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Pathways to principalship: women leaders of co-educational high schools in South Africa - a life history study

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a qualitative, longitudinal study conducted in South Africa which, through the use of narrative enquiry and life history methodology, examined and explored the personal and professional pathways to co-educational high school principalship of four South African women. This is a role that, in gender terms, remains a minority position in South Africa, and internationally. The study sought to understand why women would want to become principals of co-educational high schools, particularly in a deeply traditional and patriarchal society such as South Africa: it also considered what barriers and enablers, both 'external' and 'internal', might have impacted upon their progress to principalship

Life history is the preferred methodology in feminist research, where the voices and perspectives of women are foregrounded, and this study is firmly rooted in feminist theory and practice. The four women participants in this respondent-led study were from different mother tongue language groups and ethnic backgrounds, and were purposively selected on the basis of the interesting and varied stories which I thought they had to tell, given my brief knowledge of them from the professional courses they had attended with me in the past.

The data collection involved the gathering of the personal narratives and stories that unfolded from my interaction with the participants. The research instruments, of both a semi-structured and unstructured nature, were designed to promote and encourage, not lead, our "conversations with a purpose" (Ribbins 2007). This narrative enquiry process enabled a full exploration of the personal and professional pathways of the four women from which, their life histories were developed, the data analysed, grounded theory emerged, and my conclusions were drawn.

The study revealed that the women's personal agency was a strong enabler to their progress: as a result, they were not constrained by societally imposed stereotypes and prevailing discriminatory attitudes. This manifestation of their personal agency was also clearly interwoven with their deep spiritual faith. The study shows that it was the combination of

these powerful forces and beliefs, personal agency and a deeply held belief that they were doing ‘God’s work’, which enabled the four women to achieve principalship.

KEYWORDS: Co-educational High Schools, Feminism, Life History, Patriarchy. Principalship, Women Leaders,