

The career experiences and aspirations of women deputy head teachers

Abstract

This article draws on the findings of an in-depth study which sought to explore the career histories and professional aspirations of twelve women deputy head teachers in England. In view of the ongoing under-representation of women in secondary headship and the scarcity of literature focusing solely on deputy heads, the study aimed to gain an insight into how female potential aspirants to headship perceive their professional futures. This article explores the heterogeneous ways in which the sample experienced deputy headship and the influence that these experiences had on their career aspirations. The themes that emerged from the women's narratives highlighted both the enabling and constraining nature of deputy headship. Analysis also revealed that deputies' day-to-day work had the potential to facilitate or curtail aspirations to headship. This article argues that women's experiences of deputy headship should be taken into consideration in debates concerning the underrepresentation of women in secondary headship. Implications for leadership development and support as well as avenues for future research are identified.

Keywords:

deputy headship, professional aspirations, deputy head teachers, headship, women's careers

Introduction

This article reports on an in-depth study which investigated the career histories and professional aspirations of twelve women deputy head teachers working in state funded secondary schools in England. The aim of the study was to explore the women's lived experiences, both personal and professional, and the ways in which these had influenced the possibility of their aspiring towards secondary headship.

Deputy Headship

Compared to the wealth of empirical research that exists on the experiences and perceptions of head teachers, there is a scarcity of literature focusing exclusively on deputy heads (alternatively known as vice principals, assistant principals in the US or deputy principals in Australia) (Rintoul and Goulais, 2010; Harris et al., 2003; Cranston et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2009). It is notable too that much of the literature that does focus on deputy headship is more than ten years old (see Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Cranston et al., 2004; Hayes, 2005; Harris et al., 2003) and that, ‘without exception, these studies called for more and better research’ (Kwan and Walker, 2010: 533). Despite these recommendations, there remains a significant gap in the literature. Deputies play an important leadership role and are possible candidates for head teacher recruitment (Kwan, 2011). As Cranston (2007: 109-110) observes, assuring that there is a pool of deputies willing to step up to headship will involve investigating ‘the motives and intentions of potential aspirants in seeking promotion’ and exploring ‘what potential aspirants actually think about school leadership’. A more in-depth and nuanced understanding of deputy head teachers’ career experiences and professional aspirations would also assist policy-makers and practitioners to better support deputy head teachers’ training, career development and progression (Lee et al., 2009).

Deputy headship is commonly perceived as an important rung on the ladder towards achieving headteacher status (Harris et al., 2003). Some research suggests, however, that a significant number of deputy head teachers do not aspire towards headship. A recent study conducted by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT, 2016) examined the working lives of deputy and assistant head teachers and vice principals in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. When asked about their occupational aspirations, only 36 per cent of respondents identified themselves as active aspirants to headship with almost two thirds of the sample uncertain about or having rejected the possibility of promotion. When respondents were asked what would encourage them to pursue headship, just

over half of respondents indicated that the role would be more attractive to them if were to be free from inspection in their first year. The authors concluded that the 'punitive accountability framework' in education may be discouraging deputies from pursuing headship (NAHT, 2016:3). In a similar study conducted in Queensland, Australia, Cranston (2007) found that deputy heads identified the workload and responsibilities of headship as well as fulfilment in their current role as potential barriers to promotion.

The studies explored above suggest reasons why both men and women deputy head teachers may reject headship. School workforce data in England, however, reveal that women occupy less secondary headships than deputy headships. In November 2015, 38% of head teachers in state funded secondary schools (which includes secondary academies and free schools) were female. For the same period, 47% of deputy head teachers in state funded secondary schools were female (DfE, 2016). These statistics may suggest that women deputies are confronting structural or cultural obstacles which are impeding their career advancement, or that they are making the active choice not to pursue headship. These two possibilities are discussed in some detail later in this article.

As noted above, the professional aspirations of deputy head teachers have received limited academic attention. There are even fewer published studies focusing exclusively on women deputy heads. In a rare study of thirty eight women deputies in England, Grant (1989: 123) found that 'promotion for its own sake was not at the top of the career agenda' for the women she interviewed, and that 'their career moves were prompted by concerns relating to job satisfaction and strongly conditioned by factors outside their control'. Grant concluded that very few of the women in her sample were what she termed 'career ambitious'. A similar study of ten women deputy heads was conducted by McBurney and Hough (1989: 117). All of the women interviewed reported experiencing 'stereotyped expectations from staff' in relation to job applications but

perceived gender stereotyping as becoming a less prevalent feature of school life. While both studies, published in the 1980s, tell us something about women's experiences of deputy headship, the educational landscape has changed since these studies were published. In a more recent Israeli study, Oplatka and Tamir (2009) focus specifically on women deputy heads' impressions of their current role and that of the head teacher. Having interviewed women deputies who do not aspire towards headship, the authors reported that their participants believed the role of deputy and head teacher to be very different positions. The head teacher role, with its emphasis on accountability, administrative processes and 'masculine' managerialism, was perceived to be entirely other to the 'interesting, challenging and self-fulfilling' role of the deputy headteacher (Oplatka and Tamir, 2009: 232). It remains unknown, however, how women deputy head teachers who envisage themselves as tomorrow's head teachers experience deputy headship and how these experiences inform their career aspirations.

Women and Secondary Headship

Despite the female dominated nature of the teaching profession, men continue to be overrepresented in secondary headship posts (DfE, 2016). It has been suggested that, at the current rate of progress, 'women's representation in headship will not match their representation in the teaching workforce before 2040' (Fuller, 2017:58). The gender and educational leadership literature suggests that there are a variety of complex and interrelated factors that continue to limit women's career options and advancement to headship. Motherhood and the societal expectation that women take primary responsibility for caring within the home has been shown to exert a constraining influence on women's career trajectories and experiences (Coleman, 2002; Bradbury and Gunter, 2006; Smith, 2016). Discrimination and the stereotypical alignment of leadership with masculinity by those tasked with recruiting senior leaders has also been highlighted as a potential barrier for women teachers who aspire towards headship (Sperandio and Kagoda, 2010; Coleman,

2007; Moorosi, 2010). Furthermore, some scholars have identified the performative nature of the current educational climate, its rigid accountability measures and neoliberal policy agendas, as a potential hurdle (Cunneen and Harford, 2016).

Oplatka and Tamir (2009: 217) observe that the issue of women's underrepresentation at the secondary head teacher level is often spoken about as if women teachers 'naturally' aspire towards headship but 'are impeded by a wide variety of determinants'. Yet, as Smith (2011: 8) states, 'women can, and do, make decisions for themselves, and take steps to shape their own lives and careers'. Women are active agents. Consequently, women teachers' and leaders' agency, that is, their capacity for action and choice must feature when discussing the underrepresentation of women in secondary headship. Draper and McMichael (2003: 194) observe that a proportion of teachers of both sexes have 'always rejected headship as a career goal'. Furthermore, research has shown that the satisfaction derived from deputy headship can prompt deputies to make the active decision not to pursue promotion (MacBeath et al., 2009; Cranston, 2007; Oplatka and Tamir, 2009). It may be, therefore, that some women deputies are actively choosing to remain in a role they enjoy. It is important to note, however, that this potential explanation is not intended to blame women for their underrepresentation in secondary headship posts. It is well documented that women face a variety of complex cultural and structural obstacles on the road to leadership. This potential explanation endeavours to recognise the capacity that women have to exert agency and make positive choices about their careers within the structural and cultural constraints they confront (Smith, 2011: 22).

Intersectional theory and research focused on women and leadership (see, for example, Showunmi et al., 2016; Lumby, 2015) highlights the heterogeneity that exists between women and the multiple identity strands that can influence women's career experiences and trajectories. Intersectionality is

the ‘notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors’ (Nash, 2008: 2). Following the work of Crenshaw (1991), it is ‘rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory’ and is considered ‘a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool’ (Carbado et al., 2013: 303). A variety of complex and interrelated factors – such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, age and sexuality – frame and shape women’s career experiences, aspirations and paths to senior leadership. Far from a homogeneous group, the women deputy head teachers who are the focus of this study have identities that comprise a medley of interlaced and complex elements. Participants’ experiences of deputy headship and the factors influencing their career aspirations will, therefore, diverge from one another and encompass a great deal of complexity and nuance.

Methodology

The career experiences and aspirations of women deputy head teachers were explored through four research questions:

- How do women deputy head teachers make sense of their career histories?
- How do women deputy head teachers experience deputy headship?
- How do women deputy head teachers perceive secondary headship?
- How do women deputy head teachers envisage their future professional selves?

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

I adopted a qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology to explore these questions. IPA aims to shed light on ‘a person’s relatedness to the world (and to the things in it which matter to them) through the meanings they make’ (Larkin and Thompson, 2011: 102). Concerned with the lived experiences, perceptions and sense making of individual participants,

IPA researchers seek to ‘learn from the insights of the experts – research participants themselves’ (Reid et al., 2005: 20). The methodology draws on both phenomenology and hermeneutics, and offers a perspective which is both ‘empathic and questioning’ (Smith et al., 2009: 36). IPA was selected as an appropriate methodology for investigating the career histories and professional aspirations of women deputies because of its idiographic nature. Focusing the researcher’s attention both on the individual participant and the particularity of their narrative, IPA offers an opportunity to focus on the rich, nuanced and complex facets of individual participants’ career experiences. Its focus on the particular also offers a ‘sensitivity to context’ which facilitates consideration of the individual participant in relation to their social world and vice versa (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection

School websites were initially used to identify secondary schools in England with women deputy head teachers or vice principals. Similar to the approach taken by Fuller (2017: 56), titles such as ‘Miss’, ‘Mr’ and ‘Ms’, lists of senior leadership teams and photographs were used to ascertain deputies’ sex. Potential participants were contacted via e-mail inviting them to take part in the research. After this process, I relied on a snowball sampling strategy to recruit further participants. Once a participant confirmed their wish to be involved in the project, we arranged a mutually convenient time and place in which the interview would occur. Participants were given the option of having a face-to-face or telephone interview. This ensured that the data collection process was as convenient for participants as possible, given their busy schedules.

I adopted a semi-structured approach to interviewing. Offering both flexibility and consistency, this mode of interviewing gave participants the space and time to explore their lived experiences and sense making in their own words (Englander, 2012; Mason, 2002). Each participant was asked a series of semi-structured interview questions. Probes were used where necessary. The interview

schedule included open-ended questions focused on individuals' career trajectories to date, their current lives as deputy head teachers as well as their occupational aspirations. On average, each interview lasted for sixty minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and were later transcribed verbatim.

The Sample

Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to protect participants' anonymity. The sample consisted of twelve participants. All of the women who took part in the study worked as deputy head teachers in English state funded secondary schools at the time of interview (between March 2014 and January 2015). Six of the sample worked in the Midlands of England, two in the South of England and four in the North of England. With regard to school type, two thirds of the sample worked in secondary academies with the remainder working in local authority maintained schools. Half of the sample were in the 40 - 49 age range, four participants were in the 30 - 39 age range and two participants were in the 50 - 59 age range. There were seven mothers in the sample.

All of those interviewed were white, heterosexual women. Consequently, there are a range of demographic characteristics that are not represented in this study. It is acknowledged that this is a shortcoming of the research, and that the perceptions of a small, white group of heterosexual women cannot be assumed to be representative of a broader, more diverse group.

Prior to interview, participants were asked to indicate how long they had been a deputy head teacher. Nine of the women identified themselves as having less than five years' experience, one woman identified herself as having between five and ten years' experience with the remaining two having more than 10 years' experience. The sample comprised eight aspirants to headship, three

participants who were undecided and one participant who had rejected the possibility of seeking further promotion.

Ethical clearance was sought from the University of Leicester before commencing the study, and full, informed consent was obtained from all of those involved. The interviewing strategy was phenomenological in nature, focused on the individual's experiences, perceptions and sense-making. As Smith (2012: 498) notes, there is a risk that participants can find themselves reliving painful memories or sharing very private thoughts. It was made clear to participants that, should they find themselves sharing experiences they would prefer to keep private, they should feel free to stop the interview at any time. Participants were also made aware that they were free to withdraw from the research project at any point.

Data Analysis

IPA research focuses the analyst's attention on the single case i.e. the nuanced complexities of particular individuals' narrative. All of the data collected as part of this project were transcribed and analysed in accordance with the analytic principles outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009: 82-101). An individual transcript was read multiple times. Once familiar with the data, I engaged in initial exploratory coding. The first stage involved adding descriptive comments to the transcript. Here I wrote down key words or phrases to describe the content of the transcript. I did this for the entire transcript before adding linguistic commentary to the transcript. Linguistic comments focused on the language used by the participant. I noted down the rhythm, tone and linguistic devices used by the participant as well as any interesting words or phrases. Once again, I did this for the entire transcript before moving on. Finally, conceptual commentary was added to the transcript. These comments were more interpretative and interrogative in nature. As Smith et

al. (2009: 88) observe ‘conceptual annotating will usually involve a shift in your focus towards the participant’s overarching understanding of the matters that they are discussing’. Once exploratory coding was complete, emergent themes were identified which were concise but suitably reflected the complexity of the data. Links between emergent themes were then searched for. Once connections had been made across emergent themes and superordinate and subordinate themes had been identified, the next transcript was considered. The process outlined above was repeated. When all transcripts had been analysed separately, all cases were considered collectively and the super-ordinate and subordinate themes for the entire group were identified. This iterative approach facilitated an in-depth, nuanced analysis of the women’s idiosyncratic experiences and the sense they made of them. It afforded meaningful insights into individuals’ professional lives, capturing the heterogeneity of their career-framing experiences.

Findings

Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the data: (1) managing constraint, (2) motivating forces and (3) perceptions of secondary headship and the future. The emphasis in this article is on the women’s experiences of deputy headship and the influence that these experiences had exerted on their career plans and aspirations.

Deputy headship

The Deputy Headteacher Role

Previous studies, which are quite old now, have suggested that the roles performed by deputy head teachers are poorly defined (see, for example, Harvey, 1994; Ribbins, 1997). Deputies are said to experience what Marshall and Hooley (2006: 7) call ‘role ambiguity’. The women who took part in this study, however, described having a clear sense of the part they play in the leadership of their

schools, be that mainly academic or pastoral. Participants tended to detail a great number of duties when describing their role. In the following extract, Caitlin describes her professional life as consisting of extensive responsibility:

I am responsible for the teaching and learning across the school. I am responsible for curriculum. I am responsible for assessment and reporting and timetabling. If the head's out, I am in charge. What else? I do kind of do everything really (Caitlin).

Caitlin's working life is depicted here as highly demanding. Tasks are referred to in list form, thus highlighting the all-encompassing and 'greedy' nature of her role (Gronn, 2003). The repetition of the phrase 'I am responsible' captures her sense of accountability as a deputy head. There is also a sense of expectancy and opportunity in this extract; she is aware of the need to step up to lead in the head teacher's absence. Interestingly, although Caitlin describes her teaching and learning responsibilities as being clearly demarcated, her perception that she does 'everything' suggests that there is an ill-defined quality to her role as 'second in command'. This is in keeping with the literature on deputy headship which has traditionally highlighted the absence of clearly defined parameters, demands and expectations relating to the role (Kwan, 2011).

Despite fulfilling similar school leadership positions, the women who took part in this study had made sense of deputy headship in different ways. Some described their role as being defined by a necessity to react in the moment and deal with the unpredictable: 'My responsibilities are whatever happens. It is completely reactive' (Jennifer). While others spoke of deputy headship as being an agentic and largely strategic role: 'I do an awful lot of the strategic planning in terms of school improvement plans, quality assurance, teaching and learning and CPD' (Naomi). For the majority of the sample, however, deputy headship was perceived as comprising a tension between planning and deliberation on the one hand, and having to respond almost in the moment to the ever-changing needs of the school community on the other:

One side of me is trying to plan structure and support with the CPD, the appraisals. I've got to make sure people have a structure to work with. I've got to prioritise, I've got to work with the other members of SLT and see what they've got to prioritise. The other side, however, is very much reactionary and that knocks you all the time ... I can sometimes come in and look up and it's 2 o'clock. Look down and it's time to go (Alice).

This extract suggests that Alice perceives contradiction and tension to be central parts of her professional life. Characterising the dissimilar elements of deputy headship as two separate 'sides' of herself, she describes feeling physically torn and constrained as the two aspects of her role fight for her time and attention. What is interesting here is how Alice perceives the 'reactionary' as having a detrimental influence on the strategic aspects of deputy headship. There is a sense of restriction and, perhaps, frustration here.

Teaching

All of the women who participated in this study reported spending a proportion of their working week engaged in timetabled teaching. This was described by many as being one of the most enjoyable and satisfying parts of deputy headship:

Seeing their faces as they say, "Oh, I've got it now! I understand it!" That's just priceless.

That's why I wanted to be a teacher and I still get that every day (Beth).

It is a joy to teach (Lorraine).

Teaching was seen as having two key benefits for the deputy head. First, teaching was perceived as helping deputies to maintain a child-centred perspective that prioritises young people and their learning above all else. Second, having a teaching timetable was described as helping deputy heads to establish and preserve credibility with those they led. The women's classroom practice appeared

to affirm and strengthen their professional identities. Dawn describes her experiences of teaching as a deputy head teacher in the following way:

It is a point of pride with me that I've got to be as good - if not better than - other people who would teach them. I put a lot pressure on myself (Dawn).

This extract details the sense of responsibility Dawn feels as a senior leader to be an effective teacher. She describes her teaching practice as being linked to her 'pride' and sense of identity. There is an element of competition in this extract and, perhaps, a need to prove that she has earned her position as a deputy head teacher. The quotation culminates in the stark phrase 'I put a lot of pressure on myself', as she reflects on the high expectations she has of her teaching practice as well as the necessity she feels to lead by example.

Marshall and Hooley (2006: 8) report that deputy head teachers can 'experience role conflict and overload when it is not possible to perform adequately all of their assigned roles'. While the women who participated in this study identified teaching young people as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their role, some interviewees reported feeling as if their teaching workload conflicted with the leadership responsibilities assigned to them as deputy head teachers. In the following extract, Naomi describes the difficulties of striking a balance between teaching and leading:

It's always there in your mind. You have always got this dilemma. You know that teaching is not your first priority because everything else is and then you beat yourself up because your lessons are not as good as you would want them to be (Naomi).

Naomi reports feeling under pressure to meet the varied and conflicting duties of deputy headship. Her priorities appear divided and she expresses a sense of guilt as she accepts that the quality of her lessons do not meet her own expectations. This is captured in the phrase 'you beat yourself up' which suggests both critical self-reflection and a sense of frustration. These findings are consistent with those of other studies which suggest deputy head teachers can experience pressure

to fulfil both their teaching and leadership obligations (see, for example, Vulliamy and Webb, 1995; NAHT, 2016). They echo the observations of Rintoul and Goulais (2010: 746) who describe deputy headship as a ‘middle role’ requiring individuals ‘to be both a leader and a follower, driven by a juggling act of creative, practical and political demands’.

Workload

The vast majority of the women who took part in this study described prioritising and investing a great deal in their careers and its upward trajectory. A small group of participants spoke about pursuing career advancement at the expense of all else, including their well-being and personal relationships. Sophie, for instance, remarked:

I devote a lot of time, a lot of mental space and energy to my work and to leadership ... I spend very, very little effort and focus on my own personal life (Sophie).

Sophie perceived her life outside of work to be secondary to her professional life; it was as though her work took up both her physical and mental energies. Her use of the word ‘devote’ illustrates a sense of choice and agency, the conscious commitment of her time.

In a study investigating teacher workload, The Department for Education (2014: 13) found that deputy head teachers worked on average 19.1 hours a week ‘out of hours’ that is before 8am, after 6pm and during weekends. All of the women I interviewed described working at home to meet the demands of deputy headship. Many perceived this to be an inevitable aspect of life as a deputy head teacher. Some of the sample, however, argued that the amount of work needed to be completed ‘out of hours’ was both constraining and excessive: ‘I have started tracking my hours. When you are working 70, 80, 90 hours a week, it is ridiculous. There is an intense pressure’ (Dawn).

The women's career narratives painted a picture of the deputy role as all-consuming with a kaleidoscopic range of pressures and demands. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that some of the women who participated in this study questioned the sustainability of such working. Madeline, for instance, stated 'I am 35 and I am burning out ... The work is constant, 12 to 15 hours a day'. Her career narrative featured concerns for her health if she were to continue to work in this way. There was also some indication in the women's accounts that deputy headship, with its intensive workload and the accountability that accompanied the position, posed a risk to their relationships. In the following extract, Sharon describes her life outside work as being key to her sense of identity:

I might be a deputy head teacher but I'm a wife and a mother and a sister and a daughter and everything else that goes with life I know so many female teachers that are in failed relationships, broken marriages and I don't want that for myself (Sharon).

There are several points of interest here. The extract captures Sharon's prioritisation of her life outside of work. Her list of multiple family ties is starkly contrasted with a single occupational role. Interestingly, her words suggest at once both a sense of anxiety and certainty as Sharon describes what she does not want out of life. Comparing the lives of colleagues and others holding similar occupational positions to herself engenders the need to protect her identities as mother, daughter and sister from her work. In Sharon's account, there is a sense that the 'greediness' of deputy headship has the power to constrain, to destroy, to break relationships.

While the majority of the women described feeling constrained by the workload and responsibilities of deputy headship, a minority of participants spoke of workload as being within their power to monitor and control. Emphasising her agentic capacity to shape her own experiences of deputy headship, Lorraine remarked:

Workload is something you constantly have to think about and something you have to monitor and you do that through your time management. I have specific cut off points where I think I've done enough now and now I need to have some 'me time' (Lorraine).

Professional Futures

Each of the women were asked to talk at length about their occupational aspirations and the professional futures they envisaged for themselves. While acknowledging the precariousness and uncertainty inherent in any discussion of the future, participants described how they saw their future career trajectories and the ways in which their experiences as deputy head teachers had informed their professional aspirations. As noted above, two thirds of the sample aspired towards headship, while the remaining four participants felt uncertain about or had rejected headship as a possibility. The women's perceptions of the head teacher role have been explored elsewhere (Guihen, 2017). In this article, I focus on deputy headship and the ways in which the women's experiences as deputy head teachers had influenced the possibility of their aspiring towards secondary headship.

Relationships

Harris and colleagues (2003: 11) observe, 'the headteacher remains the main gatekeeper to leadership functions in the school and if the headteacher does not support a strong leadership role for the deputy ... it is unlikely that this will happen'. Collectively, the career narratives of the women who took part in this study support this observation and point to the important role that head teachers can play in motivating and preparing deputies for headship. In the following extract, for instance, Jennifer describes a head teacher who had supported her professional development and encouraged her to pursue promotion:

He would say things like ‘now you need to be doing this’. He used to put me in things like this collaborative group, which meant I worked with all the head teachers from the primary schools. He was gearing me towards headship, without me really knowing it. He was phenomenal, he was my mentor (Jennifer).

Here Jennifer’s head teacher is described as facilitating her aspirations to headship. She points to the key role that her head teacher played both in her experience of deputy headship and the ways in which she envisaged her professional future. It was through her head teacher that Jennifer was able to gain the additional leadership experience and the encouragement necessary to perceive herself as a potential aspirant to headship. Jennifer describes this relationship as one based on support and respect. Both characteristics are highlighted as constituting a successful head-deputy relationship in Hughes and James’ (1999) study of Welsh primary schools.

A small minority of participants, however, reported less positive relationships with previous head teachers. Katherine, for instance, recalled a previous head teacher who did not explicitly support her leadership aspirations. Interestingly, this head had inadvertently inspired her to pursue headship:

You get the idea that you can do it when you see people make a huge mess of it above you. So, you kind of sit back and watch people above you who are making decisions and think ‘I can do that better’ (Katherine).

This extract suggests that being a deputy head teacher had given Katherine the opportunity to directly observe the decision making of the head teacher she worked for. Crucially, she had found herself questioning these decisions. This experience had empowered her to see that she too could step up to headship and potentially make ‘better’ choices. Katherine’s remarks appear to corroborate the findings of Ribbins (1997: 303), who found that some of his participants believed ‘what they had learnt as deputy heads from the example of their head teachers had more to do

with 'how not to do' than 'how to do' headship'. Notably, Katherine reported that her aspirations to lead were informed more by those she was tasked with leading as a deputy head teacher than those above her in the occupational hierarchy:

You get to a point where it isn't people above you anymore that are the influential people. It becomes people below you in the institution where they'll say 'I wish you were the head' or 'it would be different if you were doing this' or 'if this one comes up, will you apply for it?' and those sorts of things. It is at that point that you think, well 9/10ths of the battle is leading people and I've got loads of people who think I can do it and would like me to do it. That becomes the motivating factor (Katherine).

Time and Age

As I explored above, a number of the women who participated in this study perceived deputy headship to be a demanding, 'greedy' role requiring a great deal of 'out of hours' working. Dawn perceived the intensive and time consuming nature of her role as inhibiting her ability to plan the next steps in her career:

In the midst of trying to get all the work done, and trying to get everything ticked off my to do list every day, I forget the bigger picture - my career development (Dawn).

Dawn believed the all-consuming nature of deputy headship to be a significant obstacle to career progression. She described experiencing a lack of time and space to even reflect on her career options and formulate career aspirations, let alone take the tangible steps necessary to seek promotion. Dawn's ability to see her career trajectory as a whole appeared to be obscured by the minutiae of deputy headship.

For some of the women in the sample, their age had a great deal of influence on how they envisaged their professional futures. The career narratives of Faye and Jennifer (both in their fifties) explored the multiple identity intersections of gender and age and the ways in which these may impact their professional futures. As a deputy head, Faye (a non-aspirant) had observed that ‘a lot of the more experienced head teachers are retiring and being replaced by bright young things’. Despite describing herself as having a ‘wealth of experience’, Faye believed she may be in danger of being ‘pushed aside’ because of her age:

I just think its narrow minded that the profession as a whole seems to have become quite ageist ... I don't feel that I am at the twilight of my career at 50 you know, I'm not on the scrapheap just yet.

This extract reveals Faye's anxieties both for her own professional future and the future of the teaching profession as a whole. She perceives her experience as being ignored and undervalued. This treatment is described as being at odds with how she perceives herself; she remarks ‘I am not on the scrapheap just yet’. Jennifer, on the other hand, spoke about her age as motivating her to get the most out of her deputy headship and to pursue promotion. She described feeling that ‘this is the time - I'm not young so get in there’.

Stagnation

Like Hayes (2005), some of the women I interviewed perceived deputy headship to be a short term role on the road to headship. Their experiences of being a deputy head teacher and working closely with those tasked with recruiting head teachers had led to the belief that to remain a deputy in the absence of head teacher aspirations could potentially harm their careers. Madeline, for instance, remarked:

If I apply for my third deputy head post that'll be suspicious because they'll be thinking, 'why does she not want to be head?' This academy wouldn't want me to plod on for 10, 12 years because it's not healthy. Turnaround is healthy, and most deputy heads go into headship (Madeline).

Madeline perceptions of her professional future are limited by others' impressions of her career decision-making and what is considered 'healthy' in career terms. Her use of the word 'plod' here is telling and suggests that the culture in which she works only values rapid and vertical career progression. Despite research suggesting that there is a great deal of uncertainty among deputies about stepping up to headship (NAHT, 2016), Madeline believes that most perceive deputy headship to be a 'transitory' as opposed to 'terminal' role (Harvey, 1994).

Autonomy and Decision Making

Some of the women in this study perceived deputy headship as being an accountable but not entirely autonomous role. Like the women featured in Oplatka and Tamir's (2009) study, these participants perceived the role of deputy and head teacher to very different posts. Lorraine described this difference in the following way:

At the moment, I work as part of a team and I'd like to take that philosophy somewhere else. But, I think when you are a head you are ... at the end of the day you have autonomy over what is done and the decisions that are made. So, yes, you can take other people's views on board but it is ultimately your vision that shapes what happens within that school and to me that's quite exciting to be able to do that (Lorraine).

Some of the women perceived deputy headship as limiting their decision making power and this had exerted a great deal of influence on their professional aspirations. For instance, Sophie stated 'I want to be able to have more autonomy to make decisions myself'. Similarly, Jennifer described

wanting more influence and to enact a more strategic and decision form of leadership. Her current role as deputy head was perceived as limiting her ability to speak her mind:

I would like to be able to say, 'I see what you're saying but actually I think this'. I would like that to be my decision rather than somebody else's ... It is one less person to say no. Sometimes I think 'no, this is what you need to be doing' but you can't just stamp your feet (Jennifer).

Jennifer perceived headship as a liberating role that was very different to the one she currently holds. She envisaged the head teacher role as a route to autonomy, the ability to take action and choose. Jennifer wanted more responsibility and more decision making power for various reasons: to see her ideas come to fruition, to realise her vision of school life but also to experience less constraint, less resistance to her ideas. The restraint she felt as a deputy is captured in the expression 'you can't just stamp your feet'. It implies a necessity to hold back, to manage the divergence between what is thought and what is said or done.

Discussion

This article sought to explore the ways in which twelve women deputy heads experienced deputy headship, and the influence that these experiences had on their career decision making. Mindful of the scarcity of studies focusing solely on deputy head teachers (Harris et al., 2003; Cranston et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2009), this study aimed to add to our understanding of this professional group.

The findings presented in this article suggest that there are several tensions inherent in the deputy head teacher role. The women who participated in this study reported having to negotiate several conflicting demands: (1) acting strategically and dealing with the unpredictable, (2) balancing the multiple responsibilities of teaching and leading, and (3) managing an intensive workload while

maintaining a sense of well-being. The necessity to balance disparate and, sometimes, conflicting responsibilities as a deputy head has been observed in earlier studies (see, for example, NAHT, 2016). The women who took part in this study, however, did not experience the role and responsibilities of deputy headship in a uniform way. Despite occupying similar leadership positions, participants had made sense of and enacted deputy headship in different ways. Some perceived the role as constraining and restricting their autonomy, while others viewed their working lives as deputies as enabling and within their control. There was a great deal of heterogeneity, nuance and idiographic detail, despite the apparently homogenous sample of white heterosexual women.

The findings of this study also suggest that women's experiences as deputy heads had the potential to facilitate or curtail aspirations to headship. The women's relationships with their head teachers, the amount of time they perceived as being available for career planning as deputy heads, their age, their beliefs concerning the transitory nature of deputy headship as well as the desire for more autonomy were shown to exert some influence on the ways in which the women perceived their professional futures. These factors were described in the women's career narratives as influencing the extent to which they saw themselves as potential head teachers. It is clear, however, that a complex range of issues and experiences inform the decision to pursue headship or stay in the deputy role. The literature on gender and educational leadership identifies a number of factors that have the potential to constrain women's career trajectories and aspirations. Cubillo and Brown (2003), for instance, propose three layers of constraint: (1) culture and tradition, (2) stereotyping and socialisation and (3) internal barriers. Yet, as Smith (2011) argues, the agentic capabilities individual women have to make positive choices are also key in career decision making. Focusing on barriers to women's career progression or women's agentic capabilities at the expense of the other, then, seems unproductive; women's career choices and outcomes depend 'as much on

understanding the constraints that differentially affect women as it does on understanding their preferences' (McRae, 2003: 334-5). This article argues that women's experiences of deputy headship, both constraining and enabling, should be considered by those interested in understanding women's senior leadership careers and professional aspirations.

Overall, this study adds to the existing picture of women deputy head teachers by detailing the different ways the women who participated in this study experienced deputy headship, and were drawing on these experiences to make a decision about their professional futures.

Limitations

The study reported on in this article was in-depth and exploratory in nature. It focused on the sense-making and perceptions of twelve women deputy heads selected via a non-random sampling strategy. It is not possible, therefore, to generalise its findings to the wider population of women deputies. In addition, since the study was limited to the career experiences of women deputy heads, male deputies' perceptions and experiences remain unexplored.

As I noted in the methodology section of this article, another limitation of this study is that it is limited to the perceptions and experiences of white, heterosexual women. It was not possible to assess the extent to which ethnicity, social class and sexuality influence women deputies' career experiences and professional aspirations. Intersectional research suggests that 'multiple category membership' frames and shapes women's leadership careers (Showunmi et al., 2016: 919). In this article I have considered, albeit to a limited extent, the interrelationship between age and gender, and the ways in which these facets of identity influenced individuals' thinking about their professional futures (see the career narratives of Faye and Jennifer). However this study was limited by the absence of other identity strands that can influence women's career experiences and

trajectories. Further work might, therefore, usefully investigate how the intersections of social class, sexuality and ethnicity shape women deputies' professional lives.

Implications and Recommendations

Despite their limitations, the findings of this study raise some interesting questions, avenues for future research and recommendations for practice, which are summarised below.

Given the persistent under-representation of women in secondary headship and the scarcity of literature focusing on deputy head teachers, and women deputies in particular, more research focusing on the heterogeneous career experiences of this professional group is needed. A more detailed picture of women deputy head teachers' career decision making and aspirations would suggest ways in which policy-makers and school leaders can better support their career progression (Lee et al., 2009).

The career narratives of Faye and Jennifer explored the ways in which the intersections of age and gender may influence their professional futures. Their narratives were consistent with data obtained by Coleman (2011: 34) who found that some of her female participants 'felt that women were disadvantaged by age more than men'. A further study could usefully investigate older women deputies' career experiences and aspirations. This may shed light on how school leaders can best recognise, and ultimately keep, experienced members of staff.

Oplatka and Taimir (2009: 233) found that deputy headship seemed 'to be a compromise between the female deputies' desire to lead, persuade, create and innovate in school, and their fear of being drawn into an overwhelming job like headship'. Some of the findings of this study, however, suggest that deputy headship may be perceived as only a short-term compromise. Madeline's fears

of stagnating as a deputy head raise important questions as to what opportunities there are for those deputies who do not aspire towards or are not ready to step up to headship. Further research is required to determine the extent to which being a 'career deputy head' is desirable - or even possible - in the current educational climate.

There is a need for future research which explores the ways in which gender intersects with ethnicity, sexuality and other identity strands to influence individual deputies' career trajectories and access to headship. The study could also usefully be repeated focusing on male deputies' career experiences and aspirations. Exploring both the divergence and convergence within a male group may be illuminating and provide interesting points of comparison with the findings presented in this article.

The findings of this study raise important questions about leadership development and preparation. They suggest that 'one size fits all' approaches to encouraging more women deputies to step up towards secondary headship may be insufficient. It may be more fruitful for leadership development programmes and schemes to take into account the diverse motivations and life projects of potential head teacher aspirants.

The women's career narratives highlighted the 'greedy', all-encompassing nature of deputy headship. Some of the women felt that their role left little time for the reflection necessary to plan the next steps in their careers. This suggests that greater efforts are needed on the part of policy makers and school leaders to ensure deputies have the time and space to consider and plan for their professional futures.

In summary, this article has argued for due consideration of women's experiences of deputy headship, as well as the heterogeneity that exists between individuals when researching the under-

representation of women in secondary headship. I have suggested that a diverse range of experiences can frame and shape women deputies' career decision making, and that further research focusing on a wider range of women deputy heads is needed. By considering women's heterogeneous experiences of deputy headship as well as the impact that these experiences can exert on their professional aspirations, fresh insights into the perceptions of potential aspirants to headship may be gained.

References

- Bradbury L and Gunter H (2006) Dialogic identities: The experiences of women who are head teachers and mothers in English primary schools. *School Leadership & Management* 26(5): 489 – 504.
- Carbado D, Crenshaw K, Mays V and Tomlinson B (2013) Intersectionality: Mapping the movements of a theory. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10(2): 303 – 312.
- Coleman M (2002) *Women as Head teachers: Striking the Balance*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Coleman M (2007) Gender and educational leadership in England: A comparison of secondary head teachers' views over time. *School Leadership & Management* 27(4): 383 – 399.
- Coleman M (2011) *Women at the Top: Challenges, Choices and Change*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cranston N (2007) Through the eyes of potential aspirants: Another view of the principalship. *School Leadership & Management* 27(2): 109 – 128.
- Cranston N, Tromans C and Reugebrink M (2004) Forgotten leaders: What do we know about the deputy principalship in secondary schools? *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 7(3): 225 – 242.
- Crenshaw K (1991) Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–1299.

Cubillo L and Brown M (2003) Women into educational leadership and management: international differences? *Journal of Educational Administration* 41(3): 278 – 291.

Cunneen M and Harford J (2016) Gender matters: Women's experiences of the route to principalship in Ireland. In: Fuller K and Harford J (eds) *Gender and Leadership in Education: Women Achieving against the Odds*. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 147 – 174.

Department for Education (DfE) (2014) *Teachers' Workload Diary Survey 2013: Research Report*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-workload-diary-survey-2013> (accessed 06 June 2017).

Department for Education (DfE) (2016) *School workforce in England: November 2015*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2015> (accessed 06 March 2017).

Draper J and McMichael P (2003) The rocky road to headship. *Australian Journal of Education*, 47(2): 185 – 196.

Englander M (2012) The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 43(1): 13 – 35.

Fuller K (2017) Women secondary school head teachers in England: Where are they now? *Management in Education* 31(2): 54-68.

Grant R (1989) Heading for the top – the career experiences of a group of women deputies in one LEA. *Gender and Education* 1(2):113 – 125.

Gronn P (2003) *The New Work of Educational Leaders: Changing Leadership Practice in an Era of School Reform*. London: Paul Chapman.

Guihen, L. (2017) The two faces of secondary headship: Women deputy head teachers' perceptions of the secondary head teacher role. *Management in Education* 31(2): 69 – 74.

- Harris A, Muijs D and Crawford M (2003) *Deputy and Assistant Heads: Building Leadership Potential*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- Harvey M (1994) The deputy principalship: Retrospect and prospect. *International Journal of Educational Management* 8(3): 15 – 25.
- Hayes T (2005) *Rising Stars and Sitting Tenants: A Picture of Deputy Headship in One London Borough and How Some of its Schools are Preparing their Deputies for Headship*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- Hughes M and James C (1999) The relationship between the head and the deputy head in primary schools, *School Leadership & Management* 19(1): 83 – 95.
- Kvale S (2007) *Doing Interviews*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Kwan P (2011) Examining the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the relation between responsibilities and career aspiration of vice-principals. *International Journal of Educational Research* 50(5-6): 349 – 361.
- Kwan P and Walker A (2010) Secondary school vice-principals: Commitment, challenge, efficacy and synchrony. *British Education Research Journal* 36(4): 531–548.
- Larkin M and Thompson AR (2011) Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In: Harper D and Thompson AR (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy*. Oxford: Wiley, pp. 101 – 116.
- Lee J, Kwan P and Walker A (2009) Vice-principalship: Their responsibility roles and career aspirations. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 12(2): 187–207.
- Lumby J (2015) School leaders' gender strategies: Caught in a discriminatory web. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership* 43(1): 28 – 45.
- MacBeath J, Gronn P, Opfer D, Lowden K, Forde C, Cowie M and O'Brien J (2009) *The Recruitment and Retention of Head teachers in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

- McBurney E and Hough J (1989) Role perceptions of female deputy heads. *Educational Management and Administration* 17(3): 115 – 118.
- McRae S (2003) Constraints and choices in mothers' employment careers: A consideration of Hakim's preference theory. *British Journal of Sociology* 54(3): 317 – 338.
- Marshall C and Hooley R (2006) *The Assistant Principal: Leadership Choices and Challenges*. 2nd edn. California: Corwin Press.
- Mason J (2002) *Qualitative Researching*. 2nd edn. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Moorosi P (2010) South African female principals' career paths: Understanding the gender gap in secondary school management. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership* 28(5): 547 – 562.
- Nash J (2008) Re-Thinking Intersectionality. *Feminist Review* 89: 1 – 15.
- National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) (2016) *The Balancing Act: Report on the Working Lives of Deputy and Assistant Headteachers and Vice Principals*. Available at: <https://t.co/lRrFm0sZBQ> (accessed 11 June 2017).
- Oplatka I and Tamir V (2009) 'I don't want to be a school head': Women deputy heads' insightful constructions of career advancement and retention. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership* 37(2): 216 – 238.
- Reid K, Flowers P and Larkin M (2005) Exploring lived experience. *The Psychologist* 18(1): 20 – 23.
- Ribbins P (1997) Heads on deputy headship: Impossible roles for invisible role holders? *Educational Management and Administration*, 25(3): 295 – 308.
- Rintoul H and Goulais L (2010) Vice principalship and moral literacy: Developing a moral compass. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership* 38(6): 745 – 757.

Showunmi V, Atewologun D and Bebbington D (2016) Ethnic, gender and class intersections in British women's leadership experiences. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership* 44(6): 917 – 935.

Smith J (2011) Agency and female teachers' career decisions: A life history study of 40 women. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership* 39(1): 7 – 24.

Smith J (2012) Reflections on using life history to investigate women teachers' aspirations and career decisions. *Qualitative Research* 12(4): 486-503.

Smith J (2016) Motherhood and women teachers' career decisions: A constant battle. In: Fuller K and Harford J (eds) *Gender and Leadership in Education: Women Achieving Against the Odds*. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 83 – 114.

Smith JA, Flowers P and Larkin M (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Sperandio J and Kagoda A (2010) Women teachers' aspirations to school leadership in Uganda. *International Journal of Educational Management* 24(1): 22 – 33.

Vulliamy G and Webb R (1995) The implementation of the National Curriculum in small primary schools. *Educational Review* 47(1): 25–41.