

# Educational Leadership at District Level: Women's Reflections on Their Self-Perceptions

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*Self-perception constitutes an indispensable component of social life that might significantly contribute to one's leadership ability. This study examined the perceptions that women in educational leadership at the district offices in one of the provinces in South Africa have about themselves and their leadership roles. It formed part of qualitative research aimed at exploring women's experiences of career advancement into educational leadership positions at the district level in the North West Province of South Africa. The aim was to understand how district office women see themselves and their leadership responsibilities, as well as how they believe their own self-perceptions have helped them advance in their careers. The participants for this study were thirteen female managers in educational leadership positions who were selected using the purposive sampling method. Framework and thematic analysis methods were utilized in the analysis of the individual face-to-face interviews. The study adopted the self-concept theory as its core theoretical framework. The study revealed that women in educational leadership perceived themselves as competent and accomplished leaders who possessed the requisite leadership qualities to enable them to progress in their careers. The study's findings also demonstrated that women's self-perceptions and educational leadership capabilities have a substantial impact on their careers, as they serve as sources of motivation and propelling forces for advancement.*

*La perception de soi est une composante indispensable de la vie sociale qui peut contribuer de manière significative à la capacité de leadership d'une personne. La présente étude examine les perceptions qu'ont les femmes qui occupent des postes de responsabilité dans le domaine de l'éducation dans l'une des provinces d'Afrique du Sud d'elles-mêmes et de leurs rôles en tant que leaders. Elle s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une étude qualitative plus large visant à explorer les expériences des femmes en matière d'avancement professionnel à des postes de direction dans le domaine éducatif au niveau du district dans la province du Nord-Ouest de l'Afrique du Sud. L'objectif était de comprendre la perception qu'ont les femmes des services publics du district de leurs responsabilités de leaders et de la manière qu'elles pensent que leur propre perception de soi les a aidées à progresser dans leur carrière. Les participantes à cette étude étaient treize femmes cadres occupant des postes de responsabilité dans le domaine de l'éducation, sélectionnées par la méthode de l'échantillonnage raisonné. Les méthodes d'analyse du cadre et d'analyse thématique ont été utilisées pour les entretiens individuels en présentiel. L'étude a adopté la théorie de l'image de soi comme cadre théorique de base. L'étude a révélé que les femmes ayant des responsabilités dans l'éducation se perçoivent comme des leaders compétents et accomplis qui possèdent les qualités de leadership requises pour leur permettre de progresser dans leur carrière. Les résultats de l'étude ont également démontré que la perception que les femmes ont d'elles-mêmes et de leurs capacités de leadership en matière d'éducation a un impact considérable sur leur carrière, car elle constitue une source de motivation et un encouragement à avancer.*

Although women's representation in educational leadership has increased in recent decades, it remains disproportionate compared to that of their male counterparts (Bynum, 2015; Chabaya et al., 2009; Johnson & Fournillier, 2021; Msila, 2013; Simkins, 2015; Wiley, et al., 2017; Wills, 2015). This study is situated in the context of women in educational leadership at the district level in the North West Province, South Africa. It focused on the office-based educators at the district offices. Education district offices in South Africa are "the intermediaries between the national and provincial departments of education, and the local schools" (Bantwini & Diko, 2011, p. 226). The office-based educators who participated in the study were the education specialists, senior and deputy chief education specialists, chief education specialists, sub-district managers, circuit managers and human resource managers who were in educational leadership positions. The study sought to understand how women in educational leadership at the district level perceive themselves and the impact their self-perceptions have on their leadership. This was to facilitate a better understanding of the importance of office-based educators, and the crucial role of self-perception in women's career advancement to educational leadership from the viewpoint of women themselves.

The notion of self-perception as rooted in the self-concept theory, serves as "a guide to personal behaviour" and emphasizes the importance of the elements of self-esteem and identity (Stojiljković et al., 2014, p. 876). Self-esteem presents an emotional and evaluative dimension of the ways in which we perceive ourselves (Stets & Burke, 2014). Scholars such as Oyserman et al. (2012), Karelaia and Guillen (2014), and Mehrad (2016) have emphasized the importance of self-perception and highlighted the inextricable link between individuals' perception of themselves and the effects on their approach to leadership. According to Stets and Burke (2014), identity "defines individuals in terms of the roles they occupy, the social categories or groups they belong to, and the individual characteristics that define them as unique persons" (p. 412). This encapsulates the character that defines an individual as a member of society, including the meanings that one's actions convey.

### **Problem Statement and Motivation**

In South Africa, the district offices are expected to provide educational "management and professional support, and help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching" (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2013, p. 11). Considering the significance of the district offices in educational leadership, an investigation into the shared experiences of women in educational leadership positions at district offices would proffer invaluable insight into the factors that could enhance women's career advancement into educational leadership positions.

Although women are seemingly well represented in teaching professions, their presence in the field of education remains incommensurate with their career advancement trajectory to educational leadership positions. The gender norms and status quo further perpetuate the issue of gender inequality in educational leadership (Bynum, 2015; Chabaya et al., 2009; Simkins, 2015; Wiley et al., 2017; Wills, 2015). The following research questions assisted to guide this article: How do women in educational leadership at the district office-level perceive themselves and their leadership roles? How do women leaders believe that their own self-perceptions contributed to their career advancement?

## The Context of the Education District Office

The education district office in South Africa is an arm of the educational system situated between the provincial department of education, education institutions, and the public (DBE, 2012, p. 8). The power of the education district office lies in the Provincial Education Department (DBE, 2012, p. 13). Bantwini and Diko (2011) described South Africa's education districts as the "intermediaries between the National and Provincial Departments of Education, and the local schools" (p. 226). Education district offices depict the decentralization of education whereby power is delegated from the top sphere of education to the bottom for implementation at the school level. This form of decentralization according to UNESCO (2017) rests upon the district office, which is the office-based and school-based educators (p. 1). Even though the onus of curriculum implementation falls on the school-based educators, the district office educators are tasked with the enacting of education policies, monitoring of education quality; and the provision of instructive support for school-based educators (UNESCO, 2017, p. 2).

The role of district education office as an essential dimension of the education system due to its contribution to the quality of teaching and learning is evident in different countries' education policy statements. For instance, in Kenya, the significance of district education office lies within the management of schools at the local level, as it plays an interactive role with the Ministry of Education and schools regarding the implementation of government policy on education at district level (Kenya Law Report [KLR], 2012). The education district offices in countries such as Ghana, Niger, and Uganda are expected to manage schools (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2016). This role also involves the enactment of education policies at the school level (Eghan, 2016).

In the South African context, the education district office manages and supports education (DBE, 2012). Unlike the racially based "19 education departments of apartheid", the education system in democratic South Africa is categorized into two strata, namely the Basic Education and the Higher Education and Training departments (Christie et al., 2011, p. 12). The Basic Education Department deals with all schools from Grade R-12 including literacy education (DBE, 2015), whereas the Higher Education and Training department is concerned with tertiary schooling. The Basic Education stratum on which this study focuses is divided into the foundation phase level of schooling—Grades R–3; the Intermediate phase level, Grades 4–6; and the senior phase level, Grades 7–9. It also consists of the Further Education and Training level, Grades 10–12 (DBE, 2013, p. 6).

The district education office is responsible for ensuring equal access to high-quality education (DBE, 2012). The goal of the district office in line with the national and provincial departments of education is "to develop, maintain and support the South African school education system" (DBE, 2016, p. 138). It is also expected to ensure "school improvement and effectiveness" towards meeting the international demands on tests and rankings (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016, p. 1). Another significant role of education district office involves the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, the realisation of "Education 2030" stressed in Goal number 4 stipulates "inclusive and suitable education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations [UN], 2015, p. 34). This includes the entirety of school outcomes (DBE, 2016, p. 135). An education district office gathers information and diagnoses problems in schools and provides support and intervention, including the exhibition of the *Batho Pele* principles (DBE, 2012). The principles of *Batho Pele* "involve consultation with clients, setting and keeping to service standards, increasing access to services, ensuring courteous

behaviour, providing the required information to the public, acting openly and transparently, redressing sub-standard performance and ensuring value for money” (DBE, 2012, p. 24).

On their part, however, the office-based educators are responsible for providing an environment that ensures commitment among colleagues and school-based educators (DBE, 2012, p. 30). They consult with all education stakeholders to ensure the provision of learning interventions (DBE, 2012, p. 31). Additionally, office-based educators are expected to work with school principals and school management in identifying the needs of the learner and preparing strategic plans and policy to meet these needs (DBE, 2012, pp. 32–33). They are also tasked with ensuring curriculum delivery including the facilitation of curriculum development, implementation, and assessment (DBE, 2012, pp. 32–33). As such, the role of educational leadership at the district level encompasses the provision of support, accountability for the effective running of schools, and ensuring effective communication flow among the education stakeholders.

### **The Need for Understanding Women's Self Perceptions of Educational Leadership**

Scholars such as Christie et al. (2011), Scott (2017), Özgenel and Karsantik (2020), and Hamilton (2021) have associated educational leadership with quality teaching and learning, as they argue that leaders have an enormous impact on student learning and teaching outcomes. Similarly, Scott (2017) contended that effective leaders profoundly influence the recruitment and retention of high-quality educators, which in turn affects the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. However, the unique responsibilities of office-based educators necessitated an examination of the perceptions of women in educational leadership at the district level.

As Parylo et al. (2013) aptly observed, women often experienced far more difficulties in the advancement of their careers to educational leadership positions than men. Although Parylo et al. (2013) focused on the narratives of persons in educational leadership, their study revealed undeniable differences between women's and men's experiences of educational leadership. Women's narratives, for example, contained an evaluation of their personal lived experiences, such as their perceptions and reflections of who they were as individuals, whereas men's narratives mostly revolved around experiences of their job responsibilities (Parylo et al., 2013, p. 573). This clearly indicates that women's perception of educational leadership is different from that of their male colleagues. For instance, this is apparent in “the structure, content and style” in terms of the construction of their story and the way of presentation (Parylo et al., 2013, p. 573). Based on the foregoing, the need for investigating women's perception of educational leadership cannot be overemphasized, as it could instigate a transformation of their sense of self value, their perceptions of leadership, and their approach to leadership positions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted self-concept theory. The self-concept theory is developed by Charles Horton Cooley (1902/1922) and expanded upon by authors such as Gecas (1982), Rahim (2010), Oyserman et al. (2012), Kyriacou and Constanti (2012), Stojiljković et al. (2014), Mehrad (2016), and Siljanovska and Stojcevaska (2018). Self-concept is the belief about oneself (Casino-García et al., 2021; Mehrad, 2016; Oyserman et al., 2012; Siljanovska & Stojcevaska, 2018). The concept of *looking-glass self* provides a theoretical framework for understanding self-concept (Cooley, 1902/1922; Rahim, 2010; Siljanovska and Stojcevaska, 2018). As a metaphorical mirror, the

looking glass self depicts how individuals use the interaction between the individual self and the other individual to make sense of who they are (Siljanovska & Stojcevska, 2018). The looking glass perspective is important if we are to understand self-concept regarding how we make sense of ourselves. Putting the looking glass self into perspective, Siljanovska and Stojcevska (2018) argued that looking at ourselves in a metaphorical mirror occurred through socialization. Put differently, “looking at ourselves in a mirror is the idea that we are seeing ourselves through someone else’s eyes” (Siljanovska & Stojcevska, 2018, p. 67).

As mentioned by Gecas (1982), self-concept is “a product of the reflexive activity, that is, the concept the individual has of herself or himself as a physical, social, spiritual or moral being” (p. 3). Mehrad (2016) defined it as “the total opinions that an individual has of herself or himself” (p. 62). Even though the self-concept is very dynamic, it is reflexively shaped by society (Wehrle & Fasbender, 2019). As such, the perception of self is rooted in society as strengthened by the interaction between self as an individual and the other individual.

Although Kyriacou and Constanti (2012) believed that the individual self’s failure to appropriately interpret our understanding of others’ perceptions might result in false self-image, what an individual thinks about self is important (p. 208). The significance of self-concept is found in the elements of identity and self-esteem, and these are particularly important to this study. From the standpoint of identity, self-concept is regarded as an important motivational tool that influences how individuals make sense of themselves (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 70). Similarly, self-esteem examines individuals’ motivations to feel valued, efficient, and accepted by others (Stets & Burke, 2014). This study draws on the self-concept to understand how women in educational leadership positions at the district office make sense of themselves and their leadership roles based on interactions between self and other.

## **Methodology**

In conducting this study, we obtained ethical clearance from the University’s ethical committee. Next, we sought permission to conduct research in the district offices from the Superintendent (Head of Department) at the provincial department of education. Additionally, we sought permission to conduct research from all the directors at the four district offices. The phenomenological study falls within an interpretive paradigm. The utilization of the interpretive paradigm for the study assisted participants in the construction and concretization of their experiences. Purposive sampling with a criterion strategy was used to select the study’s thirteen participants from the four education district offices in the North West Province, South Africa. Three participants were selected from three districts respectively and four from one district. Consent to participate in the study was sought from all the participants. Also, the methods, aim, and objectives of the study were explained to them before data collection.

## **Data Collection Strategies**

The data for the study were collected through individual face-to-face interviews which were captured using a digital voice recorder and field notes. Participants were asked to describe how they perceive themselves and their leadership roles with the goal of comprehending how women in educational leadership regard themselves and their leadership roles. Employing the principle of anonymity, pseudonyms were used to represent the participants’ and the district offices’ identity.

## **Data Analysis Strategies**

Thematic and framework analysis were concurrently used to analyze the verbatim transcribed data. Thematic analysis as an “interpretive process” (Smith & Firth, 2011, p. 55) was used to “analytically identify and analyse patterns and categories” emerged from the data (Stuckey, 2015, p. 7). The framework analysis was used to identify answers to specific research questions and aim that guided the study (Mogliacci et al., 2016; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009; Stuckey, 2015). The transcribed data were then read several times for familiarization. They were organized into rows and columns according to interview questions for coding into patterns and categories using the word document colour highlighter (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The patterns and categories were further summarized into themes and interpreted using participants’ voices and relevant literature to corroborate the findings.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study sought to ascertain women’s self-perception of their educational leadership roles and the extent to which self-perception influences women’s career advancement to educational leadership positions. This is important because the way we perceive ourselves intrinsically affects our attitudes towards life and society (Mehrad 2016, p. 65). Participants demonstrated that they held themselves and their educational roles in high esteem. This positive self-perception stemmed from the fact that they perceived themselves as accomplished, successful, capable, and confident individuals who were not only perfectionists, but also possessed effective leadership traits such as being democratic, autocratic, participatory, and situational. These qualities were categorized under three main themes: self-esteem, perfectionism, and leadership styles.

### **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is viewed as a representation of the emotional and evaluative dimensions of self-concept (Stets & Burke, 2014). These dimensions encapsulate self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity (Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 419). From this perspective, the participants for this study exuded self-esteem because they appraised themselves as accomplished, successful, capable, and confident leaders. Not only did they perceive themselves as competent leaders, but they also regarded themselves as experienced leaders who have positively transformed the education system. A good case in point of sense of self-worth, self-value, and acceptance was expressed by Participant 7: “I see myself as a diamond in a small package because we do wonders”. Similarly, in reference to their capability to lead, the participants demonstrated a significant sense of self-efficacy. One such example is: “I can describe myself as a person who has potential, which [who] can lead, who is not afraid of any challenge ....” (Participant 11).

Participants further associated their experiences with authenticity in relation to their accomplishments. For example, the participants related their abilities to make a difference, change the lives of others, and increase the pass rate of their district as their unique contribution to the education system:

I am going to cite an example of the performance of the sub-district, I was in District AAA (Pseudonym) for 5 years where I worked in a very small circuit that was underperforming but I managed to take the

circuit from 49 per cent—when I left it was a leading circuit at 86 per cent in the entire district of 9 circuits. (Participant 5).

The interrelation between the concepts of self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity as elements of self-esteem were accentuated in this study through the participants' reflection of their self-perceptions. Self-worth aims at individual self-evaluation, specifically analyzing an individual's motive of feeling valued and accepted by others. Self-efficacy is concerned with the appraisal of oneself as efficient and agentic, whereas authenticity deals with the validity of an individuals' perception of themselves as being accepted and efficient for specific roles (Stets & Burke, 2014). These dimensions have reiterated the importance of self-perception and importance of placing value on oneself (Bisong & Ekanem, 2014; Messerschmidt, 2018). Although this study has revealed how self-perception is constructed by women, it has also revealed its significance to educational leadership. As such, we argue that evaluating and validating self as being able to make a difference and successfully lead as alluded by participants might help one to leverage the necessary credentials to advance to an educational leadership position.

### **Perfectionism**

Arguably, the idea of perfectionism could be detrimental to women's career advancement (Ghaemi & Sadeghi, 2016; Njobvu & Xiu, 2015;). This is because it instills the fear of failure in women, this in turn erroneously confines them to positions which they think they are qualified and suited for, and thereby hinders them from assuming risk-related positions (Njobvu & Xiu, 2015, p. 276). As Ghaemi and Sadeghi (2016), observed, perfectionists often paid critical attention to failures at the expense of their successes. In order words, perfectionists often overanalyze their omissions and mistakes and loathe themselves if their goals are not achieved.

In the context of this study, perfectionism presents self-accomplishments and correlates with the findings of Birch et al. (2019). Perfectionism is relevant to this study because participants identified it as a shared perception they have about themselves. For example, Participants 3 and 10 identified themselves as perfectionists. Participant 10 described herself as a perfectionist when she jokingly asserted, "the people I work with sometimes even say I can pick up a mistake when they have written—or missed an 'S'". Although Participant 10's expression was humorous when she cited an example to support her identity as a perfectionist, she displayed the feelings and views she had about herself as a leader who would always strive for excellence. Participant 3 did not only view herself as a perfectionist, but also as an accomplished leader who has positively changed the lives of others. She stated, "unless you close your eyes but every time, I want things to be perfect, but I am enjoying it—when I see the lives of people changing and see them enjoying". Birch et al. (2019) investigated perfectionism from a multidimensional perspective, namely socially prescribed perfectionism, self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism. In their research, they found that self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism might have positive effects on leaders and their subordinates. Socially prescribed perfectionism is considered negative and maladaptive as it concerns the setting of unrealistic standards. Contrarily, the self-oriented and other-oriented dimensions of perfectionism are regarded as adaptive since they concern the setting of high standards for oneself and others respectively (Birch et al., 2019, p. 20). They both gear towards goal achievement and serve as a source of self-motivation. Participants' construction of a perfectionist in this study is in line with self-oriented and other oriented dimensions of perfectionism with a focus on excellence, goal setting, and achievement.

## **Leadership Styles**

This category highlights how participants perceived and defined their leadership roles. Participants defined and perceived their leadership roles in relation to different leadership styles, these include democratic, assertive, participative, and autocratic leadership styles. For example, Participant 1 viewed herself as a democratic leader, she stated, "I am kind of democratic in the sense that I always involve people with how—with strategies that I want to improve". There were other instances whereby participants were identified as democratic and firm leaders. For instance, Participant 13 affirmed, "I see myself as a democratic leader. I am a firm leader, but I don't take nonsense my yes is yes, and my no is no", and Participant 4 opined: "I am assertive, I am an assertive leader".

In a comparable manner, Participant 6 declared, "I am a democratic leader—because I don't just give instruction, I lead by examples". For participant 2, she is a participatory leader who likes to ask questions to ascertain clarity. She emphatically stated, "I like to participate; I participate, I ask questions because I want to be clear". Participant 8 described herself as follows: "I am a democratic person, and I believe in a win-win situation, but there are some instances where you must localise your leadership strategies for a particular gain". As for this participant (Participant 8), leadership strategy is not fixed, as such, she often adapts leadership strategy according to a situation with the aim of achieving "leadership goals that are appropriate" to such situation (Maisyaroh et al., 2019, p. 73).

Reflecting on the participants' self-perception about their leadership styles, one could rightly argue that the possession of diverse leadership qualities and the ability to utilize different leadership approaches helped them to achieve their organizational and career goals. For instance, being simultaneously democratic and firm did not only evince participants' ability to supervise but also their ability to motivate, inspire, and engage their subordinates towards the achievement of set organizational goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). This finding resonates with the research of Naidoo and Perumal (2014) who argued that women in educational leadership "adopt relational and inclusive leadership styles but do not have reservations in using autocratic leadership styles for effective school management" (p. 15). This is illustrated by one participant's revelation that she sometimes applied "an autocratic style so that things are done according to plan and sometimes democratic so that I engage with them" (Participant 7). In another instance, a participant gained the support of her subordinates by diplomatically pressurising them into action. For example, beaming with an aura of joy on her face, Participant 1 narrated that her subordinates once told her:

You know what Mme, you know you are really making us work because you want us to do things and you are putting us in pressure in a humble way and by so doing, we feel ashamed because (laughs)—because if it is done it has happened it does not mean that we really want [...].

Contrary to Yousaf and Schmeide (2017) who through factor analysis found that women lack leadership qualities, this study found that women in educational leadership possessed the capability to lead and were endowed with diverse leadership qualities. In this regard, the findings of this study confirmed those of Onyango et al. (2016) which suggested that women in Kenya exuded not just enormous confidence and leadership ability, but also the zeal to ascend to the zenith of their careers. Furthermore, leaders who are democratic and firm in their decision-



making may have the potential to challenge gender norms that reinforce gendered identities that perpetuate gender inequality. This could alter their sense of self-worth, leadership perceptions, and approach to leadership positions, and thus ensure career advancement.

### Conclusion

This study has revealed that women in educational leadership perceived themselves as confident, capable, and accomplished leaders with requisite diverse leadership qualities. As this study has shown, women's self-perception invariably affects their views and approach to leadership. Therefore, as Karelaia and Guillén (2014) aptly asserted, upholding a positive outlook about oneself might motivate one to lead and redefine one's view of leadership "as an attractive goal rather than a duty" (p. 204). In this respect, this study distinguished between negative and positive perfectionism and posits positive perfectionism as integral to women's career advancement. The crux of the argument is that people who adopt positive perfectionism ideals may improve their performance and that of the others by inculcating the idea of perfectionism in them, especially if they feel successful (Birch et al., 2019, p. 35).

This study successfully evaluated what women in educational leadership at district level think about themselves and how this self-perception impacts upon their career progression. The study established that the self-value and self-validation of women in educational leadership might serve as sources of motivation and propelling forces for their career advancement. Although the study showed that self-esteem is important for women in educational leadership because it allows them to evaluate themselves, a sense of competence is still important. The strength of self-perception can therefore best be substantiated by self-assessment, the achievement of objectives, and the possession of quality styles of leadership. The women leaders in this study believed that self-perception based on its attributes could make a difference in the progression of women's careers towards educational leadership. Thus, it remains pertinent for women in all spheres of educational leadership to take cognizance of them. This is because these traits could revolutionize women's orientation towards leadership and propel women to unleash their inherent potential. By doing so, they could ultimately disrupt the gender status quo and promote gender equality in educational leadership and even beyond.

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