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

Joan Smith (University of Leicester)

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Introduction
This paper reports on some of the findings of a wider, life history study on the lives and careers of forty female UK secondary school teachers. Life history interviews were conducted with forty women, including ten newly qualified teachers (NQTs), ten mid-career teachers, with between ten and fifteen years’ experience, ten late-career teachers, that is, women with twenty or more years’ teaching experience who were not heads or deputies, and ten female headteachers.

The aims of the study were to investigate the women’s perceptions of the factors affecting their career decisions, and, as a part of this, to seek insights into the factors that influence the likelihood of women aspiring to, applying for and achieving headship.

This paper draws on the forty life history narratives to consider the women’s perceptions of headship. The ten headteachers’ positive perceptions of their role are contrasted with the negative perceptions of headship harboured by the majority of the teachers in the study. I begin by considering the positive picture of headship painted by the headteachers in the study, and then, by contrast, the largely negative perceptions of headship harboured by the majority of the teachers in the study: of the thirty teachers in the study, twenty-eight were adamant that they would not consider headship.

Women headteachers’ view of and approach to headship
From the narratives of the women headteachers it was possible to identify a number of key features that characterised the women’s view of and approach to headship. These are summarised in table one, below, and will be addressed in turn.

| ‘Pupils first’ philosophy |
| Fusion of toughness and caring |
| Leadership style adaptable to context |
| Positive relationships and emotional rationality |
| Personal and professional support networks |
| Enjoyment of challenge and change |
| Work-life balance strategies |

Table one: features of women headteachers’ approach to leadership
‘Pupils first’ philosophy

‘My real aim, as a head, is to provide the best possible education for the pupils that are here, to make sure that we provide a place where they’re happy, where they’re secure, they feel safe, but at the same time academically, they’re challenged and encouraged to do their best. That’s what it’s all about’ (Sally, comprehensive school head).

The strongest theme to emerge from the headteachers’ narratives was that all ten women derived the greatest satisfaction from working with young people and seeing them develop. Most emphasised that their main concern was to promote a ‘pupils first’ philosophy in their school, in which pupil welfare and achievement were paramount. Several spoke of the need to keep the school focus on teaching and learning, for example:

‘I want to see children do well. Whatever we do…it must deliver better teaching and learning in the classroom’ (Gladys, girls’ grammar school head).

The headteachers’ personal aims were conflated with the aims they had for the school, and typically these were described in terms of equipping pupils with the confidence and skills to develop throughout life and to achieve what they wanted to achieve, to the best of their ability. As well as academic achievement, the importance of the development of the whole child was emphasised.

There were frequent references to the women’s strong commitment to the philosophy of lifelong learning, and to the provision of equal opportunities for pupils. For example, Fiona, head of a school for boys with emotional and behavioural difficulties, made it clear that for her the only point to her work was to ensure pupils achieved. She felt it was crucial to be forthright in promoting what she termed a ‘no excuses’ philosophy:

‘It is crucial, because so many EBD schools are awful, because excuses are made for the children: “They can’t achieve because they have such terrible lives”…whereas I’m saying, they have had terrible lives, but that’s no barrier, and in fact the way out of their terrible lives is to have something good. So it’s a ‘no excuses' philosophy, strong curriculum, consistency and self-esteem for the kids. That’s the biggest thing – and they will get that, if there’s a good curriculum. In an EBD school that’s half your battle in terms of behaviour. If the kids are bored and can’t see the relevance you’ve got problems. You’ve got problems anyway with these kids. If you then layer it on with ‘and we can’t be bothered to teach you anything much because you’re not worth it, it’s worse’ (Fiona, EBD boys’ school head).

There was a common emphasis from headteachers of all types of schools on nurturing and effecting change through pastoral work and caring relationships. In most cases the headteachers had a clear sense of mission in their work, and this mission related directly to pupils. Most explained, for instance, that they had chosen to work in a school that offered them the right sort of challenge, one in which they felt needed, where they felt that they would make a difference and change lives. Pupils and pupil achievement were clearly central to their motivation and aspirations. Sally, for example, explained:
‘As soon as I walked through the door I knew this was the one I wanted…I thought, ‘This is it! I can do things here!’…The ethos of the school was just lovely and academically it was struggling, so it gave me a challenge, and I just thought, ‘Yes, that’s it.’ (Sally, comprehensive school head).

The majority of the headteachers described how they sought to influence the sort of experiences pupils had on a day-to-day basis, and saw it as their role to provide an environment in which pupils (and staff) were happy, and felt safe and secure. How this translated into their day-to-day actions varied according to differing circumstances and contexts, but a constant was the focus on pupils. Although most of the headteachers spoke of their own love of classroom teaching, most also reported that the demands on their time meant that they were unable to commit to timetabled classroom teaching. The majority felt however that they still had a ‘hands on’ involvement with students, and saw this as a high priority. Typically this took the form of doing duties around the school at lunchtime, dealing with difficult or disaffected pupils and making themselves available to congratulate students who were doing well. Claudette, for example, explained how and why she prioritised spending time with young people:

‘I take on a mentoring role with children, because that’s part of the programme we have in this particular school, and I do some special needs work. I spent about half the week, when I first came here, working with a group of very disaffected youngsters, about fifteen of them, and teaching them. I still do have quite a lot of involvement with children…I try to spend at least half of my time each day…with children…I do my paperwork mostly in the evenings and that’s how I can spend so much time with youngsters…I do it largely because I want to’ (Claudette, comprehensive school head).

Claudette and other headteachers were very much involved in work that related directly to pupils. They saw their position as a means to ensure pupils’ needs were central to the work of the school, and commonly positioned themselves in their narratives as agents of change and improvement, describing how they had led or were leading major innovations to the benefit of the pupils in their care.

Fusion of toughness and caring
A mixture of caring and toughness seemed to characterise the headteachers’ self-image and their professional personas, resonating with the findings of other researchers including Coleman (2002) Evetts (1994) Gray (1993) and Sherman (2000). Most were clear in asserting their toughness, for example:

‘I’m not a pushover in any sort of set-up…[people] know that I’d stand up for myself’ (Fiona, EBD boys’ school head).

‘Anyone who knows me well wouldn’t dream of thinking that I can’t deal with discipline…because of the way I try to deal with my staff…there is this underlying agenda that if that is what I want done, then that’s the way it will be done…and that percolates right through the school’ (Gladys, girls’ grammar school head).

Toughness in this sense was clearly seen as a positive attribute. It meant the headteachers were able to stand up for themselves, and by extension, their schools. Interestingly, toughness in this sense was frequently linked by the headteachers to the
caring culture of their schools. There was, perhaps surprisingly, commonality in this respect, as this thread ran through the headteachers’ accounts irrespective of the type of school they led. Many spoke proudly of the culture of caring in their schools. There were frequent references to ‘looking after’ pupils and staff. Some used words like ‘approachable’ and ‘human’ to describe themselves, describing the satisfaction they derived from helping people to deal with problems and overcome difficulties. They saw that their roles required an ability to take a tough approach at times, but also that it required an ability to be gentle, caring, consultative and collaborative. The two were not seen to be mutually exclusive: examples of toughness and caring were interwoven in a number of the headteachers’ narratives. Fiona, for instance, as head of an EBD boys’ school, dealt daily with potentially very challenging boys, and as well as having to be tough, seemed to take on a caring, nurturing, mother substitute role:

‘Some of the [students] are 18 stone and 6 foot…if they want to deck me they will but…they don’t…I think there are definite advantages [to being a woman head]…I can cuddle them. I can put my arm around them and let them cry on my shoulder because…a lot of their issues are to do with their mums…I can do nurturing with the firm, consistent boundaries which they need, that every kid needs’ (Fiona, EBD boys’ school head).

As in this example, in which toughness and gentleness combine, it was clear that women’s day-to-day approach to leading did not fit neatly into any one of the traditional leadership paradigms. Rather there was evidence that the women headteachers adapted their leadership style according to context, a factor I examine below.

Leadership style adaptable to context

‘I am a mixture. I am dictatorial when I passionately know I’m right, but I believe in consultation…It shifts according to the situation. There are certain things where there would be no consultation whatsoever, and that’s usually a staffing issue that needs dealing with there and then…If I can I like to bounce ideas off others…to use people as a sounding board…some of that is good and people will give me ideas, so it does change according to the situation’ (Beatrice, girls’ grammar school head).

All of the headteachers were conscious of having a repertoire of leadership styles on which to draw, and of changing their leadership style according to the situation and the context being managed. Their narratives showed how they drew on a repertoire of behaviours spanning the traditional masculine and feminine paradigms identified by Gray (1993). All ten described how they used a mixture of direction and consultation to effect longer-term change and improvement, consciously adapting their style according to the context being managed. Although most preferred stereotypically feminine, gentler, persuasive, consultative and collegial approaches to managing their schools, they were also fully prepared to take on a tougher, more coercive approach as needed, and thus were to an extent ‘androgyneous’, in Gray’s terms, in their leadership behaviour. All were keen to emphasise that they took a directive approach when they felt it was justified, that is, when it was clear that children, and the school, would benefit.
Positive relationships and emotional rationality

‘It’s about managing the people, whether it be teachers or learning support assistants or kitchen staff or the cleaners, as well as the youngsters, in such a way that everyone gets the optimum feeling of success out of the situation’ (Claudette, comprehensive school headteacher).

A strongly people-oriented emphasis emerged as a major focus of the job, and an important source of satisfaction to the headteachers. Working through and with other people was prioritised, as was developing other adults and ensuring they felt valued.

Throughout the headteacher narratives, positive relationships were consistently referred to as an important part of an effective school, rather than as emotional sustenance for the heads themselves. References to their own popularity were rarely mentioned by the headteachers, and most had evidently developed emotional self-protection skills. These included an ability to manage relationships to the benefit of the school rather than to satisfy a selfish need for popularity, the capacity to view one’s unpopularity with detachment, and to de-personalise negative experiences and see them as a function of the dynamics of institutional leadership rather than as personal deficiencies - to rationalise rather than internalise them. The women’s ability to analyse their own leadership behaviour was thus characterised by an emotional rationality that allowed them to look beyond their own popularity to the context being managed and the complex range of factors at play. This example from Sally is indicative:

‘You can if you’re not careful…take too many things too personally and be too emotional about your leadership…it becomes all heart and no head…I think when I first started, if somebody didn’t do something I wanted done, I took it personally, and thought, ‘Why are they doing this to me?’ Well of course they’re not doing it to me at all are they?’ (Sally, comprehensive school head).

Sally, who was the most recently appointed of the headteachers, was becoming aware that there were dangers involved for her in a high level of emotional involvement in institutional issues. She was consciously engaged in a process of separating out the personal and the professional, in order to protect herself and to function effectively.

Personal and professional support networks

Positive relationships were highly prized by the headteachers. In school, they worked to build relationships with and between staff that would enhance school effectiveness. However most built their personal networks of support outside the institution, drawing on these both for friendship and professional advice. Networks typically included a range of former colleagues, family members and friends, usually including certain key friends who were, or had been, headteachers themselves. Support from others beyond the school emerged for most of the women headteachers as very important. The support of headteachers, especially, but not exclusively, other women, was a particular source of strength:

‘It helps to have made contact with other women heads…colleagues that you can pick up the ’phone and say, ‘What would you do with this?’…That kind of support helps, and we share things. Although…in this area, most of my
colleagues are male and they’re equally supportive…There’s a good support network…I think really it’s the local support…and the support you make for yourself that helps you through” (Sally, comprehensive school headteacher).

The support of husbands and partners was also referred to by all of the headteachers as an important factor in helping them cope with the demands of headship.

Enjoyment of challenge and change

The women headteachers were positive and enthusiastic about their roles, which they saw as exciting, satisfying and stimulating. Half expressed in strong terms their need for and enjoyment of challenge. Many had been attracted by the notion of being able to manage a whole organisation and the people within it. Teamwork, being in a position to contribute new ideas and initiatives, having the power to do good and being in control were cited by over half of the headteachers as major sources of satisfaction. The job was seen to offer freedom and variety. A number of heads gave examples of specific projects they had overseen, for example, building projects, explaining that they had derived great satisfaction from seeing change and improvement over time, as well as from the main project of managing the whole school. For example, Renee commented:

“That’s the real buzz about headship – you can see change over a period of time, and you can be involved in not only young people’s development, but staff’ development, and in…changing the building and managing projects…and you can see the thing come together…and see it change” (Renee, comprehensive school head).

Change management was frequently referred to, and was seen to require highly developed skills of communication, in particular, the ability to take an overview and act as a link between various members of the school community, and the persuasive skills necessary to convince others both of the need to bring about change and of the validity of the changes suggested. This was commonly seen by the headteachers to require an ability to challenge existing ideas and methods, and encourage a constant questioning of what was going on in school. The majority saw their role as to set the tone and lead by example, and their perception of the school as a dynamic institution, set within a dynamic politic-social context, seemed to be linked to their self-perceptions as agents of change. The headteachers saw it as their role to interpret external influences and use their knowledge and understanding of the broader context to steer institutional development in such a way that the focus on pupils’ needs was not obscured. An essentially agentic view of themselves as headteachers characterised the leaders’ accounts, as they described their work in terms of ensuring the institutional direction was informed by the imperative to meet pupils’ needs.

Work-life balance strategies

‘I don’t do school on a Sunday and last half term I went away for a week…I will do more of that because the effect was great, to get away for a whole week and not think about school…I’m quite often in school at weekends, on a Saturday, for half a day, catching up on paperwork, just having some quiet time…coming in when school is empty, you can actually get a lot done’ (Sally, comprehensive school head).
Having an appropriate work-life balance was a priority for the headteachers, and seen by most of them as crucial for a happy working life. Most had experienced homework conflicts at some point, but more than half reported that they were happy with their current work-life balance. Although it was clear that their workload was heavy and the pressure intense at times, the headteachers indicated that it was possible to find ways to make the workload manageable and to take steps to ensure some life-work balance. Many had developed, or were developing, coping strategies to ensure some balance, and to take positive steps to ensure that work did not impinge on home life. Indeed, some even viewed headship as offering greater flexibility and therefore greater scope for taking control of all aspects of one’s life.

There was variation in the headteachers’ ways of managing their workload and work-life balance, but some common strategies included identifying clear no-work times in the week, working in school when the school was closed, and working with and through the senior team rather than doing everything alone. More than half talked about working long hours during term time, but balancing that by taking time out and spending time with partners and family during at least some school holidays.

**Women teachers’ perspectives on secondary headship**

A very different view of headship was conveyed in the narratives of the women teachers in the study. Of the thirty teachers interviewed, twenty-eight were adamant that they would not consider headship, viewing the role as incompatible with their pupil-centred values, working preferences and personal lives.

The reasons the women gave for their rejection of headship as a career option revealed a set of negative perceptions and preconceptions of school leadership, contrasting starkly with the very positive, agentic view of leadership portrayed by the headteachers. The views most commonly expressed by the women teachers were that:

- headteachers’ work and values are not pupil-centred;
- headteachers are tough and lonely;
- headteachers have no life outside school;
- headteachers’ work is dull and boring.

I discuss each of these preconceptions in a little more detail below.

**Pupil-centredness and preference for classroom teaching**

The women teachers’ preference for classroom teaching and their unwillingness to give this up for a leadership role were strong themes. Most women stressed the importance to them of classroom teaching and positive relationships with pupils. Enjoyment of the job day-to-day was a greater priority than hierarchical advancement, and the majority would not want a job that would take them out of the classroom. Most perceived that moving into school leadership would inevitably entail moving away from the classroom and becoming remote from children, and were opting therefore for a classroom-based rather than a school-leadership career.

In explaining why they were discouraged from school leadership work, narrators made numerous references to aspects of current politico-educational culture and its implicit values, which were abhorrent to them. Typically too much emphasis was seen to be placed on, for example, image management, measurable outcomes,
competition, accountability and the blame culture, rather than on what most of the women teachers considered to be important matters, such as behaviour management and the development of the whole child. Lisa’s comment was typical:

‘There is far too much importance…placed on ‘facts and figures’ that don’t really add up, rather than teaching a whole child how to succeed in society’ (Lisa, late-career teacher).

School leadership was perceived as synonymous with this ‘facts & figures’ culture, and therefore different to, and separate from ‘teaching’, and the values that underpin a child-centred philosophy. It was seen as inevitable that school leaders would have to espouse the values implicit in the current wider educational culture, which were at odds with the women teachers’ own pupil-centred values. School leadership was not therefore viewed as a teacher’s job at all, with its focus on paperwork, finance and image management, rather than on classroom-related issues. Women who prioritised pupils and teaching felt alienated from school leadership, and had no wish to take on values and responsibilities that were so far askew of their preferences.

Taking on these values was also seen to entail the added risk of losing the respect and support of colleagues the women valued. Most of the women teachers expressed an unwillingness to compromise their integrity in this way, for example:

‘One reason I haven’t gone into management is that I’m not willing to be something I’m not…I think senior managers have to…agree to do things they maybe don’t like doing…They also alienate the staff because they’re doing that, and I’d hate to be in a position like that’ (Coral, late-career teacher).

Related to this was an unwillingness amongst some of the women to play the promotion game, which was also seen to require renouncing or compromising one’s beliefs and principles in order to progress, for example:

‘My career hasn’t developed as enormously as I would have liked it to, but I don’t want to play political games. I’m not interested. I’m still a bit of an idealist. People have to take me as I am. I haven’t pretended at any point to be someone else…or…espoused other views about education in order to get promotion…I’m still trying to be true to what I believe in’ (Linda, mid-career teacher).

By refusing to compromise their principles in the quest for promotion, and opting instead for classroom teaching, the women felt able to keep a pupil-centred focus. Seen in this light, a decision not to apply for senior posts could be seen as an act of resistance to a culture and a set of values the women chose to reject.

**Headteachers are tough, lonely and have no life**

‘I can imagine it is a very lonely job. My former head did say there were times when it was incredibly lonely. She felt that there were times when she wanted to talk to people and there was nobody there, and the governors were sometimes a little bit too far removed…she couldn’t open up to them. And it’s that sort of thing I don’t want’ (Caroline, late-career teacher).
Becoming a headteacher was widely seen to carry the risk of unpopularity and loneliness, which discouraged women from aspiring to headship. It was commonly perceived to afford reduced opportunities for teamwork and co-operative working. Some of the experienced teachers felt that excessive numbers of new initiatives in recent years had increased the pressure on teachers and headteachers, decreased the amount of time and opportunities for collaboration with colleagues and increased the extent of top-down, non-consultative forms of leadership, which was counterpoised to most women’s preference for more collaborative ways of working, reinforcing the view that the role of headteacher is a lonely one. The nature of the work was seen to involve being isolated from colleagues, office bound and excluded from the classroom. The need to be coercive and directive entailed compromising the highly valued relationships which sustained women teachers and from which they drew professional and personal support. Thus headship held little appeal for most women.

A related perception was that headteachers have to be tough and coercive, which was anathema to most of the women teachers. Some talked specifically about being uncomfortable with the idea of hierarchy and directive styles of managing, which were perceived to be inevitable parts of school leadership:

‘It’s like some colonel saying, ‘We’ll go to war!’ Everybody is going to do it…because they have to follow orders…even if they’re not happy about it. It’s that feeling of hierarchy that doesn’t do it for me’ (Rebecca, NQT).

The perception that school leadership inevitably meant having to work hierarchically, and thus to renounce their more equitable working relationships, discouraged many teachers from considering headship. The women for the most part attached great importance to positive working relationships and were unwilling to lose them for the sake of a senior position.

This rejection of directive working styles was often accompanied by a self-perception as incapable of hierarchical, authoritarian behaviour, as the women commonly expressed doubts about their own suitability for school leadership, usually on the grounds that they would not want to have to be tough, deal with difficult people and situations and be unpopular:

‘You’ve got to be intimidating. You’ve got to be scary, because the headteacher is the final line for the kids…and people need someone to complain about, someone to hate, and it’s always the person at the top. I don’t know if I could do that’ (Rebecca, NQT).

‘I would find it difficult in situations where I had to deal with a problem and treat it very seriously, and perhaps have to upset someone else with what I had to say. I don’t think I could do that very well. I think I would find it hard to discipline people or be unpopular…I wouldn’t like to be criticised very much…Really I need to be doing stuff where people are saying to me, ‘Oh, that’s good!’ (Marjory, late career teacher).

In the examples I have cited, which were typical of many women in the sample, the women were unwilling to risk losing their highly-valued relationships with colleagues and children for the sake of a senior position. They were fearful of school leadership
work for the unpopularity they saw it to entail, and unwilling to sacrifice their positive relationships at work, through which they sought validation.

Headship was commonly viewed as stressful and time consuming with a greater workload than classroom teaching and therefore less time for home, family and personal life. This was a particular concern to the mothers in the study, but as yet child-free NQTs also referred to the importance of maintaining an appropriate life-work balance and a happy personal life. Indeed, several NQTs already perceived that family life and leadership were mutually exclusive. NQT Daphne, for example, explaining why she would not aspire to leadership commented:

‘I would like to be able to have dinner with my kids or my partner and not be [at school] until 7 o’clock in the evening’ (Daphne, NQT).

Experienced teachers were in most cases similarly discouraged:

‘It’s meetings after meetings, and they have them all in the evenings…Our senior management, two or three days a week, won’t leave until 7, 7.30. [Our] Assistant Principal was very good at her job [but] she’s just left. She said she was sick of meetings! [She’s] been married for 3 or 4 years and she said ‘We never see each other, and I don’t want the hassle’. I think that’s one of the reasons. You look at it, and you think, ‘Do I want the hassle?’ And if you’re honest, you don’t’ (Freda, late-career teacher).

Generally headship was seen not as a route to greater job satisfaction, but to an increased workload, isolation and the erosion of one’s personal life.

Discussion: comparing and contrasting headteachers’ and teachers’ perceptions

Pupil-centred values
Most of the women teachers in the study perceived that their values and those implicit in contemporary school leadership were counterpoised. Yet, evidence from the headteacher narratives indicates that they shared the women teachers’ fundamental values relating to pupil achievement and welfare and the need for positive relationships institution wide. The motivation of both the teachers and the headteachers was underpinned by an ethic of care. How this care was conceptualised and enacted differed significantly however. Most of the women teachers defined their professional identities in terms of pupil-centredness and caring relationships, and perceived headship as a potential threat to these priorities. Headteachers, on the other hand, negotiated their professional identities through the discourses of leadership without compromising a fundamental commitment to caring for pupils.

Headship was viewed by the women teachers as a role that would control and restrict them, isolating them from others and forcing them to work in abhorrent ways, and thus incongruent with their teacher identities. By contrast, the headteachers had a greater tendency to view headship as an opportunity to enact the ethic of care and their pupil-centred values to maximum effect.

I described earlier an agentic, values-driven approach to leadership drawn from the headteachers’ narratives (see table one). It is interesting to consider how headteachers’ and teachers’ contrasting perceptions of the headship role illustrate a
key difference in terms of personal agency. Whereas the majority of the women teachers did not perceive that headship offered them the scope to make their own decisions and take control, the headteachers saw that by taking up headship they placed themselves in a position where they could effect positive change to the benefit of the school community. The headteachers’ agentic self-perceptions afforded them the understanding that they could use their power to make positive decisions in accordance with their personal and professional values.

There is a need for professional dialogue that recognises and articulates the existence of shared professional values. Perceptions of contemporary school leadership as tough, directive and autocratic predominate, whilst caring is conceptualised as highly gendered, and as such, devalued and incompatible with professionalism. The need for leadership based on an ethic of care, and an emphasis on caring as a part of professionalism, are important factors in the promotion of a more appealing and acceptable image of school leadership.

Toughness and caring
The perception voiced by many of the women teachers that headship required an ability to be tough was in a sense corroborated in the narratives of the headteachers. There were however important differences in the way that the notion of ‘toughness’ was constructed. Whereas most of the teachers saw toughness as undesirable, and linked to loss of popularity, the headteachers described it within a discourse of care and protection, in terms of ‘standing up’ for their schools and the people in them, and remaining strong and resolute in leading caring, nurturing institutions in which the focus was constantly on pupil welfare and achievement.

In explaining why they were discouraged from considering headship, most of the women teachers focussed on themselves and why they were unsuitable for what they perceived to be the leadership role, commenting, for example, that they would not be able to accept being disliked or disapproved of, and that they needed others to encourage them. Many of the teachers appeared to seek self-validation through their relationships at work.

The headteachers, on the other hand, took a less personalised view and their perceptions offer alternative insights into the lived reality of the role. Their narratives show how toughness is fused with caring in their leadership identities. Their conceptualisation of power might be seen as underpinned by a sense of ethics and social justice, within which ‘toughness’ and the ability to stand up for pupils’ rights are positive attributes. Seen in this light, ‘toughness’ is a manifestation of ethical use of power, and the importance and effectiveness of this approach to leadership needs to be highlighted. As Shields (2005: 82) comments, the emphasis placed by female leaders on values and principles must not be construed as ‘soft, vacuous, or indecisiveness’. If more women are to be encouraged to consider the headship option there is a need to raise awareness that:

‘women leaders do not need to be bullies or boxers, nor do they need to lead in...soft and fluffy ways...power...when used thoughtfully and ethically...can be a strong force for collaboration, for community and for positive change within educational organizations’ (ibid: 84).
The contrasting views of headship apparent in the narratives of the teachers and the headteachers in the study offer insights into why many women teachers are discouraged from aspiring to and applying for senior leadership positions, whilst others embrace the position readily. Even women with positive experience of middle leadership posts would not consider headship as a career. It is worth considering that middle management, with its emphasis on systems, day-to-day detail and the status quo, does not provide teachers with a thorough understanding of what is involved in headship.

Concluding comments and summary
Given the shortage of aspirant headteachers in the UK, it is important to consider how negative perceptions of headship might be dispelled and more applicants attracted to the role. Gibbs (2008: 15) argues that there is a need to ensure that a positive image of school leadership is promoted, and that headteachers are in the best possible position to do this:

‘It is clearly time that we toot our horn…Tell teachers what is great about being an administrator. Share those positive experiences, feelings and elements that make it all worthwhile. The ability to take a school or district from being in need to a productive, positive place for youth is an exciting thing’.

How this ‘tooting the horn’ might work in practice offers scope for further thought. However a positive view of headship grounded in the experiences of headteachers might be proactively communicated in literature and research in the area, through training programmes and via in-school opportunities of the formal and less formal types, such as shadowing opportunities and/or sessions led by senior leaders, with a view to sharing insights into their roles and sources of satisfaction.

The need to grow more leaders has implications for schools in terms of developing a more strategic approach to the training of future heads, as well as for other training providers such as HEIs and the NCSL. It is reasonable to assume that were the caring, agentic view of headship as conveyed in the headteachers’ narratives to replace more predominant images of school leadership, more women (and arguably some more men) might be encouraged to aspire to headship.

In summary, I have reported here on a life history study of forty women teachers, in which I found there to be a stark contrast between women teachers’ and headteachers’ perceptions of secondary headship. The women headteachers’ approach to leadership was based on a ‘pupils first’ philosophy, which mirrored the pupil-centred commitments of the teachers in the study. I have therefore argued for a more proactive approach to promoting this view of leadership in order to attract more female aspirants.
References


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