

0518

Extraordinary Women: Senior Women Managers and Leaders in Initial Teacher Training... Forging New Identities.

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Background

The situation for women who work in Departments of Education with a significant interest in the pre-service (ITE) education of teachers has always been complex and contested and has shifted over time. In certain periods, women have been positioned as more/less 'desired' in ITE settings. Indeed, Acker and Dillabough (2006: 313) assert that 'a more cynical view would be that women's numbers increase when jobs become less desirable, and certainly academic work has lost much of the allure and autonomy of the past'. Specifically in terms of ITE, it seems that men have largely (but not completely) evacuated the setting, preferring to move to areas that are more research-friendly (see symposium details). In a period of unprecedented economic and cultural changes, in a time of neo-liberal reconstruction in higher education, paradoxically while some opportunities for women have closed down, others have opened up in Initial Teacher Education as the setting has become more subjected to national policy imperatives.

Over time, there has been a focus and exploration of issues related to entry, representation and some work on the subjective experiences of working in higher education (see Morley, 2004; Reay, 2004) and there has also been some work on the experiences of women in teacher education (Maguire and Weiner, 1994; Murray, 2006). However, although there is work on senior women in education management more generally (Blackmore, 1996; Hall, 1996) there has been little work on women who manage ITE at a senior level (but see Thompson, 2007). This paper will address this gap in what is known about women managers in ITE.

Research Questions

This paper draws on an in-depth doctoral study that explores the experiences of twenty-five women who work in Initial Teacher education and who occupy different posts that carry managerial responsibilities. The research questions hinge on the ways in which these different groups of managers understand their responsibilities and the ways in which they 'manage' to cope. The focus is with the degree to which different women managers survive in new managerial times and the sorts of experiences they encounter in their occupational lives. The research explores whether becoming a manager is equally rewarding for all women who manage teacher training.

Methods

This research as a whole draws on twenty-six in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews that were conducted over a three-year period with a range of women managers in ITE working in six different institutions. Field notes were kept and observations of management meetings, curriculum delivery teams etc were undertaken. The sample was theoretically constructed to take account of the different routes into teaching that are institutionally-located (BEd, BA+ QTS, PGCE) as well as 'old' and 'new' universities, to see if setting influenced management roles and responsibilities. The approach is qualitative and the data have been subjected to critical coding and analysis. Analysis, theorisation and writing have been fed back into data collection to enable progressive focusing and identification of new themes and issues. In particular, this led to the emergence of a 'new' category of women managers; the 'top women' and data from these six interviews will be used in this paper.

Frame

The analytical framework for this research draws on a range of theoretical insights, notably related to feminist work on new managerialism in higher education settings. The work also draws on insights from feminist theory and praxis as well as social justice concerns related to treatment, association and inclusion/exclusion.

Research findings

This paper seeks to explore how a small group of 'top women' who hold extremely senior positions in initial teacher training manage to survive, or in some cases thrive, in an increasingly challenging education marketplace. It will argue that men are under-represented in the management of ITT and women are entering management and leadership positions across the board. However, although the 'top women' face the same 'sites of struggle' as more junior managers and leaders, many, although not all, seem more able to accommodate, or re-invent themselves to accommodate, the discourses of neo liberalism. Although survival is a multi dimensional project and different survival strategies are used simultaneously by different women at different times, many senior women have created a niche where, in different ways, they are able to operate as active agents as they drive their institutions forward. However, to what extent does this 'survival' displace or include any socially just concerns or responses?