The two faces of secondary headship: Women deputy head teachers’ perceptions of the secondary head teacher role

Abstract

Men continue to outnumber women at the secondary head teacher level. This article reports on some of the preliminary findings of a larger study exploring the ways in which women deputy head teachers, as potential aspirants to headship, perceive the secondary head teacher role. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants. The data revealed that, while making decisions about their professional futures, the majority of the women held dual, contradictory images of secondary headship. One image consisted of a role plagued by risk, performativity and stress, whereas the other focused on the agentic capacity head teachers have to transform lives and communities. The article highlights the ways in which a belief in the power of headship to make a meaningful difference to the lives of young people can encourage some women to aspire towards headship regardless of the precarity they perceive as being ingrained within the head teacher role.

Keywords: career, educational leadership, professional aspirations, secondary headship, women

Introduction

How do women deputy head teachers working in English secondary schools perceive headship? Do they aspire to climb the next rung of the occupational ladder? This article endeavours to address these questions by drawing on some of the preliminary findings of a larger study that focuses on the lived experiences of women deputies and the ways in which these influence the likelihood of their aspiring towards the ‘top job’. It aims to explore how women deputy head teachers, as potential aspirants to headship, understand and make sense of the secondary head teacher role.

Background

The most recent school workforce data in England show that, despite making up over half of all classroom teachers, women continue to be underrepresented at the secondary head teacher level (Department for Education [DfE], 2016). The disparate representation of men in secondary headship models unjust leadership practices to young people (Fuller, 2015), reinforces gender stereotypes, and sends the message to women teachers that secondary school leadership is inaccessible (Harris et al., 2003). As Moorosi (2015: 21) points out, the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership positions is a ‘long-standing problem which has received significant attention in different contexts over the years’. There is, therefore, a strong body of literature exploring the constraints that women face on the road to headship (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011). Argued to be ‘surprisingly similar across countries and cultures’ (Shakeshaft, 2006: 500), the medley of factors shaping and constraining senior women’s career paths is said to include family and caring responsibilities (see, for example, Conley and Jenkins, 2011), and stereotyping and gender bias (see, for example, Coleman, 2007), as well as negative perceptions of the head teacher role (see, for example, Oplatka and Tamir, 2009). In addition to identifying potential obstacles to secondary headship, studies have highlighted several factors that motivate women to pursue educational leadership. These enabling influences include networking, mentors
and role models (see, for example, Coleman, 2010), and a sense of vocation and social justice (see, for example, Fuller, 2012), as well as leadership development programmes and opportunities (see, for example, McNamara et al., 2010).

Despite the diversity of this body of research, many of the studies in this area focus on the experiences and perceptions of those women who have already achieved headship status. In comparison to their head teacher colleagues, the views, careers and aspirations of deputy head teachers have received little academic attention (Lee et al., 2009). This is despite the significant role that deputy head teachers play in school life (Kwan, 2011) and the unique position they find themselves in to ‘observe first-hand the various role dynamics’ of headship (Cranston, 2007: 110). In the relative absence of empirical studies concerned solely with deputy head teachers and their experiences, Cranston et al. (2004: 225) characterize this professional group as ‘forgotten leaders’. The ‘forgotten’ status of deputy head teachers, however, is perhaps surprising given that they make up a potential pool of head teacher applicants and that the number of tomorrow’s head teachers will largely be determined by the perceptions, motivations and aspirations of today’s deputies (Cranston, 2007; Lee et al., 2009).

Owing to their elevated position in the school hierarchy, it is commonly assumed that all deputy head teachers aspire towards headship (Harris et al., 2003). The demographic characteristics of senior leaders in our secondary schools, however, suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Compared to the secondary head teacher level, there are more equitable proportions of men and women in deputy headship posts (DfE, 2016). This suggests that some women deputy head teachers are actively choosing not to pursue headship or that other factors are conspiring to exclude or deter them. In my research, I consider what secondary headship looks like to women occupying deputy head teacher posts, as well as the factors that are shaping their career decisions.

**Research design**

A qualitative research design was used to explore the career histories and professional aspirations of women deputy head teachers. Data collection and analysis were guided by the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996). IPA researchers aim to explore the ways in which individuals perceive and make sense of their lived experiences in the social world (Smith et al., 2009: 1). Using an IPA approach to research, it is possible to gain multifaceted, detailed insights into the lives of individual participants and the particularities of their perceptions.

A snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit a small homogeneous sample. Twelve women aged between 35 and 56 agreed to take part. All held deputy head teacher or vice principal positions in either academy or local authority secondary schools across England at the time of interview. A summary of participant characteristics is presented in Table 1. In order to protect participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout this article.

An in-depth, semi-structured approach to interviewing was taken. Participants were invited to talk about their career trajectories to date, their present-day lives as deputy head teachers and their professional aspirations, via a series of open-ended questions. The semi-structured interview schedule was constructed with the aim of allowing each individual participant the time...
to explore her lived experiences and tell her own career story. The women were perceived to be ‘experiential experts’ throughout the interview process (Smith and Osborn, 2008: 59).

All interview transcripts were analysed in accordance with the principles of IPA. Drawing on the studies of phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA is concerned with ‘the importance of sustained engagement with individual personal lived experience and the individual’s attempt to make sense of that personal lived experience’ (Eatough and Smith, 2008: 192). It is an iterative and creative process which involves exploring, commenting on and interpreting an individual case in detail. By clustering initial themes together, superordinate and subordinate themes are developed from each transcript and, later, the data set as a whole (Smith et al., 2009). Despite the interdisciplinary nature of educational research (Biesta, 2011; Van Manen, 1990), IPA is not, at the time of writing, commonly used by those studying gender and educational leadership. Yet, given its concern with subjective experiences, IPA was considered an appropriate approach for this study. I found IPA offered a suitable lens through which to view the career histories and occupational aspirations of individual women leaders.

Research findings

The risks of secondary headship

All 12 participants reflected on the disincentives to secondary headship. Their comments exposed layers of apprehension regarding their professional futures. One of the anxieties that the women reported experiencing concerned the riskier reality of being a head teacher compared to the relative stability of deputy headship. Caitlin, for instance, spoke about the ways in which a potential headship could jeopardize her sense of personal and financial well-being:

I’ve got a mortgage to pay; I don’t want to walk into school one day and not have a job anymore ...It’s not a nice climate in education at the minute ... Why would anyone want to be a head at the minute?

The women also perceived the increased pressure placed on head teachers during Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspections to be a disadvantage of headship. Sophie described stepping up to headship as:

... a big risk. I’m well aware that as a head you can lose your job just like that if Ofsted come in and deem that the progress that your school is making is not good enough ... There’s almost a football manager element to the job.

This extract suggests that Sophie perceives Ofsted to be a threat to the security and reputation of those holding headship posts. Her belief that she may lose her job ‘just like that’ suggests that she fears that the punitive action of Ofsted would be immediate and without warning. Like Sophie, Faye also referred to Ofsted within her career narrative. It was clear that she perceived inspections to be potentially destructive and emotionally damaging events. She described her most recent experience of an Ofsted inspection as ‘like being ripped to pieces... it was the most horrendous day of my career’. Faye’s sense of self appeared to be closely interwoven with her career and workplace. Given this connection, it seemed that she perceived the evaluative judgements of Ofsted to be a comment not only on her school and its effectiveness but also on
her professional worth. The phrase ‘being ripped to pieces’ suggests a damaging, almost vicious encounter which threatened her sense of self and well-being. One of the repercussions of this experience was that Faye had started to fear for the future of the teaching profession:

I think there’s a lot of the human side going out of teaching, and I think that’s because everyone is under so much pressure under the cosh of Ofsted and all the target setting ... this percentage and that percentage.

Within this extract, Faye described feeling a sense of anxiety, loss and grief. She appeared concerned with what is being abandoned in the quest for a more accountable and efficient education system. Faye perceived change in educational policy and Ofsted inspection procedures as aggressively threatening values-based and empathic educational practice. Her fear for the future of the teaching profession was reported to be one of the reasons why she had chosen not to pursue headship.

Many of the women who took part in this study described the educational culture in which they work to be unstable and subject to rapid change. They talked about the educational landscape in England as being littered with challenges and pressures should they decide to aspire towards and apply for secondary headship. Naomi, for instance, remarked:

The rules keep changing ... continual working in the dark is something that puts me off headship.

The phrase ‘working in the dark’ suggests that Naomi felt uncertain in this policy climate. Conceivably, current feelings of uncertainty are not a firm foundation on which to build future professional plans or aspirations. One of the most interesting aspects of this quotation is Naomi’s reference to ‘rules’. Here she exposes a perception of the teaching profession as being governed or dictated by external decision makers. The idea that she is not the one making up the ‘rules’ suggests she does not perceive herself to be free to act in an agentic manner at work, despite her senior leadership status.

For some of the women, headship was perceived to require skills they had not had the opportunity to develop throughout their teaching careers. The most common anxiety they expressed concerned the likelihood that they would have to manage large budgets as head teachers. Madeline, for instance, remarked that she was anxious about the:

Financial side of it, managing that budget, I can’t manage my own personal budget, and then professionally you wonder whether you could do it, and I think you probably have to do it because otherwise you’d lose your job, but I know that puts a lot of people off as well.

This extract perhaps reveals a lack of self-confidence. The perceived precarity of headship also features in this extract. Madeline feared that she would lose her job and the security attached if she were found to be lacking the required skills to be a successful head teacher. Madeline’s observation that this ‘puts a lot of people off as well’ is supported by some of the other women in the sample who shared Madeline’s reservations about the budgetary responsibilities of headship:
The budget side puts me off; I’m not interested ... and you have to be. The whole sort of buildings and premises side also puts me off. (Naomi)

I think really now it is a businessman’s job almost, rather than a teacher’s job. (Faye)

The findings explored above appear to resonate with the views of the Israeli women deputy head teachers in Oplatka and Tamir’s study (2009: 232). The authors found that the head teacher role, with its emphasis on accountability and managerialism, was perceived to be stressful and less child-centred than deputy headship. Ingrained within the findings of their study is an image of headship that is externally controlled, highly demanding and isolating.

An opportunity for influence

Despite describing headship as a potentially constraining and precarious role, eight of the women interviewed reported actively aspiring towards secondary headship. These women tended to combat the drawbacks they perceived as being attached to the secondary head teacher role by focusing on the opportunities that the position offered to bring about positive change. Child-centred beliefs and the desire to make a difference were central features of these women’s career narratives. Jennifer, for instance, described her hopes for her professional future in the following way:

I would love to think that I could go to a school and make a difference. To make a difference to the whole school.

Within this extract, there is a desire to transform an institution. Jennifer’s vision is holistic, and she is clearly motivated to accomplish something worthwhile as a head teacher. Similar sentiments were echoed by Caitlin, who had the following to say about her headship aspirations:

I just think it’d be the best job in the world really ... having that impact on all of their lives and your local community. I just think that would be an amazing thing to be able to do.

One of the most interesting aspects of this extract is the way that Caitlin is looking out past the school gates when contemplating her professional future. She considers the local community and the families who live within it. The women who aspired towards headship were unanimous in their desire to lead a school in ‘challenging circumstances’. These schools were described as needing ‘a bit of help’ (Jennifer) and offering the new head teacher an opportunity to ‘make a difference’ (Dawn). The aspirants in my sample tended to reject ‘outstanding’ suburban schools on the grounds that they would get ‘bored’ (Beth). Their aspirations to work in a school ‘requiring improvement’ tended to be linked to their belief in the power of education to transform lives and an intrinsic motivation to work towards a more equitable society. Madeline, for example, expressed her desire to make a wider social impact:

I need to pay back the community ... I’m very much about don’t let the postcode influence the outcome.

The use of the word ‘need’ suggests that Madeline felt duty-bound to help the children within her care. She seemed motivated to tackle social inequality and felt that headship would enable
her to do so. Madeline, like many of the women in the sample, appeared to perceive herself to be morally compelled to help those in poorer socio-economic circumstances. The participants’ desire for social justice appeared to instil a sense of purpose and strengthen their professional aspirations.

Many of the women perceived a want for increased decision-making power as motivating them to aspire towards and apply for headship posts. While talking about their current lives as deputy head teachers, some of the women described the role as, at times, limited and constraining. This sense of restriction tended to be linked to the head teachers they were currently working with and the power that their superiors held to limit their professional autonomy. Alice, for instance, described her current role in the following way:

Being a deputy is a very interesting role because you have a lot of power, but you have your hands tied quite often.

Alice’s assertion paints a picture of a deputy head teacher who is unable to act freely or behave in the way she would like. Headship, on the other hand, was perceived as offering greater opportunities for influence and the chance to make more meaningful decisions. For some of the sample, the head teacher role was viewed as a means of increasing their decision-making power. Lorraine, for instance, reflected:

I think when you are a head ... at the end of the day you have autonomy over what is done and the decisions that are made.

Observing and questioning the decisions of those higher up the occupational hierarchy had prompted some of the sample to pursue headship. Sophie, for example, described looking ‘at how things could be done differently’ in her school, whereas Jennifer reported having a desire in meetings to say ‘I see what you’re saying, but actually I think this’.

Alongside increased decision-making, the aspirants in the sample believed that headship would maximize their opportunities to act strategically and realize their own vision of school life. Katherine reported feeling:

I want to lead, I want to be strategic, I want to improve what’s going on ...I think it’s that opportunity to shape and influence the diet the children get and the relationships within the school to make sure you are delivering the best for everybody.

In Katherine’s account of her professional aspirations there is a desire for more holistic control and to have a greater impact on those her school serves. She appears to perceive her deputy headship and its specific responsibilities as somewhat limited in nature.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This article has explored the ways in which a sample of 12 women deputy head teachers, as potential aspirants to headship, perceived the secondary head teacher role. All of the women who took part in this study reflected on the risks of applying for and taking on a headship post in a rapidly changing educational culture. They believed headship posed a greater threat to both their occupational stability and reputation than their current roles as deputy head teachers. For
eight of the women in the sample, however, their belief in the power of educational leadership to transform lives and communities had motivated them to aspire towards and pursue headship. Child-centred beliefs, a desire for social justice and the possibility of increased influence had inspired the aspirants in this study to overcome their reservations concerning secondary headship and pursue promotion regardless of the disincentives they perceived.

The motivating influences that the aspirants described are consistent with the findings of other research studies concerned with women teachers’ careers. Research suggests that choosing to become a teacher is often closely related to individuals’ beliefs about the importance of education in our society, as well as altruistic goals such as wanting to ‘make a difference’ to the lives of young people (Heinz, 2015). Similar motivations have also been cited as inspiring women to aspire towards and apply for headship. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011: 11) observe that many of the women in the body of literature on gender and educational leadership cite ‘a strong desire to transform the learning conditions and opportunities for those who have been least well served by current educational policies and practices’ as their reason for entering and staying in educational leadership. There are a number of research findings that support this observation. For instance, in their survey of female head teachers in Spanish pre-primary and primary schools, Coronel et al. (2010: 231) found that the majority of their sample made the decision to become a head teacher for altruistic reasons and perceived headship as representing ‘an opportunity for school improvement’.

The dual, contradictory images of secondary headship that emerged from this study suggest that my participants held neither purely positive nor purely negative views of the position. The women’s perceptions of both the secondary head teacher role and their professional futures were complex and multifaceted. The idea that two-thirds of my sample had decided to pursue headship having spoken at length about their reservations, fears and anxieties may suggest that risk-taking is an important part of some deputy head teachers’ career decision-making. The head teacher aspirants in my sample appeared to recognize the need for a risk-tolerant attitude if they were to step up to headship. Sophie remarked:

I try and focus on the positives because I don’t think anybody would want to do it if you really thought about the negatives.

It seems that Sophie’s aspirations were not formed in the absence of doubts and anxieties concerning the precarity of headship, but in spite of them. Like seven other women in the sample, Sophie’s faith in her own capacity to make a meaningful difference as a head teacher to the lives of young people appeared to exert a greater influence on her professional aspirations than did her fears for the future. Research focusing on the experiences of existing head teachers highlights the opportunities that headship affords individuals to lead in a caring, empathic and socially just manner (Fuller, 2012; Smith, 2011). The majority of the women deputies who took part in this study perceived the possibility of working in this way if they were to pursue headship.

The preliminary findings reported on in this article form part of a larger study. Further work is therefore required to fully explore the women’s accounts and their feelings about their professional futures. Yet, given that men continue to dominate secondary headship positions (DfE, 2016), the perceptions of women deputy head teachers are important. The career
experiences and aspirations of this professional group can generate new insights and help us to understand what can be done to encourage more women to take on the challenge of secondary headship.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the women who generously gave up their time to be interviewed as part of this project. In addition, I would like to thank Dr Joan Woodhouse for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research project was funded by a PhD studentship awarded by the School of Education, University of Leicester.

References


