

Gendered trends in student teachers' motivation, perceptions of leadership and professional aspirations

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Abstract

The paper reports on a small-scale, exploratory study investigating the professional aspirations of a cohort of student teachers at a UK university. Questionnaires and interviews sought insights into the students' perceptions of leadership, future aspirations and self-perceptions as potential leaders. Whilst there was commonality in male and female students' interest in subject-leadership and teaching- and learning-oriented roles such as Advanced Skills Teacher, gendered trends emerged in patterns of aspiration towards certain other posts. Women were more likely than men to aspire to the post of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator, and men were more likely than women to aspire to the most senior posts, especially headship. Whilst men and women showed awareness of the negative and more challenging aspects of senior school leadership, there were indications that male students were more likely than their female colleagues to perceive the affordances offered by headship and to envisage themselves as potential headteachers. There were indications of difference also in the ways in which men and women constructed teaching and leadership, and a stronger tendency for men to transfer agentic self-perceptions as teachers to a view of their future selves as leaders.

Keywords

Leadership, leadership aspirations, gender, student teachers, feminist

Introduction

This paper reports on some of the findings from a small-scale, exploratory study in which insights were sought into student teachers' perceptions of and aspirations to middle and senior school leadership, including headship. The investigation was undertaken within the context of a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) with a sizeable School of Education, providing initial teacher education (ITE) for the primary and secondary sectors.

There is an ongoing shortage of secondary headteachers in the UK (McQueeney, 2011), and there are increasingly indications of an awareness in the secondary education sector of the need to grow and retain new leadership talent (see, for example, Rhodes and Brundrett, 2012). At the same time, increasing emphasis is being placed in UK universities on the employability agenda and, whilst Schools of Education rate highly in terms of student teachers' successfully finding first teaching posts on qualifying, there is scope to prepare students more fully for their subsequent career progression. In order to encourage future aspirants to school leadership positions, ITE providers need to understand what factors impact on and influence novice teachers' career aspirations, to be proactive in ensuring student teachers are aware of what school leadership entails, and to develop strategies to enable students to see their own potential and develop their leadership skills during their teaching careers.

This study broke new ground in asking questions about how student teachers view their future professional selves. As a part of this, the study sought to ascertain whether there were gendered trends in patterns of aspiration at this early career stage. This is an important consideration because school workforce statistics show that, although women constitute more than half of the secondary teaching workforce in UK schools, they continue to be under-represented at secondary headship level (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011).

The sample population was drawn from the 2010-11 cohort of student teachers undertaking their initial teacher education year at a UK university, prior to embarking on careers in secondary education. All 185 students on the programme were invited to complete a questionnaire at the start and end of the academic year. In addition 10 students (five male and five female) participated in semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the year. Of these, eight (five male and three female) agreed to take part in follow-up interviews at the end of the year. This paper reports on some of the more salient points emerging from the interview and questionnaire data, which suggest that there are gendered trends in student teachers' aspirations that merit further investigation.

Rationale for the study, aims and research questions

The study sought insights into male and female student teachers' views of their likely career trajectories, looking particularly at their aspirations to and perceptions of school leadership in a UK secondary school context. The study sought to ascertain whether the student teachers' view and experience of leadership worked to attract or discourage them from aspiring to leadership positions, and whether there were gendered trends in their aspirations.

The main research question for the study was therefore:

Are there gender differences in student teachers' aspirations to leadership?

This comprised a number of subsidiary questions:

What are the student teachers' future aspirations?

What do they perceive leadership to entail in the context of the secondary school?

Do they envisage themselves in leadership positions, including headship? If so, why? If not, why not?

Are there indications of differences according to gender and if so, what is the nature of these differences?

How do male and female teachers construct leadership and how do they position themselves in relation to these constructions?

Literature review

Given the general shortage of secondary headteachers (McQueeney, 2011), and the proportional under-representation of women in the most senior posts (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011), it is important to consider factors influencing the future aspirations of novice teachers, male and female. Who will lead our schools in the future, and how?

The question of why gender inequity persists at the most senior levels has been long and variously debated. Researchers and theorists have focused on the multifarious factors that act to frame and influence women's career possibilities and choices. The gendered processes of socialization and their impact on identity and the choices people make in school and throughout life have been a persistent focus for over five decades (for example, Adler et al, 1992; McHale et al, 1999; Sharpe, 1976), as has the emphasis on women's relational roles (Lahtinen and Wilson, 1994; Millett, 1969;

Pfister, 1998). Parental influence (Li and Kerpelman, 2007), and the processes of social background, differentially shape men and women's views of their capacity to lead: in Bourdieu's (1986) terms, new teachers entering the profession bring with them social and cultural capital that frames their self-perceptions and aspirations. Powerful social discourses surrounding women's roles as mothers and carers and the pressure on women to prioritise childcare, is widely evidenced in the literature over a sustained period (Acker, 1994; Aveling, 2002; Ayyash-Abdo, 2000; Baxter and Gibson, 1990; Bittman, 1991; Brown and Irby, 1998; Burke, 1997; David and Woodward, 1998; Grogan, 1996; Jackson, 1994; Kim and Ling, 2001; Limerick and Anderson, 1999; Limerick and Heywood, 1994; Mackinnon, 1997; Mann, 1995; McCrae, 2003; Shah and Shah, 2012). Motherhood is a key factor framing many women's career choices (Smith, 2007), and women teachers' commitment to an ethic of care is a strong driver in their motivation to teach and orientation to career (Smith, 2008; Vogt, 2002). From the mid-1980s the notion of the 'glass ceiling' and cultural and institutional barriers to women's progression gathered traction (Acker, 1994; Acker, 1992; Coleman, 2002; David and Woodward, 1998; Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Evetts, 1994; Fairbairns, 2002; Hall, 1996; Lahtinen and Wilson, 1994; Maddock, 1999; McClay and Brown, 2000; Miller, 1996; Moreau *et al.*, 2005; Morley, 2000; Newman, 1994; Ozga, 1993; Shakeshaft 1989; Toren, 2005; Wilson, 2005; Wilson *et al.*, 2006). Whilst undoubtedly the enduring under-representation of women in the most senior posts in UK secondary schools would seem to suggest that barriers to career progression persist, over-emphasis on the constraints on women reifies female powerlessness and does little to advance the feminist project.

An alternative emergent perspective focuses on the predominant culture of UK secondary education at the macro-level, at odds with and counterpoised to the values that underpin women's work as teachers at the local, micro, classroom-level. From this angle, women's commitment to a fundamental ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Vogt, 2002; Smith, 2008; Smith, 2011a and b), reflects not their unquestioning acquiescence to societal discourses on women's roles but their positive resistance to the values they perceive to be implicit in school leadership as it is currently constructed, experienced and enacted. There are thus conflicts for teachers whose construction of professionalism is founded on child-centred teaching and valuing all pupils, within a culture in which high-stakes testing, performativity and competition mean that the achievements of only the most able children are prized. Where women teachers reject headship as a career option, this is frequently rooted in their view of school leadership as counterpoised to their values and preferred ways of working (Smith, 2011a). School leaders are seen to have to espouse abhorrent managerialist values and to engage in work that takes them away from children and colleagues (ibid). This negative view of school leadership is reminiscent of images of headship reflected in some of the literature since the early 1990s, in which it is constructed as managerialist, business-oriented, finance and market-driven (for example, Davies & Ellison, 1991; Fidler & Atton, 2004), an image which persists in contemporary discourses of secondary education. An example of this is an article (Berliner, 2012) featured in the Education Guardian (online) on 12th November 2012, in which the author notes that 'many schools struggle to fill headteacher posts', and suggests that a solution would be to appoint non-teachers to the posts, in recognition that schools operate as businesses now. This construction of headship

as an essentially business executive role is likely to be reinforced as academisation of UK schools gathers pace (Stevenson, 2011), alienating many teachers, male as well as female, whose values resonate with the women teachers in Smith's (2011a) study.

Alternative constructions of leadership are offered by a range of writers and researchers in educational leadership. Some propose a view of leadership based on the premise that in order for schools to be effective they need to be caring, nurturing institutions, requiring leaders with caring, people-oriented skills (for example, Gray, 1993; Hall, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1995; Sherman, 2000). Other models disrupt notions of hierarchical power structures in which the locus of power is with the individual at the apex of the institution, emphasizing instead the scope for distributed leadership, collective responsibility, collaboration, team-work and teacher agency (for example, Bush, 2011; Bush and Glover, 2012; Crawford, 2012; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Harris, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2001). An emergent area of interest is the focus on leadership for social justice. Even within the constraints of a managerialist and marketised culture of schooling, there are headteachers who lead 'with emancipatory intent' (Fuller, 2012: 672), seeking to address social injustice and promote people-oriented values. A growing body of research focuses on women as leaders, in education and elsewhere (Bradbury and Gunter, 2006; Coleman, 2002; Coleman, 2011; Lumby and Azaola, 2011; McClay, 2008; Oplatka *et al.*, 2001; Sherman, 2000; Smith, 2011a; Smith, 2011b), and there is evidence that women who embrace rather than resist leadership perceive the scope senior leadership posts offer to enact an ethic of care to greater effect across school communities (Smith, 2011a). The ten headteachers interviewed in Smith's (2011a) life history study saw

themselves as agents of change, well-positioned to exert a positive impact community-wide, and driven by essentially child-centred values.

This raises questions relating to the factors and experiences that frame and influence teachers' perceptions of leadership and their self-perceptions as potential leaders.

Given the under-representation of women in senior positions, an implicit question is whether there are differential influences on men's and women's perceptions and experiences of leadership and self-perceptions as potential leaders. This case study sought insights into the professional aspirations and self-perceptions of a cohort of student teachers at a UK University, to investigate their perceptions of leadership and their future aspirations, and to ascertain whether there were gendered trends evident at this early stage of their teaching careers.

Methodology

The participants in the research were student teachers in 2010-11, following the one-year Secondary Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) initial teacher education programme at a UK University. The PGCE is the main qualification needed to teach in the UK. The PGCE programme attracts applicants from a range of backgrounds and of ages that can vary from 22 to early 60s. As well as younger students who have recently graduated, each cohort typically includes more mature career changers and those who have taken career breaks to start and/or raise a family and now wish to become qualified teachers.

The PGCE year is challenging for most students. It comprises approximately 60 days spent in University-based, taught sessions and private study, and approximately 120 days on placement in schools. In a relatively short space of time student teachers have to learn to address complex and demanding aspects of classroom practice, including, for example, effective behaviour management (Bromfield, 2006) and inclusive practice (Pearson, 2007), ensuring they plan and teach to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (Norwich and Nash, 2011). Moreover, in order to succeed on the PGCE programme, student teachers need to develop a capacity for reflective practice, which requires that they are able and willing to position themselves as learners in order to become reflexive, effective teachers (Stevens et al, 2006). Thus the PGCE year, and the transition to the relentlessly busy life of a schoolteacher, can be a steep climb for many students, as the demands made on them are considerably different from the expectations of them during their undergraduate studies.

This study sought to investigate the challenging, complex, fluid, ongoing process of professional identity development (Busher et al., 2012; Giddens, 1991; Giddens and Pierson, 1998) students undergo during the ITE year, and during which their self-perceptions are transformed as they become teachers. The research design was therefore founded on a two-stage model, with phase one of the research being undertaken at the start of the academic year 2010-11 and the second at the end of it, by which time students had obtained Qualified Teacher Status. This is a mixed-methods, exploratory interpretative study drawing on simple questionnaire data combined with semi-structured interviews.

Drawing on the work of Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000), Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant (2003), Roness and Smith (2009) and Smith (2007), survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used at the start and end of the year to gain insights into the students' future professional aspirations and perceptions of leadership.

Questionnaire respondents were given an outline of the research and informed verbally and in writing that participation was entirely voluntary, and that questionnaire responses were anonymous unless they chose to write their names on them. Interview participants were sent participant information letters prior to the interview, with an attached informed consent form to sign and return on attending for interview. The letter explained that the interviews were to be transcribed and returned to interviewees for checking and amending as they saw fit before being used by researchers, that they could withdraw at any time, and that all participants would be anonymised in the dissemination of the findings. Pseudonyms are therefore used in this paper.

The questionnaire was distributed to all (n=185) new PGCE secondary student teachers at the start of the 2010-11 academic year and students were invited to respond. The questionnaire was then distributed again at the end of the PGCE year to the full cohort, by then 169 students. It comprised 3 main sections:

Section 1: Personal details, which required students to fill in their age and sex, plus name if they wished to do so.

Section 2: Reasons for choosing teaching as a career. This section, which sought insights into the values that informed their career choice, listed a set of factors that

may have influenced the students' decision to teach. Respondents were asked to tick a box on each line identifying whether the particular factor had been 'very important', 'quite important' or 'not important'. A wide range of factors were listed including the impact of the respondents' own experience of schooling and teachers, professional benefits such as job security, salary, promotion prospects, pension and autonomy, more altruistic factors such as wanting to make a difference and wanting to work with young people, and a passion for one's subject specialism.

Section 3: Future aspirations, which listed a range of typical posts of responsibility within a UK secondary school structure. Students were asked to tick any they thought they might possibly take on at some point during their careers, or to tick 'none of these'. The posts listed were:

Head of subject/department

Head of faculty

SENCo

Head of year/house

Assistant head of year/house

Advanced skills teacher

Deputy headteacher/vice principal

Headteacher/Principal

105 (of a possible 185) questionnaires were returned at the start of the year, including 36 male and 69 female respondents, aged between 21 and 53 years. 85 (of a possible 169) questionnaires were returned at the end of the year, including 30

male and 53 female respondents (2 undisclosed), aged between 22 and 54. The female to male ratio of the responses reflects the typical demographic of the PGCE programme, which tends to be roughly two thirds female and one third male. Whilst the age range of the students surveyed is wide, most were in their twenties or thirties, with very few at the upper end of the age range. This paper focuses on analysis by gender, whilst recognizing that age may be a factor in defining aspiration.

The questionnaire was designed to be relatively quick to fill in. It allowed for only a limited range of responses within a tick-box format, and was intended to gain a broad strokes view of possible trends in students' reported aspirations. In order to supplement the questionnaire data and to gain richer insights into students' self-perceptions as teachers and potential leaders, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a small sample of students at the start and end of the academic year. A request at the end of the questionnaire invited students to volunteer to take part in interviews by adding their email address to the form. All volunteers were then emailed and asked to make contact to arrange a time to meet. Of those who responded, the first five males and females available for interview were recruited to participate in the initial interviews. Two female students subsequently withdrew from the study, leaving a smaller sample comprising five men and three women to take part in the end of year interviews. The more open-ended design of the semi-structured interviews allowed a more profound understanding of some of the stories behind the statistics. Topics covered included the reasons why the students had wanted to become teachers, their future aspirations, their perceptions of leadership / headship and their view of their future professional selves. The start of year

interview focused primarily on what led the students to decide to enter the teaching profession, how they felt as they embarked upon the ITE year, and how they saw themselves in the future. The end of year interviews revisited these areas and included reflection on whether the students felt they had changed during the course of the PGCE year, and if so, how, how they viewed their current and future professional selves, and whether they saw themselves becoming headteachers eventually. Probing questions enabled me to ask participants to reflect on how prior experiences, current perceptions and future aspirations were linked. This afforded me insights into personal and professional values and some of the complex reasons why student teachers consider or reject potential career opportunities, which could not have been gleaned from questionnaire tick-box data alone.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken and comparisons made of male and female informants' responses. To enable this, two sets of grids were drawn up (one for males, one for females), in which evidence of key themes could be organized, in a way that allowed for emergent themes to be harnessed. The headings under which the data were organized were:

Reasons for wanting to teach

Future aspirations

Perceptions of headship

Other

Within 'other' a range of themes emerged, including personal relationships/parenthood, values relating to teaching/work/money, perceived changes in professional identity during the PGCE year, role models, family influences, own experiences of school/teachers, previous jobs and careers. Under each heading I made notes about each participant's responses, including illustrative extracts from the interview transcripts. I then colour-coded evidence of each theme, thereby creating a visual pattern that enabled me to compare and contrast the responses of individual respondents, as well as males and females. These patterns provided me with the basis for the analysis and discussion.

Triangulation was enabled by comparing the responses from interviewees to those generated by the questionnaire survey, as the interviews covered the same themes, in more depth. Simple descriptive statistics are used to draw out the key trends emerging from the student teachers' questionnaires. These are summarized in table one and discussed in the 'findings' section of this paper.

Assessing the validity and reliability of the qualitative interviews requires a more pluralistic approach. A useful framework is provided by Yardley (2000: 215) who identifies four principles on the basis of which qualitative research might be evaluated: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; impact and importance. Sensitivity to context implies that the researcher has a good theoretical understanding of the field, drawing on relevant literature and empirical data (Yardley 2000: 219), as well as an understanding of the

sociocultural setting. This is an important consideration in my work with student teachers. As a former teacher with twenty years' school-based experience, and a teacher educator since 2000, I have first-hand, lived experience of the culture of schools and teachers' careers. My previous research focusing on women teachers' lives and careers (Smith, 2007; Smith, 2011a; Smith, 2011b) has also provided me with a sound basis on which to draw in negotiating the sociocultural terrain of teachers' reflections on career, values and aspirations. Linked to this, Yardley's (2000: 219) second principle, 'commitment and rigour' requires 'in-depth engagement with the topic'. This study draws on work spanning over five decades, fusing with this new insights gained from in-depth interviews with teachers about to enter the profession. For Yardley (2000: 219), commitment and rigour also imply methodological competence, thorough data collection and depth and breadth of analysis. This study combines two main research tools, looking in breadth at a whole cohort of students and in depth at a sample drawn from the wider group, in a design that builds in a revisiting of the data at the end of the initial teacher education year. Systematic ordering of questionnaires and interview data meant that comparisons could be made across the sample population and over time. In addition, commitment by the researcher in terms of ensuring interview participants were at ease, and in paying close attention to what they were saying (and responding with appropriate probing questions, for example) was key to the success of this study, drawing on my skills and expertise as a researcher in conducting interviews that are sufficiently open-ended to harness participants' perceptions and idiosyncratic experiences as well as to identify where there were trends or commonality across the sample or sections of it. 'Rigour' also implies that the sample population should

be chosen in terms of fitness for purpose in trying to answer the research questions. As the study related to gender and student teachers' aspirations, it is apt that the full cohort of students were invited to complete the questionnaire and a balanced number of men and women to participate in the interviews. Transparency and coherence of description, argument, method and data presentation, a fit between theory and method and researcher reflexivity constitute the third of Yardley's (2000: 219) principles. This study addresses this principle by making clear in this report what the stages of the research process were, how participants were selected, what was included in the questionnaire and interview and how the data were analysed. The key trends from the questionnaire data are summarized in table one and the main themes emerging from the interviews identified in the findings and discussion sections of the paper. The last of the four principles Yardley (2000: 223) identifies is that of 'impact and importance' arguing that

The decisive criterion by which any piece of research must be judged is, arguably, its impact and utility. It is not sufficient to develop a sensitive, thorough and plausible analysis if the ideas propounded by the researcher have no influence on the benefits or actions of anyone else...the ultimate value of a piece of research can only be assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the applications it was intended for, and the community for whom the findings were deemed relevant'.

This study raises questions ripe for further research, which I discuss in this paper, and which can usefully inform schools' and universities' programmes of support for

early career teachers' medium and longer term career aims, beginning to address the problem of scarcity of aspirants to key leadership posts in education. It is acknowledged that this study is based on one case, and that generalizations cannot be made on the basis of 18 interviews undertaken with a sample of ten students at one university. Time, resources and being a single-handed researcher constrained the scope for a fuller study. It is acknowledged also that to single out gender as the basis for analysis is also to ignore the intersectionality of social class, ethnicity and age in framing aspirations, and a more sophisticated research design might harness a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of factors that frame novice teachers' professional self-perceptions in relation to career possibilities in schools. However, this exploratory investigation provides a basis on which further research might usefully build.

Findings

Questionnaire data indicated that there were certain gendered trends in student teachers' responses with regard to their future aspirations. Table one summarises the findings, indicating the percentage of male and female students who aspired to a range of middle and senior leadership posts, and expressing the male:female ratio in each case. Empirically and by 'rule of thumb' where the ratio is greater than around 1.5 (more males) or less than 0.7 (more females) the result could be claimed to be statistically significant (StatPac, 2012).

[insert table one here]

I comment in the next section on some of the more salient points to emerge from the questionnaire data, which provide a broad picture of the patterns of student teachers' aspirations. I supplement this with evidence gathered from interview data, which offer deeper insights into the students' motivations, aspirations and perceptions of leadership.

Discussion

It is apparent from the questionnaire data (table one) that subject and classroom teaching-focused positions such as head of subject or head of department posts were equally attractive to male and female students. The post of Advanced Skills Teacher (AST), a role in which the focus is on working collaboratively with other teachers to develop classroom practice, also attracted comparable proportions of men and women. Some of the student teachers commented that they had been very positively influenced by ASTs they had encountered during school placements. Brief comments on the questionnaires included, for example, 'Being with an AST in my first school has inspired me to aim for this area of teaching'. The post of AST is quite unique in that it is one of the few posts of responsibility within a typical UK secondary school management structure in which the primary focus is on teaching and learning. This may mean that the post is viewed by student teachers as different to what is viewed traditionally as 'management'. One student commented, for example, 'Meeting an excellent AST made me consider developing in this way, rather than in terms of management'.

This is consistent with the findings from the interviews, in which all ten participants explained that they had chosen to become teachers for reasons that resonated with the views of the undergraduates in Kyriacou and Coulthard's (2000) study, who were seriously considering a career in teaching. Their primary aim was to be successful subject teachers, effective in the classroom, motivated by an interest in teaching and learning. This was common across the sample and would seem to underpin the common interest in the subject and teaching-oriented middle leadership posts.

As students reflected during the interviews about their short-term aspirations, understandably the key emphasis was again on becoming an effective subject teacher. As Becky (24) commented, 'Focussing on being a really good teacher...is the priority'. Perhaps surprisingly, none of the interviewees explicitly discussed classroom teaching as leadership, despite engaging daily in the leadership and management of young people, although it should also be acknowledged that student teachers remain under the wing of the school-based mentor throughout the ITE year so may never develop a sense of being 'in charge' whilst on school placement.

Most of the students interviewed were open-minded about the direction their careers might take in the medium term, expressing a potential interest in both subject leadership and pastoral responsibility. Christopher, for example, commented:

Obviously I'd like to see how my [first year] goes...get through that...I think...personality-wise I would perhaps be better at pastoral care...a

bit more caring...Then I think I would [move] towards [Head of Subject]...but I think it's still early days...I am reasonably open-minded but will probably be staying with my subject...I'd like to be in the classroom for a while. I think, say, 7 or 8 years, 10, whatever, 15...I think...[then] probably leadership, ... like...Head of Subject, and then take it from there (Christopher, 22).

The questionnaire and interview data indicated parity in male and female students' aspirations to middle leadership posts that were subject-oriented (Head of Subject/Department), pastoral (Head or Assistant Head of Year/House), and teaching and learning-focussed (Advanced Skills Teacher). There were slight, but not significant, discrepancies in males' and females' interest in the post of Head of Faculty, a more senior role than Head of Subject, but these were insufficient to merit attention here.

It is worth considering at this point how middle leadership posts appeared to be differently perceived to senior leadership posts, especially headship. Whilst, as I discuss later, headship tended to be construed as strategic and managerial, middle leadership posts with pastoral and curricular responsibilities were constructed as child-focussed, caring work, a part of and not separate to teaching.

Both male and female interviewees talked about teaching as caring work, and discussed teaching and middle leadership interchangeably in this respect. For example, David (26) drew comparisons between teaching and social work:

I'm always drawn towards the more pastoral side of school work...I do see myself working in that kind of area, you know...as year head or something along those lines...I do think there's a huge amount of crossover [between teaching and social work]. I think in terms of the...situations that a teacher gets put into also...They have to see the children every day, the problems and the issues that arise – they have to be aware of all these things. They have to be aware of the background, and where the children are coming from, if there's a reason why this child hasn't done his homework, because he's got such and such a problem going on at home...My personal perspective...[is]...it's incredibly important to build up a child's self-esteem...I think there's a lot of time in the classroom where the teacher has to tackle problems the social worker would deal with, and they have to be aware of those kinds of things...there are kids who have deep underlying issues that you kind of help them resolve' (David, 26).

Pauline, who at 43 was older than the other interviewees, also commented when thinking about how her career might develop, 'I would, I think, like the pastoral route...only because of my experiences, my negative experiences at school...It's a bit trite...but if I can 'make a difference' that's what I would like to do'.

Although in the interviews men as much as women discussed their interest in the caring aspects of teaching, the questionnaire data indicated that women emerge as far more likely than men to aspire to the post of Special Educational Needs Co-

ordinator (SENCO – a post with responsibility for ensuring appropriate provision for children with Special Educational Needs in the school). It may be that the post of SENCO is more readily constructed as a caring, child-centred role rather than a managerial position, and therefore a role women teachers are more likely to consider. I have written elsewhere about how a child-centred focus and an ethic of care have been identified as fundamental to the motivation of women teachers (Smith, 2008).

By the same token it is interesting to note that the SENCO role is largely shunned by the males in the sample. This is in itself an interesting question to ponder, and would merit further research. There are indications that the post of SENCO remains a low status role, even though it is key to ensuring inclusion and entails significant managerial responsibility in terms of people, resources and administrative management, such that it would be more appropriately situated in alignment with senior management in the hierarchical structure of schools (O’Gorman and Drudy, 2011). There are indications that supporting children with special educational needs within a data-driven culture of performativity entails a heavy workload yet is accorded low status. For example, The Guardian’s ‘Secret Teacher’ blog (accessed 15.5.13) comments:

Staff spend large amounts of time liaising with outside agencies, filling in special educational needs (SEN) and welfare-related paperwork, dealing with English as an Additional Language (EAL) new entrants and low level language skills generally...Our children are often complex individuals and our unrecognized and undervalued strength as a staff has been to nurture and

include these complexities into a happy, cohesive school. However these skills seem to count for little in the current climate’.

If career progression is seen to be linked to measurable outcomes in terms of pupils’ achievements in external examinations it is unsurprising that early career teachers who have longer term ambitions to leadership opt out, even if in principle the nature of the work interests them. Michelle (22) for example reported in her end of year interview that she had initially thought she wanted to become a SENCO, but the PGCE year had led her to re-think her plans:

I was considering being a SENCO for quite a while. Before, I thought, that’s maybe where I want to go with it, before I applied. But having worked with a really low ability year 9 set and experiencing how patient you have to be with things...Just to see how SEN students quite a lot of the time have those behavioural, social and emotional problems as well...I found that most challenging in this placement having that set, because I found it really quite a lot of the time frustrating, as you don’t get much done. Even though they are progressing I think you just assume you can always get students up to higher grades, but you can’t always. Sometimes you just have to support what they are doing and I think that’s something I have reconsidered you know?

From this extract it is apparent that Michelle is aware of the performative imperative to ‘get students up to higher grades’, and she links this here to her frustration that, in working with students with SEN ‘you don’t get much done’ and ‘you can’t always’

make sure they get to the 'higher grades'. Implicit in this recognition and frustration is her understanding of the tensions for teachers in meeting performative demands yet supporting children with SEN. Her decision by the end of the year to reject the SENCO role constitutes her recognition that the two agendas are counterpoised, involving different sorts of work, underpinned by different values and presumably, characterized by different types of teaching approach. This has important implications for teacher identity, self-perceptions and aspirations. It is interesting to note that Woolhouse (2012: 751) reports that the dyslexia teachers (many of them SENCOs) in her study viewed themselves as 'different from other teachers...having distinctive attributes and different motivations for pursuing their chosen career paths...being empathic, understanding and good communicators'. Woolhouse (2012:752) describes the teachers as having a 'caring warrior identity': they entwined caring with self-perceptions as agents of change, resonating with the women headteachers in Smith's (2011a) study, whose leadership approach was characterized by a fusion of toughness and caring. Unlike the headteachers, however, at least some of the teachers in Woolhouse's study expressed their perception that their work with pupils with special needs was accorded low status in their schools. It may also be that the student teachers in this study who rejected the role of SENCO as a career option perceived it as low status, feminized work with its focus on children with special needs, and involving the leadership of overwhelmingly female teams of teaching assistants. This would require further investigation before it were possible to make claims in this regard, and it is worth noting that one of the male interviewees did express an interest in this kind of work, commenting,

Some of the work we've been doing [as a part of the University Professional Studies programme], that I haven't had much exposure to actually in either of my schools, like on SEN and disability and stuff like that, has made me think that I would quite like to have something to do with that at some stage. But because of the classes I've had I really haven't had much exposure to it. So I haven't any classroom experience with it. So I don't know for certain. But some of the stuff we've done [at the University], I thought it was really interesting. So at some point, I am going to try and do some of that I think...that is something I would like to look into (Tim, 30)

Male and female students alike considered their possible future career choices to embrace pastoral roles such as head of year, curricular responsibility such as head of department or faculty, and posts with a strongly pedagogical focus such as Advanced Skills Teacher. All of these would appear to grow out of their current perceptions of what teaching included, which was strongly focussed on caring work with children. Middle leadership responsibilities were seen to be closely linked to teaching and discussed in terms of natural progression, woven into and not separate from classroom-based work with children. The more senior posts, especially headship, were to an extent set apart from the caring, pastoral, pedagogical and curricular aspects of teaching and construed as largely managerial, and more distant from children and the classroom. Interestingly however it is at this point that the gender divide becomes most apparent.

Perhaps most significant are the patterns of aspiration to the top three senior leadership posts, Assistant Headteacher (a ratio of 2.2 males: 1 female by the year end), Deputy Headteacher (2.7:1 by the end of the year) and Headteacher (a ratio of 2:1 males: females at the start of the year rising to 5.4:1 by the end). There are two potentially interesting points to consider about this finding. The first is that all students, both male and female, were less positive in their aspirations to middle and senior leadership roles by the end of the year than they had been at the start. The second is that at both the start and the end of the year, there was evidence of a gendered aspirational trend.

With regard to the first point, there were no real indications in the interviews that the aspirations students held at the start of the year were adjusted downwards in the light of the PGCE year experiences. Rather by the end of the year interviewees' career plans were more focused and more honed, which may have been a function of having the opportunity to discuss future plans in an interview. This general trend is intriguing. It may be that the hierarchical structure of schools suppresses novice teachers' self-perceptions as teacher leaders. Stevenson (2012) argues that despite the growing interest in teacher leadership (Harris, 2003 & 2005), this is still 'conceived of within managerialist terms, located within traditional managerial hierarchies' (Stevenson, 2012: 345).

Further research would be required to understand more about why students' aspirations might shift downwards during the initial teacher education year. It might be argued that at the start of the year career aspirations were more likely to be

conceptualized in an abstract and de-contextualised way, and that as students engage in contextualized experiences of leadership during their two school placements they modify their aspirations in accordance with their experiences and perceptions of leadership in situ. Marshall et al (2012) found that transformational leader behaviours, for example, positively impacted on teachers' self-efficacy. If this is a factor in determining positive, aspirational forward-thinking a question to consider in follow-up research is the extent to which student teachers' self-perceptions as potential leaders are influenced by the leadership exerted and experienced in their placement schools. It is interesting to note that fewer students overall aspired to subject leadership by the end of the ITE year. It is likely that for student teachers, the head of subject would be the leader with whom they would have the most contact during their school placements, so it is reasonable to assume their contextualized experiences of subject leadership as enacted in their placement schools would have some impact on their own aspirations. However there is nonetheless an intriguing gendered trend apparent here. Whilst 84% of males and females aspired to subject leadership at the start of the year, by the end the figures were 75% of females and 63% of males – more than a 20% difference in the number of male aspirants. This merits investigation and could be an indication that males focused more consciously by the year end on the higher status positions.

It is the second point, however, that provides the main basis for discussion here.

The questionnaire data indicate that the difference between the proportion of male and female aspirants increases the more senior the post, with a mere 5% of female students aspiring to headship by the end of the year. These results raise questions

about why, even at the start of their careers, female teachers are seemingly less inclined than their male colleagues to envisage themselves in the most senior posts.

The interviews undertaken with ten participants provide further illustration of the tendency for men rather than women to aspire to senior positions. Discussions about how interviewees viewed headship were especially revealing. Of the five female student teachers interviewed, two rejected headship outright, mainly because they saw it as detracting from their teaching role:

I don't think I'd ever like to be a head teacher...I can see it would take away some of my passion for [teaching]...It would grind me down...being behind the scenes rather than actually being out there and doing it (Megan, 21).

I'm not sure I'd want to take on the high-up role, you know, like the deputy head or the head...I just know a lot of situations where the head's been off with stress...The...business side of it as well, doesn't really appeal to me...It just seems so far away, and it just seems like it's a lot of responsibility...And I don't know how much teaching they actually get to do...so trying to think of myself in that position is quite hard' (Michelle, 21).

These extracts illustrate a tendency to view senior school leadership work as hidden and distant: it is 'behind the scenes', 'high up' and 'so far away' from the business of

teaching. Megan and Michelle did not change their view during the course of the year, and their discussions of what headship involved did not include any consideration of potential opportunities the role might offer for effecting positive change. The three other women did not completely reject headship when interviewed at the start of the year. Becky, who was in her early twenties, said at the start of the year that headship might be a possibility. In her end of year interview however she was clear that she would *not* be considering headship as a career option, and she talked then about how she did not see herself as the 'right sort of person' for headship:

Gosh, it just seems really scary to think [about being a head]. I don't really see myself being that sort of person...you'd need to be really confident with your own decisions and judgments...and that's something I really struggle with, trusting myself to make the right judgment and being in control...I'm not likely to be the person to say, 'No, we're doing this and let's go ahead with it', because I always worry that it'll just crash and burn and I'll be responsible. I think it is the responsibility that's quite frightening (Becky, 24).

The language Becky uses reflects her self-perception as essentially powerless and therefore unsuitable for leadership. Headship is a 'scary' prospect and responsibility 'frightening'. She doesn't see herself as 'that sort of person'. She 'struggles' with making judgments, decisions and 'being in control', and the words she uses as she envisages making bad decisions as a headteacher border on the nightmarish: she

worries that 'it'll just crash and burn', and she will be responsible. This powerful imagery captures the sense of fear that pervades her self-perceptions, fuelling her self-doubt as a capable future leader. Leadership is perceived here as decisive, confident and vested in one person, rather than as collaborative. This concept of leadership is more akin to traditional, heroic, Great Man theories of leadership than notions of collaborative styles, reflecting a very traditional construction of headship, from which Becky disassociates herself. It is intriguing that the responsibility she holds as a teacher, essentially leading groups of young people every day, is not conceptualized as having transferability to a whole school leadership context and suggests that her reluctance may be linked to the notion of the inherent masculinity implicit in the individualistic Great Man model, in tandem with her own diminished sense of agency (Smith, 2011a; Smith, 2011b).

A second woman, Maggie, was very tentative in her comments, stating, 'I joked to my mum that I'm going to be head of a private school!', but was then clear in stating that a full involvement in the life of the school, rather than headship, was her driving passion:

I...see myself as a very involved teacher...I don't just want to teach [subject], I want to get involved with the school. I want to do extra-curricular and I want to do assemblies...I want to promote certain things...I can do all of this, and I'd love to...I want to be a role model' (Maggie, 22).

Again, in this example, Maggie uses agentic language to describe how she will 'do extra-curricular', 'do assemblies', 'promote certain things' and 'be a role model' – all aspects of leadership in the context of leading young people, but Maggie nonetheless dissociates herself from headship, which she perceives as other to the types of leadership in which she envisages herself engaging. Enactment of professional agency via the leadership of young people is evident in the responses of the female student teachers, but headship is not seen as in the same category of work. Maggie withdrew from the study before the end of the year so it is not possible to know whether her aspirations changed.

It is worth noting that the two brief extracts from Michelle and Megan's interviews illustrate how the women perceive headship as a role that would control rather than empower them. Becky perceives the responsibility of headship as something to fear. Megan and Michelle go further, subconsciously abdicating their own agency as they try to envisage themselves in the role that is more powerful than they are, a role with the capacity to 'take away some of my passion', 'grind me down' and cause stress. In all of these examples it is striking that the women do essentially talk about their work with children in agentic terms, evoking implicit constructions of leadership. This reflects a developing professional identity as empowered teachers. However this identity does not incorporate a self-construct synonymous with the formal position of headteacher. This could be grounded in assumptions about formal leadership as a male preserve and would merit further investigation.

There was a different emphasis in the responses of Pauline, a mature student and a career changer, as this extract indicates:

I think I've probably got the management skills for [headship]...I think that the worst thing a school can ever do is get one of these accountants in to come and head a school...I think you need loads and loads of good experience to enable you to understand...but...I would like that opportunity...[being] a figurehead, to a degree. The only problem with being a head I think is that you lose touch with the classroom...I wonder if heads should teach just a little bit...So, it's a figure head. Definitely you've got to set the right image for the school. There's no question about that. I see the role as to manage money...and discipline...In an ideal position I'd want to be teaching...probably five lessons. I think I would like to teach one class of a year group so...you're in touch with the school...I'd like to be a hands-on head. Too many heads shut the door and they are not seen around the school. Children don't even know what the head looks like sometimes. The contact with the staff has got to be fundamental (Pauline, 43).

Whilst some of the male student teachers interviewed were very much aware of the potential downside of headship, they were nonetheless aspirants to headship and already envisaged themselves in the role. They considered the less attractive aspects of headship to be the risk of losing contact with children, having to take on a

managerial rather than a teaching role, too much paperwork, having to deal with budgets, and coping with stress. In this respect they echoed the women teachers in Smith's (2011a) study, as well as their female student colleagues on the PGCE programme. An important difference between male and female interviewees however was that whilst the male students might articulate their awareness of the negative or challenging aspects of headship, there was a greater tendency to balance this with a view of the affordances of the role. David (26), for instance, commented, 'I think [as a head] you can make a massive difference. And I think you can really shape the ethos of the school'. There was a far greater tendency for male interviewees to reflect on the positive possibilities headship might afford them, and to discuss this in conjunction with an assertion of their self-perceptions as agentic and empowered. All five male interviewees expressed an aspiration to headship, discussed the potential the post offered to shape a school, critiqued the actions of leaders they had encountered and ultimately were able to envisage themselves in the post. In contrast with the women cited earlier, who perceived the role as something that would control them, the male students saw their own capacity to take charge, which, interestingly, extended to changing the nature of headship work. Male interviewees interspersed their discussions about the less appealing and more difficult aspects of headship with assertions about how *they* would approach the role, rather than how the role would limit and confine them. The following extracts from male students' interviews are illustrative:

[In] ten to fifteen years I'd like to be Assistant Principal, maybe even a deputy looking towards...headship...I mean, I feel like that's

ridiculously ambitious to say as a newly qualified teacher, but I think I would...I think there is something attractive about it. It's the highest you can go in school. I think it's being a representative...the spokesperson, the figurehead of the whole school and steering it in one direction...in the right direction, and focussing on what's important (Rob, 25).

Yes, I'd like to [become a headteacher]...At the school I'm at, I'm not entirely sure. The head seems very cut off from the rest of the school. I think that if I was going to be a head, I'd like to be more of a hands-on head if you like...I think I certainly wouldn't have time to teach a lot, but it would be nice to teach a little bit. It doesn't seem to have much to do with the children at all from what I can see and I don't know if I'd like to do it like that if I was going to do it...but ultimately it would be good...you get to put your stamp on the school...you really can make a difference then when you get to that sort of level of responsibility...If you're ambitious it's sort of the natural end goal I suppose...Although...the impression I have of it is that it is actually a lot of paperwork... I think that ultimately I would like to do it...I just think that you would have the opportunity to set the tone for the school and if you can get the school going well it also has a positive impact not just in the school but in the surrounding area...if you get it right it could be a powerful thing' (Tim, 30).

It is interesting to note the way the male informants use language assertively to convey a sense of confidence and agency. Rob talks about 'steering', Tim about putting his 'stamp on the school', and envisaging the 'positive impact' he could have, which would be a 'powerful thing'. It is striking that Tim and other male interviewees talk positively and assertively about their own possible futures as school leaders, positioning themselves as agents of change and improvement and emerging as similar in their self-perceptions to the headteachers described by Smith (2011a) and Fulller (2012), relishing the scope headship offered them for effecting sustained change institution-wide, to the greater benefit of children and the school community. These examples from the male students' interviews contrast starkly with the more tentative responses of some of the women. Becky, cited earlier, saw headship as 'scary' and perceived herself as not 'that sort of person', unable to 'make the right judgment' or 'be in control' as she envisaged the nightmarish 'crash and burn' that ultimate responsibility might entail. This sense of diminished agency was also reflected in the language some of the other women used too in their reflections on whether they might become headteachers. Michelle, interestingly, used active and agentic language when discussing how she had developed as a teacher during her PGCE year:

I feel a lot more confident...and...a lot more able to cope with different situations...I think I've changed over a year...I think I am who I wanted to be...When you see a student improve...the way that if they get involved with something, and you know, you have lots of hands up, and they really respond

to your lesson – I think that's really rewarding...On my phase B [school placement] I've taken on a lot more responsibility as a tutor'.

However in contemplating her future career she became less assertive in her language the further into the future (and the higher up the hierarchy) she looked, moving from active to passive as these extracts demonstrate:

[In my first post] I really want to help set up the English A level, because that's what I really enjoyed doing on my first placement...Three years from now I really hope I'll have taken on more responsibility. I think I've realized that over that year, that I really would like to, you know, either have some sort of whole school language/literacy across the curriculum [role] or something like that...I want to take on more responsibility and be able to implement it...I definitely want to aim towards Head of Department...I don't think I want to be a head...it just seems like something quite far removed...the Head is quite removed from teaching...I'm not sure completely having my timetable taken off me will be something I'll want' (Michelle, 22).

Again, it is worthy of note as in this example that teaching is seen as separate to leadership/headship. Whilst Michelle clearly has developed a strong sense of self-efficacy in her teaching role this does not extend to seeing that her current role might develop into leadership at the level of the whole school. Instead she distances herself from the headship role, which she constructs as detached from and different to teaching. Her male colleagues do not however make this distinction. Whilst

recognizing the different types of work headteachers undertake, the male students are able to transfer their agentic self-perceptions as teachers seamlessly to the more senior leadership role further down the line. This may point towards fundamentally gendered constructions of what teaching is, that is, is it viewed as primarily a caring profession, founded on a feminized ethic of care (Smith, 2008; Vogt, 2002), which informs teachers' commitment to children's welfare and individual achievement, or essentially as leadership, albeit of younger people? If thus perceived, it starts to become apparent why some teachers recognise early their own capacity for leadership in the broader context beyond the classroom.

This suggests that aspiration to the most senior posts is not simply a matter of gender, but may be a function of the individual's ability to fuse an appreciation of the affordances offered by the role with an awareness of one's own capacity to act, take control and exert professional agency. A complex range of factors are likely to influence the potential for individuals to develop this capacity to envisage themselves in positions of power. This would seem to develop from an ability to transfer a sense of personal agency to a developing professional identity and to use this to inform the envisioning of one's future professional self. The indications from this study are however that there is a greater tendency for men rather than women at this stage of their careers to envisage themselves as potentially empowered.

Whilst, as I have argued elsewhere (Smith, 2011b), awareness of one's capacity for agency and a willingness to exert it can be important factors in career decisions, to theorise apparent gendered differences in career aspiration in terms only of

personal agency is to ignore the very real social, cultural and structural constraints within which women work (McCrae, 2003). Moreover, whilst Giddens' (1991) work has been highly influential in informing our understanding of modernity and the choices and freedoms now open to individuals, it is an over-simplification to pretend that men and women enjoy the same freedoms and choices within the patriarchal structures of western society and its institutions. Schools are amongst the most strongly hierarchical of institutions, and a numerical predominance of women has not disrupted the overall balance of male-female power. There are thus limitations to the usefulness of theories of personal agency in accounting for male teachers' over-representation in the upper echelons of school hierarchies. In the context of neo-liberalism it is questionable whether the same range of choices is open to women as to men, both within the competitive, performative and highly regulated culture of schools and in wider, UK society. Whilst educational discourses surrounding equity and social justice predominate, little has changed in terms of creating more equitable schools and a more socially just society. McRobbie (2009) argues that, far from offering greater freedom for women, social processes that appear to take account of equality actually work to reinforce inequality, and she is therefore heavily critical of sociological theorists' unquestioning acceptance of neo-liberal discourses of equality:

There is a kind of sociological complicity taking place in the work of Beck, Giddens and Lash, insofar as it fails entirely to reflect on the way in which the processes, which seem somehow inevitable or inexorable and which seem to free up people and give them more choices, are in fact new and more

complex ways of ensuring that masculine domination is reinstated, and at the same time protected from the possibility of a new feminism, in sociology as well as in public life (McRobbie, 2009: 48).

The problem with theorizing only in terms of agency, personal choice and individual identity is that this risks obscuring our understanding of the interplay of formal and informal institutional and societal structures with gender, age, ethnicity, social class, sexuality and disability to differentially influence and determine the options open to a diverse group of teachers. There is therefore a need to investigate and understand more fully how the culture and power structures of UK education and schools frame, define and limit the opportunities and experiences open to new generations of teachers.

Richer insights into the ways in which novice teachers perceive leadership, and men's and women's self-perceptions in relation to senior leadership roles, merit further investigation. Findings might usefully inform the development of strategies by schools, universities, and school-university partnerships to offer fruitful opportunities that enable early career teachers to recognize, develop and realize their potential as leaders, and to effect sustained and positive shifts in the culture and leadership of schools as caring, child-centred and socially just institutions.

Conclusion

The under-representation of women in headship positions, and the shortage of aspirants to headship in general, continue to be issues schools need to address.

This study considered the longer-term aspirations of new entrants to the profession, and set out to ascertain whether there were gendered trends in student teachers' leadership aspirations. Some commonality between the male and the female student teachers emerged: a strong interest in subject- and teaching and learning-oriented roles at middle leadership level, and an understanding of what headship involves, including the conflicts and difficulties this might entail. Certain gendered trends also emerged. In particular male students were more likely than their female colleagues to aspire to the most senior positions, and to envisage themselves as headteachers. Male interviewees were more likely to articulate their perceptions of the scope the role offers to effect positive change, whilst women were more likely to view it as a job that would restrict and control rather than empower them.

These findings raise questions worthy of further investigation, with regard to male and female novice teachers' professional self-identities and perceptions of their future selves as potential leaders. The development of teachers' professional self-identities during the first few years of teaching, and the impact of their experience, perceptions and enactment of leadership on their self-perceptions as potential leaders, provides a useful focus for more research. A further phase of the research has now started, during which 6 early career teachers (3 male, 3 female) are involved in an in-depth, longitudinal study focusing on their perceptions and contextualized experiences of leadership and their developing self-perceptions as actual and

potential leaders. The insights afforded might usefully inform universities', schools' and school-university partnerships' strategies to develop structures and cultures which fruitfully nurture student and early career teachers' leadership skills and understanding and foster their leadership aspirations, leading to a more equitable distribution of men and women in posts of responsibility in schools.

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Biography

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