

Community strategies of women in educational management

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This article focuses on the communication strategies of women principals in secondary schools. Against the background of the continued under representation of women in education management abroad and in South Africa, gender differences in communication as a managerial function are discussed and the implications for the workplace outlined by means of a literature review. A qualitative investigation explored the communication strategies of a woman principal in Northern Province, South Africa. Reputational sampling was used for the selection of site and the key participant, the principal. In addition, judgement sampling was used to select six teachers as participants. Rich data were gathered by means of in-depth interviews with the principal and the teachers, observation at the school over a period of two months and analysis of school documents used by the principal in school administration. Findings show the principal's preference for a "feminine" style of verbal and non-verbal communication; her use of symbolic leadership strategies to manage her presence as a female manager in a male dominated environment; the constraints of traditional culture regarding communication and coping strategies to transcend these limitations; other barriers to communication and the principal's use of diverse channels of communication in the administration of a well-run school.

Introduction

Male dominance in education management is a worldwide phenomenon. Moreover, minority women experience even greater barriers to a career in education management (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000: 4). In South Africa management has traditionally been male-dominated in the senior levels of decision-making, although equal opportunities policies introduced since 1994 by government have led to significant improvements in opportunities for women especially in the public sector (Wolpe, Quinlan & Martinez, 1997:195). According to the Report of the Gender Equity Task Team of the Department of Education, South Africa (Wolpe *et al.*, 1997:196), a majority of women teachers are employed by the Department of Education. They are, however, mainly located in the lower ranks of the profession, having increasing representation at middle management levels but with the unseen barrier to women's career mobility, 'the glass ceiling', applying at higher levels of school management. While men made up 36 percent of all teachers in South Africa in 1994, they held 58 percent of all principal posts and 69 percent of all deputy principal posts (Edusource Data News, 1995:18). The position of women in management in secondary schools and of black women, in particular, is even weaker (Wolpe *et al.*, 1997:200).

The poor representation of women in education management has been ascribed, among others, to the unequal division of domestic responsibilities, a lack of self-confidence and public exposure and the absence of a supportive and encouraging environment to develop and improve female leadership qualities (Hill & Ragland, 1995: 7). Moreover, women in education management tend to show a preference for particular styles of management which appear to inhibit career development (Hall, 1996:151). Considerable research carried out in several countries (Shakeshaft, 1993; Ozga, 1993; Blackmore, 1999) suggests that women in education management prefer a different management style from men. They are less hierarchical, more democratic, flexible and sensitive, foster cohesiveness, value trust and openness and are more humane. These features of management are convergent with innovative and 'softer' management discourses that focus on people management as the new source of productivity in organisations. Yet the association of effective management and leadership with masculinity and autocratic control remains as does the disproportionate representation of men in senior posts in education (Hall, 1996:3).

Communication is an important managerial function and consti-

tutes the greater part of the work life of the school principal (Moller, 2000:210). Consistent with the corpus of research regarding gender in communication, the communication behaviour of women in management differs markedly from that of men (Goddard & Patterson, 2000). Women managers tend to choose verbal and non-verbal communication behaviour that is distinctively different from that preferred by male counterparts (Becker & Levitt, 1999:273). They communicate better with subordinates, use different, less dominating body language and different language and procedures. Admittedly skilled communicators, their language is more hesitant and tentative (Ozga, 1993:11). In the workplace female patterns of speech convey uncertainty, indecisiveness and a lack of confidence (Lemmer, 1996:57-58). This communication style has been described by Wetzel (1998: 385) as "powerless language". In a male-dominated workplace, women's communication style may even be considered 'deficient', and as a result, women managers have been told to 'talk like men' in order to succeed (Shakeshaft, 1993:9).

Against this background, research was undertaken to explore communication strategies used by women principals in secondary schools. The main research problem was formulated as: *How do women school principals manage communication in secondary schools?* A literature review on gender issues in communication situated the chosen topic within a relevant body of knowledge. Communication strategies of women principals, in particular, have received some attention in the literature (Shakeshaft, 1993; Hall, 1996) but has been a virtually unexplored topic in South Africa. A qualitative investigation using multiple methods of data gathering examined the experience of a woman secondary school principal and that of selected teaching staff with regard to the principal's use of communication in school management. The investigation was located at a secondary school in Region three, Northern Province (the former Venda). The inquiry was facilitated by the researcher's knowledge of the area and proficiency in the Venda language.

Language and gender

Communication is a key resource for control, particularly within an organisation. Talk is used by managers to get others to act in desired ways (Hall, 1996:110). A large body of research indicates that women prefer verbal and non-verbal behaviour that is equated with powerlessness, while men's communicative styles are associated with professionalism and power (Coates, 1998).

Verbal communication

Women's speech tends to be marked by politeness due to their frequent use of devices known as hedges and boosters (Holmes, 1995:74). Hedges reduce the strength or force of an utterance, while boosters intensify or emphasise the force. Hedging and boosting are devices used by women to show that they are taking other people's feelings into account. In this way they signal a wish not to impose (Coates, 1996:264; Holmes, 1995:74). Hedging and boosting devices are tag questions, questions in place of commands ('would you?'), repetition, apologies, disclaimers ('what if', 'possibly'), qualifiers ('okay', 'all right') and fillers ('um', 'ahem', 'so') (Coates, 1996:265-268).

Moreover, women tend to converse co-operatively, whereas male speakers organise their conversation competitively. Thus, according to Coates (1996:154), women tend to put far more effort than men into maintaining and facilitating conversations. Men tend to interrupt more than women (Breshnan & Cai, 1996:171). Furthermore, men tend to interrupt women more frequently even where a woman has a high status (Holmes, 1995:52). Women's avoidance of interruptions produces conversations that convey attraction, affiliation and sensitivity to the interactive needs of others. Conversely, interruption suggests dominance, aggression and conversational mis-coordination (Breshnan & Cai, 1996:172). Coates (1996:101) postulates that men use interruptions to deny women the right to control the topic of talk. Shakeshaft's (1993) review of the research relating to women in management confirms these verbal preferences among women principals.

Non-verbal communication

Interpersonal communication involves both verbal and non-verbal aspects. Gender differences are observable in both types of communication. According to Briton and Hall (1995:80), Spangler (1995:412) and Kalbfleisch and Cody (1995:64), women seem to smile and laugh more than men, and to be more concerned about the listener. They go on to show that women claim less space, are touched more, and tolerate more spacial intrusions than men. On the contrary, men tend to speak loudly but are less talkative than women. Briton and Hall (1995:81) indicate that women are better encoders and decoders, especially of facial expressions. In fact, women are more alert to non-verbal cues in general, and are even better at recognising the specific messages conveyed by non-verbal actions (Briton & Hall, 1995:81). Hall's (1996:63) study of female school principals' use of body language showed that principals used gender-correct body language which conveyed self-control and leadership but did not contravene expectations of how women should sit, stand, walk or relate physically to others. In summary, Kalbfleisch and Cody (1995:64) postulate men's non-verbal behaviour is characterised by dominance and women's behaviour by submissiveness.

Implications for the workplace

The above discussion indicates that men and women communicate differently. Wetzel (1998:386) postulates that the "powerlessness" of female speech patterns exists only relative to the power of so-called masculine patterns and the relatively weaker social position of women. Even when women in the workplace are encouraged to change their communication behaviour and essentially to adopt "male forms" of communication, they find themselves in a no-win situation. The characteristics of male forms adopted are ignored, and the assumption of power as domination is reproduced (Thomas & Wareing, 1999:80). Thus, women's communicative style may be proper but not the most effective style of communication in management contexts. However, the female communicative style should not be dismissed as deficient, but attention given to the positive aspects of female speech. In this way men could also benefit from positive female characteristics incorporated into their communication patterns. It can be argued that both men and women should learn from positive aspects of gender-specific communication.

Research design

A qualitative research design was used to understand and describe the communication strategies of a woman principal in a secondary school. This approach allowed the principal and selected teachers the opportunity to define their own experiences and perceptions. The research was conducted in a secondary school in Region three, Northern Province, which was identified by means of reputational sampling. The school and its principal were nominated by a senior official in the regional department of education on the basis of the principal's long experience as principal (11 years), sound management of the school and the consistently good matriculation results obtained by learners. Six teachers, three male and three female, were also selected by the researcher by means of judgement sampling with a view to sharing their experience of the principal's communication strategies. The teachers' experience at the school ranged from two years to ten years. The findings of the inquiry were exploratory and descriptive. No attempt was made to predict behaviour or test hypotheses; rather the primary aim was to understand and describe the communication strategies of the principal as experienced by herself and staff from their own frame of reference.

Data collection and analysis

The main data collection strategies were individual interviews with the principal and teachers respectively, scrutiny of school documents and observation over an unbroken period of two months at the school. During this time the principal and teachers were asked to share their experiences of the principal's communication strategies with the researcher during in-depth interviews, resembling ordinary conversations, which were conducted in the school environment. Interviews were recorded on audio tape and later transcribed. The period of field work also allowed the researcher to 'shadow' the principal as she carried out daily tasks. Moreover, the researcher attended all formal meetings held at school and observations were recorded as extensive field notes. School documents used by the principal in school administration included the school minute's book, information book, school journal and school policies. Multiple data gathering enabled the researcher to validate the interview data. Finally, the researcher's proficiency in the Venda language allowed her access into the daily life of the school and enhanced the interviews which were conducted in English and Venda.

Data analysis

Analysis of data obtained from the observation, individual interviews and documents was done through content analysis, which entailed identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In trying to make sense of the data, transcriptions of interviews and field notes were read and re-read and tentative categories and sub-categories emerged. Literature, observation and experience assisted the researcher in identifying the final categories. Extracts from the raw data were selected and either paraphrased or suitable quotations from the written responses were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories.

The research was limited to a single site and a small sample, typical of qualitative research and is not generalisable in any way. However, the findings do suggest patterns that are useful particularly where they are corroborated by the large corpus of literature dealing with women in education management and gender specific styles of communication, which has been carried out in a variety of contexts.

Research findings

Consistent with guidelines for inductive analysis of data all the descriptive categories and ideas discussed in this section emerged directly from the data. Five major themes emerged from the analysis of the data: preference for a 'feminine' communication style; symbolic leadership strategies; transcending constraints of tradition within a rural setting; barriers to communication; and using diverse channels of communication.

Situating the inquiry

The school principal, Martha, (pseudonym) is a woman in her early fifties and consequently is regarded as quite elderly by members of her small, very rural community and in the school. She was born and raised in the Northern Province. She has an honour's degree in English and a professional qualification. She has been in the teaching profession for more than thirty years, moving slowly up the career ladder from senior teacher to head of the department and then to her present position as principal in 1990. School A is a large secondary school with an enrolment of 1 025 learners. In 1992 the school obtained a 64.7% pass rate with its first cohort of matriculants and in 1996, an 84.7% pass rate. From 1996–1998 the school has boasted the best matric results in the area. The school is located in a small township surrounded by farmlands. Martha manages a teaching staff of 28 and support staff of three. Only seven teachers are female and 21 are male. Observation showed that Martha is a very organised person and her well-appointed office is spotless and attractive. She moves gracefully and never does things in a hurry. She is a controlled speaker who formulates her viewpoints with care and takes time, even lengthy monologues, to explain a point. She regards herself as a talkative person, confessing: "I think I talk too much ... that is my greatest weakness in communication."

Preference for a "feminine" communication style

As indicated above, the theory of "female" style of management is hotly debated. In the same way that women are not a homogenous group, women managers are also not a homogeneous group and may operate using a variety of managerial styles depending on the various situations in which they find themselves. The theory of a woman's style of management risks creating a meta-narrative universalizing the category of women and idealising characteristics such as self-sacrifice and caring (Blackmore, 1999:58). Moreover, many women managers in order to succeed in male environments are forced to adopt the male *modus operandi* (Wolpe, *et al*, 1997:204). Similarly, researchers caution about formulating sociolinguistic universals (Holmes, 1998:478). However, as indicated earlier, a large body of research confirms distinctive patterns of women's talk across diverse contexts (Homes, 1998:477).

In this study the principal herself and participating teachers endorsed the principal's preference for several communication strategies which are earmarked as characteristic of women in management. Martha is regarded as consultative and considerate in her communication, seeking to give others the opportunity to participate in discussion and decisions. According to a male staff member, "In this school, people are asked to give their own view regarding whatever she [the principal] is saying". Observations as well as the minutes of staff meetings recorded over a period of ten years confirm the principal's willingness to allow for turn-taking and to solicit and listen to other's opinions. She refrains from dominating discussions and, if she is not chairing a meeting, will occupy a position alongside the teachers as one of the audience. She is not intimate with staff, yet she is considered friendly, approachable and ready to listen. A male teacher commented, "One thing about the lady principal ... it's her strength when you go to her office, she talks to you and listens to you."

Certain patterns of speech associated with relative powerlessness were observed. Teachers commented on the frequency with which the principal apologises if there has been a misunderstanding, a female trait mentioned by Mills (1995:30). Another common female tendency used by females in the workplace is the use of a question in the place of a direct command or assertion (Mills, 1995:22). Questions are experienced as much less threatening than statements or commands, particularly in mixed gender situations. In both conversation and in formal meetings, Martha used questions when she actually intended giving an instruction or making a statement. Moreover, transcriptions of Martha's conversations showed that she often used disclaimers in her speech ('Maybe', 'I think', 'I don't know') as well as fillers ('you know', 'eh', 'well', 'okay', 'you see'). The use of disclaimers and fill-

lers is consistently typical of women's speech (Thomas & Wareing, 1999:70).

Furthermore, Martha smiled whenever she talked, irrespective of instances when she was expressing dissatisfaction with the teachers or learners. Both Woods (1994:193) and McElhinny (1998:309) confirm that women smile more often than men, even when they are not genuinely happy. This appears to be to avoid censure as non-smiling women are often judged more severely than males would be judged (Sprangler, 1995:413). Men in authoritative positions also tend to use raised voices, displays of anger or swearing to reinforce authority and control behaviour of subordinates (Ozga, 1993:11). During the entire period of observation (two months), Martha was never encountered shouting or overtly angry. A teacher confirmed this, saying: "Words never burst out of her. Even if she is to say 'I did say you must do that!', she always keeps her voice low and polite." Instead she betrayed her annoyance by means of subtle gestures, such as a stiffer posture or colder tone of voice which her staff had learnt to decode over time. Hall (1996:106) also observed that these shifts in the demeanour of women principals were used to confer disapproval rather than overt displays of emotion.

Symbolic leadership strategies

Symbolic leadership is a central component of a principal's management style and how she behaves as a leader in the everyday reality of the school (Hall, 1996:89). It can be defined as the way principals attempt to manage the meaning of their organisation. Women principals use certain strategies to manage their own presence as women and influence the expectation of and the support that staff and learners give to them as women managers (Hall, 1996:90). In spite of demonstrating gender specific communication preferences, Martha employed her own personal symbolic strategies to establish her professionalism and leadership. She has, after all, maintained a strong leadership role both in the school and in the principals' fraternity within Region three for more than a decade. Firstly, she firmly maintained a social distance in her relations with staff, parents and learners. Although teachers experienced her as a warm, open personality, they repeatedly described her as "strict and formal". A teacher described this paradox as follows: "When she has to talk to us, it is good and we feel comfortable but she never talks casually or informally to us." Hall's (1996:95) research reiterates the isolation established by women principals, who, though they may express the desire for closeness with staff, consistently maintain a social distance from subordinates to bolster their senior status. To further effect this distance, Martha uses and expects the reciprocal use of formal address when communicating with teachers. A teacher explains: "She'll never go to somebody who is very much formal and call him, 'How are you, Jack' [i.e. using first names], she won't do that." Secondly, Martha avoids any informal physical contact with the staff, such as patting or hugging, only permitting a handshake to congratulate a staff member or greet a visitor. Moreover, she consistently maintained the rules of gender-correct body language: sitting neatly, knees together or legs crossed, hands in the lap or arms crossed (Hall, 1996:103). Dress is also a powerful means of non-verbal communication. Martha's choice of dress was conservative, usually dressing in formal suits and stockings and she wore no make up at all. She described her style of dress as part of her self-presentation, which had to be professional not only within school context but also appropriate for a woman of her age and status within the local rural community. Similarly, Blackmore (1999:170) found that women in education management made frequent reference to taking care with dress and of dressing with the occasion and their status in mind. Blackmore (1999: 170) suggests that women in management mask their gender and sexuality through how they dress, walk and talk in order to minimize their female presence and thus manage the difference they present in a male dominated environment.

Transcending constraints of tradition within a rural setting

Holmes (1998:477) points out that children acquire the folk linguistic

patterns of their community from infancy and language is a tool to convey socio-cultural knowledge and acts as a means of socialisation into gender roles. In this study, all the participants had been raised within rural African families and were articulate about the role that tradition can play in shaping communication styles, also in the workplace. Traditional culture stresses respect for men, elders and people with a senior status and requires certain verbal and non-verbal features. Families follow a strictly patriarchal structure, women are not encouraged to speak in front of men, avoidance of eye contact is a sign of respect and children and subordinates are expected to greet and interact with superiors in certain ways. These features are not unique to South Africa and are encountered with some differences in other contexts (Nichols, 1998:61). Where women are limited in their exercise of public authority, it can be expected that linguistic consequences will follow. In Afro-American communities, "respect for elders is a crucial component of the black child's socialisation process in the extended network system" (June & Parker, 1991:40).

In this context, deference to men is expected to realise even in the school setting. A male teacher remarked that in this setting "women were not allowed to question men." Thakhathi (1996:3) confirms that in South Africa male dominance frequently pervades in black schools. Men regard women as less suited for leadership positions. Such patriarchal attitudes complicate the relationships of women principals with both male and female teachers who work with them. Gardiner *et al.* (2000:102) confirm the acute conflict experienced by minority women managers between traditional roles and expectations and professional roles and responsibilities. In this inquiry, a male teacher referred to gender-specific men's talk, "In our culture, when we speak as boys, we are more arrogant when we talk to girls, because we were taught in the initiation school that if you are a man you have to be seen to speak as a man does. So, in a way, when I am speaking with a woman then I must show [this]."

Nevertheless, Martha has gained the respect of the teachers both male and female. She attributes this to her management style, personal example and the respect, which is ascribed to an educated woman of her age in the rural community. Martha shows traditional male characteristics of independence and strength in the public sphere, yet teachers do not associate her character with masculinity. They reconcile themselves with this ambiguity by interpreting her unconventional behaviour as the gender-neutral "strictness" expected of any leader. A male teacher, in agreement with his colleagues, remarks: "The principal is very strict. Very strict. If she delegates you to do something, she likes you to do it up to utmost best. And if you don't do that then she will not fear to question you."

It is possible to ascribe the respect of the teachers as a function not only of status but also of age. Martha is a senior in years, describes herself as the "mother of the school" and is very well educated within her community. These aspects of personality are more acceptable to a traditional staff than female ambition and authority and Martha maximises them. While sensitive and even appreciative of traditional norms, she transcends cultural barriers to communication in management where necessary. Teachers mentioned specifically that the principal confidently made eye contact in all her interactions: "She usually looks at us whenever she addresses us in the meeting." Yet female teachers, however, were observed to avoid eye contact with Martha to indicate their respect for her. Moreover, the respect she commands facilitates opportunities for other women staff. She says: "The fact that I am a woman and happened to be chosen as chairperson of the principals [of the district] makes the other woman principals to be free as well". As in the case of other women in management (Chase, 1995:104), she is a role model for ambitious women and feels responsible towards them.

Barriers to communication

The use of English in a linguistically diverse rural school can constitute a barrier to communication (Garcia, 1995:105). Martha is aware of the inhibiting effect of a second language in a Venda speaking

school and did not hesitate to use mother tongue to avoid inaccurate messages to her staff. She said, "You might think because it's in a work situation, you have to stick with English all the time. But there are those people that if I want to reach them properly, maybe I need to talk more of [our mother language] than English." She did, however, prefer to use English in formal meetings. During morning assemblies, announcements were made in English. However, most informal communication observed was done in mother tongue.

Martha was also sensitive to certain possible perceptual barriers to communication with her staff. She was vulnerable to the effect of being labelled a feminist if her communication was too assertive. She strove to avoid this, saying: "There is this perception that because I am deviating from the traditional expectation, I am regarded as a feminist and viewed negatively. I need to be a bit cautious because if maybe I feel very strongly about a thing and I say it, people are likely to say "Oh, you are one of those", rather than taking it that maybe that's the way I feel about a particular thing." Blackmore (1999:188) agrees that many women in education management reject being named 'feminist' because of its depiction in popular discourse as an aggressive and anti-male stance, equating feminism with abnormality. This is not strategic in the long term and can close promotion opportunities for women managers.

Furthermore, research shows that women leaders are more susceptible to the negative effects of gossip in an organisation. Distrust and suspicion engendered by gossip affect communication negatively and increase defensiveness (Bedeian & Glueck, 1991:579). Martha was somewhat defensive concerning the popular perception that women achieve higher positions due to nepotism or favouritism on the behalf of the education authorities. She explained: "For a long time, in the former homeland [Venda], people tended to make it look like a woman was being promoted not because you are capable, but because you are perhaps doing things that are not proper — the wrong behaviour, maybe you're doing this person in authority a favour, that's why you get promoted as a woman." She believed that this perception had restricted her career mobility, "I remained down [in the lower echelons of management] for a very long time because, when you're afraid you don't want to give people the impression that oh! Mrs So-and-so has done things like that [pleasing the authorities in order to get a management position]." Hill and Ragland (1995:8) confirm that the perception of women leaders who scheme or even seduce their way to the top is a common myth that still has the power to affect female career development.

Using diverse channels of communication

An effective communicator will choose diverse channels of communication (face to face, written, electronic, etc.) to suit audience, function and context (Bartol & Martin, 1994:442). Most managers prefer oral to written communication because it is usually informal and timely (Bartol & Martin, 1994:440). Similarly, to fulfill daily administration of the school, Martha preferred personal conversations, in which the teacher is called to her office. She also preferred personal encounters to solve issues outside the school. When the school experienced a problem of resources with the education department, she and members of the school governing body went to the regional department's offices in order to raise the complaint. Her preference for personal interaction for giving instructions was confirmed by the teachers: "She communicates to us through private conversations, and that is done very well. She is exceptionally very good in such matters." Grinwood and Popplestone (1993:56) postulate that face to face contact is a particular preference among women managers. However, Martha also delegates the giving of instructions to heads of departments who take the messages to the relevant teachers.

Formal meetings are used for collective communication regarding general school matters. According to the Staff Minutes Book, six staff meetings are held on average each year. Management meetings between the principal and the Heads of Department and the subject heads take place three times a year. The minutes showed that these

meetings were mainly informative. In addition, Martha also relies on regular meetings to communicate with the parents. However the researcher observed that she was willing to communicate on an *ad hoc* individual basis with parents who came to see her at the school.

Written communication was also a frequently used strategy, especially when communicating official notices. Martha used circulars, the school journal, the notice board and information book. Circulars were disseminated through the senior teachers. The same applies to the information book. The latter is a book where the principal records essential information for the staff to read and to counter-sign. Teachers often referred to the information book as a most effective means of communicating routine information. Scrutiny of the information book showed that it was used frequently for notices and information in contrast to the issue of directives, which were always given personally to teachers. A notice board was also used to reiterate information and Martha insisted that deadlines were posted on the board 14 days before work was due. A school journal or log book was used for communication between the principal and officials from the regional office. This practice had been instituted during the previous dispensation by the inspectorate. However, Martha still deemed it useful for recording cases of staff discipline and other important events. She executed this task thoroughly and in detail. All conflicts and problems encountered, especially with teachers, were recorded. The researcher's presence at the school to conduct the study was also recorded. Although the journal is seldom checked by circuit managers, Martha regarded it as an important strategy for personnel management, "If you have a teacher maybe who gives you problems, then at some stage you record it, then it will help you. Maybe if the matter gets out of hand, and you've got to take the matter up, the circuit manager is likely to say, 'Now that you are bringing the matter to me how long has it been going on, and have you got any record to show?' then you may refer to it." Clearly, Martha appreciated the value of written communication. Written communication is vital to management as it allows the manager to carefully organise his or her thoughts, and provides a record for future reference (Bartol & Martin, 1994:440).

Concluding remarks

Communication does not exist in a social vacuum but is at the very core of human interaction. This small qualitative study is not generalisable in any way, yet together with the literature on gender, management and communication, it gives voice to women's perspectives which may provide direction for future studies of both men and women as education managers. As a managerial function, communication should be clear, unambiguous while fostering positive interpersonal relationships in the organisation. There is a large burden of evidence to suggest that women managers appear to prefer certain styles of communication, which in a gendered world can detract from their authority and may comprise one of the factors affecting their career development. However, a danger of this view is to overlook the differences of age, nationality, class, regional and cultural background that shape an individual woman. This inquiry suggests that a feminine style of communication does not necessarily inhibit the position of a principal nor the sound management of a school. Traditional expectations of communication can also be transcended in a sensitive and

flexible way and subordinates are able to cope with ambiguity in the professional setting. Gender alone is not a determinant of the respect given to a person in authority but age and level of education also play a role.

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