

GENDER THEORY IN PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

Matthew Goniwe introduced a module on Gender in the Advanced Certificate for Education in Leadership and Management for principals in 2006. The first cohort of principals who completed this course graduated in 2007. The course was conceptualized through a collaborative process by Matthew Goniwe, Prof. Claudia Mitchell of McGill University in Canada and Dr. Ann Smith. The programme on Gender and Leadership: Women in Educational Management focused on critical areas for integrating gender awareness and transformation for leadership positions in schools (Smith & Mitchell, 2005:4).

The course was designed to draw together all the Gender policy international, national and local and make it relevant for the women so that they are able to contextualize it to their own situations and schools.

The rationale behind the introduction of this intervention was to engage and challenge both men and women school leaders in SA to examine their own assumptions, stereotypes, bias and prejudice on Gender and how this may be perpetuated through the practices they engage with at school level thus continuously reinforcing inequality.

BACKGROUND

South African black women, have been doubly discriminated against first through the apartheid system and secondly in respect to personal, systemic, and cultural written and unwritten laws that created gender inequality. All women have been disadvantaged through previously existing power and economic structures that subtly promote inequity and injustice currently this may still be the case especially if conditions are such that it favours men. Promotion of women into leadership positions in SA has largely been in the primary schools where women are seen to be nurturing and care givers whilst men still dominate the secondary school sector. These discrepancies in material and human resources were also reflected in the quality of education that was available for black schools (Vally & Dalamba, 1999: 10). The inequalities can never be

overemphasized and the effect of an unequal system is still apparent. It is therefore, relevant that an intervention programmes is introduced to address the imbalances.

MATTHEW GONIWE PROGRAMME

The Gender programme used a multi-media approach such as Visualizing change, keeping a Reflective Journal, and the making of a documentary, Various Gender concepts are also explored such as Glass Ceiling, Glass Precipice, direct and indirect discrimination were also explored, discussed and debated.

Through the engagement with policies and conventions both global, and national women are capacitated with the knowledge on Gender and were able to translate the theories relevant to the schools so that the gender inequalities that do exist is firstly recognized and secondly challenged.

VISUALISING CHANGE

The key transformation strategies used in the course was a Photo-Voice project and a reflective journal. This process of visualizing change through the lens of a camera is seeing gender issues up close. Through the pictures participants are able to see the possibilities for change. Writing their experiences in the reflective journal clarified their thoughts and enabled the, feelings, and emotions to also surface which was cathartic for many (Smith & Mitchell, 2005:37). Many women have said that they did not even realize how deep some experiences had affected them until they began writing about it and in this way releasing the effects of the experience.

PHOTO-VOICE PROJECT

The participants had to compile a collection of photographs. They have to use a camera (gender lens) in order to interpret data, analyse and synthesise the gendered dimension of education management and to demonstrate the ability to use gender constructs in the analysis of education management issues (Smith & Mitchell, 2005:37). This process enhances their skill of critical reflection and they are able to distinguish structural and systemic imbalances in respect to Gender. This process also forms one of the summative evaluations for the course

Through this process the women in the course have been able to reexamine their context objectively and have been able to address the problems captured with their staff whereas in the past the issues emerging through the pictures were not always as clearly visible.

Women have taken pictures of the school toilets and school buildings and the stark reality of the conditions had been made visible through the display of the photos. While the photos themselves did not change the situations it allows for focus and a more critical eye to the emerging conditions and problems. This shared with all educators becomes a very powerful tool to display things as they really are and in many schools it encouraged debates and reflection. In some schools this led to intervention strategies that really begun dealing with the issues. A very poignant picture of a boy been isolated at break tells the story of bullying. Boys are often targets of bullying. In this way 47 schools were exposed to this visual medium and were drawn to issues of Gender that they may not have necessarily had exposure to.

The photos had to be taken in sequence following a theme. The pictures were presented in a photo album with statements reflecting the emerging scenarios. A curatorial statement captures the story. Some women struggled with depicting one story or theme and related various themes. The assessor allowed for discussions and resubmissions which assisted in clarifying thoughts and sharpened their focus and created structure in their work. These are critical skills for leaders to have and they began to have a grasp and understand of this as they progressed through the course.

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

The participants kept a reflective Journal through the course. This is a structured journal as questions are posed around critical concepts that have to be considered and translated into their own experiences. The journal may also be used to record experiences and critical questions that may arise through the exploration of the various topics in the course. For example participants had to dig deep to remember an earlier experience of power. This memory of earlier experiences had to be recorded. Some participants found this extremely difficult but many participants recorded incidents that had lodged in their memory without them even realizing how deeply they had been affected.

The journaling process encouraged critical thinking and reasoning as well as developed the skill of writing and of recording difficult emotional experiences which became cathartic and transformative. Some women presented their journals confidentially to the assessor as many excerpts were painful and personal records of their lives.

Some women initially struggled writing their journal as they were not accustomed to writing but many found the exercise enlightening at the end. Writing skills also improved. More importantly it gave them new insight into who they were and how they reacted to certain issues. This skill was easily translated into their roles as managers. Many encouraged their subordinates to start journaling. The new reflective skill is also being used in their Departments and Schools.

DOCUMENTARY

Participants were workshopped in developing a documentary. The women were taught how to make a documentary, how to use a video camera etc. They role-played various themes from their experience in the programme. Issues such as glass-ceiling and the glass precipice were explored as well as domination by male leadership in high schools. The women felt really empowered by this technical process of video making and watching their work allowed them the new insight into the concepts.

COURSE WORK

Participants were challenged to reflect on their own identity and have a clear sense of who they are and were able to delineate their multifaceted identity such as their Social, Cultural, Gender, Spiritual, Historical and Political. This process was further reinforced through the reflective journal. Participants through various activities, group work and reflection were continuously examining their belief systems, attitudes, assumptions etc and were in the process reconstructing their identity. This was an emotional and difficult journey for many. The group coherence and support become very critical and essential for this process.

TRANSFORMATION

By exposing participants to the multi pronged approach to Gender theory, Gender Machinery and various concepts such as Glass precipice and the Glass Ceiling lead them gaining a deeper, collective understanding and insight into feelings and the process of constructing anti-sexists and anti-racist consciousness and behaviour. Participants are also able at this stage to examine

and challenge structures, systems as well as to seek out relevant resources for use in classrooms. It also encourages participants to explore avenues from which they previously shied away. Many of the women say that while their learning was acute in the two years and they had started making an impact at their schools they are just beginning to get a clearer understanding of their roles as managers and the immensity of the task. The learning that had been started is continuing and in many instances is being accelerated. Some of the women have been called to assist with the new cohorts to share their experiences and it is at these forums that they share their learning and growth and development with other managers.

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