0255

Understanding career decisions: women teachers' and headteachers' perceptions of secondary headship

Joan Smith
University of Leicester, Leicester, United Kingdom

Background

There has been a steady increase in recent years in the percentage of UK secondary headships occupied by women (DCSF, 2007). Proportionally, however, women continue to be under-represented at headship level, in the UK as elsewhere (Gokçe, 2009). In 2006, women constituted 57% of the secondary teaching workforce in England and Wales, but just 36% of secondary headships were held by females (DCSF, 2007). Women are not, it seems, progressing to secondary headship in great numbers, either because there are still too many barriers to progression for women, or because they are opting out, choosing not to pursue senior positions.

A substantial body of literature focuses on the notion of 'barriers' to women's career progression. Areas of focus have included, for example: the influence of gendered socialisation on shaping girls' aspirations and women's approach to their lives, roles and careers (Lahtinen & Wilson, 1994; Millett, 1969; Sharpe, 1976); the constraints placed by motherhood on women's lives and careers (for example, Aveling, 2002; Kim & Ling, 2001; McCrae, 2003); overt and covert discrimination in the workplace (for example, Ayyash-Abdo, 2000; Davidson and Cooper, 1992; McLay and Brown, 2001; Moreau et al, 2005; Neill, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1993; Wilson et al 2006); as well as on the women who break through the 'glass ceiling' and become leaders (Coleman, 2002; Evetts, 1994; Hall, 1996; Limerick & Anderson 1999; Sherman 2000).

The focus on 'barriers' or the 'glass ceiling' assumes that most women are being excluded from senior positions by a range of identifiable impediments to progression.   This analysis is problematical in that it implicitly denies women's personal agency (Smith 2010) and makes assumptions about the nature of women's career motivation (Smith 2008). Women can, and do, make decisions for themselves and take steps to shape their own lives and careers. This is not to pretend that there are no constraints on women's lives: via the life history interviews conducted for this study, it was possible to examine the ways in which the women exerted their personal agency, negotiated the limitations and possibilities afforded them by their particular life contexts, and made choices. Whilst some chose to pursue careers as headteachers, others refused to consider it as a career option, opting positively for classroom teaching. This paper explores some of the reasons for this, contrasting the perceptions of headship voiced by the teachers and the headteachers in the study.

Research Questions

The paper reports on some of the findings of a wider, life history study of forty female UK secondary school teachers, including ten newly qualified teachers, ten experienced teachers and ten headteachers. The study focussed on the women's perceptions of the factors affecting their career decisions. The research questions were:

1. What are the main factors affecting women secondary school teachers' career decisions?
2. What factors influence the likelihood of women aspiring to, applying for and achieving headship?

This paper concentrates on some of the findings relating to the second of these questions. In particular, consideration is given to the importance of the women's perceptions about the headship role in framing their career decisions.

Methods

Open-ended, life history interviews were conducted with forty women: thirty teachers and ten headteachers. The interviews consisted of one or two open-ended questions, supplemented by probing and prompting questions. The open-endedness of the approach offers clear benefits as a means of giving voice to the participants in the research, allowing their perspectives to be represented, and scope for involving participants in an empowering research process, in which they are enabled to take the lead in defining what is significant, rather than responding to a narrowly researcher-led agenda (Anderson et al, 1990; Anderson & Jack, 1991; Casey, 1993; Munro, 1998; Osler, 1997). The analysis could thus move beyond a focus on 'barriers', to offer a more nuanced understanding of the multi-layered complexity of women teachers' career decisions.

Frame

The interviews yielded a set of rich, in-depth, idiosyncratic narratives. Nonetheless,   certain themes about the key factors influencing women's career decisions were consistently apparent. Using a grounded theory approach, the analysis was based on these emergent themes, which were organised into three categories: societal, institutional and personal factors. Societal factors included socialisation and the social construction of women's maternal and relational roles. At the institutional level, important factors included sexism and discrimination in schools. Key personal factors included personal agency in career approach, motivation, values, aspirations and perceptions of headship. This paper focuses primarily on the latter.

Research findings

Of the thirty teachers interviewed, twenty-eight were clear that they would not consider headship as a career option. The role was viewed as incompatible with their pupil-centred values, their preferred ways of working and their home lives, and the majority harboured a set of negative perceptions of the headteacher role. The most common of these were that headteachers' work and values are not pupil-centred, that headteachers are tough, lonely and have no life outside school, and that their work is dull and boring.

By contrast, the women headteachers positioned themselves in their narratives as agents of change, with a clear mission and purpose, seeing headship as an opportunity to enact their pupil-centred values to maximum effect. Based on the headteacher narratives I posit an agentic, values-driven paradigm of leadership of which the key features are:

- A 'pupils-first' philosophy
- Fusion of toughness and caring
- Leadership style adaptable to context
- Positive relationships and emotional rationality
- Personal and professional support networks
- Enjoyment of challenge and change
- Work life balance strategies.

I argue in this paper that, were this view of headship to be more proactively promoted, more women might be encouraged to aspire to and apply for headship posts.