Factors contributing to female educators’ underrepresentation in school management positions in Lulekani Circuit, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract: Literature shows that women remain underrepresented in management positions in South Africa. While several studies have been conducted on the subject of the causes of underrepresentation of women in such positions, most of these studies tend to ignore the views of males. This article explores the views of educators (both male and female) with regard to the underrepresentation of female educators in management positions at primary schools in the Lulekani Circuit in the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The researchers collected data via semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 20 participants from five primary schools in this circuit. The results revealed that the underrepresentation of female educators in management positions is influenced by many factors. The fact that most, if not all, of these barriers affect women in different countries, cultures, and socio-economic contexts suggest the need for collective efforts to combat them.

Keywords: women promotion; women in management; school management; glass ceiling; gender stereotypes; South Africa.


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1 Introduction

Bismark et al. (2015, p.1) argued that “the number of women enrolled in professional degrees such as law and medicine has risen from under 25% in the 1970s to over 50% today”. However, despite their increased presence in education, the same authors argued that “gender imbalances in leadership positions still persist across a range of professionalised organisations, including law firms, consulting firms, universities, and health services” [Bismark et al., (2015), p.1]. Women also have “increased presence in the professional and managerial sector, notably in the judiciary, banking, and civil service areas, as well as the private sector” (Barmao, (2013), p.38). However, according to a United Nations Report (2015) titled ‘The World’s Women 2015: Trends and Statistics’, even though “the lives of women have improved in a number of areas over the last two decades … the pace has been slow and uneven across regions, as well as within and among countries” [United Nations, (2015), p.iii]. Despite progress, Shava and Sibanda (2015, p.4) observed that “studies globally have found that women are grossly underrepresented in education management, with men outnumbering women at about five to one at middle management level”.

Women also form the majority of the work force in public education in both developed and developing countries [Richardson, (2003), p.245], yet, “despite the fact that women dominate the primary and secondary teaching profession in both developed and developing countries, they remain underrepresented in leadership and management positions in both public and private education institutions” [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1203]. The same views are also held by Avgeri (2015, p.2), who argued that “gender plays an important role in all facets of human life” and that “although great strides have been made against gender discrimination, still the progress is gradual and slow”. “More specifically, in the field of educational management and leadership”, as Avgeri (2015, p.2) noted, “women’s attempt to gain equal ground work with men is quite evident but the former still face gender-related barriers that hamper their progress”. Avgeri (2015, p.15) cited authors such as Sanchez and Thornton (2010), who also argued that “although lately the number of women in the superintendency (i.e., the act or process of superintending; direction; supervision; oversight, which is referred to as school leadership or school headship [Masuku, (2011), pp.5, 58] is similar to the term referred to as ‘school management positions’ in this article. However, in this article, the term ‘management position’, which “is generally applied to positions of leadership (superintendency, headmaster, school head, etc.) in any public or private organisation” [Pirouznia and Sims, (2006), p.7] “refers … to educators … who occupy positions such as principals, deputy principals, heads of
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In the case of school management, according to Niesche (2014, p.29), “the head occupies the dominant position in the power structure and therefore the privileged site of influence” and the “leadership from below can only be translated from the sphere of ideas to that of action when it is sanctioned by the authority of the head teacher or when the micro-political relations of power are sufficiently favourable to allow authority to be contested in practice”. The success of schools depends heavily on the quality of leadership provided by people (both male and female) who occupy school management positions in the sense that, as Masuku (2011, p.4) citing Davis, (1999, p.12) argued, “I have never seen a good school with a poor principal, or a poor school with a good principal. I have seen unsuccessful schools turned around into successful ones [by both males and females occupying school management positions], and regrettably outstanding schools slide into decline [also because of the leadership provided by people occupying school management positions]”.

However, while Mulford (2003, p.25) argued that “whether the principal was male or female and the teachers’ years in education, age, and gender were not factors promoting leadership”, studies conducted over many years in different countries, cultures, and contexts have revealed that in school administration, men are “more likely to be found in positions with the greatest power, pay, and prestige” in comparison to women [Gelberg, (1997), p.45]. A study conducted in 2013 by the Centre for Research on Gender in the Professions (CRGP) at the University of California, San Diego, USA, found that “while recent high-profile stories in … the New York Times have helped popularize the theory that the role of men in the workplace is declining, women continue to lag behind in securing top-level positions” (2013) cited in Books (2013, p.1). The same findings that Indian women’s education has improved over the past few decades, and that their employment has increased in many professions, but remain underrepresented in leadership positions, were noted by Sondhi and Chawla (2014, p.35) in their study ‘A cluster analysis approach to grouping Indian women professionals’. In terms of education, for example, Gyngell’s (2012, p.1) study cited in Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014, p.1203), conducted in 2012 in the UK, concluded that while the teaching profession in both secondary and primary schools has become a female-dominated one, most school management positions were held by male educators. The conclusion that the rate of female school teachers is as high as 80% in the vast majority of developed countries (such as France) or developing countries (such as Brazil) but that the school management positions were dominated by male educators was also reached by Oliveira and Abreu (2012, p.226).

A comparative study of women upper secondary principals in Thessaloniki, Greece, and Stockholm, Sweden, conducted by Avgeri in 2015, found that “despite the great progress that has been achieved in Greece [and Sweden] in the field of educational management and leadership in terms of gender, women are greatly underrepresented in upper secondary school management positions and significantly face sociocultural constraints and discrimination in their career path” [Avgeri, (2015), pp.1–2]. A study titled ‘An exploration of the influences of female underrepresentation in senior leadership positions in community secondary schools (CSSs) in rural Tanzania’, which was conducted by Mbepera in 2015, found the following: “the trend of female underrepresentation in senior leadership positions is manifested in schools in both developed and developing countries… In the United Kingdom (UK)… female
headmistresses comprised only 36.7%. In Bangladesh in 2006, only 17.4% of college heads were women, and in secondary schools, women heads comprised 22.7%. In the province of Guangzhou in China, women secondary school leaders comprised 38.4%. In Tanzania... primary school women teachers constituted 84.1% in the Ilala district in the Dar es Salaam region, but only 38% of them were heads of schools in 2009” [Mbepera, (2015), p.17, also citing Omboko and Oyoo (2011)].

In Rwanda, according to Asaba (2016, p.1), almost 80 out of every 100 primary school teachers are female, but “according to data at the Rwanda Education Board (REB), there are only about 30 female head teachers for every 100 schools, and the trend is not any different in secondary schools” [Asaba, (2016), p.1].

According to Uwizeyimana and Mathevula (2014, p.1206), the teaching profession in South Africa “has not been spared this anomaly”. For example, according to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) Report (2012) cited in Uwizeyimana and Mathevula (2014, p.1206), there were 418,109 educators in both the public and independent schools in South Africa in 2012. Public schools are schools that are state controlled and generally funded from taxpayers’ money [Du Toit, (2004), p.2], while independent schools are privately owned, and governed and/or funded by parents and/or private shareholders [DBE, (2012), p.11]. The “total number of female educators in public and independent schools combined is 285,252 (68%), “while the total number of male educators is estimated at 132,852 (32%)” [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1206]. These figures clearly show that there are more female educators than male educators employed by the DBE in South Africa. However, while “women comprise over 70% of the teaching population in South Africa, only about 30% of people holding school management positions in South Africa are women” [Mbepera, (2015), p.17].

The trend of employment of women, and their underrepresentation in senior positions, despite there being more than males at national level, is similar to that found in the Limpopo Province. According to the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education (2012), there are a total of 58,194 educators in Limpopo. The number of female educators’ total 34,074, while there are 24,120 male educators. In the Mopani District (where this research was conducted), there are 12,131 educators. The female educators outnumber the male educators by 7,107. According to the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education’s Persal system 1 for the year 2012, there were 11,360 educators in promotional positions in Limpopo, and of this figure male educators numbered 6,881, while the number of females was 4,479 (Limpopo Provincial Department of Education, 2012). The report further indicated that in the Mopani district there were 2,350 educators in promotional positions, the number of male educators in these positions being 1,410, while women numbered 940. There are 21 public primary schools in the Lulekani Circuit. The total “number of educators at these 21 public primary schools in the Lulekani Circuit is 435”, of which “343 are female and 92 are male educators” [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1208]. In the district, the number of female teachers in management positions is 45, while the number of male educators in management positions is 33 (Limpopo Provincial Department of Education, 2012). These figures clearly indicate that “although women are underrepresented in school management positions” in the Limpopo Province as a whole, they constitute the majority in the teaching fraternity of the province and Lulekani District [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1211].

It is against this background that this study investigated the effects of the challenges facing female educators’ rise to school management positions in the primary schools of a
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Developing country such as South Africa, but more specifically, in the rural context of the Mopani District in the Limpopo Province [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1208]. The findings of this article are important to scholars outside of South Africa because the effects of the obstacles on women’s promotions in school management positions, as discussed in this article, are likely to be similar in other countries; especially those with similar levels of social, economic, and cultural development.

2 Theoretical analysis

The above analysis clearly indicates that the problem of female underrepresentation in management positions in the public and private organisations is not limited to one socio-economic sector, culture, or country, and is found in both developed and developing countries [Cubillo and Brown, (2003), p.279]. The education profession, which is the focus of this research, is no exception to this problem. Many factors have been cited in the literature as being the main causes of persistent underrepresentation of women in school management positions. Barmao (2013, p.38) identified “lack of support, starting from the family to national level, and other factors reinforcing each other, like women’s dual roles, being undervalued as a result of African culture, societal perception, [and] educational and political interference, among others” as the main factors behind “low participation of female teachers to headship positions” in many countries. A study titled ‘An exploration of the influences of female underrepresentation in senior leadership positions in community secondary schools (CSSs) in rural Tanzania’, which was conducted in 2015 by Mbepera, found that “that female underrepresentation in school leadership in rural Tanzania is influenced by a number of interrelated factors at the individual, societal, and organisational level, with dominant social norms and values having a cross-cutting influence on the access, experience, and perceptions of female school leaders”. Bismark et al. (2015, p.1) categorised these potential barriers into three broad domains, namely ‘perception of women’s capability, capacity and credibility’. Many obstacles that hinder women from progressing to management positions are generally linked to three analytical models: “the individual perspective model, the systemic gender bias model, and the cultural model” (Gobena, 2014). The “meritocracy model, or the individual perspective model” blames women for being the cause of their own failure to be promoted to “top management positions in terms of personal traits, characteristics, abilities, or qualities” [Growe and Montgomery (2000, p.2) cited in Uwizeyimana and Mathevula (2014, pp.1204–1205]. This analytical model focuses on women’s attitudes, such as their ‘self-image and confidence, motivation, and aspirations’ [Pirouznia and Sims, (2006), p.10].

Another issue mentioned by many researchers is the lack of mobility of female educators with family responsibilities [Coleman, (2004), p.7; Oplatka and Tamir, 2009; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2006]. However, “unlike the individual perspective model, the systemic gender bias conceptual model tends to explain” the differences in the “career aspirations of men and women as an effect of the limited opportunities available to women” [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1205]. ‘Limited opportunities for women’ are said to be a result of ‘systemic gender bias’ in organisations [Pirouznia and Sims (2006, p.11) cited in Uwizeyimana and Mathevula (2014, p.1205)]. Based on the systemic gender bias model, women cannot be blamed for their underrepresentation.

Finally, the cultural model blames the ‘cultural and social norms that encourage discriminatory practices’ [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1205]. Therefore, based on the cultural model, many authors whose research was consulted in this article seem to point to issues such as gender stereotyping and sex-role stereotyping, and family responsibilities [Burton and Parker, 2010; Chuma and Ncube, 2010; Osumbah, 2011; Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1206]. Based on this summary of selected literature, the following nine themes can be identified:

1. conflict between aspiring to promotion posts and family responsibilities
2. lack of aspiration
3. gender stereotypes
4. uncertainty about female educators’ own abilities
5. inappropriate hiring and promotion practices
6. lack of mobility
7. lack of support
8. the belief that women are not as strong as men and are therefore unfit to hold management positions
9. lack of networking and lack of support as a barrier.

These problems cut across culture and continent, and are not limited to one specific profession or socio-economic life (Uwizeyimana et al., 2014). Unlike other studies which included one or two obstacles [Pirouznia, (2013), p.300], all these factors were used to gauge the different perceptions of the respondents of this study. In the following sections, a description of the research objectives, and the research design and methodology applied in this study, are discussed.

3 Research objectives

- To analyse the causes of underrepresentation of female educators in school management positions.
- To explore the views of educators (both male and female) with regard to the underrepresentation of female educators in management positions at primary schools in the Lulekani Circuit in the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa.
4 Research design and methodology

Researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Thomas (2009) defined research design as a plan that shows how a researcher intends to explore a research problem. A good research design helps to ensure that the data collected, and the process of gathering the data, are able to achieve the research objectives in the most accurate way possible [Mouton, (2002), pp.55–57]. A good research design contains a plan for selecting the research population, research subjects (i.e., sample), research areas, and data-collection methods and procedures [Mouton, (2002), pp.55–57]. There are three types of research design, namely qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research design. A quantitative design is usually “a formal, objective, systematic process in which the researcher makes a deliberate effort to collect numerical data about the phenomenon under investigation” [van Rensburg, (2010), p.85]. A qualitative research design differs from a quantitative design in the sense that it helps the researcher to understand social or human problems through the building of a “holistic picture, formed with words and detailed views of the respondents and is conducted in a natural setting of the respondents” [Creswell, (1994), p.6]. A mixed-methods design combines the characteristics of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Given that the focus of the research was to collect detailed views of respondents in their natural settings, a qualitative research design was adopted for the purpose of this study.

4.1 Sampling methods and sample size

A purposive (rather than random) sampling method was used to select the sample of this study in order to ensure fair representation of all the diverse elements of the research population, such as educators in management positions and those who were not, and the two different genders (male and female) comprising the population. Purposive sampling means that the researchers deliberately targeted those respondents which they believed possessed the necessary information to achieve the objectives of this research (Uwizeyimana and Modiba, 2016). Four criteria were combined to select the participants of this research, namely the proximity of the school to the researchers, the urban-rural area factor (socio-economic condition of the schools), gender factors (male/female), and the holding of a school management position or not.

The selection process of the respondents started with the identification of five out of the 21 public primary schools in the Lulekani Circuit (Mathevula, 2014). This circuit is located in the Ba-Phalaborwa Municipality within the Mopani District in the Limpopo Province of South Africa [Mathevula, 2014; Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1208]. The criteria used to select these five schools were based on their proximity to where the researchers lived in order to minimise the financial and time resources required to conduct the interviews. Out of these five primary schools, three were in the rural areas and two in the urban area of the district (Mathevula, 2014). All the schools in the rural areas were no-fee schools (i.e., learners in these schools do not pay school fees; the South African Government pays for them because their parents are too poor to afford the school fees), while the two schools in the urban area were fee-schools (learners’ parents or guardians pay school fees for the children) (Uwizeyimana and Moabelo, 2013). Selecting schools based in rural areas and those that were situated in urban areas of the district was
done in order to obtain a balanced view of respondents working in different socio-economic contexts.

The second step in the selection process of the respondents involved categorising the participants selected from the five schools into two groups on the basis of their gender composition. There were a total of 82 educators (of which 15 were males and 67 were females) in the five selected schools. The final sample of this study included 20 educators out of the total of 82. Of the 20 educators in the sample, four were males who held a school management position and four males who did not hold any management positions in the schools. The final sample also included four female respondents who held school management positions and eight female educators who did not. Babooa (2008, p.1) argued that a sample is deemed appropriate if it contains at least 10% of the given research population. Hence 20 respondents out of 82 represented 24.40% of the research population and the sample was thus deemed to be representative because it was above the 10% level.

4.2 Data-collection methods

There is a variety of data-collection methods in qualitative research, including observations, textual or visual analysis (e.g., of books or video recordings), and individual or group interviews [Gill et al., (2008), p.281]. The choice of data-collection method depends on the information a researcher needs in order to achieve his or her evaluation objectives [World Bank, (2008), p.3]. The choice of the data-collection method is also influenced by the resources available to a researcher [World Bank, (2008), p.3]. It is also possible, and often advised, to combine more than one data-collection strategy [Auriacombe and Schurink, (2012), p.51]. Combining data-collection strategies helps to triangulate data, which can lead to richer outcomes [Behrman, (2006), p.1]. For the purpose of this research, the researchers combined two types of data, namely secondary data and primary data. Secondary data refers to data that are available in published literature, while primary data refers to data that are obtained from the original sources, which in this study were the face-to-face interviews. Secondary data for this study were collected by means of documentary analysis and a literature review, and primary data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews. A detailed description of the two data-collection methods used in this study is presented in the following sections.

4.2.1 Literature review

The literature review or survey involved a thorough and critical review of existing literature on the factors influencing the promotion of women to management positions. The literature review included works published internationally and in South Africa, and comprised books, academic journal articles, official documents such as government reports and policies, and master’s and doctoral theses [Bush et al., (2006), p.3]. Internet data on the promotion of women to management and leadership positions were also reviewed.
4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

After permission had been obtained from the Head of Department of the Limpopo Department of Education, and the principals of the selected schools and all the selected participants had signed and returned the consent forms to the researchers, the researchers were able to conduct one-on-one interviews with each of the 20 individuals who voluntarily agreed to participate. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data-collection method for this study. According to Hardon et al. (2004, p.24), “semi-structured interviews are based on the use of an interview guide”. Gupta and Rangi (2010, p.2) defined an interview guide as “a written list of questions or topics that need to be covered by the researcher during the interview”. Semi-structured interviews were deemed the best method for collecting primary data for this study because it allowed the researchers to pose the same or similar questions to different categories of participants, and then to compare the responses from different individuals within and between the groups in relatively objective ways. Each face-to-face interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded on audio-CDs, which were later transcribed for data analysis. Audio recorders were used because they are believed to increase the accuracy of the data collected (Chabaya et al., 2009).

Following is a list of selected topics and questions included in the interview guide:

1. Statistics have revealed that female educators are underrepresented in management positions. What do you think are the barriers which prevent female educators from promotion to school management positions?
2. Do you think female educators are interested in promotion posts? If yes, why? If no, why not?
3. There are some people who believe that women are not fit to be in management positions because they have some weaknesses that are inherent to women that make them unsuitable for promotions. Do you agree or disagree? Motivate your answer.
4. The South African Government has promulgated various pieces of legislation such as the Equity Act in order to assist women in getting promotions. Is there any improvement, and what can be done to remove the barriers?
5. Do you think female educators are aware of their own abilities to be good managers? If yes, why? If no, why not?
6. What challenges do you experience as a female in a management position?
7. What challenges are females in a management position likely to experience, and why?

4.3 Data-analysis methods

Once all the fieldwork had been completed, the raw data needed to be analysed before being interpreted. According to Babbie (2007, p.378) and Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.1), “data analysis refers to a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge about the subject of the research”. Mouton (2002, p.108) described this analysis as involving the breaking down
of data into manageable themes, patterns, trends, and relationships. For the purpose of this research, the secondary data were analysed by means of an in-depth critical evaluation of literature dealing with the theories and topics related to the different causes of underrepresentation of women in school management positions around the world. Since the primary data used in this research were principally qualitative in nature (i.e., descriptive data, people’s own spoken words, views, and perceptions, without numbers or counts assigned to respondents’ observations), the data (transcribed from the recorded interviews) were carefully organised manually and displayed using graphics such as tables to present the data in a more visual way [Davids, (2011), p.14]. Therefore, a descriptive analysis approach was used to provide insight into the nature of the responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the respondents. Table 1 summarises the Tesch Method used in the primary data-analysis process.

Table 1    Tesch’s framework for qualitative data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Organising information, preparation of data, reading through all transcripts carefully, and making notes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reading through all the transcripts of the interviews, considering the content or underlying meaning of the information, and writing down thoughts in the margins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Listing all the topics, putting similar topics together, and forming topics into columns that might be grouped as major topics, unique topics, and “leftovers”.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assigning to each topic an abbreviated and identifiable code and writing the codes next to the data segments that correspond with the codes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Writing the most descriptive wording for the topics and turning them into themes or categories.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Making a final decision on the abbreviation for each theme or category and alphabetising the codes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Assembling the data material belonging to each theme or category in one place and conducting a preliminary analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Interpreting and reporting the research findings.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table 1 originally created by Tesch (2002, p.176) and adapted by Mathevula (2014, p.42) and Rikhotso (2015, pp.17–18)

4.4 The validity and reliability of the measuring instrument

The validity of a research instrument is defined by the extent to which it measures what it is intended to measure [Thatcher, (2010), p.5]. According to de Vos (2002, p.166), a valid measuring instrument is one which measures what it is supposed to measure, and yields scores whose differences reflect the true differences of the variable or concept being measured, rather than random or constant errors. For the purpose of this study, the validity of the investigation was ensured by the researchers following certain stages in the data-collection and data-analysis processes, such as:

- reviewing relevant “literature on the problem in order to establish and evaluate the findings of past and recent researchers”;  
- using a “heterogeneous sample (male and female, respondents from fee- and no-fee schools, urban and rural areas, and those in management positions and those not)”;


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- assuring the respondents that their identities would not be revealed
- ensuring that the instruments used to collect the data were valid [Rikhotso, (2015), p.55].

In order to ensure the validation of the research instrument (i.e., semi-structured interview questionnaires), the researchers discussed the research problem with the respondents before using the instrument and verified their responses with the other participants of the study.

The researchers also followed certain steps to ensure the reliability of the investigation. Reliability is concerned with the extent to which the results of a study are consistent over time, the extent to which the total population under study is accurately represented by the selected sample, and the extent to which an experiment, test, or any measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials [Joppe, (2000), p.1]. In this study, reliability was achieved by testing the research instrument (i.e., semi-structured interview questionnaires) by means of a pilot study. The aim of the pilot study was to determine possible flaws in terms of ambiguity and the possibility of the repetition of questions. At the end of the pilot study, the researchers were able to determine with a reasonable degree of accuracy where there was a need for the further refinement of some of the research questions, and/or the addition of further questions.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethics is a matter associated with morality in research. In conducting research which involves human beings or animal subjects, ethical guidelines serve as the standard which guides the conduct of the researcher [Babbie, (2007), p.118]. All the respondents engaged in this study were requested to sign a consent form and were informed of the purpose of the study, the importance or potential value of the findings, and their right to participate voluntarily and withdraw at any time from the interview without consequences. In order to protect the interests of the participants, all of them were assured of their anonymity and that their names and the names of their schools would not be disclosed in the public domain. In line with the ethical considerations, the researchers demonstrated due respect for the participants. They were assured that the data would only be used for the stated purposes of the research and that no person other than the researchers would have access to the interview data, as advocated by Bless and Higson-Smith (2000, p.101). It was hoped that, under these conditions, the participants would feel free to offer honest and comprehensive information.

4.6 The limitations of the study

The study was concerned with the underrepresented promotion of female educators in primary schools only. All public and private high schools, and all educators of special needs schools [schools for learners with special educational needs due to severe learning difficulties, physical disabilities, or behavioural problems, as defined by the DBE (2012, pp.2, 32)] were excluded from the study. This made it impossible for the study to identify the views held by educators in private schools or in special needs schools. In addition, because the Lulekani District is located in the rural area of the Limpopo province, with little or no presence of white, coloured, or Indian people, the sample was limited to...
black/African educators. As a consequence, it was impossible to identify the differences or similarities between the views held by different racial groups on the phenomenon analysed in this study. Therefore, while the researchers made sure to include both male and female educators, and those in management and those not in management positions, at five ordinary primary schools in the Lulekani Circuit, it is possible that a different perspective would emerge if the educators in high schools and those in private schools, as well as the racial backgrounds of the educators of those schools, had been included in the sampling criteria.

5 Results

Figure 1 indicates that 95% of the respondents tended to perceive conflict with family responsibility, lack of mobility, and the belief that women are not fit to occupy management positions as reasons why female educators remain underrepresented in school management positions. However, a substantial percentage also believed that women were their own worst enemies in the sense that 100% of the respondents expressed that women’s lack of aspiration, and women’s uncertainty about their own abilities to succeed in school management positions (60%) constituted barriers to their promotion to these positions [see also Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1211]. This negative perception on the part of women is compounded by the fact that 95% of the respondents believed that there is a perception among male and female educators that women are not fit to hold school management positions. However, while these reasons given by the respondents point to intrinsic factors, the analysis of Figure 1 shows that a host of extrinsic reasons were given for women remaining underrepresented in school management positions [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1209].

Figure 1 Barriers to the promotion of women to school management positions (see online version for colours)

As Figure 1 demonstrates, about 60% of the respondents named unfavourable hiring and promotion practices, combined with gender stereotyping, as the reason why women remain underrepresented in management positions. Other reasons were closely linked to social and cultural factors. For example, lack of mobility was cited by 95% of the respondents, lack of support systems by 60%, lack of networking by 85%, and conflict
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with family responsibilities by 95% of the respondents. Figure 1 summarises all the barriers to women’s promotion to school management positions [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1209] as reported by the respondents who participated in this research.

6 Interpretation of the results

The following sections provide an interpretation of the results on the basis of the main themes cited by the respondents.

6.1 Conflict between aspiring to promotion posts and family responsibilities

The findings of this study indicated that 95% of the respondents (both male and female) perceived conflict with family responsibilities as the main barrier to female educators’ promotion chances in this circuit. These findings are in line with Chabaya et al.’s (2009, pp.247–248) argument that “preference for family responsibilities at the expense of their own career development tends to be one of the reasons for the persistent underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles in Zimbabwe”. The analysis of the responses of the participants of this study indicated no difference between male and female respondents on this particular issue. For example, one of the male principal respondents expressed his view regarding women educators balancing the demands of a management position and family responsibilities, and how this detracts from the quality of their performance:

“It is difficult for female educators to cope with management jobs and their family responsibilities. Those who ascend to the top management positions, they find it hard to cope; as a result they do not perform to an acceptable standard.”

The view of this male respondent was supported by the female respondents who were not occupying a management position at the time. Commenting on the possibility of the demands of a management position distracting her from her family responsibilities and her caring role, one of them explained:

“Yes, I believe that one major barrier for me as woman is my family role, which is very challenging. I don’t aspire to occupy any management position now because I am already occupying a challenging position of looking after my family at home. I have to ensure that my house is clean, children are well looked after, clothes are clean, and ensuring that we have enough food. I ensure that my husband is well looked after and that the household participates in community affairs like societies, meetings, and women’s’ clubs. I think that [a] management position here at work will distract me from fulfilling my family roles effectively.”

The fact that women find it difficult to balance their dual roles as house executives, mothers, and school principals was also mentioned by female principal respondents. One of them indicated that when she became a principal, it was not easy for her to balance her work and family commitments. While admitting that it had been far from easy, she reported that she managed to cope with these dual responsibilities of work and family at a later stage, and that she was still holding her position as a school principal in one of the primary schools of Lulekani. These findings confirmed those of a study conducted in the
USA by Meyerson in 2001, which found several women managers to be more at risk of stress “due to multiple role demands”, which are “inherent when running a career” while also taking care of a home [Meyerson, (2001), p.2]. A study investigating the “dilemma of work-life balance in dual-career couples” conducted in India by Delina and Raya in 2015 found that “employees with greater levels of negative work work-to-home spill-over and home-to-work spill-over tend to have greater levels of emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions” [Delina and Raya, (2016), p.5].

6.2 Lack of aspiration

This negative, and arguably gendered, stereotypical view of women was held by both male and female participants. One of the male principals remarked:

“Female educators do not apply for management positions and they seem to be comfortable with their current position. They do not see the need for occupying management positions.”

This male principal’s assertion was supported by several of the female educators who were not in management positions, saying that they enjoyed being teachers and wanted to stay in their classes with their learners [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1210]. In the words of one respondent:

“For the last several years, being a resource teacher has been a joy and less stressful for me. However, I must be honest, I have not gone out of my way to search for an administrative position.”

This female respondent also indicated that management positions seem to be accompanied by a high degree of stress. One female respondent, who is a Head of Department, concurred with the views of the other female respondents with regard to women’s lack of confidence [Mathevula, (2014), p.53], adding that one of the reasons is their relative lack of willingness or ability to ‘advertise themselves to others’:

“It is true that most female educators are not interested in management positions. Lack of self-confidence is one of the reasons why they are not interested and it prevents women in showing how much capable they are. Females often suffer from a belief that by keeping one’s head down and working hard, you get noticed. This can be the main problem as this can be the lack of advertising themselves to others. As letting others know about areas of interest, skills, and accomplishments is not bragging, it is giving people valuable information as showing up the achievements and one’s skills can also value the respect of a person and if females lack this confidence to show up themselves, probably it could be an obstacle for them to rise up to the top management level.”

The above comments seem to be in line with research findings over the last three decades which indicated that ‘low aspirations’ have been “directly affected by women’s internalisation of their inferiority as ascribed by society through sex-role stereotyping” [Pirouznia and Sims, (2006), pp.16–22]. It is, however, also possible that such lack of aspiration could be the result of women’s low self-esteem [Chabaya et al., (2009), p.240]. This is because, as other male respondents who were not in management positions indicated, when promotional posts are advertised, female educators do not apply for them. Studies in different contexts, such as the one conducted by Kyriakous and Saiti (2006) in Greece, and the one conducted by Omukaga et al. (2007, p.604) in Kenya,
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confirmed the unwillingness of female teachers in primary schools to assume leadership responsibilities.

6.3 Gender and sex-role stereotypes

Delina and Raya (2016, p.5) argued that “the boundaries and roles within the workplace have been blurred”, thus suggesting that there should really no longer be gender-based roles and responsibilities in workplaces in the modern era. However, despite Delina and Raya’s (2016, p.5) observations, this study discovered marked differences between males and females on the question of “gender stereotyping as a contributing factor to the underrepresentation of women” in school management positions [Mathevula, (2014), p.21]. On the one hand, all (100%) the female educators, both those in and not in management positions, perceived gender stereotyping as a barrier to their promotion and a significant contributing factor to women’s underrepresentation in school management positions. One female respondent, who was a principal at one of the schools, described an instance at her school where she perceived that the expectations of her staff were influenced by the gender of a (male) administration officer trainee:

“The administrative role is generally regarded as a male role. All women are regarded as unfit for [a] management position and this view is very wrong. Most people still have double standards and the idea that men can make better managers is strong. Most people believe that men can do a better job. Recently I asked for help from the Circuit Office and the administration sent a male administration officer trainee. When he came in, everybody said he is great. Not that I did not appreciate what he was doing, but my vice-principal and me kept everything going. But when he came in, everybody said he is great with administrative work.”

The respondent said that she knew what the male principal was doing, yet everyone said she was not competent. However, even though the male principal who replaced this female respondent “could not do it all, because he didn’t have the big picture”, everyone said he was a great principal. When asked why her colleagues behaved differently towards her and the new principal, she responded, “I think it is the perception some people have that we need a male principal” [see also Mathevula, (2014), p.51]. Another female respondent, who was not in a management position, echoed this perception:

“Women have been seen as different from men, as lacking the necessary personal characteristics and skills to make good leaders, such as dominance and aggressiveness.”

On the other hand, all the males (100%), both those in management positions and those not occupying management positions in the participating schools, rejected the view that gender stereotyping is a barrier to female educators’ promotion opportunities. Therefore, while previous studies would use the saying “women take care, men take charge” to explain these conflicting perceptions about the roles of men and those of women, and of their abilities [Welbourne, (2005), p.1], this analysis pointed to the perception that women were not doing enough to get promoted to school management positions. One male educator, who was not in a management position, felt that the problem of the lack of promotion of women lay with the women – they were not doing enough themselves to get promotions:
“I think, and in my opinion, everyone can reach his or her destiny unless they work hard and struggle for it, but females sometimes have to put in a little more effort in order to achieve a certain level of position. I think that men and women have nowadays equal opportunities everywhere in the world to utilise and to grow in their professional life.”

Instead of pointing to women’s traditional role in society, male respondents argued that women should start working towards realising their dreams instead of continuing to blame someone else. This was clearly apparent in one of the male respondents, who was a head of department. This respondent thought that the problem was located with the women themselves:

“Female educators need to start to have confidence in themselves, and those who are competent [should] compete with male educators for promotional positions and succeed. Gender stereotypes cannot be used as a scapegoat for women’s lack of competency. There are policies that are against any form of discrimination, and that women should take the advantage of these policies. I am very worried about this issue of gender discrimination, but in my twenty years’ experience as a teacher I have observed that female educators themselves are not serious enough about being promoted to senior positions in our schools and above. During our informal discussions in the staffrooms we motivate female teachers to apply for promotion positions, but most of them indicate that they are committed with their family responsibilities. I have also realised that female educators who are in management positions are at a disadvantage sometimes; when their husbands are promoted to management positions in other provinces, they are forced to relinquish their positions in order to relocate with their husbands.”

6.4 Uncertainty about female educators’ own abilities

This study revealed that 100% of the male respondents, both those who were in management positions and those who were not, perceived female educators as having uncertainties in terms of their management capabilities. One of the male educators occupying a management position had perceived this but admitted that this could be due to societal influences:

“Female educators are more dependent on other people to help them identify their talent and skills. They always undermine themselves compared to their counterpart male educators. They do not think they can do the right things. The society has taught them to be submissive to men. It is in their mind that men are [more] capable than them.”

Another male educator who was not in a management position confirmed the long-held male perceptions about ‘women’s lack of confidence and assertiveness’ [Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1211] by saying,

“Female educators are not confident and are not aware of their own abilities. This is evident when we are in group discussions, and they will choose men to lead the group. When chosen to lead the group, they will make some unnecessary excuses.”

It is possible that women behave this way because they fear criticism. This was, for example, highlighted in studies such as that of Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government (1990), which found that women in the UK tended to avoid the risk of facing criticism and receiving negative feedback. They also fear taking risks and being
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public figures. Most women, especially in Africa and the less developed countries, prefer to be fairly private [Osambah, (2011), p.63]. Surprisingly, the male respondents’ views were also supported by all four female educators who were in management positions at the time. In this regard, one of the female respondents who was a principal remarked on the need for women to be affirmed by others:

“Very few female educators are aware of their own capabilities, while the majority are not aware of their talent and skills. This is a barrier because they will wait for someone to tell them that they can be capable managers before they can start aspiring for management positions.”

Many of the female principals supported the view that ‘women’s lack of confidence’ and awareness of their innate capabilities to carry out management functions as successfully as their male counterparts are to a large extent responsible for their lack of aspiration to these positions [Mathevula, (2014), p.53]. Another female principal respondent, like all (100%) of the male respondents (both in management positions and not), mentioned the influence of a ‘patriarchal’ society’s conditioning of women to play dependent and submissive roles, and all members of society to see women in this way:

“I believe that most female educators are not interested in management positions because society has conditioned both men and women to believe that women are not as capable of holding leadership positions as men. This belief leads to lack of confidence in women educators. Since patriarchy has conditioned women to see themselves as inferior, it is unreasonable to expect women to achieve independence on their own. Some talented women teachers still wish to find husbands upon whom they can be dependent.”

6.5 Hiring and promotion practices

When the respondents were asked whether they viewed hiring and promotion practices as barriers to the promotion of female educators to management positions, there were contradictory views. Male and female educators who were not in management positions (60% of the respondents), agreed that unfair practices continue to exist regarding appointments to promotion positions at schools. A female educator who was not in a management position said,

“There is no fairness in the shortlisting and interview processes. The interview committees are biased against the female educators because they have the mentality that women are not good managers.”

This respondent’s view tends to confirm the finding of studies conducted in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1990s by Morris (1999, p.56) and in the USA by Gupton and Slick (1996) cited in Pirouznia and Sims (2006, p.22), which found that due to the lack of clear and universally accepted ‘criteria for hiring’ people for administrative positions in education, hiring committees “often choose males over females”. As a result, inexperienced men were often selected for their potential competence, whereas women at that time were required to have already demonstrated their competence [Baldoni, (2013), p.1]. The views of this respondent were supported by a male educator in a non-management position who was of the view that a degree of corruption and bias exists in selection processes in general, and that this also affects male applicants for promotion posts:

“Despite the availability of acts and policies which promote fair practices and discourage all forms of discrimination in the appointment of educators,
biasness in the appointment of educators in promotion positions continue to exist. To be honest, this does not only affect female educators; even male educators are affected by this kind of practices.”

However, these views were rejected by both male and female respondents holding school management positions. Based on these responses, it could be argued that educators who were already holding school management positions (40% of the 20 respondents) seemed to reject any ideas that hiring and promotion practices affect the promotion of women to these positions, while those males and females who were still aspiring to management positions (60% of the total sample) tended to pin the blame for their failure to secure promotion on hiring and promotion practices.

6.6 Lack of mobility

The findings of this research indicated an almost unanimous (95%) perception held by the respondents that women educators do not like to accept “management positions at schools far from their families” [Mathevula, (2014), p.135]. One of the female respondents who was not in management verified this perception:

“I can only accept a management position in our town only. As a female educator, I cannot occupy a management position very far from my home, where I will be forced to be separated from my family.”

This opinion was supported by a male respondent who is a head of department:

“Female educators do not want to work far away from their home. They do not apply for the posts that are far away, even when they meet the requirements of the posts, because they do not want to stay away from their children and husbands.”

This male head of department’s views were supported by his colleagues in other schools, one of them being of the opinion that

“it is difficult for female educators to work far from their home, because their husband will not give them permission to go and work far from their home”.

These findings tended to confirm the findings of a comparative study between French and Turkish women executives conducted by Akpinar-Sposito in 2012, which also found that it was “true that many women managers would choose not to relocate if asked to, because of their children’s education” and the fear of losing their social and family support systems [Akpinar-Sposito, (2012), pp.1–7].

The fact that all eight women who did not hold any school management positions but who were in fact aspiring to promotion to management positions were not willing to accept a management post if it meant separation from their loved ones (children, parents, husbands, etc.) seems to be one of the biggest contributors to the underrepresentation of females in management positions. Alicia Kagirimpundu, a part-time female educator in Rwanda, summarised the prioritising of fulfilling family (including children) obligations over taking school management positions by women as follows: “I think female teachers are more concerned about their family obligations than taking up demanding roles in schools. Being a head teacher or an administrator means you need to be dedicated to good service delivery. Surprisingly, when it comes to early childhood education, you will realize that women have taken over all the roles since it corresponds to their nature of nurturing” [Kagirimpundu (2016) cited in Asaba (2016, p.1)].
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Other studies conducted in different contexts also confirmed this. For example, Chabaya et al.’s (2009, p.5) study in Zimbabwe also found that “some work organisations have reported increases in numbers of female managers” who turn down promotions to management positions which would require them to relocate to another place [see also Mathevula, (2014), p.24]. Research shows that the need to prioritise one’s family and childrearing responsibilities over women’s desire to take up management positions in organisations is a general problem that cuts across cultures, continents, and social and economic life. Thus it is not limited to Africa or the developing countries.

Research investigating the reasons and remedies for underrepresentation of women in medical leadership roles conducted in Australia by Bismark et al. in 2015 found that the underrepresentation of women in medical leadership roles was “as a natural result of women’s childrearing responsibilities” [Bismark et al., (2015), p.1’. Indeed, as Avgeri (2015, p.29) put it, “childbirth, child-care as well as homemaking require time investment, increasing their workload, and deterring them from seeking administrative positions”. Peterman (2008, p.9) summarised the consequences of the conflicting roles of women on their advancement to management positions as follows: “A 24/7 work ethic includes a low tolerance for the intersection of the commercial and domestic worlds, particularly at the senior level. A ‘round the clock’ culture struggles to accommodate parenthood, which impacts on women who have prime carer responsibility. When business is viewed through a narrow masculine prism, the skills and traits attributed to the feminine leadership style do not align with business essentials”.

6.7 Lack of support

Disagreements emerged between the male and female respondents as to whether female educators in management positions experienced a lack of support from their male colleagues. On the one hand, in line with a study conducted in Uganda, which concluded that “Ugandan women are hardworking, strong, cooperative, and have leadership skills, and the only challenge is to encourage and support them to look for leadership posts” [Mbepera, (2015), p.37], all of the female principals who participated in this research claimed that female educators are neither encouraged nor supported to take management positions [see also Uwizeyimana and Mathevula, (2014), p.1211]. One of the female respondents who is a principal commented on what she perceived as negative attitudes towards, and discouragement of, women managers:

“People would make bad remarks that women are not good managers, and they are failures once they are in leadership and management positions.”

These comments were echoed by another female principal who had experienced a lack of support for women in management, who were often forced to become aggressive and behave in ‘masculine’ ways in order to command respect:

“It is not easy to get support from your colleagues as a female manager. You sometimes have to employ the male leadership style in order [to] show your subordinates that you are in charge by being aggressive.”

This observation seemed to confirm some authors’ findings, such as that of Bismark et al. (2015, p.5), who found that “women were not often being taken really seriously … and their traits were readily dismissed as too feminine and thus not stereotypically consistent with being a leader”. As an extension of this, as Bismark et al. (2015, p.5) further argued,
“several of the women interviewed noted a pressure on senior leaders to behave like ‘one of the boys’”. Bismark et al. (2015, p.5) cited one of the female respondents who participated in their research, who said, “It’s almost like females in politics; you’ve got to be like one of the boys to be a leader…. It almost forces”. It is like saying “You can join us if you’re a girl but you’ve got to act this way” [Bismark et al., (2015), p.5]. Some interviewees cited by Bismark et al. (2015, p.5) also noted that “habitual privileging of stereotyped ‘maleness’ as the only credible context for leadership, created a heavily-gendered work environment”. Bismark et al. (2015, p.5) indicated that respondents argued that “this environment was alienating and uncomfortable for some female leaders”. According to Avg eri (2015, p.19), this “maleness of leadership … comprised of certain characteristics that are more frequently displayed by men rather than women, i.e., aggressiveness, competitiveness, forcefulness and independence” in performing leadership functions. There is a serious problem with this blind generalisation that suggests that women are not aggressive, competitive, forceful, and independent without providing evidence to support these claims. There are many definitions of the term ‘leadership’ and the concept might mean different things to different people [Petersen, (2006), p.1]. Uwizeyimana (2016, p.40), citing Choi (2007, p.244), argued that “a leader is a person within a group who has the abilities to exert the most influence over other members of the group”. Thus a leader is a member of the group who “has the ability to influence another person or group members in any manner to comply with his/her requests – willingly or not” [Uwizeyimana (2016, p.40) citing Fox et al. (1991, p.93)]. Someone with leadership qualities is said to have some specific traits or characteristics such as the ability to ‘adapt to various situations’, being “alert to social environment(s), being ambitious and achievement oriented, being assertive, cooperative, decisive, dependable, dominant, energetic, persistent, self-confident, tolerant of stress” and expresses the “willingness or drive to assume responsibility” [Baron (1989, p.691) cited in Uwizeyimana (2016, p.40)]. Based on this definition of the term ‘leadership’ and the main characteristics of a leader, it is not clear whether a leader has to be aggressive in order to influence, how a leader can compete with the group members she is trying to influence, or use force and still be called a leader. Does one need to be aggressive, competitive, and forceful to earn the respect of followers? Does it mean men must be forced to follow the leader, whether a man or a woman? The answers to these questions are important in order to understand the reasoning behind Chisholm’s (2001, p.388) argument that men and women in South Africa do not support women who want to be managers because they are generally not ready to be led by women. Chisholm’s (2001, p.388) comments seem to be in line with the comments of female educator respondents who were not in management positions. One of them remarked on the lack of support for women in management on the part of both female and male colleagues:

“She [female educator] will not apply for [a] management position because most female educators, once they are in management positions, they do not get support from their [female] colleagues. In most cases the male educators do not give support to female principals.”

However, Chisholm’s (2001, p.388) argument does not explain whether this lack of support for female educators by their male counterparts is limited to the South African context or if it is experienced in other non-African cultures and contexts. Chisholm (2001, p.388) also did not give reasons why South African men tend to behave this way towards their female counterparts. In fact, empirical evidence contradicts Chisholm’s
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(2001, p.388) claims. For example, all the male educators in management positions (4) and those not in management positions (4) who participated in this research tended to disagree with the female counterparts on the issue of lack of support for female managers (12). One male respondent, who was not in a management position, argued that those female managers who demonstrated competency would earn support from their colleagues:

“I do not think female managers lack support. They are given support, unless their competency level is of an unacceptable standard. To gain support, they need to be competent.”

Therefore, judging from the responses from female educators, there is clearly a fear that once females are in management positions, they might not get the support they need from their colleagues. However, the male educators are likely to refuse to support any person who is placed in a school management position – unless that person (male or female) is able to convince his/her colleagues that he/she is capable of performing school management functions. There is no evidence to suggest that male educators would support an incompetent male educator who assumes a school management position. Thus, without discounting women’s challenges, it can be argued that gender does not seem to be the main criterion for earning respect and support from colleagues – the capacity and capability to perform the school management function successfully is the main requirement. There is also no evidence to suggest that a capable woman will not be supported by male counterparts. The requirement to apply the fit-for-purpose principle, as opposed to the rush to appoint females in order to meet gender quota requirements of females in leadership positions, seemed to be supported even by women who were not part of this study. For example, Pascaline Mugisha, a female university student in Rwanda [cited in Asaba (2016, p.2)], argued that as much as there is a need to deal with the problem of underrepresentation of women in school management positions, and as much as there is a need to create several opportunities for women to climb the leadership ladder in schools,

“you cannot just hire someone because they are women. They should at least have the minimum standards. Make a mistake and hire the wrong person, you are compromising the system. I believe, as women, we need to work hard instead of feeling sorry for ourselves. We should [also] strike a balance between family and careers” [Asaba (2016), p.2].

6.8 Lack of networking and lack of support as barriers

The findings of this study indicate unanimity in the views expressed by the participants of the vital importance of reducing the degree of underrepresentation of women in school management positions. One of the female respondents who was a principal listed some of the many advantages of networking for women aspiring to management positions:

“The networks provide alternative communication channels and act as a forum of power that challenges stereotyped representations of women as passive and silent. It is essential for those pursuing upward mobility to gain influence, and active networking allows them to do this in at least three ways. It enhances visibility, speeds up the process of finding a mentor, and yields valuable information.”
The views of these female principals were supported by other female respondents in school management positions; one of them arguing strongly for the necessity of women being “connected” in order for them to be promoted to management positions:

“Competent or not competent, it will not be easy for you to get [a] promotion if you are not connected. I observed so many competent people fail to get [a] promotion because they were not connected. The moment they start to connect themselves with other people, they were promoted.”

These respondents’ comments were in line with many findings in current literature, such as Pirouznia and Sims (2006, p.100) and Chen et al. (2012, p.240), who found that networking plays an important role in assisting women to advance to principal positions. According to Peterman (2008, p.9), networking and “team-play in competitive, results-focused environments require skills in forming strategic relationships and navigating organisational politics that often require separation of the personal from the professional”. This is because, as Peterman (2008, p.9) concluded, “men and women who are not adept at ‘playing the game’ are less successful”. Peterman’s (2008, p.9) argument, and the views of the male and female respondents who believed that lack of networking has been and remains a barrier to women promotion to school management positions, were supported by all four male heads of departments; one of whom emphasised the importance of networking for gaining exposure to a wide circle of people in terms of one’s leadership abilities:

“It would be difficult to be appointed to management positions if you are not known because people want to work with a person who has demonstrated his or her abilities. If you do not mix with people, they will not know what you are capable of.”

It is, however, evident that men would suffer the same fate if they had no abilities to network.

6.9 Assumption that women are not fit to hold management positions

The findings of this investigation revealed that 19 (95%) of the respondents did not agree that women have leadership weaknesses. One of the female principal respondents became very emotional when answering this question, viewing leadership capabilities as being evaluated by many men in terms of stereotypical masculine qualities:

“I do not think that women have leadership weakness[es]. That is very wrong. Men are judging us very wrongly. I think that the fact that the leadership role is a male domain means that the success criterions, by which a leader is evaluated, have been characterised by men in masculine terms.”

These views of women’s capabilities, or lack thereof, in management positions were strongly supported by those female educators who were not in management positions. One of these female respondents said,

“It is wrong to say women have weakness[es] when it comes to management and leadership positions. We have seen so many women managers who are doing very well in their positions. Some men are worse than women in leadership position[s]. Nowadays women are empowered to take positions and doing very well compared to male[s].”
The most encouraging factor is that all of the responses from the male participants echoed this view, to a lesser or greater extent, with one of them stating,

“Women may have a different leadership style to that of a man but that does not mean that women are weak leaders. I know many women who are better than men in leadership. Women may be reluctant to occupy leadership positions because they are not interested. I also know of many women who have superior intellectual abilities.”

7 Conclusions, unique contribution, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews in this study have corroborated a number of factors believed by many scholars cited in this research to be the main factors contributing to the underrepresentation of female educators in school management across countries and cultures. The analysis of the findings led to the conclusion that women, irrespective of whether they are in developing countries such as South Africa, Tanzania, or Zimbabwe, or developed countries such as the USA, the UK, France or Australia, to name but a few, face the same problems found in the teaching profession in the Mopani district in Limpopo. It can be concluded that all these factors, such as “lack of mobility, lack of support from family and colleagues, and lack of mobility” [Mathevula, (2014), p.61], could be overcome if the ways in which the roles of women in both their professional and domestic/family lives are perceived were to change, and if women were able to get over their fears in order to make it happen. There is a great chance that a woman who is capable of successfully executing her school management functions will earn the respect of her counterparts. There is no reason for an incompetent person to earn support on the basis of gender. One of the strategies that could change this situation could be motivating women who have the necessary management skills and abilities to seek and accept school management positions and helping them to build confidence in their own abilities to be successful school managers. It would be a serious mistake to appoint women who do not have the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitude to school management positions, even if the policies of a country require school governing bodies to appoint women to meet certain gender quotas.

The findings of this research have both theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical and managerial implications of this type of research include that the findings of this research could help educational institutions in the development of appropriate promotion, recruitment, and appointment strategies for women with the right management skills, knowledge and attitude that are aspiring to become school leadership positions. The findings and conclusions of this research could also assist “educational policy makers to better understand some of the causes of underrepresentation of female educators in school management positions and find remedies” [Barmao, (2013), p.38]. The findings of this research also alert educational policy makers of the possible dangers of setting gender quotas and attempting to appoint women to meet these gender quotas at all costs. Most importantly, the findings and conclusions of this research can assist female teachers in school leadership/managerial positions to become mentors to young female teachers who might find it difficult to network in male-dominated leadership positions. Capable women should be prepared and encouraged to take up the challenge of being in school management positions in order to motivate others to also aspire to these
positions. Therefore, last but not least, the findings and conclusions of this study have “policy implications for various institutions in the government on the need to create gender awareness and promote equality in leadership positions” [Barmao, (2013), p.38] in order to reduce the problem of underrepresentation of women in school management positions everywhere, as this problem still persists.

As briefly indicated in Section 4.6 (Limitations of the study), this study had limitations, which included the fact that its findings were based on a small sample. As indicated, the researchers relied on data collected via semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 20 participants from five primary schools in the Lulekani Circuit in the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. There are about 87 education districts in South Africa, of which 10 are in the Limpopo Province [DBE, (2016), p.1]. Because the Mopani district is just one of many districts in South Africa and the Limpopo province, it is difficult to generalise the findings of this research outside the district in which it was conducted.

Because of these limitations, further research covering a wider sample is recommended in order to increase the generalisability of the findings.

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Notes

1 This article was written by the first author and substantially borrowed from the second author’s mini-dissertation.