their leadership in historically advantaged ‘white’ schools. With this in mind, we found Critical Race Feminism (CRF) in education to be a helpful framework to guide the analysis of our empirical study with the view that their lived experiences become the theory (Wing, 2003). Like Carter (2011: 13), this article dares to challenge “discriminatory power structures” that keep the faces of women of color “at the bottom of the well, and stop to help them to the top”.

CRF begins with the assumption that race-gender discrimination exists in the schooling system in South Africa and manifests itself differently in the lives of women of color. CRF also brings to attention that race and gender discrimination rarely function in isolation. Intersectionality is, therefore, at the forefront of our study (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). We imagined this to mean that there is no need for us to justify intersectional discrimination and oppression but to focus on the lived experiences of women of color in their roles as school leaders in South Africa. In agreement with Davids (2018), we also acknowledge that there could be (mis)conceptions of gendered leadership in South African schools. However, our thoughts resonate with Wing (2003) that the experiences that shape women of color (in school leadership) are different to the experiences that shape their male counterparts and ‘white’ women (and men) in the same spaces.

3. Research methodology

This study followed on from the research gathered for, *Who gets in and why? Race, class and aspiration among South Africa’s elite schools* (Jansen & Kriger, 2020) in the broader area of Cape Town, South Africa. As women authors living with the marker of ‘coloured’ ourselves, we wanted to know more about ‘coloured’ women’s experiences in their new principalship positions at historically ‘white’ schools. In this light, we drew attention to the first seven ‘coloured’ women leaders at the historically ‘white’ schools. A qualitative research design lent itself to phenomenological and interpretive paradigms (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). We were interested in the views of the women as they had experienced their roles as principal leaders at their respective schools. In this regard, accounts of their lived experiences were valuable. A case study research method was apt for the study, relying on Yin’s (1994: 39) conceptualisation of an embedded multiple-case study. We collected the data using semi-structured interviews. All research protocols were adhered to, including confidentiality and anonymity. The data were analysed thematically and, with this conference in mind, leading transformative change is discussed next.

4. Leading transformative change

4.1. From managing shortfalls to managing privileges

The consequences of apartheid rule meant that post-apartheid schools that had historically accommodated learners from marginalised communities lacked sufficient teaching staff, educational resources, finance, administrative staff and parental involvement with high teacher-learner ratios (Spaull & Kotze, 2015). According to Bush and Sargsyan’s (2007: 397), transformation in South African schools “require[d] action at all levels and there [were] limits to what principals c[ould] achieve in the absence of appropriate physical, human, and financial resources”. Furthermore, with no official training programme for principals to understand the meaning of transformation in schools, it was left for the principals to work it out on their own (Bush & Glover, 2016). Each of the women in this study was principal leaders at schools that enrolled learners from historically marginalised communities (townships) before they applied for their new principal positions. As Dawn pointed out, it was not an easy time because the education department put enormous pressure on principal leaders for schools to become fully functional and how to do so. Although Bush and Sargsyan (2007) describe transformative leadership as redressing the inequities of the past, its meanings in township schools were tested by managing resource, administrative, financial and staff shortages. Through an interpretivist lens, transformative leadership in a township school means compliance with the education department and being innovative about a school’s survival.

On the other hand, ‘white’ schools were historically well-resourced and academically sound. However, there were challenges that the ‘coloured’ women principals had not experienced in their township schools. At Dawn’s new school, she found that she had greater autonomy; the education department gave her time to acclimate to the school context and decide how she wished to move the school forward. Although the schools appeared to be fully functional, underneath the surface, there were challenges they were unaccustomed to. For example, O’ Shea stated, “I had to make a lot of financial decisions that had an effect on the school. I had to make financial changes ... we were over-staffed”. O’ Shea was not accustomed to managing large numbers of School Governing Body (SGB) staff, which “also impacted the school’s financial management,” she stated. SGB consist of elected parents, staff and school leadership. The SGB decide on the amount of school fees per learner and staff appointments. SGB staff appointments are not paid from the state’s purses but from the learners’ school fees. Dawn and O’Shea point out that they were unaware of the number of SGB staff in their new schools as, in township schools, SGB posts were slim. Dawn states, “But then I came in here to about 30 plus SGB staff. That is huge! And, I had to manage them as well”. The data directs attention to tough financial decisions that had to be made, which affected the employment of some of the predominantly ‘white’ staff and their reactions to staff redundancies. Therefore, redressing inequities in historically ‘white’ schools has little to do with managing tangible shortages. Instead, redressing equity in this context meant making financial decisions about re-directing finances in the interests of the schools without the ‘interference’ of the education department.

4.2. Transformation from within privileged schools

Transformation is a common phrase in South Africa, often understood as redressing equity (Mestry & Schmidt, 2012). However, redressing equity through representation does not imply transformation, as issues around equity go much deeper in South Africa, historically and politically. Seemingly, there are missing conversations about what transformation means for staff employed at historically ‘white’ schools. Belinda made the following observation:

A lot of assumptions were also made by not understanding things from a different perspective, not maybe taking the time to understand what transformation looks like. When you start unpacking it from what the teacher needs in the classroom, of what the children need, of the type of conversation and spaces that need to be created for people to unpack all of this. I don’t think that was given a priority.

To this end, transformation begins with difficult ongoing conversations with staff about understanding that privileges may need to be given up to accommodate the needs of those with less. Abels, for example, addressed some difficult issues with her staff members and found that “it was a hell of a battle for the teachers ... they couldn’t deal with it”. Gallie “invited every staff member to come and see me and tell me their story, and I remember there were a few of them who never came”. The teachers’ absence may imply that face-to-face discussions may work for some and not for others. Gallie adds, “You have to strategically plant the seeds if you want things to change” – to be an agent of change. Another strategy was for an external service provider to unpack deeper meanings of transformation with staff, as was the case for Belinda. In her view, “if you really want transformation, you need to create the spaces for connections to happen [amongst staff]”. Still, Dawn affirms, it remained her responsibility as a ‘coloured’ woman principal to lead on transformation as “we cannot transform from the outside in, you need to be inside to transform outwards”, leaning towards the determination and resilience required for transformational change.

5. Conclusion

This article highlights the leadership experiences of the first seven ‘coloured’ women, a category of women of color in South Africa, as they began their principalships in historically ‘white’ primary schools in the broader Cape Town area. Lived experiences revealed that although the women brought a wealth of leadership and management experiences from their historically marginalised schools, they experienced different challenges in their new schools, which they needed to adapt to. While there may have been a plethora of successes and challenges in these schools, we discovered two variables perhaps overlooked when women of color apply for principalship positions in historically ‘white’ schools. Firstly, the implications of managing the employment of more than necessary staff. Secondly, doing the ‘work’ of transformation with staff who reaped the privileges of ‘white’ spaces. We believe that what is needed in (predominantly ‘white’) privileged schools is not necessarily transformational leadership in terms of

employment equity redress but to employ principal leaders who can lead transformative change in the schools. While we could not identify what constitutes transformative change and managing the processes thereof, we seeded conversations that all principal leaders should have with their staff if they are serious about school transformation.

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