

Women Headteachers in Government Schools

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was aimed at exploring ways of knowing applied by women headteachers in the course of their daily leadership and decision-making activities. A phenomenological research paradigm is used in this study. The data used in this exploration was collected mainly through interviews, conducted from a feminist perspective. The knowledge construction experiences were collected from excellent and successful women headteachers from government primary and secondary schools through purposeful sampling. In addition, informal observation and review of accessible official documents were also carried out. The ways of knowing women headteachers engaged in that emerged from this data included *watchful knowing*; *procedural knowing*; *interpersonal knowing*; *gender-related knowing*; *visionary knowing*; *contextual knowing*; and *conscientious knowing*. The study concluded that the ways of knowing represent the development of knowing from a dependency on authorities to autonomy of self, knowledge as abstract and objective to being relative and subjective, and the cognitive process of receiving knowledge to one of generating knowledge. Ways of knowing practiced among the women headteachers in leadership and decision making is unique to the participants of this study. The findings are conceptualized into a thematic portrayal of ways of knowing. Specific recommendations for further research are also suggested.

Key words: *Ways of Knowing, Women headteachers, Phenomenology, Feminist perspective*

1. INTRODUCTION

More and more women are given the opportunity to become teachers but not many made it to the position of headteachers. Some women headteachers have become very successful headteachers and brought various effective changes to their schools. Since there were compelling needs related to the transformation of the role of women to headteachers it is necessary to undertake a study on how women think, make decisions and develop their intellectual power on leadership. Much literature has postulated that women in general, perceive and often view their world differently from men (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger & Tarule, 1986; Brunner, 1998; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). In addition, they also have a different style of leadership from men, which is generated from different experiences and alternative ways of thinking. Although there was literature for men on this topic, there was little for women (Freeman, Bourque & Shelton, 2001). In order to attend to women's experiences of knowing, alternative studies of knowledge and knowing that offer a feminist perspective to male-biased research is needed.

2. THE PROBLEM

Traditionally, research on knowing and learning used males as samples and the findings generalized to women (Dunsha, 1998). Men's behaviors on knowing which include individualism, competition, and detached objectivity, have become the dominant understanding and acceptance of a male's intellectual and decision power. Feminine behaviors and perspectives on knowing historically have neither been valued nor rewarded in the public sphere (Henning-Stout, 1994). In fact, leaders

ation and other interpersonal and soft skills were considered only in recent years taking into consideration the scope and developed and developing countries have policies to select interpersonal and interpersonal skills to improve their schools (Fullan, 2006). In Malaysia with the National Education Blueprint 2006-2010, authorities are now looking at both men and women's competencies to contribute to the education aims. However, there still exists a wide disparity between men and women in terms of participation in headship. It is therefore necessary to help women secure and succeed in headship positions and as knowers. Unfortunately, there is little relevant empirical literature (Brunner, 1998). It could be that educators have not examined the philosophy and psychology of women's thinking thoroughly in order to learn how to be more inclusive of women in decision making and as successful headteachers.

In recent years, there have been some literature or description concerning the growth and intellectual development of women, however, they have either not been critical or they have been limited in scope. Examples of these sources include research on cognitive development (Belenky et al., 1986) and cognition in relationship to gender, race and class (Abrahamsson, 2001); material on feminist pedagogy (Tisdell, 1998; 2000); and scholarly work on communication patterns (Freeman & Varey, 1998). These materials include many similar messages and ideas about alternative ways of viewing women learning patterns. Although there is research on these topics, researchers and managers still lack understanding of how women learn and think in their working lives. It is when the essential structure of knowing is established for women headteachers that strategies can be formulated to provide them with the necessary training and education. The purpose of this study was to research the phenomenon of ways of knowing from the perspective of women headteachers.

3. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

A phenomenological research paradigm is used in this study. The main focus of phenomenological research is on describing the essence or structure of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it (Meriam, 2002). It is by entering into their field of perception that the researcher sought to understand life (in this case knowing) as women headteachers saw it. This study also applied a feminist research stance which means working with different ways of understanding and explaining events and interactions of women subjects (Olesen, 2000, 2003; Smulyan, 2000; Mavin & Bryans, 2002). More generally, feminist research takes women as subject matter for studying issues of potential importance to women and uses women's standpoint as a point of departure for research (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Ezzy, 2002; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Naples, 2003; Casey, 2003; Kincheloe, 2003). This study involved ten participants who had been selected based on a set of criteria that included: (1) women headteachers who have gone through the experience; (2) women headteachers who others consider to be learned, capable, respected, effective and well-liked; (3) participants had served as headteachers for at least one school year prior to the beginning of the study, and to have held other significant leadership responsibilities within the state such as assistant headteachers, curriculum partners, or leadership of significant initiatives within the teachers' federation; (4) they were also available and willing to candidly discuss the issue of women's professional development. The data collection employed to achieve the purpose of the study were mainly in-depth interviews with the participants. Each interview lasted between one hour and two hours, were taped recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using hands-on as well as NVIVO, a qualitative software program. In addition, non-participant observation at the work place of the participants and examination of official documents that were made accessible to the researcher, were also carried out.

4. FINDINGS

Ten Malaysian women headteachers in primary and secondary schools from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Malay, Chinese and Indian were interviewed but the data was saturated at the

anged from 45 to 57 years old with an average age of 51. varied from diploma to Master's degree completion. The opment, however, are age, educational attainment and chener (1994), age, educational attainment and experience correlate with high levels of reflective judgment or knowing. Most of the participants selected had experienced higher education which could challenged them to make their own knowledge. At the same time, their maturity would make it likely that they would be able to progress to higher levels of knowing. For two of nine headteachers interviewed, they were experiencing only the first headship meaning that they had stayed in the first same school for several years. The other seven participants were experiencing their second or third headship.

The overall findings are conceptualized into a thematic portrayal of ways of knowing. The process of headship for women headteachers is viewed as stages on a continuum from entry in headship, identity formation, making a difference to reformulation of personal values. In each stage of the headship process, women headteachers practiced the ways of knowing as indicated by the following table.

Table 4.1: Ways of Knowing in the Process of Women Headship

STAGE	WAYS OF KNOWING PRACTICED
Entry in Headship	- Watchful knowing - Procedural knowing
Identity Formation	- Interpersonal knowing - Gender-related knowing
Making a Difference	- Visionary knowing - Contextual knowing
Reformulation of Personal Values	- Conscientious knowing

The ways of knowing include watchful knowing, procedural knowing, interpersonal knowing, gender-related knowing, visionary knowing, contextual knowing and conscientious knowing. The actions and attributes addressing the concerns of truth/knowledge, authorities, cognitive processes and self that characterized the ways of knowing are also described.

4.1 Watchful Knowing

In Stage One, the newly arriving head must engage in considerable knowing as she encounters the staff, the organization and the community at large. They may face resistance from established school members who could challenge her competence and ability to exercise leadership. Consequently, many headteachers did not make any change to the school policies and practices but make extra effort to be watchful and try to learn the ropes as quickly as possible. Knowledge was uncertain and ill-structured for which immediate solutions cannot be defined and alternatives sought with accuracy. Things become worse when the headteachers do not have the support of their staff. Having knowledge is viewed as competence so the new headteachers worked to the job from the veteran teachers who are regarded as the authoritative figures. The headteacher would observe and watch as well as wait in the approach of safe practice. The self develops and believes the competence of the self would continue to increase with experience.

headteacher to seek for knowledge in a trusted authority. Procedures set by higher authorities so as not to incur fatal mistakes which may threaten her survivor. Authorities are seen as the expert. Uncertainty only exists of not knowing how to adhere to the procedures. The headteachers practiced receiving and listening to information from the authorities without contradicting or challenging them. Their own opinions are kept mute. The self prefers and seeks predictability, stability and compliance, and views it as a duty to the authorities.

4.3 Interpersonal Knowing

In stage two of Identity Formation, it involves the task of the headteacher trying to fit in. They try to accommodate with the new work role, the people and the culture of the school. They look for role clarity, tried to establish a new identity and to integrate it into the school. They may face resistance, difficulties and rejection of both members of the same gender group as well as from different gender group.

Knowledge here is partly certain and partly uncertain. Thus, the headteachers tried to understand knowledge through their staff by discussing knowledge and skills in meetings, informal encounters. The headteachers believe that a true and certain reality will eventually exist. She provides the opportunities for understanding and applying knowledge directed at creating certainty and problem solving. Authorities are acknowledged as not knowing everything. The women headteachers seek to establish their own authority through persuasive language, rational explanation. She tries to connect with the staff by providing a supportive environment, nurturance and care. The headteacher does not feel total security and is still working for approval and acceptance by staff members. Here, the self in her is trying to establish a grounded identity in the school to mark her leadership like dropping an anchor and securing it in the seabed of the organization.

4.4 Gender-related Knowing

Knowledge was uncertain but believed to be a temporary state of affairs. Women perceived themselves not having equal access to knowledge as well as expression of thoughts. Knowledge being monitored by others, blocked or thumbed down, the headteachers have limited options for personal development. To get around and struggle against these obstacles, the women tried to obtain knowledge indirectly, ~~affiliately~~ with others. She was not silenced but she silenced herself in the approach of achieving job security and autonomy. Instead of competing outwardly with others (men), women tend to use indirect strategies when asserting influence. Conscious of the tension between gender and power role, the pressed down self, full of frustration, inferiority and self-consciousness began to change as the headteachers allowed their gender thinking to emerge. As the feelings shifted, the women began to reach out to others. Like a chick breaking out from the discomfort of its shell, a fundamental search for the legitimate ~~self~~ was launched. A leadership identity and life were now goals of the women headteachers.

4.5 Visionary Knowing

In stage three of headship, stable patterns have begun to emerge where the head consolidates all efforts to realize her vision for the school. Having established her self, knowledge in this stage is certain as she had acquired and advanced her knowledge and skills soundly. The headteacher is confident, independent, and autonomous. She can create her own perspectives on the most important school issues. She has recognized her own sense of authority derived from own personal experience.

empowers other teachers to carry out strategies in the form of Changes in knowledge, is imminent at this juncture through and reflecting. Taking solutions-focused approach, the thinking among her staff and rewards the ability to think independently for the goals of school achievement. Her role is the task of an active change agent. An inner sense of strength and abilities is expanded resulting in a heightened confident self-belief. Knowing is viewed as life-long, increasingly growing holistically, stepping into the dream of leading others. She, as the vine, has arrived at the tree-tops in the tropical forest of opportunities and reaps the reward of unlimited sunshine.

4.6 Contextual Knowing

To effectively carry out their goals for the organization, the women headteachers recognized the importance of understanding the context and the players involved. Different players require different strokes of knowing and leading. This was also the development stage where the heads recalled as the period of progress in their careers in which they were most effective. Knowing and meaning are situated in particular individual and context. Knowledge and knowing varies with different situations and occurrences. Thus, understanding the needs, conditions and state of affairs is of utmost importance. Everything can be relative and subjective, resulting in open interpretation. Access to knowledge is conditional and should be looked at holistically, rather than in fragments. It is by listening and being sensitive to others that knowing is illuminated. To effectively lead knowing, the headteacher firstly needs to identify and understand the values and beliefs of others. Next, she works to find common ground where cultures and beliefs can meet. Finding common ground and having the ability to apply knowledge in a multicultural setting and society, produces unity and societal tolerance. The self develops an awareness of self and others. Through reflective thinking, the headteacher develops the ability to relate, compare and contrast two abstractions of culture or beliefs. A deeper sense of self and others will emerge in producing a better and workable relationship between the leader and its communities.

4.7 Conscientious Knowing

This is the advanced stage of leadership. In this stage, the head is generally confident and competent, has already achieved her vision, a balanced home and school life, worthwhile school achievements, mastered the demands of headship, and is ready to move on or leaving headship due to retirement. At this point, the headteachers might begin to reassess their life goals. Knowing has to do with the soul's fulfillment. At these specific points of life transitions of the leader, the knower engages in an internal dialogue regarding how they feel about themselves and direction they intend to continue on. New knowledge gained from the work experience changes the knower. Old thoughts and values are questioned, dropped and changed. New ones are generated and adopted. Knowledge is transformed to give meaning to the individual. Knowing can be an offending process to the pride of a person as soul searching unmask the secrets of assumptions, good and bad ones. It propels the person to look deeply into themselves, their prides and their regrets, joy and sadness, and rights and wrongs as they progress in life. Picturing, recalling details, reflecting, coming to terms with it or understanding life positively reinforce their ability to lead more effectively in life and professionally. Through this heart searching experience, they are able to break barriers and identify new goals. After the assessment, they seemed to be more confident and optimistic. They still see their work as focusing on children and their achievements. They still speak with a commitment about the profession of teaching and of the life of the headteacher. They are renewed, recharged, affirmed, and assured that they have not only weathered the worst, survived the storm, emerged triumphant and standing tall after the race. They can honestly say that they have run a good race.

could be viewed as separate or comprehensive ways. If they or cannot be combined in one comprehensive or holistic definition. According to this understanding, headteachers do not need to pass through or develop on all the seven dimensions of ways of knowing. Perhaps they only need to concentrate on the dimension which they consider as most relevant and important for the knowing process. The heads can begin at any one of the dimensions and not all do so at one particular dimension. This is true especially for those heads not assuming the post of headship for the first time. Many headteachers may experience a second, a third or even further headships. Each time they start the headship in a new school, they start again on the first of the four stages. In addition, the heads can pass through the ways of knowing at different rates. The experienced heads, for example, can pass through the earlier ways of knowing very quickly. Furthermore, there are numerous factors like the personality of the head, the school environment, the school condition at the time of taking up the post, and the community's reception towards the head, will determine the rate of the headteachers' dimension of knowing development. Next, the heads may operate at more than one ways of knowing at any one time. It is also possible for the head to slip back one or more ways of knowing or progress by more than one dimension in general or in aspects of her role or relationship with the relevant staff or others. Lastly, some heads may never progress to the final level as indicated by this study because they would have been transferred to another school, thus starting the first stage of headship and ways of knowing again.

On the other hand, it is also not wrong to assume that all seven dimensions of knowing can be combined to form a comprehensive definition. Therefore, headteachers can be considered as demonstrating a very high level of development only to the extent that they approach the goals and manifest the qualities emphasized by all seven dimensions. Consequently, it is proposed that a high level of headteachers' development is indicated by four general attributes: truth/knowledge; authorities; Cognitive process; and self. All the seven dimensions are considered important to knowing development. The qualities and processes emphasized by each dimension contribute to the effectiveness and well-being of both the headteacher and the organization. Although by considering that all dimensions are important, it does not mean that headteachers who do not show high levels of knowing on all the dimensions should be judged as poor headteachers. This is because most headteachers will likely possess some, but not all of the qualities shown in the study.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The research concluded that women headteachers' ways of knowing in the headship stages moved from a dependent, submissive, one of receiving knowledge, feminine role in the workplace to one of more independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness in efforts to achieve higher status. The knowing process by which the individuals developed, moved from the ability to listen and receive, to an increasingly better ability to evaluate knowledge, and to justify as well as to defend it. The later levels of ways of knowing are built on the earlier ones. Each stage represents a more complex and effective form of justification of knowledge. However, individuals may progress at different rates of ability. As a result of varied experiences that they go through, they develop different ways of knowing in an invariant sequence. The knowledge acquired moves from a stage full of uncertainty and ill-structured problems to a stage of certainty and correctness. Progression from uncertainty to certainty finally happens when the decision making as well as the contextual learning becomes intuitive rather than analytic. Such progression requires significantly more experience. A person moves from learning right from wrong (dualistic), to considering diversity of opinion and multiple perspectives to many ways to answer questions. The move is from dependency and trust in external authorities to carving out one's territory of personal freedom. A person then moves on to an evaluative approach to knowledge and grasp the concept that truth is relative and relates to the context in which an event occurs and to her own framework of learning. At this point the person constructs knowledge which is contextual and not fixed.

contributed to the understanding and knowledge of women and conduct further research on this intriguing area to improve challenges faced by women headteachers. Alternative educational researchers and leaders are to be truly responsible, asking for new ways of looking into the reality of women headteachers. Thus, it is recommended that longitudinal studies that investigate on this area be conducted such as ethnographic studies. This is because the development of knowing in the headteachers requires an expanded research base. Not only would this help in enhanced definition of the concept but would also help in designing more effective training programs. Further research would benefit training programs by identifying knowing strategies to encourage women leadership and lifelong learning.

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