Problems experienced by women re-entering the education profession: a South African case study

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The problems experienced by women re-entering the education profession in South Africa were focused on. A review of the literature revealed that problems are experienced at five different levels: within the women themselves, in their work situation, at management level, within their career, and within society. These observations were tested empirically by means of a structured questionnaire. The results indicated that the most significant problems were experienced by women educators at three levels: within themselves, within their career, and within society. Problems at management level were not widely experienced by female educators. On the basis of these findings, it is recommended that increases in maternity benefits, as well as the introduction of paternity and childcare leave, should be introduced to assist women educators to combine work and family responsibilities more successfully. Good childcare facilities are also essential for allowing re-entering women to combine family and workplace responsibilities. More promotion opportunities should also be provided for women who aspire to educational management positions.

Introduction

The re-entry of women educators into the teaching profession has been a topic of concern to educators and counsellors since the late 1960s (Padula, 1994:10). It has been noted that women's return or re-entry into the work force has been becoming more complex as a result of the multiple problems that re-entering women encounter after a period of absence.

Background of the research problem

One of the major areas of neglect in research in South Africa has been the phenomenon of women re-entering the education profession. Only one study (Lemmer, 1990) could be identified in South Africa as concentrating on the re-entry of women into the labour market and on the implications for educational provision. However, a fair amount of research abroad has focused on the re-entry of women into the work force, specifically into the education profession. (*cf.* Green, 1992; Korving, 1991; Maskel, 1997 for research in Great Britain). Green (1992: 24), for example, found that women who had been away for some time could be faced with enormous change when they re-entered the education profession, yet there was little support and advice available to them to facilitate their re-entry.

Substantial research concerning the re-entry of women into the work force has been done in the United States (Dyer *et al.*, 1991; Fagan & Williams, 1991; Moen, 1992; Padula, 1994). Fagan and Williams (1991:42), for instance, reported that the population of re-entry women was diverse and heterogeneous: they varied in age, marital status, and socioeconomic background. Today's women re-entering a profession could also be described as having multiple roles and responsibilities as family members, parents, community members, workers and students. Studies in the USA also concentrated on women's return to school following marriage and motherhood (Bradburn, 1995; Fagan & Williams, 1991). For these women, as well as for women who were considering returning to higher education, different forms of counselling were available (Flynn *et al.*, 1989; University of Washington, 1999). Unfortunately, the above studies from the USA concentrated on anecdotal information rather than on empirical research designs (Padula, 1994:14).

An overview of the literature revealed that the problems experienced by women re-entering the education profession were:
- within themselves

The problems within persons (the re-entering women) are generally perceived as deficiencies or inadequacies (Greyvenstein, 2000:33). Role conflict, stress, work satisfaction, guilt and loss of self-confidence can be seen as other problems within persons (Dyer *et al.*, 1991; Murray, 1994; Padula, 1994; Redelinghuys *et al.*, 1999; Van der Linde *et al.*, 1999; Van der Westhuizen & Du Toit, 1994; Van Deventer & Van der Westhuizen, 2000).

- in the work situation

The absence of in-service training opportunities is a problem experienced by persons (i.e. re-entering women) in the work situation. Re-entering women need to catch up on skills, knowledge and experience (Bird, 1999; Fagan & Williams, 1991; Geber, 1999; Herkelman *et al.*, 1993; House of Commons, 1998). Furthermore, the loss of meaningfulness and interest in the work, as well as the lack of interpersonal relationships in a work situation, can cause problems (Van der Westhuizen, 1999). For example, routine work can lead to frustration, boredom, lack of motivation and to dissatisfaction in the work situation.

- at management level

Conscious or subconscious discriminatory practices on the part of employers, exacerbated by the absence of legislation and the relevant policies (Brine, 2000; Nyman, 1997:6) can lead to problems being experienced at management level. Many employers hold negative and stereotyped beliefs about women — for example, that married women or women with children are less committed to their work and their organisations (Herkelman *et al.*, 1993:133). Furthermore, a woman may see her career as supplementary (and therefore secondary) to her primary role in the family (Greyvenstein, 2000:32). Discrimination with regard to age is also seen as a significant problem (Lemmer, 1990: 108).

- within the career

Insufficient remuneration and the lack of prospects of promotion are problems experienced within the career (Waldfogel, 1998). Interruption of work often leads to decreases in remuneration and impacts on the prospect of promotion (Dex *et al.*, 1998).

- within society

The values of a society may be viewed as problematic if a person's values (i.e. those of a re-entering woman) differ from those of society (Van der Westhuizen, 1999). The shortage of workplace nurseries and after-school and holiday play schemes are also problems located within society (Wilson, 1997).

The literature review also revealed that there may be substantial differences in the nature of the problems experienced by returning women in the different life stages. For example, women who re-enter the education profession during early adulthood are likely to be subjected to considerable role stress as a result of conflict between family and work (Redelinghuys *et al.*, 1999). However, women who re-enter the education profession during mid-life are more likely to experience problems centred on choices about careers than on issues such as marriage or children.

Problem statement and aim of the study

The aim of this South African case study was to determine problems experienced by women re-entering the education profession. From an

overview of literature it was revealed that such problems are situated at five different levels: within themselves, in their work situation, at management level, within their career, and within society. These findings and the extent to which re-entering women experience these problems at different life stages were subsequently empirically tested by means of a structured questionnaire.

The empirical research design
In order to test the validity of the observations in the literature, an empirical study was designed for a South African case study. It was hoped that the empirical survey would not only contribute to our current sketchy knowledge about the problems confronting women educators who re-enter the teaching profession, but also contribute towards the alleviation of such problems in practice. The research design was as follows:

The questionnaire
A structured questionnaire, based on the theory expounded in the literature, consisted of six Sections, A to F, and comprised 44 question items, as follows:
A: items relating to general or biographical data
B: questions relating to problems within women re-entering the teaching profession
C: items relating to problems within the work situation
D: questions relating to problems at management level
E: items relating to problems within the career
F: questions relating to problems within society
    A Likert-type four-point scale was used to ascertain the frequency with which the re-entry problems were encountered by women educators.
    A pilot study was carried out before the questionnaire was finalised to ensure that the questions (items) were clearly and unambiguously formulated and easy to understand. Some of the questions needed slight rephrasing. The respondents in the pilot study did not form part of the final population.

Population and sampling
The population was made up of all the women educators attached to secondary schools in four districts in the North West province of South Africa. A total of 169 schools were in the four districts. All the women teachers (n ≈ 110) in these schools who re-entered the education profession after a period of absence (at least one month) formed the study population. The study population was stratified into four groups (less than a year of absence, 1–3 years of absence, 4–10 years of absence, and more than 10 years of absence).

Statistical techniques
The data were processed by means of the SAS computer programme (SAS Institute, 1996). Descriptive statistics were produced by means of the FREQ and the MEANS procedures of SAS (SAS Institute, 1996).
    As already mentioned, there can be substantial differences in the nature of the problems experienced by returning women educators in the different life stages. The Kruskal-Wallis test was therefore done to determine whether the different age groups differed significantly on the same variable. To determine where the difference lay (i.e. which pairs of groups were significantly different) a *post hoc* procedure was performed. Kruskal-Wallis rank statistics were computed to examine all pairwise group comparisons to determine which pairs of groups were significantly different.

Results
Profile of the sample group
The data obtained from the empirical survey revealed that the typical re-entering woman educator to a secondary school in the North West province was in the range between 22 and 39 years of age. In other words, these women educators exited and returned to the education

profession between the ages of 22 and 39 years. The data also showed that these women educators took career breaks of less than a year.

Problems experienced by women re-entering the education profession
The highest and lowest priority rankings of re-entry problems were determined. The extent to which the respondents experienced a particular item as a problem was determined, also to what degree this information corresponded with the observances reported in literature. The findings were arranged in sequence from *largely* to *fairly* (Table 1) and *slightly* to *none* (Table 2). The mean scores are given out of four (4) because of the four-point scale used. The cut-off point for problems with a high priority was 3.0 and 2.0 for problems with a low priority.
    Table 1 shows that the following problems regarding re-entry are viewed by women educators as problems with a high priority. These findings confirm conclusions drawn from the relevant literature:

•   *Role conflict*
Item B6: Homemaking and the presence of children may cause women to defer the serious pursuit of a career while their children are young (mean = 3.2)
    Women educators experience role conflict as a significant re-entry problem. This is in line with literature. Today's woman has multiple roles and responsibilities as a family member, parent, community member and worker. Consequently, women are forced to adopt various strategies for coping with home and work, such as limiting her career aspirations and postponing attempts to gain promotion while her children are young.
Item B13: Women often grapple with feelings of anxiety and guilt as a result of spending time away from children (mean = 3.2)
    Returning women educators ranked anxiety and guilt as a problem. This is confirmed by literature where it is reported that re-entering women feel guilty about leaving children in day-care centres or in another person's home when they return to work. Consequently, these feelings of anxiety and guilt may lead to feelings of self-denial, and to other psychological and physical problems.
Item B7: Women experience stress as a result of the demands of family life and career (mean = 3.0)
    Experiencing considerable stress as a result of the demands of family life and career is regarded as a serious problem. This is a confirmation of literature about career women and their experience of stress. It is likely that women who try to meet the demands of multiple roles (wife, mother, worker) are those most at risk as far as stress is concerned. Re-entering women perceive the transmission of stress between work and home as particularly problematic

•   *Promotion*
Item E35: Women who achieve promotion to managerial positions in a country such as South Africa are still a minority, especially in the area of educational management (mean = 3.0)
    The fact that women who achieve promotion to educational managerial positions in South Africa are still in the minority was confirmed. Differential treatment concerning promotion often occurs during the hiring process when selection by employers takes place according to stereotyped gender role criteria. One of the major stereotypes is that married women in particular, or women with children, are less committed to their work and their organisations. Furthermore, women's income is seen as supplementary to the male breadwinner's income, therefore the career is seen as supplementary to women's primary role in the family.

•   *Care for sick children*
Item F42: Many women find it difficult to arrange care for sick children (mean = 3.0)
    Difficulty in arranging care for sick children is a problem for re-entering women and may be due to the fact that the needs associated

Table 1 Re-entry problems experienced largely to fairly

No.	Women educators	Mean score	Correlation with literature
B6	Homemaking and the presence of children may cause women to defer the serious pursuit of a career while their children are young	3.2	Yes
B13	Women often shoulder anxiety and guilt as a result of spending time away from their children	3.2	Yes
B7	Women experience stress as a result of the demands of family life and career	3.0	Yes
E35	Women who achieve promotion to managerial positions in a country such as South Africa are still a minority, especially in the area of educational management	3.0	Yes
F42	Many women find it difficult to arrange care for sick children	3.0	Yes
B10	Women experience a lack of work satisfaction if their need to achieve is not being satisfied	2.9	Yes
B12	Work-family role conflict might disproportionately affect mothers' work satisfaction	2.8	Yes
C24	A lack of hints and positive replies from superiors can influence work satisfaction negatively	2.8	Yes
B8	Women experience stress as a result of change in the work situation	2.7	Yes
B9	Women experience a lack of work satisfaction if their need to be appreciated is not being satisfied	2.7	Yes
B16	Women undergo a loss of self-confidence during a career break as they may question their own competence, compare themselves unfavourably with their peers and be discouraged by how far behind they are	2.7	Yes
C23	Routine work leads to frustration and to dissatisfaction in the work situation	2.7	Yes
E34	Withdrawal and re-entry to the work force can have a negative effect on remuneration, as returning women do not build up seniority or receive on-the-job-training, which in themselves, often lead to higher remuneration	2.7	Yes
F43	Career women are subject to traditional patriarchal stereotyped views of gender roles held by society, e.g. that family and home are women's primary responsibility	2.7	Yes
B1	Women have to cope with conflict between the traditional role of wife and mother and the career role	2.6	Yes
B4	Women spend more time on household tasks than their spouses	2.6	Yes
B11	Women experience a lack of work satisfaction if their need to be an authority figure is not being satisfied	2.6	Yes
E37	A career break has a detrimental effect on promotion prospects for women returning to the work force after a period of absence and in particular for women with children	2.6	Yes
F40	The high cost of children is a serious obstacle	2.6	Yes
F41	The provision of state-provided childcare is limited	2.6	Yes

with schooling can be met but that no childcare provision is available outside the school environment. Consequently, this may impede re-entry because before a woman with children can re-enter employment, she must make adequate provision for the care and supervision of her children.

Table 2 shows that the women educators in this case study experienced re-entry problems differently from the perceptions described in the literature study:

• *Role conflict*
Item B2: Women may have other roles such as the role of family caregiver for elderly, sick or disabled relatives who live either in their home or nearby (mean = 1.9)

Although this is seen as a significant re-entry problem, it is interesting to note that women educators in the study did not indicate it as a problem. It seems as if husbands support their wives, physically and psychologically, to such an extent that most role conflict can be avoided. Furthermore, working women perceived their multiple roles as an acceptable and normal way of life for women of the 1990s.

• *Retraining programmes*
Item C21: Many women have the need for a system of support and professional retraining programmes after a career break (mean = 2.5)

It appears that the need for in-service training courses and/or retraining programmes is not experienced as a serious problem. This indicates a change in the perceptions of women regarding retraining programmes as the literature indicates that a system of support and professional retraining for re-entry women is apparent and extremely beneficial.

• *The age of the women*
Item D28: The age of the women returning to the work force after a

period of absence seems to play a significant role in discrimination by employers (mean = 1.80)

Age seems to be of no significance for re-entering the profession. This is contrary to the literature stating that discrimination with regard to age is seen as a significant problem. The literature suggests that women who re-enter during their forties or fifties, regardless of qualifications, face age discrimination.

Differences in the nature of the problems experienced by returning women educators in the different life stages

There are substantial differences in the nature of the problems experienced by returning women educators in the different life stages (Table 3). A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to determine whether the median of the different age groups differed significantly on the same variable. A value of less than 0.5 for p will indicate a significant difference and therefore a difference between the groups. The Kruskal-Wallis rank statistics test (Miller, 1980:165-168) was performed to examine all pairwise group comparisons to determine which pairs of groups were significantly different. Where a significant difference (p) between pairs of groups was found the effect size (d) was calculated to determine the practical significance of these differences. In this study, the interpretation of effect size was done on the basis of the following guidelines (Steyn, 1999:3, 5):

• $d = 0.2$: small effect. If this effect is obtained in new research, a study should be repeated to ensure that there is an effect. In other cases, such a result will be considered as not significant.
• $d = 0.5$: medium effect. This effect is perceptible and may be of practical significance. A better-planned study may present more significant results.
• $d = 0.8$: large effect. The results are of practical importance.

Table 3 shows that there were substantial differences in the nature of the problems experienced by returning women educators in the dif-

Table 2 Re-entry problems experienced not at all or slightly

No.	Women educators	Mean score	Correlation with literature
C18	In-service training courses are sometimes attended by women only to grow in certain areas of their careers and not because they are interested in the courses	2.5	No
C19	Management teams in organisations are responsible for creating opportunities for in-service training and this is not always effectively done	2.5	No
C20	Improved knowledge and technology cause returning women's qualifications and past experience to be outdated and inadequate for functioning in today's work situation	2.5	No
C21	Many women have a need for a system of support and professional retraining programmes after a career break	2.5	No
F38	A shortage of work-place nurseries exits	2.5	No
B3	Society views women's traditional and primary allegiance to be the family role	2.4	No
B5	Women assume greater responsibility for the care and well-being of children than their spouses	2.4	No
B17	Women returning to the work force after a career break no longer identify with the professional role for which their education and training prepared them	2.4	No
D32	The absence of legislation and work policies that consider the particular needs of women returning to the work force are a problem	2.4	No
F39	The provision of childcare facilities, such as after-school and holiday play-schemes is limited	2.4	No
B14	Women often experience low self-confidence as a barrier in their career development	2.3	No
B15	Low self-confidence is reinforced by society and organisations which provide no opportunities for women to develop self-confidence	2.3	No
C22	Many women have to provide retraining for themselves and often at their own expense	2.3	No
C25	Few opportunities for interaction with colleagues may lead to feelings of isolation among workers	2.3	No
D30	There is a lack of flexible, more innovative organisational policies dealing with maternity, such as an increase in the maximum period of maternity leave of four months and provisions for greater flexibility in the taking of maternity leave	2.3	No
E36	A reason for the lack of promotion opportunities may be that few women apply for promotion posts	2.3	No
F44	Career women often lack support in the form of emotional support from family members	2.3	No
D29	Legislation and work policies fail to promote equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through equal remuneration and promotion opportunities for women	2.1	No
E33	Gender discrimination occurs in remuneration despite legislation and work policies	2.1	No
B2	Women may have other roles such as the role of family caregiver for elderly, sick or disabled relatives who live either in their home or nearby	1.9	No
D28	The age of women returning to the work force after a period of absence seems to play a significant role in discrimination by employers	1.8	No

Table 3 Kruskal-Wallis test regarding problems experienced by re-entry women

Item	Variable and source	Age group	No. of respondents	Mean score	Standard deviation	Median	p value	Rank order statistics	Effect size (d)
B1	Women have to cope with conflict between the traditional role of wife and mother and the career role	1: 22-29	28	3.5	0.8	4.0	0.0001	1 – 2	1.08
		2: 30-39	26	2.5	0.9	3.0		1 – 3	2.18
		3: 40-49	18	1.5	0.9	1.0		2 – 3	1.10
		4: 50 +	3	2.3	1.2	3.0			
B3	Society views women's traditional and primary allegiance to be the family role	1: 22-29	28	2.9	1.0	3.0	0.0012	1 – 3	1.08
		2: 30-39	24	2.4	1.0	3.0			
		3: 40-49	18	1.9	0.7	2.0			
		4: 50 +	3	1.3	0.6	1.0			
B12	Work-family role conflict may disproportionately affect mothers' work satisfaction	1: 22-29	28	3.5	0.7	4.0	0.0001	1 – 2	0.98
		2: 30-39	25	2.8	0.6	3.0		1 – 3	2.63
		3: 40-49	18	1.7	0.7	2.0		2 – 3	1.65
		4: 50 +	3	3.0	1.0	3.0			
D30	There is a lack of flexible, more innovative organisational policies dealing with maternity, such as an increase in the maximum period of maternity leave of four months and provision for greater flexibility in the taking of maternity leave	1: 22-29	28	2.9	0.8	3.0	0.0001	1 – 3	1.41
		2: 30-39	26	2.4	0.9	2.0		1 – 4	1.80
		3: 40-49	18	1.7	0.8	1.0			
		4: 50 +	3	1.3	0.6	1.0			
F39	The provision of childcare facilities such as after-school and holiday play-schemes is limited	1: 22-29	28	3.1	0.6	3.0	0.0001	1 – 3	2.57
		2: 30-39	26	2.6	0.8	3.0		2 – 3	1.93
		3: 40-49	18	2.6	0.7	1.0			
		4: 50 +	2	2.5	0.7	4.0			

ferent life stages. Women in the age category 22–29 years appear to have significantly and practically more problems than re-entry women in other age categories. The age category 22–29 years is the life-phase characterised by the primary responsibilities of raising children and managing households. Consequently, having a career during this prime period of family formation may lead to problems because of the lack of adequate childcare facilities. In addition, women in the age category 22–29 years experience feelings of anxiety and guilt as a result of spending time away from their children.

Discussion

It can be concluded that the most important problems for re-entering women educators are experienced on three levels (Table 1):
* within themselves
  – The negative influence of homemaking and the presence of children on career development of returning women constitute a problem of high priority (B6).
  – Feelings of anxiety and guilt as a result of spending time away from their children (B13) constitute a high priority problem for re-entering women.
  – Experiencing considerable stress as a result of the demands of family life and career is another problem of high priority (B7).
* within their career
  – Gender inequities with regard to educational management positions may be marked as a problem facing re-entry women educators (E35).
* within society
  – The inadequate provision of childcare facilities and in particular the problem that women have to arrange care for sick children (F42) seem to be problems which can impede women educators in promoting their careers.

Problems of low priority for re-entry women educators are on two different levels (Table 2):
* within themselves
  – A problem of low priority for women educators appears to be the role of family caregiver for elderly, sick or disabled relatives who live either in their home or nearby (B2).
* at management level
  – The age at re-entry seems to be no problem for women educators (D28).

Recommendations

* As a result of their multiple roles and responsibilities, re-entering women are forced to limit their career aspirations. An increase in maternity benefits and the introduction of paternity and childcare leave will assist women to combine work and family responsibility.
* Many women feel guilty leaving children, particularly young ones, in day care centres or in another person's home. If finances are not a problem, the possibility may exist to hire someone to care for the children in their own home. Some working mothers may feel less guilt-ridden if their children can stay in their own home while their mothers are working.
* Women educators ranked stress as a result of the demands of family life and career as a problem of high priority. Career women have to be the homemaker, the supportive wife and mother and at the same time, a good worker. One solution is for husbands and other family members to share in homemaking and childcare to such an extent that most stress as a result of role conflict is alleviated.
* Educational management in South Africa has traditionally been and still remains male-dominated. Promotion opportunities for women who aspire to educational management positions should be created. All women, especially re-entry women, should be treated fairly when they apply for promotion.

* Good childcare facilities are essential to allow re-entering women to combine family and workplace responsibilities. In South Africa, the absence of work place nurseries and after school day care for children is considered a shortcoming. The provision of childcare facilities such as after-school and holiday playschemes is an important necessity for the career development of, especially younger, women educators.

Conclusion

Women re-entering the teaching profession are in a state of flux and transition as certain obstacles make it increasingly difficult for them to return to the work force. In themselves, they are often plagued by a negative self-image, guilt, stress, and concern over balancing the roles of homemaker and worker. Externally, they are confronted with problems such as discrimination in the workplace in terms of remuneration, promotion, and legislation. The absence of family leave to care for young children, inadequate provision of childcare facilities for pre-school children and differing levels of maternity/paternity leave are also problems which can impede women on making progress in the workplace.

In future, the profession will rely to a greater extent on women returning to the work force. The profession will also require a work force with more skills than ever before. In order to take up this challenge, both the government and the education profession will need to open the door for women to re-enter the profession in a more efficient and productive manner.

Acknowledgement

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