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**Contact Details**

**Dr Thidziambi Phendla**

Department of Education Management and Policy Studies  
Faculty of Education  
University of Pretoria  
0002  
South Africa

[thidziambi.phendla@up.ac.za](mailto:thidziambi.phendla@up.ac.za)

Phone: +2712 420 4641; Fax +2712 420 5584

**Thidziambi Phendla**

Lecturer in Education Management  
Department of Education Management and Policy Studies  
Faculty of Education  
University of Pretoria

Thidziambi Phendla is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education Management and Policy Studies at the University of Pretoria. She has offered several courses in educational leadership including, Leadership and Community Building, Maximising Leadership, Education Leadership and Gender Equality, and Education Management and Leadership at master level. She is also the Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization - International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa UNESCO-IICBA which is a centre within the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria. The main role of the centre is to build up institutional capacity in teacher education in Africa. One approach has been by establishing a system of networking with specialist institutions in Africa as well as outside Africa.

## ***“THE PARADOX OF LUSELO-LUFHANGA METAPHORS”: AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE***

### **ABSTRACT**

Building empathy and building coalitions, essential to creating social change in schools, is difficult and oftentimes defeating. Regardless, Black women in South Africa, have been shifting the paradigm and practice of schools, and have been addressing the discrimination and limitations of mainstream/western thought. On the one hand, the lives of African women school leaders are likened to the “Luselo<sup>1</sup> metaphor of oppression”. Like “Luselo”, the intricacy of the constructs (institutional, political, cultural, language, social/historical, and economic) defines black women in their work of social change and the practice of school leadership. On the other hand, using the metaphor “Musadzi u fara lufhanga nga hu fhiraho”<sup>2</sup>, women reclaim their liberation; they find hope in the hopelessness of their environments. Holding leadership roles in the lives of these black women can be likened to holding the sharp edges of knives, where women are cut without mercy. As a result, women have to learn strategies of how to hold these knives without being cut, how to navigate tensions within and across the personal, school institutions and the broader society. Black women school leaders are compelled to learn how to navigate across tensions created by culture, language, and customary laws.

These metaphors provide a powerful reflection of Black women who encounter enormous challenges, women who strive under the multilayered and multiplied burdens of oppression. And often times they strive, they fight back through their silent resistance; they find hope from the hopelessness and through the creation of a socially just environment. Through their caring nature they create environments of hope, and succeed in linking families, schools and communities of underserved children and youth in South Africa.

This study included the participation of three Black women elementary school principals in South Africa from urban/township school settings in Soweto, Johannesburg. Each professional’s story is unique as it illuminates individual experiences of addressing pressing issues around race, gender, class, segregation, and oppression. The study asked the school leader to reflect on her formal (e.g., institutional schooling) and informal (e.g., family, culture and ethnicity, socio-economic background) educational experiences in an effort to discover how these experiences have influenced her work for social justice in school and school community settings. While each story presents lessons learned (practical tools) that might help professional practitioners, a comparative analysis across the narratives provides rich data, contrast, and informative themes which extend our

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<sup>1</sup> Luselo is a Tshivenda name for an African tray. This is a typical African circle shaped tray woven from natural fibres and materials such as bamboo, reed, cane, grass and straw.

<sup>2</sup> Meaning, “Holders of the Sharp Edges of Knives” in the Tshivenda language. This metaphor is commonly used by various ethnic groups in RSA. The other eight ethnic languages are: isiNdebele, isiSwati, isiXhosa, isiZulu, sepedi, sesotho, Setswana and Xitsonga/Tshangaan.

understanding of the meaning of social justice that is both contextually and culturally appropriate in school settings.

The study promotes thinking about what leadership and social justice are and what possibilities and limitations moderate them in general and in the context of South Africa in particular; what conditions make it possible for one to participate in leadership and social justice given interlocking systems of oppression; and what commitments must be addressed when deciding on a theory (theories) of leadership and social justice in the context of understanding Black African women's personal narratives. This study helps us understand questions such as: What happens to leadership when a Black woman is at its centre? How is gender understood in the language and discourse of power/lack of and privilege/lack of? What meaning do Black women school leaders derive from their acts of a creation of a socially just and equitable school environment/community? How does understanding social justice contribute to Black women's emancipatory goals? While I do not provide definitive answers to these questions, nor, in truth would I be able to, I do demonstrate how several Black feminist scholars have had a powerful impact on my thinking about, understanding of, and reflection on these problems and issues in my study.

Framed by this complex background, the main compelling question that I proposed for this study was "How do Black women elementary school principals navigate across institutional and political, cultural and language, economic and social/historical arenas to create socially just and equitable schools in South Africa?" It would seem that Black South African women from various ethnic groups learn to create strategies and establish networks of support and, also, fight oppression, repression, segregation, isolation and injustices through silence and passive resistance while working to uplift and support their various communities.

## ***“THE PARADOX OF LUSELO-LUFHANGA METAPHORS”: AFRICAN WOMEN DEFINING LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE***

### **Introduction**

Feminism is a despised word in my vocabulary. I detest it because it has different meanings for different people. For one group it is equated to a struggle for equal participation in social mobility while for other groups it is a cry for recognition as fellow human beings on this earth. How do I begin to claim and own something that fails to promote my being? How can such a cause begin to represent me if all it accumulates is small victories for a few already privileged individuals? This is a word that has been reduced to serve the needs of a few privileged persons in our communities. This then suggests that confining feminism to a simple definition is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

In its true definition, feminism should be based on the principle that women have innate worth, inalienable rights and valuable ideas and talents to contribute to society. True feminism goes beyond mere equity as it insists not only that women be given equal rights with men, but that they be respected for themselves as well. At the heart of the woman is an individual that is a valuable, contributing member of society. Women have been marginalized since time immemorial and thus continue to exist in the confines of their social conditions. As a result women have been systematically denied the right to participate fully in many socio-economic arenas and institutions.

Why examine feminisms? The current definition of feminism is in itself disempowering, in the sense that it does not take account of women of colour and African women whose marginalization is far beyond the economic, social, and political fields, but includes realities in the face of race, class, ethnicity, patriarchy, geographical location and religion. These women constitute a majority in the so-called developing world or second economies. Given these diverse experiences and realities, it is essential that a new definition of feminism be constructed to include the ‘other women’ identities as well. It is essential then that researchers who employ feminist lenses to create theories of practice must also critique feminist theories.

### **Examining current feminist paradigms**

#### **Liberal Feminism**

Liberal feminists assume that equality for women can be achieved by democratic reforms under current social and political conditions. Weiner (1999) explains: “Liberal feminism, among the first wave of feminisms, is associated with emergence of liberal individualism and Protestantism, at the time of the enlightenment, draws specifically on ideas about

natural rights, justice and democracy. Access to education is fundamental to this perspective since it claims that by providing equal education for both sexes, an environment would be created in which an individual women's potential can be encouraged and developed" (p. 54). The assumption is that through current bureaucratic structures, which are hierarchical in nature and that see power as exclusive, equality can be achieved.

Additionally, the strategies for liberation assume that the advocate is in a position, within the hierarchy, to bring about change for social justice. This stance poses problems in that Black women and women of colour, many coming from lower socio-economic classes, are rarely in these privileged positions let alone comfortable working as an agent of domination within restrictive context (Benham & Cooper, 1997).

### **Radical Feminism:**

Building on the thinking and activities of liberal feminists, radical feminists more directly, forcefully critiqued the oppressed position of women within a society that constructed social, cultural, economic and political policy on patriarchal values. The movement can be aligned with the growth of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s, which grew out of the momentum produced by the 1950s civil rights and was kept alive with the increasing political crisis of the Vietnam War. In short Weiner (1994) states the following on radical feminism: "Radical feminist educators, as might be expected, attribute inequalities in schooling to patriarchal forces and male dominated power relationships in which sexuality and hierarchy combine to create the dominant male and subordinate female dualism. Further they assert that these are manifested at every level of society; in the family, in the school, in higher education and in workplace. Therefore neither the responsibility nor solution to sexual inequality can be placed entirely on the shoulders of the school" (p. 71). Because the school and the classroom were seen as bastion of male-focused domination (men were seen as intelligent and would succeed in academics), radical feminism laboured to disrupt the norms of gender-centred traditions. Albeit, as Weiner points out, the struggle was still fought within the framework of traditional school setting and political arenas.

### **Marxist/Socialist Feminism**

Given that growing distrust of policy and practice was viewed as the poverty of the dominant, privileged classes, Marxist/socialist ideas sought to critique the social reproduction of unequal distribution of power/material property based on race, class and gender lines. Weiner (1994) writes: "Marxist and socialist feminist educators appear to have less faith in the role of education in social change; rather they see it as one of the terrains upon which gender as well as class struggle is played out and in which patterns of social domination and subordination are reproduced and sustained.

Therefore the solution to the educational inequality is fairly limited because of perceived structural nature of sexual inequality and capitalism" (p. 72). The limitations of Marxist/socialist theories appear to be inherent in their emphasis on power viewed as property that needs to be redistributed, but fails to address the domination that comes

with this sort of action (see Wheedon, 1987, p. 28). Neo-Maxist feminism, on the other hand, would argue that new power, collective power that would not disadvantage or oppress, could be constructed through new, liberatory discourses and activities.

### **Black Feminist Theories**

In a critical review of the literature on feminist theory, hooks (1984), projects a picture which shows that feminism in the US emerged from the white middle and upper class, college-educated women, who were not concerned with economic survival or ethnic and racial discrimination in a capitalistic society, but interested in resisting sexism or gender inequalities. Most feminists of colour recognize that gender, race, class, and sexual orientation -not gender alone -determine the allocation of power and the nature of any individual's identity, status, and circumstance (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1989; and Delgado-Bernal 1998). In other words, for these White women, feminism is about sexism, not about class and racial issues, while for most Black women, feminism is all of the above and more. As though these layers are not enough, for a Black South African woman, the burden is multiplied, that is, central to creation of a Black woman's identity are race, ethnicity, gender, class, mother-tongue/language, traditional values, location, customary laws and the other interlocking layers constructed by apartheid policies.

hooks sees the plight of Black women as the problem of lack of socialization. Black women are not socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor because they are allowed no institutionalized "other" that they can discriminate against, exploit or oppress (p. 15). In addition, hooks suggests that the use of this "lived experience of discrimination, exploitation or oppression" directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology and may shape Black women's consciousness in such a way that their world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege, "the White Feminists" (p. 15). hooks invites Black women to recognize the vantage point of their marginality from the racist, classist, sexist hegemony and to criticize it while creating a counter-hegemony through the formation of a liberatory feminist theory and praxis as a collective responsibility to be shared by all.

hooks goes on to define feminism as " a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permits western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. Feminism, defined in political terms that stress collective as well as individual experience, challenges women to enter a new domain, to leave behind the apolitical stance of sexism, decrees in our lot and develop political consciousness (p. 24). hooks believes that when feminism is defined in such a way it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality and centralizes the experience of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movement. She writes: "When we cease to focus on the simplistic stance 'men are the enemy' we are compelled to examine systems of domination and our role in their maintenance and perpetuation" (p. 25). Hence, women need to liberate themselves and move away from perpetuating the situation of oppression.

From her arguments, hooks challenges and counters the mainstream feminist hegemony that perceives feminism as an individual identity and lifestyle choice rather than a political commitment, which reflects the class nature of the movement (p. 27). Her vision of a new hegemony is shared and supported by Delgado-Bernal (1998) in her stance on Chicana Feminist epistemology in educational research. She maintains that Chicana's experiences are different from those of African American and Native Americans in the United States. A Chicana feminist epistemology is formed by and shares characteristics of endarkened, feminist epistemologies (e.g. examinations of the influence of race, class, gender, and sexuality on opportunity structures), but is different from the "Black Feminist Thought" (p. 561). Like hooks, Delgado-Bernal's new paradigm shifts away from simplicity to include elements of differences while recognizing the commonalities with the "Black Feminist Thought".

Thus, as Delgado-Bernal argues further, "endarkened" feminist epistemologies are crucial as they speak to the failures of traditional patriarchal and liberal educational scholarship and examine the intersection of race, class gender, and sexuality (p. 561). The epistemologies that emerged from these readings informed my understanding and perspective of how the interlocking categories of race, gender, class, ethnicity, language among others, are situated in the world experience of Black African women in South Africa.

### **South African Feminist Thinking**

It is in light of the foregoing discussions that I make a transition to the emerging theories of feminism in South Africa. Bonni, Deacon, Morrell and Robinson (1998) maintain that by 1990 feminism was almost a dirty word; national liberation came first and women's liberation second (p. 115). A Women's National Coalition emerged in 1992 to demand that the process and product of negotiating a new constitution and the Bill of Rights provide effective equality for women. At the same time Black women had begun to protest strongly at their exclusion from the white feminists' political and theoretical projects, raising issues of gender difference, the fragmentation of the subject and the category 'woman' by race, culture and class (p. 112). Thus, as Bonni *et al.* put it, "a feminist politics identity is being asserted against phallogocentric hegemony while itself being challenged on the ground of its racial exclusivity" (p. 113)

Different experiences of gender might lead to very different sorts of demands for change. If possibilities for the transformation of gender relations lie in the instability of a performed gender identity, then the direction of change in gender order(s) also become unpredictable. Bonni *et al.* assert that rather than being a site of unremitting reinforcement of domination gender relations, everyday performance of gender becomes the stage for the constant possibility of disrupting and challenging these relations. However, the postmodern challenge, and especially the post-colonial turn, has seen feminism take on board a critique which calls into question its own, previously unexplored, class and racial biases (p. 114).

The South African feminist discourse was, and to some extent, is still informed by white women's thinking of sexism rather than issues of race and class. As a result, questions of race and location also intervened to ensure that the emerging feminist discourse took differences as its starting point. The WNC aimed to achieve equality under the new constitution reinforcing unitary identity of women and their oppression. It has been recognized that the removal of the white minority government would not correct sexist practices which were well entrenched within the structures of both the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the African National Congress (ANC). The WNC drew up a Women's charter with concentration on five key areas: women's legal status; access to land; violence against women; women's health; and women's work (see Bonni *et al.*, 1998, p. 116).

In these five areas cited above, what emerges are the similarities and diversity of issues which affect South African women as much as respondents speak "with one voice" in censuring the roles and treatment they are subjected to, there is a keen awareness of the complexities of this oppression; especially when culture and tradition enter the frame (see Bonni *et al.*, 1998, p. 117). For instance, the Bill of Rights provides two contradictory clauses: first, the demand that an equality clause should enjoy priority in the Bill of Rights in order to pave the way for gender equal affirmative action; and that traditional and customary law be democratized. While the first clause frees the women from gender discrimination, the second one imposes customary and traditional laws which disadvantage them. These events problematize the idea that interest can be read off location. Rural or any groups of women are at the intersection of a number of factors which constitute their identity. They navigate across many tensions; they wrestle with many social constructs which form their daily existence. Bonni *et al.* (1998) maintain that for rural women their experiences of customary and traditional laws have not been empowering. Similarly, the idea of western women's interest is problematic and homogenizing (p. 117). The implication is that custom, culture and equality can be challenged in the public sphere but the private domain is still private and beyond the reach of the Bill of Rights. Thus, the drawing up of the Bill of Rights is seen as a process of different and competing interest groups (political parties, traditional leaders, women and others) demanding to have their needs met.

Bonni *et al.* (1998) argue that just as racial identity disrupts a too easy assumption of sisterhood even in an environment where non-racial politics was paramount in resisting apartheid, so divisions across education, location, languages and class all potentially disrupt any appeal to race (let alone experience) as a primary foundation for the right to appropriately represent others (p. 126). The authors assert that the recognition of identities as multiple and fragmented means that we need new models for representing others and for building political relationships around gender concerns. With this understanding in mind, a first step is to think differently about opposing identities, to seek out alternative ways of conceptualizing disabling modernist dichotomies (self/other; male/female; heterosexual/homosexual; white/Black; researcher/researched) (see Bonni *et al.*, 1998, p. 126).

Historically traditional mainstream educational scholarship has not addressed the influence of gender, race/ ethnicity, class, and sexuality on education policy and practice. By looking at commonalities based on gender and omitting issues of race/ ethnicity or class, one may overlook how institutions, political, economic and cultural structures contain and support different groups of women differently. By shifting the analysis onto Black South African women and their race/ethnicity, mother-tongue/language, and class, scholars are able to address the shortcomings of the traditional mainstream thought and western liberal feminist scholarship (see Phendla 2000, p.33).

## **Research Strategy**

This study sought the participation of six Black women elementary school principals in South Africa from urban/township school settings in Soweto, Johannesburg<sup>1</sup>. Each professional's story is unique as it illuminates individual experiences of addressing pressing issues concerning race, gender, class, segregation, and oppression. While each story presents lessons learned (practical tools) that might help professional practitioners, a comparative analysis across the narratives provides rich data and informative themes which extend our understanding of the meaning of social justice that is both contextually and culturally appropriate in school settings.

The study uses the biographical narrative and phenomenological methods to collect data from three principals identified by their colleagues and communities as individuals working for social justice. Since I was interested in exploring how the six women worked for social justice in both apartheid South Africa and the new South Africa, it was necessary to capture the past in order to direct one's attention towards the present, and show how they have managed to transform it. It can be seen from Casey's (1995) work that narratives disclose diverse political projects, but also demonstrate social inclusivity and reveal progressive points of convergence. Thus all educators working for social change have a great deal to learn from the care these women give to their students, the outrage they feel towards injustice, and the way they dare to use the limited power and resources they have.

The stories were collected through a series of three interviews of 1-2 hours each, a one-day shadowing session, a group dialogue and document analysis. To break down what scholars (Griffin, 1989; Oakley, 1981) call the one-way male hierarchical framework of traditional interviewing techniques, my participants and I engaged in interactive and open-ended interviews, working together to arrive at what Tesch (1994, 147) calls "the heart of the matter". I employed Tesch's (1994) advice on phenomenological methods and learned to take cues from my participants' expressions, questions, and occasional sidetracks to take the level of the probe further. We engaged in talk between friends where I shared similar experiences with the women. Our interviews were in dialogue form and both the women and I revealed ourselves and reflected on our disclosures. This was made possible because as a Black elementary school principal in Soweto, I had had similar experiences at various stages in my life as an educational leader. Because of these mutual disclosures, the women were able to open up their hearts to me and we developed

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<sup>1</sup> The original research reported here comes from a PhD completed at Michigan States University in 2000.

a more intimate relationship. In their opinion, our dialogues were non-judgmental and my body language assured the women that I believed in their sincerity in the telling of their true experiences.

The processes of data analysis and synthesis were conducted through thematic analysis and coding. Naturalistic qualitative enquiries tend to produce large quantities of data. Since I used three interviews, shadowing, group dialogues, and documentation to collect the data, it was likely that I would become what Rudestam and Newton (1992) call “the victim of data overload” (p. 113). Thus, the phenomenological analysis of transcribed data was done on a continuous basis as the process of interviewing went on. To do this, I discussed emerging themes with my participants at different stages in our journey. My analysis, drawing on interviews, field notes from shadowing the women, conversations from the group dialogue, and meaning derived from documents and artefacts revealed that there are “tensions within and across the personal – the school institutions – and the broader society” which are created by power and privileges in the lives of these six Black women.

### **Introducing the women: Holders of the sharp edges.**

There is a powerful metaphor prevalent among African ethnic groups of South Africa; it is “Musadzi u fara lufhanga nga hu fhiraho”<sup>2</sup>. This is a Tshivenda version, which, if directly translated, means that women are forced to hold knives by their sharpest edge. The meaning is derived from the multiple roles women are expected to fulfil. In another sense a woman has to face the challenges of life and succeed through thick and thin. This metaphor may serve two purposes. On the one hand it may be understood as a symbol of struggle, resistance, obduracy, and strength. On the other hand it may be seen as a symbol of hope, faith, courage, and words of wisdom (Phendla, 2004a, p. 51)

Metaphors are powerful reflections of Black women’s enormous challenges while facing the multilayered and multiplied burdens of oppression. Metaphors are so ordinary that they need to be pulled apart to reveal their ordinariness and highlight the invisible yet powerful features in order to give meaning to our contemporary society (Phendla, 2004b). Their colourfulness and resonance with the thinking of ordinary people give them the potential to engage all of us in more creative thinking about our role of serving others. It is with these thoughts in mind that I present the research participants’ metaphors of social justice.

### **Little Star**

I named the first research participant Little Star. She says “I shine in the darkness. I give light to those in the dark”. Like a star, she is like a magnet that attracted other

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<sup>2</sup> Meaning, “Holders of the Sharp Edges of Knives” in the Tshivenda language. The other eight ethnic languages are: isiNdebele, isiSwati, isiXhosa, isiZulu, sepedi, sesotho, Setswana and Xitsonga/Tshangaan.

stakeholders to the cause of justice. She demonstrated the ability to develop links beyond the borders of South Africa – Belgium, France and Germany. Little Star, a 62-year-old Motswana woman, a mother of two children with 38 years of experience as an educator, particularly as teacher and college lecturer, and who was in her ninth year as an elementary school principal when this study was conducted in January 2000. She lost her mother at the age of six and was raised by her eldest sister. Her father was a garden boy all his life, and as a result, she grew up in poverty.

### **Oak Tree**

I named the second research participant Oak Tree. She says, I really stood the test of time for one lifetime”. When this study was conducted in February 2000, Oak Tree was a 47-year-old recently widowed Mutshangana woman. She grew up in a Black middle class family, where her father was the first BA graduate in the rural homeland of Gazankulu in the early 1950s. She is the fifth of nine siblings. She was still in her mourning clothes after losing her husband in October 1999 after many years of illness. In her 25 years as an educator, she has been a teacher, Head of Department (HOD) and was in her 10<sup>th</sup> year as an elementary school principal.

### **Footprints**

I named the third research participant Footprints, a self-projection of her role in life. Footprints, says “my life has been like climbing a mountain of challenges, but I have probably left some footprints on the sands of time”. Footprints was a 47-year-old woman in her 7<sup>th</sup> year as an elementary school principal at the time of our interviews in February 2000. She is a Muvenda woman, the oldest of four siblings. She was born in Alexandra Township to working class parents; her father was a labourer and her mother a homemaker. She lived with her paternal grandparents when she was in elementary school. Her 18 years of experience as an educator included teaching at her present school. She was also a radio announcer at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), a high school teacher, a subject advisor for Gauteng schools, an adult night school head teacher and a church elder.

### **Rain**

I named the fourth research participant Rain because she uses the metaphor of hope. Rain says “It has been like rain after a long drought where one does not even mind about getting wet”. She demonstrated that she is indeed the mother who puts children first. Rain’s story concern children and the love she had for them. Rain was a 47-year-old Mosotho woman, born in Soweto Township and the older of two siblings at the time of our interview in March 2000. She was in her 10<sup>th</sup> year as an elementary school principal when the study was conducted in February 2000. During her 21 years as an educator she had been a high school teacher, head of department and deputy principal of a high school, before attaining her present position in January 1990.

### **Calabash of water**

I named the fifth research participant Calabash. She says, “I carry my calabash to the fountain of education, fill it up before I take it back to my beloved children, parents and teachers”. Calabash was a 49-year-old widowed UmXhosa woman at the time of our interview in March 2000. She was born in the rural homeland of Transkei and was the last of four sisters raised by both her migrant labourer father and eldest sister who was a domestic servant in Johannesburg. Death seemed to follow her everywhere – she lost her mother in 1972, her father died in 1988, her eldest sister died mysteriously in 1990, her husband was murdered during the political struggles in 1991, and her mother-in-law died in 1993. She lost her 19-year-old son in July 1999. In her 27 years of experience as an educator, she taught in the present elementary school, became a HOD and then an assistant principal. She is in her 11<sup>th</sup> year of her principalship.

## **Roots**

I named the sixth research participant Roots. She says: “I’m like roots that go deep down under the soil in search of nutrients, always searching for opportunities to feed our children.” At the time of our interview in April 2000, Roots was a 53-year-old Muvenda woman who had been born in Alexandra Township in Johannesburg. Her Muvenda father and Motswana mother were domestic servants in the white suburbs of Johannesburg. As a result, she was forced to live with her paternal grandparents in rural Vendlan at the age of 15. In her 31 years of teaching experience, she taught for four years in an elementary school before becoming a school principal. She moved from school to school for almost 20 years before the new government built her current school in 1997. She was in her 27<sup>th</sup> year as a school principal and had one child.

The six women were selected by individuals or groups who either work or live in the areas where the schools are located. Second, the women were selected by individuals or groups who have had some encounters with the women at some stage or who have heard about the women’s work within the different communities. For instance, Little Star’s name was mentioned by at least six individuals from diverse career backgrounds and environments. First, she was identified by one of my close former colleagues; she was identified by the former Member of the Provincial Executive Council (MEC) of education, Mary Metcalfe, and other principals including some who are part of this study. The snowball effect strategy was also used to identify other participants. For example, Calabash was identified by Oak Tree, who in turn was also identified by Little Star, and so on. It was exciting to note that principals who had agreed to participate in this study would suggest a name, just to find that the person was already part of this study. My choice was also influenced by the fact that I selected the townships that I am familiar with, i.e. Meadowlands and Diepkloof. For example, my mother grew up in Meadowlands, and I was born in Diepkloof.

The women in this study were educated under the apartheid's Bantu Education system in the early 1960s. As a result, they all received their elementary education in their mother tongue. Little Star and Oak Tree were born and raised in the rural areas, while the rest of the women were born in the cities, but had to go to the rural areas for their secondary schooling. This was in line with Verwoerd's grand plan of separate development. It is clear that these women would have very different childhood experiences given their diverse upbringing.

Besides Oak Tree, whose father was the first person in their rural area to obtain a BA degree, and Rain, whose mother was a professional nurse, these women have a low social status. Moreover Little Star and Calabash share some similarities in that they lost their mothers at an early age, their fathers were migrant labourers, and their elder sisters were forced to drop out of school to take on the responsibility of taking care of the younger siblings. Their experiences support the claims of Wing and Carvalho (1998) who argue that the nature of patriarchy and sexism was reflected in the norms created by society, such as the different expectations that parents had for their sons and daughters (p. 388). It is clear that Black families placed more emphasis on education of the male children, while girls were the first selected to leave schools to help with family responsibilities. Thus, it was expected of both Little Star's and Calabash's elder sisters to drop out of school without a career in order to take care of the younger children in their families. Footprints and Roots had to go to the homeland to live with their grandparents at some point in their lives, because their migrant parents who were working as domestic servants in the white suburbs of Johannesburg, were not able to take care of them.

The women were also prepared for unequal participation in the South African economic and social life. These women grew up on the understanding that their education should preserve the cultural identity of their community, in particular, and their ethnic origin in general. These are women who are responsible for the wellbeing of other extended family members. For example, Footprints pays for her youngest siblings' college fees while Roots takes care of her elderly parents' monthly medical needs. Since her parents live 600 km away in Limpopo Province, which used to be the homeland of the Vhavenda people, it is her sole responsibility to provide transport to bring them to Johannesburg where better health care services are available. Calabash still supports her nieces and nephews. In some instance, these women take care of orphans and street children from their schools and neighbourhoods.

With the exception of Oak Tree, who lost her husband to a long period of illness three months before our meeting, and Calabash, whose husband was killed during the political struggle ten years ago, Little Star, Footprints, Rain and Roots were still married to their first husbands. From their stories, we get to learn of many experiences, and challenges of gender, culture and ethnicity. These are women who still uphold their ethnic origins and are appreciative of who they are in the midst of all trials and tribulations.

From their stories it is evident that all these women's choice of career was coerced. They either wanted to become nurses or social workers before choosing teaching as a profession. For example, Little Star failed her first year at the nursing college before deciding to try teaching, Roots trained as a teacher so that she could get a job and help

support her family, Oak Tree was influenced by her father who was a teacher. Rain who obtained a Bachelor's degree wanted to become a medical doctor or pharmacist, but she was refused entrance to the department. She was told that medicine was not for Black women. Calabash had to choose a career that would enable her to be home in order to support and take care of her nieces and nephews, and Footprints would stand in front of the mirror with a paper cape and cap pretending to be a nurse, but chose teaching as the last resort.

It is not surprising that these women's choices of career were limited to care-giving professions. As dictated by Verwoerd, Blacks were assigned specific and inferior career options that would enable them to serve their communities, to use Verwoerd's (1955) words: " There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. Within his own community, however, all doors are open" (Christie, 1986, p. 12 & Molteno, 1986, p. 92). For that reason, there was no reason for Black people to be trained in other professions that would allow them to serve or compete with white people. Teaching or nursing professions allowed Black people to remain in their communities, so that the education system could not, "mislead him by showing him the pastures of European society in which he was not allowed to graze. We should not give the native an academic education, as some people are too prone to do. If we do this we shall later be burdened with a number of academically trained Europeans and non-Europeans, and who is going to do the manual labour in the country?" (Christie, 1986, p. 12 & Molteno, 1986, p. 66).

The six women became teachers during the apartheid rule in South Africa and as a result, they have experienced both systems of education in South Africa, the old Bantu Education in the apartheid regime, and the new single education system governed by the ethos of a democratic rule. Since these school leaders became principals during the reign of apartheid, it is likely that they were also recruited through some of the following criteria: bilingualism, age and marital status, teaching experience, ethnicity, religious beliefs, knowledge of departmental hierarchy, residency, and knowledge of rules and regulations of the department. For example all six women are fluent in both English and Afrikaans, became principals when they were over 30, were married, had taught for more than 10 years before becoming a school principal, belonged to a specific ethnic group, claimed to belong to a Christian religion, lived within the same area of the school where they became a principal, and had a thorough understanding of the department's rules and regulations.

### **Power and privileges: tensions within and across the personal - school institutions – broader society**

From the stories told by these women, it is evident that the past history of apartheid and its oppressive nature had a great impact in shaping and moulding their unique individual identities in making them who they are in the present South Africa. From the women's life experiences, it becomes clear what it means to be an educational leader who is

challenged by various social constructs and at the same time strives to create socially just schools and environments in Soweto. My analysis, drawing on interviews, field notes from shadowing the women, conversations from the group dialogue, and meaning derived from documents and artefacts revealed the theme “Power and privileges: tensions within and across the personal - school institutions – and the broader society.”

The theme of power and privilege: tensions within and across the personal; - school institutions – and the broader society runs across the women’s conversations. All six women reveal the theme with passion, especially when they talk about their experience of gender inequalities, ethnic discrimination, and language. This theme emerges when women talk about their roles as women in their homes, schools, and broader society. There are many tensions created by power and privilege on personal, school, and societal levels.

#### Power and privilege: tensions within and across personal level

On personal level, these women were subjected to various forms of oppression including traditional obligations and cultural practices that deny women power and privilege. For instance, widowed women are forced to mourn for at least a year, while men may mourn for a month or less. During the mourning period, there are some restrictions that remove and take away some privileges. At times, a widow may not be employed, attend specific functions, express herself in public, attend parties and ceremonies or even visit friends. At times, a woman in mourning clothes is isolated by the community and is regarded as a curse. For example, Oak Tree was compelled to wear a hat as a symbol of respect for her deceased husband. Even though it was in the middle of summer in South Africa at the time of our conversations, Oak Tree would not remove her headgear. In another example, Calabash reveals that her opinions were not considered and her right to free speech was violated. Consequently, some powers and privileges were denied as result of these women’s widowhood. Both Oak Tree and Calabash indicate below the power and privileges that were taken from them as a result of their being widows. In their own words they comment:

...And of course, my husband passed away in October, three months ago. At least in our Xitshangana culture the widow is not forced to wear Black mourning clothes for a year or two like it is with other ethnic cultures. I just have to cover my hair or put on a hat for a year as a symbol of mourning. Of course this is also not fair because most men do not mourn at all. In a year or less men are can get married again, with no questions asked. As a woman, if you do that, you are in trouble. It means you killed your husband or you are glad that he is dead. What a culture! (Oak Tree)

I experience double or rather, multiple oppression because of being Black, woman, and widow. In general, both single and married women tend to discriminate you when you are widowed. The discrimination is also felt in the

community. For example, when there are community meetings the points you raise as a widowed woman are not taken seriously. Even in the church people say, “Whose wife is this one?” As if you have to belong to someone for you to be able to make a valid point (Calabash).

Even other members of the women’s extended family have more power than they. Power is also a function of submission. For instance, Calabash had to comply with her father-in-law’s demands. First, at the insistence of her father-in-law, both her husband and son were buried in the far remote Eastern Cape. Even though her husband had died almost ten years ago, her father-in-law was still in control.

Traditional obligations and culture define leadership in terms of gender, that is, men are born leaders. From the women’s stories, both men and women share this belief. Although women do not necessarily verbalize this belief, their actions tell more stories than their words. From the six women’s transcripts, men’s blatant arrogance is evident while women act in silent resistance. Moreover, even children grow up knowing that school principals should be men. For example whenever Rain entered various classrooms, children would say, “Good morning/afternoon Sir,” because they did not have a concept of a female school principal. Even outside visitors would come in the office and ask her to call the male school principal. It took a while for these children to get used to the idea that she was the principal and that they should address her as “Mam”. Furthermore, Rain revealed the animosity experienced from other women who were expected to be in support of other woman as leaders. Rain says that in most cases, what was heard was, “She thinks she is better than us.” Instead of helping each other, women tend to be jealous and denigrate the female leader.

. . . . I have never been led by a woman and as you understand our culture, if you are a woman you are a woman”. When a boy is born in a family, a man is born!  
(Rain)

I think the stereotype went further to the extent that these men felt that “because you are a woman, then your leadership skills were questionable!” And the English teacher, the old man, kept on saying that the school will never become right because it was under “a petticoat government” (Footprints).

Traditional obligations and cultural practices put these women’s husbands in power and in control as heads of families. These powers are also directly related to the issue of lobola. On the one hand, lobola is defined as a symbol of honour, a mechanism to join two unrelated families. On the other hand, lobola is also a controlling mechanism that removes power from women. For instance, Oak Tree’s perception of lobola is negative, and she says, “Just because he paid lobola, then I have no voice. In other words, lobola buys out my voice”. Calabash’s story, however, reveals a different grammar. She reflects tensions in power as a result of the lobola’s dualist nature. In short, she accepts the domination created by this so-called symbol of honour as the expected. She says:

I’m not saying everything about our culture is or was wrong. Take for instance, lobola. It is something honourable. Lobola should be paid to the bride’s parents

because if a man wants to get a wife without paying anything, he cannot have the pride of ownership (Calabash).

Domination of women by their husbands is also seen as a cultural practice that cannot be eradicated by attainment of a scholarly education. Rain and Roots make these comments:

On the other hand, achievement of higher education has no great influence on our culture. At home we are still expected to do our chores when our husbands sit and read newspapers. We end up doing what is best to sustain a peaceful existence and in most cases we do it at our own expense. For example, I could have had the position of a principalship a long time ago. But my husband kept on saying that I don't need the problems and challenges that come with the position. I was just frustrated and I wanted to keep peace in my family, and for the benefit of my children. ... it is a problem that we educated women have in our homes. You earn more, even if you don't mention it, you already have a problem because your husband wants to remind you that your money does not make you the "man of the house!" Education has liberated us to a certain extent, but not yet fully. ... When I look at the whole picture, not only the issues in our families, but at the whole apartheid ideology, the oppressors created the whole thing. The western culture/ apartheid, or rather the white man made sure that he dominated our Black men, who in turn dominated their Black women! It is a vicious circle (Rain).

You know, when you get married the Tshivenda culture puts you down. There are things that you cannot do as a woman. For example, when you have an argument or some misunderstanding with your husband, you cannot answer or talk back. This is so difficult for me even today. I just get angry and keep quite. I'm considered a leader in my job not everywhere. Someone once said, "it is just like when you are a rubbish collector, people don't see you as one once you leave the place of your employment and get into your house. It should be the same case with you, once you leave your office and enter your husband's house; you are no longer Roots the principal. You became Roots the wife of so and so! (Roots)

In the past the traditional customary laws were not written; they were flexible and yet, difficult to interpret. Thus codifications of traditional laws were for the main purpose of oppression and discrimination against the African people in South Africa. These laws were especially for the reinforcement of migratory labour where men were given more power at the expense of women. As a result the one place where men had power was in the family.

#### Power and privileges: tensions within and across school institutions

This suggests that because schools and communities are vehicles that carry out certain ideas and beliefs, they also serve to perpetuate gender stereotypes, biases and racism. For instance, schools reward students differently as a result of skin tone/complexion, language, and ethnicity. In general when a student has dark complexion, she/he is given a

negative identity. The general stereotype is that “Black is ugly.” Often these students are subjected to derogative definitions and abuse and are treated as subhuman by their teachers, peers and communities.

Consequently schools teach students to expect different treatment as a result of these constructs. For example, in the case of the two women of the same Vhavenda ethnic group, Footprints and Roots, we note very interesting dichotomies created by their skin complexion. On the one hand, because of her dark complexion, Footprints was treated badly by her African teacher who was a choir trainer on the other hand, Roots received favours and superior treatment from her teachers, especially her white female teachers as a result of her fair and lighter complexion. Moreover, however, the two women’s stories are full of contradictions to the extent that it is unbelievable that the two women have so much in common. For example, both come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they were born in the black township of Alexander in Johannesburg, they lived with their grandparents when they were adolescents, and they also trained at the same college. Regardless of these similarities, however, their experiences of power and privileges are worlds apart as a result of the workings of schools and communities. One’s power was taken away while the other was empowered as a result of skin colour. In their own words they say:

Because I am dark she didn’t want me to stand in front. She said I should hide myself between two girls who were lighter in complexion. She told me “I just want to hear your sweet voice and not your face!” Myself identity, well... I have a very negative self-image, because of my colour and very dark complexion I think I’m not good-looking. I was told by people that I was not good-looking, in fact some said that I was ugly...and I thought I wasn’t good for anybody, as a result, I developed a very negative self-image. (Footprints)

As you can see, I have a lighter complexion than most Vhavenda people. I remember one day when I was in a queue in one of the stores in Louis Trichardt where a young white Afrikaner was in attendance. I was way far behind, but she summoned me to come to the front and served me before my turn! I didn’t understand why until later at the boarding school. I think it was because of my complexion and the fact that I could speak Afrikaans so well. As a result my white teachers used to like me a lot! I never experienced ethnic rivalry or rather discrimination because I am a Muvenda woman. May be it is because I can speak all the 11 official languages in South Africa (Roots).

Language has the ability to assign specific power and privilege to different speakers. For example, from Roots’s transcript (above), it is evident that knowledge of the Afrikaans language gave her power and certain privileges. In addition tensions created by the command of languages are evident in Footprints’s report. While she acknowledges that the other languages deprived her of the use of her native Tshivenda language, she accepts that they had given her power to have a basic command of most of the eleven official languages of South Africa. Somewhere in her transcript, she commented that she was able to get a job at the SABC radio station as a result of her command of various

languages. Mere command of a specific language meant a sure key to other opportunities. Footprints states:

...For example, in Meadowlands High we used to have Tshivenda, Sesotho, Setswana, IsiZulu, Xitsonga or Xitshangana, etc. And we could not speak our Tshivenda language in public! It was like you were a sub-human to speak another language other than the dominant Sesotho or IsiZulu. "And we were forced to know their languages". Hence I can speak Sesotho, IsiZulu and I have a good command of the other African languages that are some of the 11 official languages of South Africa (Footprints)

Educational institutions and society assign specific power and privileges to women by virtue of being leaders of their various schools and communities, but at the same time, however, remove some of their powers. If we take a look around and count the women in leadership positions in relation to women in the education system, it is shocking that the statistics show that women occupy only 20%-27% of the senior positions. The society does not expect women to be in positions of power. Furthermore, the educational institutions do not consider women for positions of power. To support this claim, there is the example of Roots who started a school under a tree and worked hard for a long time under very adverse conditions. She was removed to start at yet another school while the school buildings that she had been promised were erected and a male principal was appointed. From a number of comments below it is clear that the problem of gender inequities predominate these women's experiences. They are revealed in different angles; they interlock with a large number of other socially constructed layers that serve to dominate and oppress women. Calabash provides evidence in her comment:

I also believe that because I was a married woman, I could not get a permanent post. All married women were considered temporary teachers. First of all, I couldn't get a teaching post in Meadowlands, especially in IsiZulu schools... On top of that, gender discrimination denied me a better salary in order to support my children and extended family. For instance, in the same position, same job, same qualifications, when it comes to the salary part of it, women earned less every month, and man always had all the benefits, housing, and some rights to other privileges. I lived through gender discrimination all my life. When you want to open an account, any account, even a bank account to save your own money you have earned every month, your husband is required to countersign. In short, you need his consent to run your own financial transactions, because you are a child! Therefore, it is not a right but a privilege to own an account even if you are the accountholder. We are always supposed to be subjected to our husbands. "Always treated like children" (Calabash).

It is evident throughout these discourses that the women in this study are among the few holding leadership positions in Soweto schools in South Africa. Their female colleagues constantly reminded them that leaders are supposed to be men. In addition, male followers, the community and the society at large tried to prove that leadership is indeed defined in terms of male attributes, and as a result, these women were seen as anomalies. Schools are parallel to the bigger body, the government. In the end, however, schools mirror the working of the bigger philosophies and ideologies that govern the mind and

thinking of a nation. If women are skilful enough to cross the institutional, racial, and other social boundaries, they therefore hold great power and authority.

### Power and privilege: tensions within and across broader society

This emerges as the interplay or relationships across various social barriers. What inhibits these women's movement as school leaders, women, and mothers is revealed in the interaction of apartheid laws, political institutions, ethnicity, religious beliefs, societal expectations, media, language, and unemployment which serve as barriers to their individual and communal power. For example institutions like culture and society assign differentiated powers and privileges to male and female children. Girls are seen as inferior and as a result are given less power than boys. The women in this study demonstrated that they directly and indirectly experienced discrimination as a result of traditional and cultural expectations as they were growing up. These differentiations are ingrained to the extent that the public perception of women is very low. Oak Tree raised a very interesting point regarding femicide in South Africa. She demonstrated that the institutions remove power from the women to the extent of silencing them forever. She comments:

When a woman dies, no one is responsible, no one killed her, and it's just God's will! Look at what's happening today, just this year three incidents occurred in which a man killed his wife for one reason or another. I mean I'm talking about 1<sup>st</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> January 2000! That's scary! If the present government does not do anything about this, God knows what will happen to us (Oak Tree).

There are tensions in the power and privilege experienced by some of these women because of their religious beliefs. Christianity from one angle is seen as a power base for most women. Three of the six women indicated that they were raised in Christian families and followed the Christian religious rituals at early ages. For Little Star, Footprints and Roots, Christianity served as a pillar of strength. At another angle, however, Christianity is seen as a vehicle that removed most of African traditional powers. For instance, while Footprints has been a church elder for six years, church choir member and a highly devoted Christian, she questions the role of the church in relation to initiation schools. Oak Tree, although raised in a Christian family, does not mince words when talking about Christianity. She believes that Christianity deprived people of their origin, their identities and culture. She gives the example of her English Christian name that was forced on her. She goes on to show the relationship between religion and leadership. She sees the dichotomies created by ideologies that subject people to believe that everything can be solved by prayer while ignoring the real facts and evidence of life. In addition, it is also a known fact that children could not be enrolled in the education system if they did not have an English or Christian name. Oak Tree comments:

As I grew up, I started questioning the Christian religion in so many ways. Right now, I have an English name and could not use my Xitshangana name at all. Otherwise, my parents were going to be labelled "hedons or non-believer" if they had tried to use our Xitshangana names. ... at least all my children do not carry

English Christian names! ... I believe Christianity destroyed our roots, our origin and culture. Although I grew up being aware of the traditional rituals, I was not allowed to practise them. Those were referred to as "hedonic practices" (Oak Tree).

Apartheid policies also created social economic barriers to accessing a better quality of life. For instance, as a result of the Group Areas Act that forced Black people to live in specific townships like Soweto, Little Star and her family were compelled to live in a cramped four-roomed house for a long time even though her husband could afford a better home in a better environment. As a result they did not have power to make their own decision to choose where to live and raise their children. Power was assigned in terms of racial division where white people lived in better houses than Black people and with all the amenities basic for human existence.

Even when we had money to purchase a better house, because of segregation and the Group Areas Act, we were confined to the four-roomed .... As Black people we saw education not for it's worth, not only for enlightenment, but also as a vehicle to enable us to run away from starvation, poverty, hunger, and violence. One believes that the more one gets educated, the better one would earn more and be able to move away from the ghettos, the Black townships. Education's aim is not necessarily to uplift the Black communities, but to enable those who manage to escape, to move away from them, and leave the poorer of the poor as helpless as ever. Education reproduces poverty and starvation in the name of enlightenment (Little Star).

Apartheid laws prohibit access to basic human freedoms. For instance, the pass laws were also used as a measure to divide, rule and control. Pass laws were used as a tool to keep track of and monitor Black people's movement. Consequently, those who did not have these documents were denied access to urban areas and related work places. More importantly, however, these laws subjected Black people to living on the level of animals. From Roots's experience it is shocking to learn that Black people were subjected to raids in the wee hours of the morning, where those who were regarded as violators of the laws would be towed along as officers moved from one house to the next. In her statement, Roots reveal the inhuman nature of apartheid laws that denied them power and privileges. In her own words she states:

The apartheid laws were really cruel. One experience that sticks out in my memory is when I nearly got arrested in Diepkloof where I was visiting my husband. Back then, one was not allowed to spend a night in a different township without a permit. I was supposed to carry a permit in case I decided to put up in different township. So, in this case, it was at around 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. when the police came searching for cases of illegal residents. There I was, without a permit. I told them that I got lost and found my way to a friend's house. They gave me a warning and told me to go back home first thing in the morning. From then onwards I had to carry a temporary permit whenever I decided to visit my husband. Or else, I was going to end up behind bars. That was the time of influx control. The experience was so dehumanizing. People without permits were reduced to the level of animals. For instance, these policemen would start their

raid from one end of the street to the other, knocking at each and every house with their batons. Every person arrested was to tag along in the cold until the truck was full before being taken to the police station. In most cases these people would tag along till 6 a.m. before they were taken to the cells. Can you imagine what happened in the rain? What about those ice-cold winter Joburg mornings? That was very bad, very inhuman! (Roots)

In addition apartheid laws created unemployment which is seen as a plague to the present South African society. As a result, although the Black parents strive to advance the education of their children, they fail to do so as a result of lack of economic power. Consequently Black principals are denied the power to resources derived from the partnerships and linkages between schools and families, linkages between schools and communities. Calabash comments:

I think unemployment is one of our worst enemies destroying our society. Our schools will forever suffer lack of resources because most parents are unemployed. Take for example, this school is situated next to one of the largest informal settlements in Soweto. As a result, our demand and pleas for payment of school fees fall on deaf ears. How do you pay school fees when your kids are hungry? Where do you get the money if you are unemployed? Another supporting factor is lack of knowledge. We have a very low literacy rate. Most parents cannot read or write. When we speak of parental involvement, to some that does not mean anything. We invite parents to parents' meetings and explain some of these changes, but you are lucky if you get a 50% attendance rate (Calabash).

Although all the women in this study echoed this concern, Footprints however, provides a clear analysis from her perceptions of the new government. She argues that the new government empowered the white communities more because it made them more aware of the need to support their own schools. In view of the fact that the white communities are an advantaged group with more economic power, it stands to reason that a Black school will receive less funding or none at all from white-owned business.

The topic of ethnicity is as complex as it is important, and most interpretations of experiences by women suffer from gross oversimplification of ethnic reality. At the same time, beliefs about the role of ethnicity in South Africa affect the very nature of the problem, and must therefore be taken into account, though not accepted at face value. Ethnicity is seen as one of the major obstacles to equal access to power and privileges. Ethnicity, by its nature, functions to perpetuate the divisions created and supported by apartheid structures to distribute power and privileges differently to different ethnic groups. Throughout the stories, it is evident that most of the women were denied access to various things in their personal and professional lives as a direct result of their ethnic origins. For instance evidence from Oak Tree and Footprints emerges that show ethnic discrimination. They say that:

Our present government ignores the problem of ethnicity and concentrates on racial difference. Of course, the apartheid system regarded me as a Third Class Citizen, maybe not even a citizen but an "alien", but the main machinery was ethnic separation introduced and perpetuated by the apartheid system. Because of

your ethnicity they put you down as a human being... I believe I got the job because the then principal was a Mutshangana old man who also knew my prominent father. Otherwise I would have suffered like most women in the cities ... (Oak Tree).

Without even going further than racial differences, right now, Mandela is going from school to school in the Eastern Cape, the AmaXhosa areas, building primary schools! Just this year, about four or five new, well built schools were officially opened by various organizations on TV, with Mandela standing by and smiling, while preaching the “back to school, culture of learning and teaching sermon!” Have you ever heard of or seen any new school from Venda, let alone the Limpopo Province? Maybe that is our understanding of social justice. Justice in terms of giving one ethnic group more than the others! (Footprints)

In view of all these debates, one may think that these women are powerless in all aspects of their leadership. However the women demonstrate that even without certain powers, they do fight and get the attention that they deserve. They show that in their own way of doing things, they do achieve some element of order and power which enables them to go on with their everyday fight for socially just and equitable schools. The women in this study challenged the various dominating structures in different ways and using diverse strategies. Those who belong to the African minority groups learned the language in power to defeat the ethnic and language domination. In addition, the women devised means that were meaningful to themselves to create a peaceful existence for their families. In order to create peace, the women went to the extent of encouraging their low-esteem husbands to study to attain a scholarly education. These women fought and tried to stay afloat despite these challenges. In most cases, these women created their own unique ways of handling the challenges. Rain and Calabash make the following comments:

For instance, I planned a trip to a Civic Theatre and Art Centre in order to expose my children to the other side of education, since we do not have that in our curriculum. I sent the forms and everything. When we were due to go, I was told that the inspector had not been in the office or was too busy to sign the forms, or whatever, but he had not signed the forms yet. And the forms were sent months ago. I refused and went on with the arranged trip. I had to write a report afterwards. And I think even with my so-called soft nature, I have written a few too many reports challenging the system or the order of the day so far! You have to show me what the negative impact will be on the student, convince me, but don't order me around. I refuse to be ordered around especially when I know that what I'm doing is right (Rain).

As a leader, I see myself like a fowl, like a hen, because a hen protects her chicks. So I protect my staff against everything. You know, so much that at times I feel scared when I realize that I am putting my job at risk. Because at times I overlook some of the regulations that I see as oppressive to the staff and just pretend as if I don't see some of the things. For example, teachers are supposed to sign a logbook when they are late for school. I just call the person concerned and talk to

him or her. I don't see why we should be confined to using all these rules and regulations if they can't help change the climate in the school. As a leader, one has to create an environment of trust. People can be late for many various reasons beyond their control (Calabash).

### **Theorising power and privileges: The paradox**

We must recognize that current social systems (to include schools) endow varying degrees of power and privilege (social and political capital) to different groups of people. In the light of Collins's work (and others to include hooks, Henry, Benham, Phendla and Delpit), the work for social justice becomes complicated and messy given that the barriers, which prevent access and equity, are defined by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and language differences. Indeed the differences in power and privilege constrain the ability of Black women school leaders to connect with and engage in dialogue and action across differences.

Racism is still a very powerful phenomenon in our contemporary times. From these stories, racism is so obvious and yet so invisible. For instance Oak Tree's comment:

I'm seen as a Matshangana woman first before I become a person. My being a school principal of a very successful school is secondary to my ethnicity. Our present government ignores this problem and concentrates on racial difference. You may not have thought about this, but race does not play a big role in our daily lives in our schools. I mean, we do not have white schools in Soweto, we do not interact with white people on a constant basis and I do not witness racial oppression in my every-day existence except based on ethnicity (Oak Tree)

It is clear from this comment that Oak Tree is looking at ethnicity as an independent variable from racism. Oak Tree is looking at the effects without looking at the causes. From her transcripts, she reveals that she was expected to take on a lower status teaching career and by acknowledging that she grew up in Gazankulu, a homeland or rather Bantustans assigned for the Matshangana people, is to acknowledge racism since the Homeland Act was one of the products of the racist apartheid government. By acknowledging that she was compelled to further her scholarly education while being a mother, wife and teacher is to acknowledge that Bantu education, which was designed to perpetuate the racist government, was based on race. Oak Tree's present school was built in an area assigned for the Matshangana group and moreover, the school's buildings look exactly the same as most schools in Soweto. The dilapidated building lacks basic facilities like sports fields, laboratories, administration building and so forth. These and other inequalities were created and founded on racial differences. So, what is Oak Tree's understanding of race and ethnicity?

The majority of these women do not want to verbalize their oppression, segregation and domination in terms of race. They choose to look at this in lighter tone. For instance Calabash sees the lack of support and involvement of her parent community in the running of the school as a result of unemployment. She comments, "I think unemployment is one of our worst enemies destroying our society. Our schools will

forever suffer lack of resources because most parents are unemployed.” This unemployment in the real sense boils down to the effects of the former racist government where people were given limited education to produce semiskilled labour in order to serve the white racist government by reducing the intellectual capacity to challenge it.

From their conversations racism is reflected, portrayed and revealed in different forms which are too subtle to see or understand. With the exception of Rain, who grew up with the awareness of racial inequalities as a result of her socialization and, taking into account that her father was a political activist, all the other women fail to see the bigger part of the iceberg that is submerged deep down in the sea, - the bigger part of the race dialogue. Rain seems to be the only one who really perceives the lack of power and privileges as a direct product and outcome of the socially contracted racial phenomenon. She comments:

Moreover, apartheid laws have really messed us up. I was born here in South Africa, while my brother was born in Lesotho. But he was registered as a South African and I could not get the so-called “dompas”, the identity document. And to think I had a birth certificate that proved that I was a full South African, it is just amazing how the system worked. I was very efficient! I think that strengthened me because as I told you before, I wanted to do something and I want to show this country that I can be something. I went on without an identity document for a very long time. Sometime as young lady, the white officials would even try to ask for sexual favours in return of the “dompas” I just told myself that the time will come. But at the end, after obtaining my B.A. it took only two hours to get it! Amazingly, it took my young Afrikaner white female friend two hours to get me an ID that I could not get in 10 years. So, I was 25 years when I got my very first dompas. You can only imagine what that meant. Colour or rather race is everything (Rain).

These women talk about apartheid laws, apartheid education and apartheid this and that without making connections between apartheid and race, without conceiving the constructs as interlocking systems created by the racial apartheid laws. After these deliberations what comes to mind are the questions: What is the definition of ethnicity? And what is our understanding of race? Why is racism so obvious and yet so invisible? Horowitz (1991) sees ethnicity as a purely divisive and negative phenomenon, which needs to be balanced by recognition of the positive dimension in the intellectual, political and academic levels that will transcend to education. Horowitz (1991) maintains that South African society is not difficult to classify because of the following:

It is characterized, above all by what is appropriately called *ascriptive ranking*. There are superordinates and subordinates, largely defined by birth criteria. To be sure, within the ranks of each stratum, there are also cleavages that divide, in some variables measure, Afrikaans speakers from English speakers, Zulu from Xhosa and Tswana, and so on. But the overall design of the society is predicated on racial hierarchy, and the significance of those alternative cleavages is, at least temporarily, suppressed (p. 35).

Lopez (1994) provides a simple and yet comprehensive definition of race. He believes that,

Races are categories of difference which exist only in society: they are produced by myriad conflicting social forces; they overlap and inform other social categories; they are fluid rather than static and fixed; and they make sense only in relationship to other racial categories, having no meaningful independent existence. Races are thus not biological groupings, but social constructions (Lopez, 1994, p. 200).

These women are discriminated against in terms of race, class, gender, language, and ethnicity, and subjected to cultural obligations, etc. Yet, even as the most oppressed, they fail to see the connections between race and the other social constructs when functioning independently. There is overwhelming evidence of inequalities indicated by these women as a result of language, culture, traditional obligations, and also as a result of the position and role African women play in the South African cultures.

It is rather difficult to define the term “culture” in such a way that it embraces every meaning derived from different life experiences. Culture is a social construct and should be perceived as such. Therefore different people will give the term different meanings as a result of their different historical life experiences. We tend to look at culture as if it was cemented through time. Culture, as a tradition, impacted on who these women are as school principals today. It may be that African traditional norms are misunderstood; in their essence, they are not meant to discriminate against nor oppress women. As is obvious from the stories provided in this study it is clear that women have mixed feelings about their roles and positions in the customary stratification. While they believe that men dominate and oppress them in various forms, they also agree that men have the right to do so.

In general these women see gender discrimination as a direct result of organizational behaviours. Moreover these women perceive gender discrimination in terms of institutional oppression created by the workings of apartheid. For example factors such as salary, benefits, and access to employment for married women were purposefully separated from mainstream gender discrimination and were seen as the product of apartheid rather than as a social construct created by and supported by men. According to these stories, men’s role in the domination of women was considered as customary obligation and was not necessarily seen as a role created with the approval of African men themselves.

While composition of traditional customary laws remains a contentious issue in South Africa, the claim that colonialist rules perpetuated the domination of African women seems to provide more impetus to this debate. To be more precise, in the light of the apartheid rules of separate development that created Bantustans while destroying the leadership of African chiefs, the end result was that women suffered more in the long run. After destroying the real traditional laws, the colonialists recreated new ‘customary laws’ with other specifications, to support the legislated separate development. For example we

note this, if we look at the definition of customary law as defined in the Law of Evidence Act of 1988, “ the Black law or customs as applied by the Black tribes in the Republic or territories which were formerly part of the Republic” (Hoffman & Zeffertt, 1988 cited in Wing and Carvalho, 1994, p. 389). This law defines women as perpetual minors and lifelong wards of their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons.

Under the customary law, women cannot engage in contractual agreements, acquire property, inherit or marry without the permission of a guardian, who is usually a male relative. Under this law, a woman’s assets became the sole property of her husband after marriage. For instance, Oak Tree indicated that whilst she was the sole breadwinner, providing food, education, and everything for her children and sick husband, society was still giving the credit to her husband who was not contributing anything at all. “When I purchased my new car, people said that her husband had bought her a nice car” (Oak Tree). Women are denied ownership and do not have rights to property. Moreover, women needed their husbands’ permission to work. To support this statement, from the women’s stories, it is evident that the women’s husbands expected to have the upper hand and control. Rain revealed that she had to waive many opportunities of leadership before accepting her current position. In other words, she needed her husband’s permission to become a school principal.

Apartheid laws denied women basic power and privileges in various ways. First, Wing and Carvalho (1998) state that women were not allowed to enter the cities and urban areas without permits. Pass laws legally kept Black women out of urban areas and denied them access to the skills and opportunities that they needed to become participants in an organized labour force. Jobs traditionally held by Black women during apartheid were not protected by fair labour standards in terms of minimum wages, maximum hours, maternity benefits, paid sick leave, disability insurance and other basic employment benefits. From the women’s transcripts, overwhelming evidence emerges about their professional experience which included subjection to unequal treatment by the educational institutions – women were paid less than men and did not enjoy benefits like housing subsidies, medical schemes, maternity leave and others.

I highlight these considerations, not because I think that they need to be interpreted exhaustively, but to provide some insight into the multiple grounding from which our fragile identity as Black women emerged. Moreover, I provide these debates to show how the grand apartheid plan, like “Luselo” as illustrated on page 27, made provision for the machinery to perpetuate and support itself in a vicious continuing cycle. On the one hand, the debates show how these women navigated through the interlocking systems of oppression, how they tried to untie the Gordian knot. On the other hand, like the cutting edges of the knives, these women are holding on and fighting back with all their might to create better environments for their children.

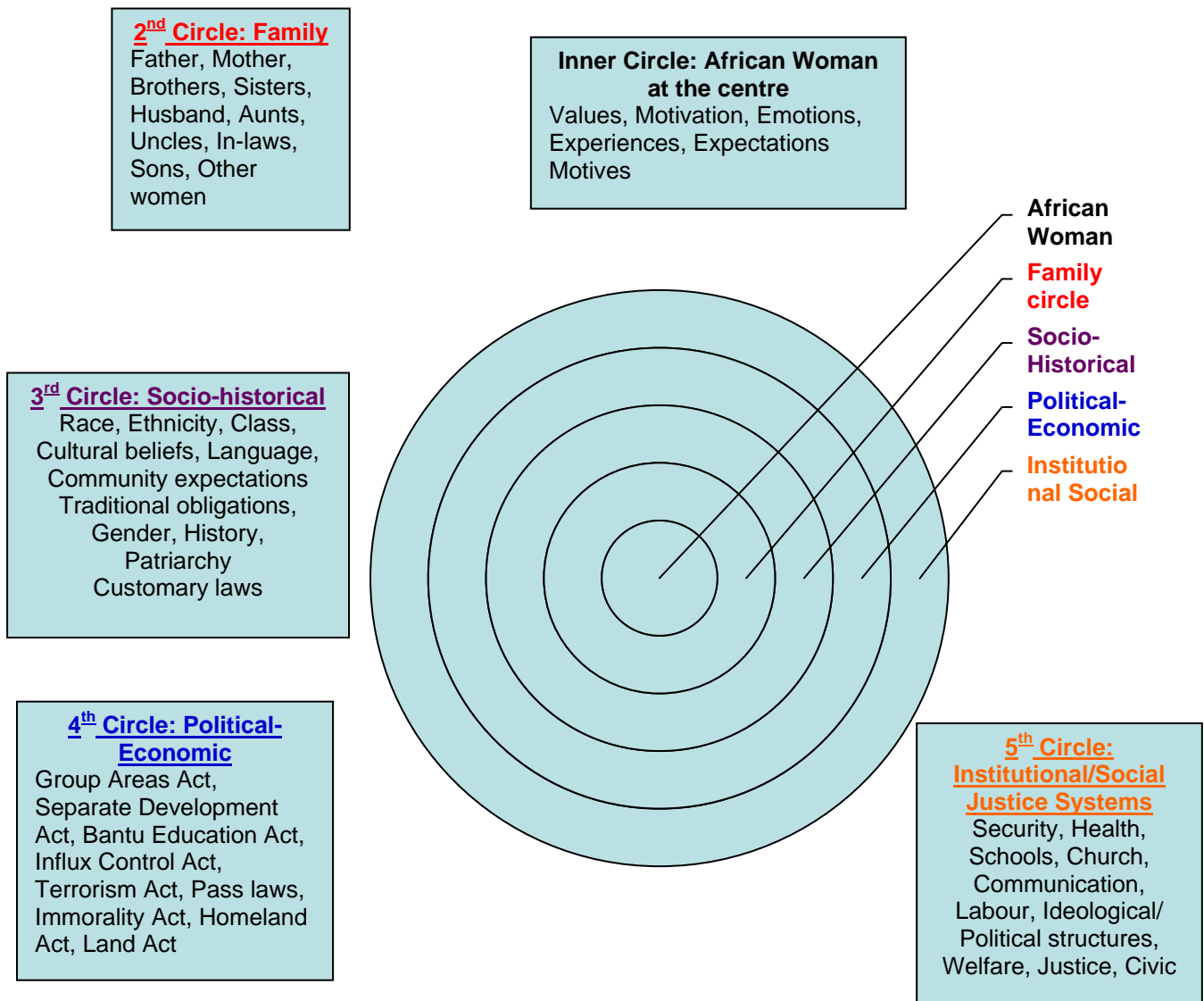
## **Paradox of Luselo-Lufhanga Metaphors: Beginning work on African feminist thoughts**

Linguists and cultural anthropologists have used metaphorical analysis to better understand some of the more implicit meanings, beliefs and values of cultural groups. Johnson (1987) identifies metaphor as an essential structure of human understanding by means of which we symbolically comprehend our world. Metaphors are based in shared knowledge, experience and conventional social usage. They express specific values, norms, standards and collective identities (Phendla, 2004b). In essence, they reveal knowledge that is taken for granted and they often relate to profound meanings that a cultural group understands.

The above findings provide the basis for the metaphor "Luselo". Luselo is a Tshivenda name which describes an interwoven African tray. African trays are woven with the aim to carry heavy objects. For the tray to sustain longevity, the weaver needs to make sure that she uses strong twine, which, while pliable, should provide resilience at the same time. Luselo is about the intricacy of the layers, the intertwined threads, interwoven and minute stitches. If one stitch becomes loose, the rest remain intact and in place to sustain the tray for a very long time. Consequently, Black women's life can be likened to the African tray, "Luselo" (See diagram on page 27).

Lufhanga means knife in the Tshivenda language. I took the word from the African metaphor, "Musadzi u fara Lufhanga nga hu fhiraho" which translated means "the woman holds the sharp edges of the knife". This is a metaphor which is common among the nine African ethnic groups of South Africa. In simple words, a woman has to face the trials and tribulations, life's hardship without complaining. Whilst the metaphor projects a negative connotation, it can be understood as a symbol of struggle, resistance, obdurance, and strength (Phendla, 2004a). In addition, it may be seen as a symbol of hope, faith, courage, and words of wisdom.

These metaphors underscore how I perceive and understand Black women in general and Black South African women in particular. As a Black South African woman who lived and worked through the apartheid era as I do now in the post-apartheid times, I derive meaning both from my personal and professional experiences and the literature and findings provided in this study. Various scholars suggest that the form of our understanding depends upon the genre in which our experiences are created. Thus, the South African discourse may fail the Western mainstream feminist yardstick which uses the or/and view of race and gender rather than the and/both view. Black women's lives can only be understood through the interlocking categories of various constructs including race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, culture, and traditional norms. These interlocking systems can be presented as a model; like the African tray, they work to create a circle and matrix of domination (See diagram on page 27).



**A Conceptual Model: Luselo metaphor - Matrix of oppression**

**Matrix of oppression: Socially constructed oppressive systems**

These circles, layers and systems are created over time to work and systemically dominate women.

**Inner Circle - Black woman:** This is an area in which young girls, as human beings, have a choice, dreams dreams, have hopes and visions. They are governed by emotions, motives and values. She has experiences and expectations of social mobility. They desire to do well, to hold powerful positions and reach self-actualised existence. This is where

all the dreams end, and she wakes up to the realities created by various social constructs created over time.

**Second Circle - Family Systems:** Women are dominated by their fathers, who determine and control the brides' price, by their brothers and sons who have the right to inheritance and succession, by their husbands who control their movements – the right to work, right to own a bank account, they are controlled by their mothers and in-laws who remind them to be a good wife is to be subservient and obey your husband, they are dominated by other women in the society who do not want to see them in better positions, who do not support and give them the opportunity to prove their worth.

**Third Circle - Socio-Historical Systems:** Race and gender - Blacks experience multiple oppression, they are neither Blacks nor women first since both these constructs work simultaneously to reduce women to subservient levels; history serves to perpetuate and maintain the vicious cycles of domination; language plays a vital role in that a woman takes on the ethnic identity of her husband when she gets married, she loses her mother-tongue, her children adopt her husband's name, culture and customary laws; education (formal and informal schools) perpetuate the power difference, where the woman is taught from childhood that a man is the ultimate power in the house; he is the head of the family regardless of the financial contribution to the household or the amount of money he brings to the house; he makes all the important decisions; traditional expectations bind women to respect their heritage; religion perpetuates the belief that power rests in the man's hand (so says the Bible!); culture is used to reinforce and maintain the power structure and inequalities which were created by the society; class continues to create poverty circles when a majority of women are unemployed, illiterate and hold service-oriented careers/positions; ethnicity seeks to separate people and provides different levels of power to different ethnic groups in South Africa; society continues to determine what women can or cannot do and reinforce the stereotypes and generalisation that women cannot lead as effectively as men.

**Fourth Circle - Political -Economical (Apartheid) Systems:** These oppressive systems were created by the apartheid regime in order to meet its ideology of separateness. Separate development policies created different strategies to maintain and perpetuate domination where one race group received all the social benefits at the expense of the other races, women as caregivers suffered more than men; pass laws and influx control prevented women from the right to work, live in the townships, and movements, Black women were banished from the cities and were expected to remain in the poverty-stricken rural areas without access to health amenities, running water, education and other social benefits; Group Areas Act worked to separate people in terms of race and ethnic group (and it continues to do so in the new democratic South Africa, given that the statistics show that out of 30 cabinet ministers 12 are Xhosa-speaking, and of the 18 deputy ministers, 7 are Xhosa-speaking as well); this represents a rather disturbing ratio given that the Xhosa population at most is 20% of the entire population in RSA but represents at least 40% in the government leadership; the terrorism act restricted people, put fear in all the activities in its effort to rule and govern the apartheid regime with coercive measures; the immorality act declared and prevented interracial relationship

where intermarriages were illegal; women in particular were denied the right to husbands of their choice (the status quo is still the same in the RSA where of the few Black people who dared to date out of their racial lines, the most were men); the land act continues to keep women in poverty circles as a result of the apartheid laws that denied women to have the right to ownership of land; without land women continue to be marginalised, unable to create their own employment and remain in poverty; the Bantu Education Act provided inferior education which ill prepared Black people in general and Black women in particular since they were denied access to secondary education and where access was given, they were subjected to service-oriented careers; the homeland act forced women to remain in the barren homelands, where people are separated and divided in terms of their ethnic origins and at the same time, power was allotted to different ethnic groups especially in the major cities in terms of these divisions.

**Fifth Circle - Institutional-Social Justice Systems:** These systems are created to protect the groups in power, all measures are taken to maintain the status quo, pass laws, terrorist acts and other judiciary laws were used to sustain and maintain the government of the day; health systems in democratic existence are basic rights where proper health care is provided, as a result, in the RSA, Black women were denied this right and they continue to suffer the consequences of the previous regime; judiciary systems were supposed to protect and uphold human rights, but not in the then RSA; schools and education systems were used as vehicles to perpetuate segregation, maintain divisive laws, create subservient workers with inferior intellectual capacity; communications systems and the media were used to push forward the agenda on the apartheid government, where issues of separate development could not be addressed in public, as a vehicle of the apartheid philosophy, these served the interests of the few in power; welfare systems were not adequate, and women were bearers of the heavy load suffered more and continue to do so under the new government; labour systems were measures to ensure that adequate manpower would continue to be available to serve the interests of the few; today women continue to be unemployed with lower literacy rates, endure poverty and poor health; church and religious groups continue to marginalise women, where women are perpetually subjected to discrimination in terms of leadership positions in the church, where men continue to use the Bible to justify their oppressive behaviours.

“Luselo metaphor” as matrix of oppression provides a powerful reflection of Black women whose lives are socially constructed, whose lives encounter enormous challenges, women who strive under the multilayered and multiplied burdens of oppression. While these defeating metaphors work to suppress and dominate women, they also provide pauses, women can choose to strive and fight back through their silent resistance. They can use the “Lufhanga metaphor” to liberate themselves; they derive hope from the hopelessness and through the creation of a socially just environment. Through their caring nature they create environments of hope, and succeed in linking families, schools and communities of underserved children and youth in South Africa. Holding leadership roles in the lives of these Black women can be likened to holding the sharp edges of knives, where women are cut without mercy. As a result, women have to learn strategies on how to hold these knives without being cut, how to navigate tensions within and across the personal, school institutions and the broader society (Phendla, 2000). Black

women school leaders are compelled to learn how to navigate across tensions created by culture, language, and customary laws.

What gives me pause is not the women being cut by the sharp blades, but how the woman learns to handle the knife in such a way that she cuts back. A woman being cut by blades is an action of defeat. If she succumbs and gives up, she dies a passive victim. But that passive death sadly misrepresents both the real nature of women in the world at large, and the real dangers that death might warn of. In the real world, women resist oppression, although at times in silence, but they do have a choice to resist. It is in this choice and resistance that encourage me to learn more. On the informal and unofficial level, my identity was created through metaphoric language rooted in my experiences and upbringing.

Consequently, this work is a piece of developmental research on the metaphorical relationship between two fields written by someone who is a participant and observer in both fields. Because I have spent time learning about, and being involved in both endeavours, I can write as someone who has not only knowledge of, but a "feel" for what it is to manage and to do weaving. However, because I am still a neophyte researcher, and because my career has been more in teaching and management than actually doing research, I also bring a certain sense of detachment to this study. I am both an insider and an outsider, a stance that is sometimes considered ideal for a qualitative researcher (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

### **Summary Statement**

Social science argues that every society prepares its youth to take part in the political, economic, social and cultural responsibilities of adult society through formal and informal processes of socialization which is its "educational system" (Keto, 1990, p. 25). Given this, the Bantu education system, as a product of the racial apartheid ideology in South Africa, can be seen to have served to perpetuate the ideals of separate development by providing inferior education in order to develop specific and appropriate behaviour patterns to limit knowledge and produce a semiskilled workforce on the level of "hewers of wood and drawers of water."

Indeed, the women in this study proved beyond doubt that theirs was a struggle from oppression, domination and isolation as a result of the interlocking of the various socially constructed layers that served to silence them. Throughout the women's personal and professional reflections, we see how they uplift and liberate themselves - and others, through the attainment of a scholarly education. Their histories demonstrate that "the oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves" (Freire, 1997, p. 33).

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