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A large, stylized yellow graphic on a purple background. It consists of a thick, wavy yellow line that starts on the left, curves down, then up, then down again. A black railing with white vertical bars follows the path of the yellow line, appearing to be on top of it.

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Exploring teachers' perceptions of women principals in the Solomon Islands

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the perceptions of teachers towards woman principals in the Solomon Islands, a country where women are very poorly represented in educational leadership and are not readily accepted in leadership roles. This qualitative study identifies the expectations of teachers, the influences of cultural norms on the perceptions of teachers, and in particular the influence of land tenure practices from the cultural backgrounds of individual teachers on their views of woman principals. Self-reported changes in teachers' perceptions over time, as a result of working under the leadership of a woman principal, are described. Specific strengths and skills brought by woman principals to their leadership roles are identified and the positive influences of these women are acknowledged by teachers. This study shows that in a society that is still strongly influenced by patriarchal norms, the perceptions held by both male and female teachers of women in educational leadership can change over time.

Introduction

In the Solomon Islands today there is a concern that women are not fairly represented in school leadership (Akao, 2008; Akao & Strachan, 2011; Malasa, 2007). In the education sector of this country almost all principalships are held by men (Akao & Strachan, 2011). That being said, a small number of women are now working in leadership roles in education. The perceptions of teachers working with some of these women are the focus of this paper. A recent study focusing on the experiences of Solomon Islands women in educational leadership revealed a number of issues that impacted their ability to attain leadership positions (Akao, 2008). Solomon Islands culture, including the accepted perceptions of the place of women in society, had a significant effect on women who aspired to leadership roles in education. These perceptions also affected their legitimate authority when stepping into such leadership roles.

The perceptions that people hold of their leaders are influenced by their beliefs and value systems and affect the way they interact with the leaders. Such perceptions have also been shown to affect followers' performance (Carston, Uhi-ben, West, Patera, & MacGregor, 2010; Crossman & Crossman, 2011), so it is important to know what they are. Conversely research shows that people in leadership



affect their followers, and that a working knowledge of followership in an organisation can facilitate organisational change (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2009, Shum & Cheng, 1997). This means it is important that school leaders have some understanding of the views of their teaching staff. This paper looks at an aspect of the complexity of educational leadership: the perceptions of teachers working with woman principals in a country where woman principals are the exception rather than the rule.

Women in educational leadership

Melanesian countries are the poorest countries in the South Pacific (Strachan, 2009; Strachan, Akao, Kilavanwa, & Warsal, 2010). These countries tend to have basic educational provision for their populations, and have fairly conservative educational expectations. There are opportunities for women in educational leadership but they do face barriers. Literature on Melanesian women in educational leadership is slowly emerging, with studies completed by a range of authors such as Akao (2008), Douglas (2000), Pollard (2000, 2006), Pollard and Waring (2010), Strachan (2009), Strachan et al. (2010), Vali (2010) and Warsal (2009).

In Melanesia there are very few female school principals, and most are found in primary schools. For example, in Vanuatu the percentage of woman principals was 3.9% in 2008 (Warsal, 2009). Similarly, in Solomon Islands in 2006 only 2.9% of principals were female (Akao, 2008). The seeming disproportionality is not necessarily caused by government policy or bias but "... is the consequence of people's traditional world view, which includes the notion that women's place is at home" (Pollard, 2000, p. 6). Reasons for the under-representation of women include the traditional cultural expectations of women's roles, the lack of access to education for some girls and women, gender discrimination, low confidence and self-esteem issues, and the busyness of tasks around the home. As Strachan et al. (2010) state, "gender is deeply embedded in culture" (p. 68) and "gender thus plays a larger role in women's under representation in Melanesia" (p. 103).

Although not visible in formal educational leadership roles, many Solomon Islands women have had experience in leadership through church and community activities. For example, in church communities women are often able to hold leadership roles, particularly with respect to leading women and children. Pollard (2006) argues that women play a crucial role in cultural leadership in feast giving, and warrior and priestly roles in some Solomon Islands communities. Women have also taken the lead in times of need; for example women were found to be an important influence in the peace process in Solomon Islands after a period of political instability and localised violence.

Sociocultural context

Traditionally, the role of a woman in the Solomon Islands is to be a housewife, mother, and the basis of kinship for the family or clan. Women help the men in farming the land, using subsistence techniques. In addition they do the domestic chores of cooking, washing, caring for the children and looking after the aged. Fishing, collecting firewood and fetching water are additional tasks. Women in traditional times were seen as the backbone of how a traditional family functioned. More recently western influence through media and education has led some modern Solomon Islands women to question traditional roles (Pollard, 2000). Urbanization is also a contributing factor towards changing perceptions of the roles of women (Griffen, 2006).

In the Solomon Islands, land tenure is an element of the complex social structure that impacts on views of leadership and of women, and land tenure practices vary from island to island. Land is collectively owned by clans and its use is dictated by the clan (Koian, 2010; Whittington, Osipina, & Pollard, 2006). There are three principal forms of descent with related land tenure that are recognised: patrilineal, matrilineal and bilineal. In these three forms, the leadership roles of men and women with

respect to the land are quite distinctive. Communities that practise patrilineal descent are in the provinces of Choiseul, Malaita, Temotu, Rennell, and Bellona. Here the land is passed down through the male line from father to son, and women have no authority in the decisions that are made. In this system males assume all responsibility for decision-making about land as well as all other issues, so that men are decision-makers in all spheres of life. Matrilineal descent is practised in the Solomon Island provinces of Western Province, Isabel, Guadalcanal and Makira. In this system women own land and are responsible for the land decisions for their clans. They do not have to leave their land if they marry, and they pass it down to their daughters. This gives women in matriarchal societies higher status than those in patriarchal societies. Bilineal descent occurs for some families in some areas. In this system land is passed through both male and female lines to children. In this case both the male and female lines are important and both males and females have some authority when it comes to land issues.

This system of land tenure has broader implications and affects more than just the arrangements around the inheritance of land. Ideas about the relative place and power of women and men are to some degree dictated by the culture of the community within which individuals have been raised. This means that in different communities within the Solomon Islands there are differing cultural beliefs and practices with respect to gender and leadership (Huffer, 2008; Maetala, 2008).

Research question

This study asked the question: What are the perceptions of teachers regarding woman principals in Solomon Islands?

In particular it was hoped the research would uncover the expectations teachers had of their principals and the issues that they felt they faced when working with a woman principal. The impact of sociocultural factors on the teachers' perceptions was an area of interest.

Methodology

A qualitative interpretivist approach was taken in this research using *talanoa*, an indigenous research methodology, which enabled the researcher to engage in conversation and discussion with participants on their own terms. *Talanoa* is "dynamic interaction of story-telling, debating, reflecting, gossiping, joking, sharing families' genealogies, food and other necessities" (Otunuku, 2011, p. 45). It involved one-to-one conversations with participants using their own language and talking about issues, in order to build relationships and understanding between the researcher and participant. Most communities in Solomon Islands still emphasise and practise the art of story-telling and have a strong oral tradition where beliefs and customs are passed down through generations (Malasa, 2007; Memua, 2001). Thus this methodology was deemed appropriate for this study, for as Vaioleti (2006) points out, "talanoa's philosophical base is collective oriented towards defining and acknowledging Pacific aspiration while developing and implementing Pacific theoretical and methodological preferences for research" (p. 25).

Nine participants (six men and three women) were involved in this study, all teachers working with woman principals in four schools in Honiara, Solomon Islands. Their teaching experience ranged from four to 27 years, and eight of these teachers had previous experience working with a male principal. The participants in this study originated from two areas of the Solomon Islands: Malaita and Western Province.

The first author met with each participant at a place suitable to them and the research conversation took approximately one and a half hours in each case. The language used during the discussion was Pijin (the *lingua franca* of Solomon Islands) since participants felt more comfortable expressing themselves in this language. The discussions were recorded and were then transcribed and finally

translated into English. Once completed, transcripts were returned to participants for checking, and at this stage clarifications or corrections were made where participants felt it was necessary. Once the transcripts were verified analysis of the data began. Analysis focused on making meaning through multiple readings of the transcripts of interviews. Thematic analysis was used, and coding of items allowed for categorisation and the identification of emergent themes.

Findings

On the basis of the analysis of conversations held with participants, we identified a number of themes. This section focuses on these themes.

Perceptions of women as principals

1. Expectations teachers held about female principals

In any school organisation teachers hold expectations of their principals. In this study there were three important expectations that were addressed by each of these participants.

Presence of principals in school

The visible presence of their principal at school was a major expectation of all participants. Participants observed that most of the time their principals stayed in their offices to focus on the administration of school. Each participant felt that it was very important that their principal was seen around the school, meeting with teachers, seeing what they are doing, visiting classes and building good relationships with teachers. They felt that this contributed to their motivation as a teacher. Clyde supported this when he said:

With this lady here we produce a lot of good results because she motivates us and encourages us.

Addressing teachers' needs and welfare

Participants expected principals to provide for teachers' needs and welfare, especially when it came to resources such as textbooks, chalk, dusters, learning materials and stationery. Participants said that a lack of these resources sometimes occurred because most female principals were very strict when it came to budgeting and would not overspend. The payment of incentives (extra money paid to teachers to cover basic costs like bus fares to work) helped teachers to meet some of their personal needs. These payments were expected by the teachers, but not always received if the budget was too tight. Administrative expectations also included that the principal liaised with the education authority regarding teacher registration and promotion.

Communication between teachers and principals

Teachers expected to be informed of decisions made by their principal, including plans for the school, and the latest happenings around the school. Participants voiced their disapproval when they were not informed. As Clyde pointed out:

She should inform us what is happening and link us with our education authority. When she does not inform us and something happens in the school we become frustrated.

Participants felt that good communication not only permitted teachers to be aware of decisions in the school, but demonstrated that principals recognised and valued the teachers as a team. When expectations were fulfilled, teachers felt that their leaders valued teachers' contributions and this caused them to be more motivated to teach.

2. Issues that arose while working with a woman principal

In this research project it was found that each participant identified what they saw as female-related issues while working with a woman principal.

Disciplinary action

Participants in the research commented on the disciplinary style that female principals used. Female principals were generally seen to be more compassionate towards the students. Take for example Florence's statement:

When the student breaks a rule and the teacher reports it, this student needs to be suspended or sometimes expelled. However, with my principal she looks at this situation like a mother and her family. She would say to us teachers, "If it was your child and we expelled that child how would you feel?" Or she would say, "If you don't have a child that has been disciplined you then won't feel what it's like with those parents that have a child that is disciplined." She is more lenient, especially when it comes to disciplining students. I would say she wants to understand more the reasons why they behaved that way than the rule of punishing these students for their actions.

Clyde commented:

... maybe because she has a heart of a mother.

Assistance of man-power for women leaders

Many of the participants suggested that female principals should have a male to work alongside them, given the physical nature of the work that principals were sometimes called upon to do in the Solomon Islands. This work included classroom building and maintenance, which were seen as men's work. Samson supported this:

I am a male figure so I do many of the heavy jobs that female principals cannot do. So the challenge I face is that I have to be there especially with the development to give a hand. Because I am the only man in the school, she looks to me to support her with this, concerning developments in the school.

Male support was seen by these teachers as a way to assist and not to undermine a woman principal's leadership.

Confidentiality

Three participants found it difficult to approach their principals because they were unsure whether they could be trusted. They explained that the woman principals they worked with did not always keep confidences.

Lance explained this by stating:

... another challenge I face is sharing my personal problems with her which is hard for me. I feel that if I tell her she might go and tell another person. I don't really trust her. She's my principal but I see her sometimes sharing people's personal problems with other colleagues of mine, especially women teachers.... With the other male principal he is more private. Thus I put more trust in him.

According to three participants the way male principals handled sensitive issues was more confidential.

3. Sociocultural background and its impact on teachers' perceptions.

Participants identified the fact that their cultural land tenure practices affected their perceptions of woman principals.

All the participants from a patrilineal background expressed a strong belief in leadership being a man's role and explained that they felt it was not appropriate for women to question the authority of men. Therefore, for them, working with a woman principal generated tensions and challenges. Clyde raised this issue when reflecting on his appointment to teach at a school with a female principal:

Coming from a patrilineal society when I got appointed to come and work under this female principal, I said "How come a woman is principal up there?" ... I also was saying to myself, "I think this other person should be up there and not this female...."

Ivy, who also came from a patriarchal society, said she thought leadership was meant for men and not for women. This was because she did not think that women had the necessary skills in leadership to run a school. Ivy stated:

Coming from a province like Malaita where they practise a patrilineal system ... when I first worked under a woman principal it affected my judgment at first, why a woman was holding a leadership role....

In contrast, the participants who had a strong matrilineal background, including participants with a bilineal background, were more accustomed to seeing women as leaders so they did not feel negative towards working with a female principal. Lance stated:

In the first place when I was informed I would be working under a woman principal ... coming from a matrilineal background I saw this as normal, since women in our village were involved in decisions concerning land issues.

These participants saw that leadership roles could be held by women as they were used to women making decisions, drawing on their matrilineal background. As illustrated above, they accepted woman leaders in school and attributed their acceptance to their cultural beliefs and acceptance of the leadership of women in land matters in the village setting.

4. Effective leadership styles of woman principals.

In this study, participants highlighted some influential leadership qualities they saw in their woman principals, and to which they attributed the success of their schools.

Sharing responsibilities with work colleagues

Participants explained that when woman principals shared responsibilities with classroom teachers this gave them courage and confidence to take up the leadership roles assigned to them. Samson explained:

... the unique thing is that she does not keep the work to herself. When she sees that there is a need for things to be done she shares it with us.

Participants said the success of their schools was dependent on their woman principals delegating responsibilities, especially when working with males that came from a patrilineal background. They felt that by delegating tasks, men gained some legitimacy in their roles and it helped them to feel that they could contribute to some area of leadership within the school. As Clyde said:

... When you are up there [working as a principal] and you do not delegate responsibilities, especially female principals, and you have male teachers who come from a patriarchal society they will definitely want to put you down. Thus, delegation is important.

Open interpersonal relationships

Each participant identified the interpersonal relationships between their female principal and staff as being critical to her success. Three participants perceived a gap between themselves and their principal, while the others spoke of openness, care and understanding being shown by their principal. Teachers felt that female principals focused on interpersonal relationships, which was seen as a strength of their leadership.

Woman principals' firm decision-making style

Five of the participants in the research discussions addressed decision-making. These participants described their female principals as firm decision-makers, especially when it came to the financial matters of the school. Florence stated:

She is strong in her thinking ... and you cannot bend her when it comes to the financial part of the school. She is firm. It has become a reality, because a lot of development has been done for our school since she is firm in allocating money to projects. It is only through the development of buildings that I see her leadership style is strong.

Female teachers aspired to gaining the strong leadership skills they saw in their female principals. They admired how their principal made firm decisions, as for most women handling money was seen as a male prerogative.

Being a visionary leader

Participants admired the vision of their woman principals and acknowledged that developments in their schools were a direct result of these women's visionary leadership. In all the schools represented, participants acknowledged that the physical development of the school (classrooms, housing or student accommodation) had improved under their female principal's leadership. Florence stated:

I really admire her to be honest ... especially to do with the development of this school. Like she has the vision already, to do with developmental side of the school... But she also has this moral spiritual outlook that is very strong, ... and it has helped her develop this school.

Participants felt that the principal's vision was directly related to development, so when a leader had a vision, development in the school was likely.

5. Beliefs and attitudes of teachers towards woman principals changed over time.

Participants admitted positive and negative reactions when first appointed to work for a female principal. In addition, these teachers admitted to stereotypical perceptions and thoughts about women as leaders. However, they recognised that their attitudes were changing over time.

Changing perceptions about role of gender in leadership

In this study each participant acknowledged that their perceptions had changed with respect to seeing women as capable leaders. Ivy stated:

My attitude has changed since I can see that there is a difference in that as ladies, we can have leadership skills that ... not only men but we ladies too have these skills. If men can do it as principals, ladies too can do it.

Over time participants recognised the leadership skills of their female principals. Clyde, a teacher with a patrilineal background, acknowledged his changing attitudes:

At first I had no confidence in her.... However, as she delegated responsibilities it built up my confidence in holding leadership roles ... also I had confidence in her.

Samson supported this:

Yes. Working with this female principal, I feel my thinking and mindset towards woman principals has totally changed.... It has given me the opportunity to be there to support my female principal.

Male and female teachers identified the delegation of responsibilities by female principals as a cause for their changing perceptions of woman principals. Once given responsibilities these teachers felt empowered to make a difference in the school, and they stepped up to the challenge.

Most participants admitted that they originally felt that decision-making should only be done by males; however, they admitted that their thinking had changed over time. Hazel stated:

However, when I compare the leadership of women I come to realise that we women too are good decision-makers.... I have concluded that not only men are wise in making decisions; women too are good decision-makers.

Participants pointed out that becoming a leader should not be determined by factors such as cultural background or gender, but that anyone could take up a leadership role and lead if they had the skills of a leader. Teachers' conceptions of only men having skills in leadership had changed.

Support from teachers for female principals

The participants in this study supported gender balance in educational leadership. They explained that through their experience of working with a female principal they had witnessed success in their schools. Success was measured by them in terms of development of infrastructure, improved disciplinary systems, grades of students and financial management. Betsy commented:

Working under two female principals in my teaching experience I have seen a success. We successfully go through the year and I don't see any reason why we should not have woman principals in schools. I think it's good that there is a gender balance ... especially in the Solomon Islands where we do not have plenty of women holding principal positions. However, through my experience woman principals are doing a good job.

Samson also supported woman principals:

... Women should be given the opportunity to hold that position as principal of the school because women have creative ideas that they can use to help young people especially in classroom settings. They are more organised especially in the classroom setting.

The aspiration of female teachers towards leadership

Female teachers explained that the example shown by woman principals encouraged them to aspire to become leaders themselves. The way female principals endured challenges had made a positive impact on each of the three female participants. Pauline shared her experience of her principal being firm about the decisions she made:

... Thus this challenges me that I would want be like her too, in being firm on decisions.

Interestingly, two of the three female participants came from a background that was strong in its patriarchal norms. These women were not allowed to make decisions in the home and the community, but they saw possibilities for themselves in educational leadership. Hazel tells of the influence that her female principal's leadership skills has had on her:

When I came here and saw how the female principal does her work and carries out her decisions, it has helped in encouraging and motivating me in pursuing the dreams that I might have in becoming a leader like her. I said to myself if I want to become a leader like her I would have to be firm in the decisions that I make like she has displayed to us as a teacher....

The female teachers in this study explained that their aspirations for leadership came about because of their own education and because of the example of woman principals, who became their role models.

Discussion

This study provides insights into a previously uninvestigated topic in Solomon Islands education. The under-representation of women in educational leadership positions in Melanesian countries has been documented (Akao, 2008; Malasa, 2007), so it is important to acknowledge and understand the perceptions of teachers working with woman principals, particularly as this is a relatively new but potentially growing phenomenon in the Solomon Islands. A number of important findings in this study contribute to an understanding of the dynamics at play as teachers work under the leadership of woman principals in the Solomon Islands.

In Melanesia cultural norms make it harder for women to be involved in leadership roles (Akao, 2008; Oplatka, 2006; Warsal, 2009). The cultural understandings and practices of teachers in this study, and in particular their cultural practices regarding land tenure and guardianship, clearly impacted their views on leadership. A clear self-reported link is evident between the cultural background of teachers and their attitudes towards women in leadership. Teachers from a patrilineal background, where men make decisions regarding land tenure, found the concept of a woman in leadership quite difficult to deal with. It was a real challenge for these teachers to become reconciled to the fact that they were now working for a woman and they did not feel comfortable with the arrangement. Teachers from bilineal or matrilineal backgrounds were more accepting of women in leadership as they had experienced female leadership within their social system, albeit in a specific domain. However it still took time for these teachers to be comfortable with this arrangement. Although generalisations cannot be made from such a small study, the indications are that teachers from all backgrounds, but

particularly patrilineal backgrounds, may need support when they are placed in a school with a female principal. Similarly it would seem important for woman principals to be supported as they work with such staff. At the Ministry of Education level an awareness of the issues these cultural norms raise when female principals are appointed could inform induction processes for principals. The findings from this study illustrate some of the factors that ameliorated the working relationships and actually promoted good working relationships. These are discussed later in this section.

Although teachers talked about their initial concerns over working for a female principal it was evident that their perceptions changed over time. Even those who were initially sceptical of women's abilities to lead described the ways their ideas changed over time. A number of writers have discussed the time that it takes for beliefs and practices to change in Pacific nations (Pollard, 2000; Strachan et al, 2010; Tongamo, 1988). Change is a slow process, as it requires a basic change in fundamental attitudes, beliefs and values. However, through the experience of working with woman principals the teachers involved in this study were all able to articulate changes in their own beliefs. This is noteworthy as it provides evidence that teachers were reflective and responsive to their work environment, rather than fixed in their views. Many of the participants explicitly described their shift from a negative view of woman principals to a positive view. They were able to identify behaviours and approaches used by their principals that raised their credibility and proved their effectiveness. For men in particular the leadership skills that were demonstrated by these principals were admired. Women teachers were encouraged to aspire to leadership through the role models of woman principals. This is encouraging in a country in which the cultural norms dictate that woman principals are not suitable or capable in the job.

Expectations held by the teachers for their principals were mainly of a practical day-to-day nature and focused on ways that provided the teachers with encouragement and support. In particular visibility around the school, and the developing relationships between teachers and principals were seen as important and motivating. The development of lines of communication and working relationships were seen as a high priority by teachers. They appreciated the efforts made by their principals to get to know them and their teaching. As Glanz (2006) points out, "principals who take time to understand the school from the teacher's perspective are better able to forge meaningful relationships with them" (p. 23). In the case of this study this included the principal understanding the cultural perspectives brought by the teachers.

Principals' leadership practices or styles were a focus of conversation in this study. All participants were able to identify particular leadership practices that they found positive and motivating. In particular the ability of women to share responsibilities was appreciated by teachers. Power sharing is seen as a powerful and effective tool in teams (Cranston & Ehrich, 2009) and it empowered members of the teaching teams in schools. In particular, it was seen by some as a key way to engage teachers from patrilineal backgrounds, who may otherwise have been quite uncooperative or critical. Avolio and Base (2002) suggest, "the follower needs to feel valued by the leader, the follower needs to find meaning in what he or she is doing, the follower needs a sense of ownership in what's being done" (p. 6). The delegation of responsibilities to male teachers, particularly those from patrilineal backgrounds, enabled these teachers to feel that they had leadership responsibilities, which mitigated the power imbalance they may have perceived by working with a woman. This aligns with other work which shows that authentic leadership behaviour is positively related to the engagement and feeling of team membership of the followers (Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010).

The findings of this study suggest that teachers see woman principals as visionary as well as pragmatic. Much of the support gained by woman principals from their staff seemed to be built on the staff's assessment of the improvements made at their school including infrastructure, discipline and students' learning outcomes and qualifications results. They saw these as the practical outworking of vision.

The place of woman principals in Solomon Islands is a growing and evolving one, and although there are significant cultural shifts under way in the country, this study bodes well for the gradual acceptance and promotion of women into roles of principalship. It is important to make the challenges facing female principals explicit, and to provide support both for teachers and principals stepping into new types of relationships. However it is encouraging that in this study we have been able to document the positive difference that female principals are making for teachers and for students in schools.

Implications

A number of implications from this research emerge. This was a pilot project, and further investigation of the dynamics around female principals working in similar contexts would be helpful, including using a wider sample of schools and those in more remote areas to gain wider perspectives on the issues facing woman principals and their teachers.

Educational leadership in Solomon Islands could be further strengthened by the further encouragement of women into principal roles, including through merit-based promotions. It has been acknowledged that some teachers will find this adjustment difficult, but, given the shifts seen in this study, it would be hoped that teachers' attitudes and ideas may change over time. The particular behaviours and practices that afforded this shift in thinking may help change entrenched or traditional views about women in leadership. This knowledge of enablers in changing teachers' perceptions could be used in the induction and leadership training of future woman principals. In this way Solomon Islands will be better served by a wider variety of educational leaders who will lead education forward.

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