Career development of English female head-teachers: influences, decisions and perceptions
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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study examining the career development experiences of female head-teachers in the south of England. Adapting a three-stage career model, the study examined different stages of the women's lives and careers in order to understand what encouraged and influenced them to become educational leaders and how their experiences shaped their perceptions of headship. The study used semi-structured life story interviews to generate rich accounts of women's lives from childhood. Findings suggest that parents exerted significant influence on the participants' values and ambitions, while teachers influenced their career choices. Their perceptions of headship developed and changed over time, transforming from feelings of shock at the reality and the complexity of headship to control and confidence that increased over first, second and third headships.

Introduction

Research on gender equality in school leadership has increased significantly worldwide since the works of Patricia Schmuck and Charol Shakeshaft in the early 1980s in the United States. This research has addressed several issues including socialisation and stereotyping (Cubillo and Brown 2003), external and internal barriers that affect women's progression in school leadership (Shakeshaft 1987, Coleman 2007) as well as aspects of women's lives and career paths (Day and Bakioglu 1996, Oplatka 2004, McLay 2008, Moorosi 2010). A gap arises in the literature wherein existing career development models do not adequately capture the lives and unique experiences of women's career paths, "in respect of the cultures and societies from which they emerge" (Gronn 1999, 31). Given the context-dependent variation in such experiences and processes in different countries as well as differences that arise from the gender of the school heads (Oplatka 2006, McLay 2008), the need for global research on women leaders' career development assumes even greater significance.

The progression of women heads may be understood better with reference to recent statistics identifying trends in school leadership. A report from the *Department for Education* (2013) in England revealed that 65.1 percent of the head-teachers were female, which is a considerable improvement when compared against the far modest percentage (35.1 percent) for the year 2001 (Coleman 2002). However, a further statistical breakdown shows a significant difference in progression between different groups. Only 33 percent of women were found in positions of headship within secondary schools (DfE 2013), suggesting that the majority of women head-teachers were concentrated in primary schools. Further, the majority of headships were also occupied by white British women with the exception of only a few (3.1 percent) ethnic minority group representatives in similar positions. Geographically too, some locations showed the presence of significantly more or fewer female heads than others (see Fuller 2013, 2017). Reasons for these inconsistencies are not conclusive, but as Fuller (2009, 19) has earlier noted, in some areas female head-teachers are an 'endangered species'. The topic of career development of female head-teachers is thus, key to the understanding of women's career choices, their influences and experiences of progression (Coleman and Fitzgerald 2008). Research in this area of inquiry can help to provide more options on models of career development, answer broader questions on women's participation in leadership and eventually contribute to an increase in the number of women in school leadership in the global context (Gronn and Ribbins 1996).

To contribute to the literature on women's experiences of headship, this paper presents findings from a study that examined the career development of female head-teachers in two Local Education Authorities (LEAs) within one county in the south of England. In this county, female head-teachers accounted for 77 percent of all head-teachers serving in the area, a notably higher percentage than the national average. While the reasons for the higher percentage of female head-teachers in these LEAs have been speculated upon (HMSO 2010), factors contributing to women's career development and progression to headship in general require closer scrutiny. In view of the fact that women are still less likely to hold headship positions than men, as they continue to experience discrimination (Fuller 2017), studying a context wherein school leaders are predominantly female represented an opportunity to gain rich insights into factors contributing to the successful progression of women school leaders.

Therefore, the study was aimed at addressing the identified research gaps by probing into the influences on female head-teachers' career choice, their decisions to become head-teachers and changes in perceptions of headship over time, in order to contribute to a better understanding of their career development. The study addressed a broad question on what shaped and influenced women's career development, with the following specific questions guiding the study: i) What influenced female heads' career choices? ii) How did female heads decide to become head teachers? and iii) What are female heads' perceptions about headship over time?

Gender and career development theory
The concept of career development is inextricably linked with a person's occupational life (Patton and McMahon 2006), with definitions of the former ranging from a focus on profession and a developmental process over time (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad and Herma 1951) to a 'lifelong process' (Brown and Brooks 1990, xvii). Brown and Brooks describe a career as a process of making choices from various available occupations, while Wolfe and Kolb (1980) provide a more dynamic description that concerns the whole person and not just the occupation. In considering career development, Wolfe & Kolb (1980, 1-2) invite attention to the broader context of the ever-changing contexts of life, 'self and circumstances that evolve, change and unfold in mutual interaction'. Similarly, foregrounding the connectedness of the personal and the professional in the lives of individuals, Chen (1998) and Sears (1982) highlight the inseparability of life and work in career development, with the latter being influenced by 'psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic and chance factors' (Sears 1982, 139). Over the years, the researchers have also identified various career development stages across many sectors, which insights help to explore changes, transitions, influences and role-shifts in an individual career (Super, 1990; Chen, 1998; Bimrose 2008).

Many career theories have been developed over the years, however, these theories have not proven sufficient to account for women's careers (Patton 2013) and have been criticised for failing 'to address adequately the complex and relational nature of women's career development that is distinct from that of men', (Bimrose, Watson, McMahon, Haasler, Tomassini and Suzanne 2014, 79). Although it was Super (1990), who first identified women's vocational issues and began to delineate women's career patterns, his work has drawn criticism for lacking depth and being largely descriptive (Patton and McMahon 2006). By beginning to look into the possibility of women following careers in terms of both employment and family, Crompton and Harris (1998) championed the gender difference focus. Their work explained how women's career development was influenced by the different stages they were at depending on their reproductive cycles. Bimrose et al's study (2014) further advanced the gender and career theory by providing culturally relevant insights into career theory, which suggested the need for more support and guidance, thereby affirming Ribbins' (2008) contention that the careers of men and women are facilitated by various agents.

Career development models in educational leadership
Numerous models have been developed and used to examine career paths in different sectors and help to 'structure our knowledge about careers in a meaningful manner' (Oplatka 2004, 45). Some of

these models relate only to professional lives (Day and Bakioglu 1996, Hart and Weindling 1996), while others outline whole life experiences starting from pre-entry stages, which identify 'early markers of leadership' (Gardner 1995, 32) and formative influences in childhood and their preparation for principalship (Fidler and Atton 2004, Gronn 1999). However, the utility and validity of career development models as well as criteria for dividing one's career into stages may be questioned, as some models appear to be simplistic, perhaps excessively so, suggesting a cautious approach in the explorations of career (Gallos 1989) in the first instance. In the second instance, career development models that are frequently drawn upon are not exclusive to female leaders' careers and often lack the ability to account for women's careers (Bimrose et al. 2014) Hence there is a need to treat these with caution (Oplatka 2001). Gronn (1999) argued for the importance of acknowledging the 'historical, cultural, societal and individual' influences that shape careers (Gronn 1993, 347), as these circumstances constitute extensive contextual parameters within which 'the microcosmic details of each individual leader's life' are located (Gronn, 1993, 346).

Below, a three stage career development model as developed by Gronn (1999) and further used and enhanced by Ribbins (2008) is presented to understand the development of female head-teachers' career development. It should be noted that the model could have more than three stages, but only three have been reviewed in view of the scope of the paper and applicability to the career development of the participants in our study.

Stage 1: Formation
Formation is a preparatory stage wherein the concept of the self and favourable working styles are being shaped through key agencies including family, school and reference groups such as peers, friends, teachers or mentors (Fidler and Atton 2004, Gardner 1995, Gronn 1993, Gronn and Ribbins 1996). The same agencies may be broken down into micro (parents, teachers) and meso (peers, schools, local communities) and macro (culture, history) level variables (Ribbins 2008). It has been noted that 'these agencies, particularly those exerting their influence during the early years, shape personality by generating a conception of self, along with the rudiments of a work style, attitude and outlook' (Ribbins 1999, 84). They affect individual's character through creating the concept of the self before working style and leadership style are formed.

However, the extent to which an individual adopts norms and values is influenced by the coherence of the activities of these agencies and messages they sent (Gronn 1993). These may differ for men and women, and while there is no pattern to suggest that all head-teachers have an intrinsic affection for school (Rayner and Ribbins 1999) despite evidence to suggest that they may enjoy their school experience (Coleman 2002) and regard school as a place where their values are shaped, indeed, others may not have good school memories (Ribbins 1997b). Highlighting differences in experiences based on differences in gender, the study by Coleman (2002) suggests that more women than men were influenced by families, while schools exert a greater influence over more men than women.

Stage 2: Accession
Accession has been described as a 'developmental period of wing-stretching' (Gronn and Ribbins 1996, 466) wherein women take decisions to work in the educational sector. This helps them to gain experience that influences knowledge, attitudes and skills, which help prepare them for promotion. Although to become a head-teacher in the UK context, one need not be an accredited teacher (Male 2005), school leaders are likely to have worked as qualified teachers while others attain a leadership position 'by chance' without having a clear structured plan. This appears common amongst female leaders (Oplatka 2006) and some studies suggest that women head-teachers often take opportunities as they arise (Ribbins 1997b) and hardly plan their careers (McLay and Brown 2001, Coleman 2002). In fact their career decisions are likely to be influenced by particular circumstances or aspects of family, social, cultural or national demands, not only at this stage but across all the stages (Oplatka 2006, Coleman and Fitzgerald 2008, Richardson and Schaeffer 2013). While this may hold true for

women and men, family responsibility is often regarded as the main barrier to leadership for women, and socio-cultural issues tend to hold back women's earlier accession to headship, rather then men's.

Stage 3: Incumbency
Incumbency begins at the initial appointment into headship even though some heads will go through this stage a few times when they experience subsequent headships (Ribbins 2008). Fidler and Atton (2004, 144) contend that this stage of career progression may be either 'negative and destructive' or 'progressive and creative'. At the beginning of incumbency, head teachers become familiar with the role, school norms, expectations and daily routines (Ribbins 2008). However, it takes time for some heads to feel confident about fulfilling tasks they may not have undertaken before (Day and Bakioglu 1996). This stage is also about attempting to socialise into the school, which involves recognising complexities of various issues and achieving acceptance by colleagues and adapting to school culture (Earley and Weindling 2007, Weindling and Earley 1987).

Other studies found that rather than using power to express their dominance and control (Hall 1996), some women tend to stress the importance of interpersonal relationships and care amongst school members (Hurty 1995, Oplatka 2001), while others opt for leadership incorporating influence and opinion of their colleagues whose characters and cultures may vary (Blasé and Anderson 1995). Hence, heads acclimating to their new environment may experience a wide range of emotions, starting with initial enthusiasm and excitement and followed by doubts and anxiety (Ribbins 2008, Parkay, Currie and Rhodes 1992). It is also possible at this stage that head-teachers may undergo renewal (Arar and Abu-Rabia-Queder 2011) or a 'turning point' (Oplatka 2001, 91), wherein they experience doubts about their life structure and start thinking about introducing changes and new commitments in their life (Bejian and Salomone 1995). This may happen, for example after a burnout crisis when head-teachers take sabbaticals and have more time for self-reflection, thereby interrogating their old attitudes, which is a process resembling rediscovery.

Thus, although the stages of headship career development are presented one after the other, and head teachers may experience career stages in a linear and sequential order (Gronn and Ribbins 1996), career stages are 'not necessarily linear' (Oplatka 2004, 45). Head-teachers can move forwards as well as backwards when they experience 'regressions ... and unpredictable changes of direction' (Oplatka 2004, 45), thereby experiencing progression and regression. These processes are affected by a wide range of factors, including individual background and psychological or social factors (Parkay et al 1992). Additionally, there are differences between sectors: For instance, primary heads are likely to move through stages faster than secondary head-teachers (Earley and Weindling 2007). Furthermore, it happens that some head-teachers operate simultaneously at multiple stages, while other principals may never advance to the final stage of some career development models (Ribbins 2008). Caution must therefore be exercised when using these career development stages as women are likely to experience them differently. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of women's leadership practice (Ruminski and Holba 2012) and their leadership development, particularly linked to structures of opportunity (Grogan and Shakeshaft 2011), remain of great interest for their potential to inform women's career development theory.

Methodology

The study is based on data from in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out with six female heads whose profiles are summarised below in Table 1:

Table 1: Profiles of female heads participants

Name	Age	Marital status	Headship	Years in headship	School type
Laura	30-39	Single	1st	1-5	Primary
Sarah	50-59	Single	1st	6-10	Secondary
Ann	50-59	Married	1st	1-5	Primary
Hannah	50-59	Married	2nd	10-15	Primary
Sue	50-59	Divorced	2nd	15-20	Secondary
Rachel	50-59	Married	3rd	15-20	Primary

Informed consent was sought through personalised email. As university-based researchers and outsiders to the world of headship, we were aware of the biases that could affect levels of trust. Initial emails helped to establish rapport with the participants, in preparation for the interviews with each of the participants. Face-to-face life story interviews were conducted allowing the interviews to explore experiences, feelings and attitudes of female heads towards their career paths and highlight their unique stories of leadership (Kvale 1996, Warren 2001). Life stories are believed to be well suited to feminist research as a means to 'giv[e] voice to women's experiences' (Basit 2010, 113) and to let them describe, explain, and explore what affected their careers and how they made career choices (Haig 1999), thereby generating rich accounts of their career and lives.

For data analysis, full transcriptions of all the interviews were prepared in order to facilitate engagement with the data and to 'enhance [its] trustworthiness and validity' (Mertens 2010, 424). A narrative approach to data analysis reflecting female head-teacher's stories and views of their careers through the themes that emerged was adopted. This approach involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, which were then coded using emergent themes in the data. The broad division between women's lives and careers was identified and formation, preparation, headship then and now. Within this framework, coding and categorising were undertaken, and the transcripts were analysed by coding information into common themes, which emerged through identifying reoccurring words, phrases or topics. These themes were then cross-referenced with those from the career development model. This was done initially for each interview and then by observing themes common across all the interviews, thereby helping to create a hierarchy of codes that allowed common themes related to influences, decisions and perceptions as well as links between these themes to emerge (Easterby-Smith et al. 2002). Comments and quotes that appeared to be key within datasets and themes and which could represent the interviewees' voices adequately were identified.

Findings

The findings are presented using career development stages as themes, namely formations, accession and incumbency. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for the participants.

Formations: making a head-teacher
The findings suggest that early career influences through values instilled by family during childhood and through schooling experiences stayed with female heads, creating an impact on their career choices and leadership practice.

The heads emphasised parental influence in shaping their personalities and instilling values that served as the foundation of their moral integrity and inclined them towards an approach to leadership informed by social justice. Ann was brought up in a village by educated parents who decided to take her to a mixed city middle school completely different from what she had been used to. Her father was a businessman and her mother was an artist, and with both parents exercising a significant influence on her values, she reports:

> Parents did shape me as a person and ... instilled a lot of my views and values and that everyone is important and I believe in it at school now... they made me quite passionate about fairness and equality (Ann).

Hannah was also influenced by parents, albeit, differently. She was born and bred in a city and attended a girls' school. Belonging to a family of strong women, she was hugely influenced by her mother and her well-to-do maternal grandmother. Her mother was well-educated and had a powerful job in the city, while her father came from a poor background and held a clerical position at work. Hannah believes that the variation in the social classes of her parents encouraged her to serve others and to work hard:

> They [parents] made me aware of the whole cross-section of society...that some people have and some don't...I was brought up with very strong themes about fairness for everybody, a more equal society... there was this sense of service to society (Hannah).

These extracts show that the values embedded firmly in the women's lives and careers influenced leadership informed by an approach to social justice. Besides instilling values, the parents supported their decisions throughout their lives, which nurtured their ambitions, independence and built up their confidence and self-drive. Hannah observed that '[my parents] encouraged me to have aspirations to want to be successful in life' while Ann revealed that her parents 'encouraged me to be what I wanted to be'.

Although the parents of the female heads were equally supportive, it was noticeable that fathers, particularly well-educated and professionally successful fathers were the ones who promoted their daughters' aspirations and ambitions. Apart from Hannah's mother, who had a powerful job in the city and 'was a good role model', the female head-teachers' mothers were housewives, who provided mainly emotional support. Rachel's father was a head-teacher and had a huge influence on her. Also, as the eldest of five children, she developed an interest in children, wanting 'from a very early age ... to work with children'. She has this to say about her father: 'I was highly influenced by my father [head-teacher]...he shared the schools that he worked in...I knew I wanted to work with children ... to be a teacher'.

Sarah's parents were not necessarily educated, but her father owned a small family business. She started schooling in a comprehensive school, later moving to a grammar school. She grew up with similar values of serving the community, which seemed to be ingrained in her by her parents. She describes her upbringing in the following way:

> I think I was given a very traditional upbringing, and how to behave, how to speak, and you just didn't misbehave, you didn't show off in public and you didn't do these sorts of things. And you always tried to help people, cos they [parents] both did voluntary work with different groups, so I saw them doing things (Sarah).

Sarah's parents valued education but did not put her under pressure to achieve academically, and she ended up becoming a Physical Education teacher because she loved sport. Perhaps the small town background with negligible pressure to achieve academically or professionally can provide an explanation for Sarah's choices.

Like Sarah, Sue also loved sport, but she chose teaching because of her love for education and schooling. Sue was brought up in a stable home that also valued education. 'Dad was an engineer and mum was at home, ... cleaning, washing, cooking'. Her father was her main influence because "he

was hardworking", and Sue also became similarly industrious. She says about her father: "dad was the man in charge and I admired him enormously". Asked how she ended in teaching, Sue says: 'I just wanted to carry on, I just liked going to school. I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to do'.

Because of her love for school and studying, Sue was noticeably the only one who openly admitted to wanting responsibilities at school, thereby showing early signs of her desire to achieve leadership: 'I did like having positions of responsibility...I was a school athletics captain...a house captain...a college secretary'.

Besides parents, other female heads had been influenced by their siblings who were described as helping them discover their individuality or to encourage their future profession. Laura who grew up as 'a bit of a rebel', who hated being told what to do said that following the example of her conventional sister, who had very good academic results, not only motivated her and increased her self-drive but also influenced her career before headship. Laura had more fun at school climbing over fences and being naughty than while learning. She was the youngest of the heads and believed that being a difficult child shaped her current role. She hated school and disliked teachers, but her choice of teaching and ultimately headship was influenced by her head-teacher's remarks: 'The head said to me "I think you'd make a nice teacher" and I had my heart set on the fact that I wanted to be a teacher...I was still a pain...but I did change my attitude'.

Laura believes it was her own childhood that prepared her for headship. She understood difficult children and thinks that the desire to help them drew her to teaching. She observed that 'I can see spirits in them and I can see that drive not to be doing what they've been told'.

Thus, family and schooling became sources of influence or 'micro agents' that played a significant role in inculcating values that shaped character, nurtured the ambitions of female heads and influenced a career in teaching that later progressed to headship and shaped leadership practice. Although some schooling experiences had an indirect influence, such as teachers "being unkind" making heads develop different approaches to managing students' behaviour, other experiences were more direct with some teachers being acknowledged as 'natural role models'.

Accession: becoming a head-teacher

Most of the women who were interviewed did not set out to become head-teachers, but some had aspirations to become heads when they started teaching and started considering headship after holding positions of leadership at lower levels. It was noticeable that transitions between teaching and middle leadership took longer with some of the participants devoting time to raise a family. As Hannah commented: '... I had my family, and my life was quite demanding, not too much time to plan ahead'. However, we found that most women progressed quite quickly through the ranks from working as head of subject, head of year, phase leader and head of lower or upper school thereby gaining *on-the-job experience* that prepared them for headship. This is indicated in extracts from interviews with Ann and Laura, who observed in a similar vein: 'Because I had some experience here and there...it was priceless when going for [headship]. And Laura says: '[Promotions have] given me an awful lot of experience and knowledge which built up, I was already making the decision in my head that...I would make another move'.

For Ann and Laura, as well as Sarah, experience meant that they could see elements of school life that worked or did not work over the years, which shaped their vision, confidence and self-drive. This is connected with working for different heads who were, for example, either 'very remote' or 'phenomenal in terms of moving the school forward'. This enabled the heads in this study to build up their own picture of a good leader who could inspire them. As Rachel noted 'you suddenly saw different ways of working that helped you think of your own way of leading'. These rich experiences, good or bad, encouraged heads to pursue headship, be more critical of ways of leading that they had observed and helped to form their own views of a good headship. For instance, Hannah revealed that she 'used to look at the decisions the leadership were making and I thought I would do better'.

Collegial support also motivated some of the participants. Sue and Rachel were driven at the beginning of their teaching careers and later supported by their colleagues, which played a significant role in their path to headship. Sue commented that:

> I went to see the head and I said "I fancy doing that job [being in charge of resources' department]"...I got it... And then I did start thinking about being in a position where I could make decisions...then my head encouraged me to apply for headship.

Although she was still encouraged to take the final leap to headship, Sue took active steps towards leadership roles and did not wait for opportunities to arise on their own.

Rachel too found the support of colleagues and friends encouraging. She noted that 'I was motivated and driven...but it was colleagues, friends and everyone around me that encouraged me to go for headship'. Ann's self-drive was similarly reinforced through support and encouragement provided by different people. She commented that:

> Had I not been nurtured by school improvement partners and governors pushing me and friends telling me "you should be going for this", I would not have done that...the head's role came up and I knew I wanted it (Ann).

Encouragement and support from colleagues seemed crucial to women's careers, often representing a turning point in their careers and decision-making. Women were encouraged or inspired by heads they worked for, who were often supportive role models and who encouraged and inspired them. For example, in Sue's case, her 'head encouraged [her] to do an NPQH...and then she said "apply for headship"...so I did'. Rachel was inspired by 'this head who was so inspirational and so exciting to be with...and I thought what would it be like to run your own school'?

Even Hannah, who seemed driven and had a career plan, was encouraged by her head-teacher to apply for headship, suggesting that encouragement complemented her self-drive and motivation. Sarah was also influenced by her head-teacher who was 'very good...a tremendous visionary strategist' and who encouraged her to undertake a headship qualification programme.

All female heads we interviewed, chose headship for the same reason: to make a difference. Perhaps some more direct than others, for example Laura 'wanted to see things change', and Sue sought 'to have influence and responsibility', whereas Sarah who was 'always encouraged to do something'. The reasons given for the pursuit of headship seemed to comprise a common mission, affected and influenced by numerous factors including people's own experiences, their self-drive as well as encouragement from others and the desire for change.

Incumbency: being a head-teacher

The incumbency stage was to a large extent not what the women had expected. All six heads mentioned lack of confidence, fear of introducing changes and feelings of anxiety at the beginning of their headships. Sarah noted that; '… for two years I was terrified of everything...frightened to do something wrong...there was no confidence...people asked "do you enjoy it?" and I said "I am too worried to enjoy it"'.

Ann too experienced difficulties in the initial period of her headship. She found that it was 'very hard and challenging …. I felt lonely...there was no one in school to confide in and reassure me'.

Hannah's lack of confidence was reflected in trying to socialise and include everyone's opinion. She owned to being 'cautious at the beginning and try[ing] to listen to everybody'. However, she later developed confidence and started making firm decisions and it was then that she found headship 'satisfying'. On the other hand, while Sue described her experience as being mostly 'great, fantastic, lov[ing] it, I could throw myself into it', she seemed, in reality, less confident at the beginning, as the extract below shows: 'I didn't feel prepared at all...I remember sitting in my office and thinking "I don't have the faintest idea what to do"... but you would just go and do it...and never show your insecurities'.

This showed her drive to act and be a strong leader, similarly to Laura who also had to mask her real anxieties. Laura reported that 'in the big picture I feel confident, but on a day to day basis

you question yourself all the time...inside you don't feel confident but you have to portray confidence outside the door'.

The reality of headship appeared to have shocked most, suggesting that they might have had an idealistic image of headship before starting. For instance, Hannah found that 'it was much more complicated than I thought...it's not such a rosy picture...It wasn't what I expected in many ways'. Rachel observed that 'headship was surprising...I went in with full enthusiasm and excitement and it turned out to be a huge challenge'. These experiences could also suggest the women were not sufficiently prepared for the headship, despite having undergone a headship preparation training (NPQH[1]). This argument is supported by the fact as they got used to the job, women became confident and better prepared for subsequent headship(s). Hannah went into the current school for her second headship 'with a different attitude, with a much clearer vision of what I wanted to achieve...I felt that my first [headship] job was kind of preparing me'. Sue found 'the second headship was easier...I was confident, I knew what to do…the new relationships I had to build up…the things not to do'. Rachel also 'felt well prepared in terms of having done one headship [as] I'd got to understand the job'.

To a large extent, as women grew more accustomed to the role, they grew in confidence and changed their perceptions of headship. The longer they stayed in headship, the more accustomed they became to its demands and challenges. It would appear that when women are new in their first headships, there is shock at the beginning, but with time there is greater calmness and enjoyment of the role. For those in second and third headships, there are more discoveries, but no further shocks and surprises as the big shock is in the first headship. As Sue noted 'I'm confident...nothing will surprise me, I know what I'm doing'. Hannah pointed out that 'I am more realistic and grounded...nothing happens as quickly as you wish...I understand the day to day reality and all conflicting pressures that you face'.

As they have gained more experience, the women acknowledge the reality and value of their experience and what they have learnt over the years. Perhaps what Rachel says can explain the initial shock: 'In many respects...headship is in your head, it's hard to explain'. This may suggest that the reality of headship might actually be more daunting than its perception. But these perceptions, informed by their experiences and contextual realities influenced the heads' desire or lack of it to stay in headship. On the one hand, Hannah appeared to be discouraged from headship by the pressure of Ofsted: 'I can't face another inspection. It's destructive and frustrating'. Rachel and Sue, on the other hand, would like to stay retire in headship. Ann and Sarah also want to stay in headship, but only Ann finds herself considering changing schools for 'a bigger school [as] I want more out of [headship]'. Yet, Sarah has not changed schools for almost 20 years, perhaps because of the fear of a new environment: 'I won't have confidence to go to a school without knowing it'. On the other hand, Laura is young and driven and plans to stay in headship for longer with future aspirations for a leadership role in the department for education.

Discussion

These findings suggest that early career influence occurred at the formation stage wherein the micro agent of family and school had a great deal of influence on the heads' personal development and career choice, corresponding partially with Coleman's (2002) findings wherein more women than men were influenced by families. Supportive parents providing a happy childhood and instilling value for education played a significant role in the development of the characters, values and ambitions of

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[1] The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) was mandatory for aspiring headteachers when the participants entered headship, but has since stopped being compulsory in England.

the women heads in the study. These findings are in parallel with the findings of other studies that have made similar observations (Hall 1996, McLay and Brown 2001, McLay 2008). For instance, the study by McLay and Brown (2001, 108) showed that head teachers had 'supportive parents who believed strongly in the value of education'. While Ribbins and Marland's (1994, 13) research showed that the fathers of head teachers were ambitious for their children, it found that it was the mothers who 'exerted the most compelling example and influence'. In contrast, within this study, the majority of the female heads appear to have been influenced to a greater extent by their professionally successful fathers, while the mothers mostly housewives, provided emotional support. Mostly well educated, the fathers of the female heads belonged to the post-war generation, and as such, they were likely to be very ambitious for their offspring. These families provided stability, valuing education thereby giving the women a strong foundation and a positive head start in life. The upbringing and background experiences share similarities with those of women in Hall (1996), Coleman (2002) and McLay (2008). Additionally, while head-teachers in Ribbins and Marland's (1994) study complained about their fathers' anxiety and excessive pushing to do well, the participants in this study reported their fathers as nurturing their ambitions, allowing freedom of choice and supporting their decisions.

We also found it significant that family values instilled at a young age shaped female heads' own leadership dispositions, thereby socialising them into particular norms and values that shaped their subsequent leadership practice. The significance of family is thus notable, particularly factors such as the parents' own social class in influencing and instilling certain values of fairness and equality. All female heads came from traditional families with both parents, wherein at least one parent was working and education was valued. Awareness of inequality, arguably from the then societal inequalities and the inequalities within the parents' own families, was developed early on and influenced heads to lead for social justice. As Fuller (2013, 169) contends, it is only by recognising inequality that head-teachers would understand inequality as located in difference.

Undoubtedly, for the women in this study, the teaching experience was a critical point in their careers and was justifiably a 'developmental period of wing-stretching' (Gronn and Ribbins 1996, 466), wherein they learnt about their own capabilities, gained insights from observing those around them, gained leadership experience and made important career decisions in terms of moving forward. As with the participants in McLay and Brown's study (2001), all women found their promotions and initial leadership roles very useful. Their leadership experiences, good or bad, provided valuable opportunities for development that ensured readiness for headship. Similarly, to previous studies of Ribbins' (1997a, 303), the women learnt practices either from good head-teachers or 'how not to do' headship from bad head-teachers. This critical engagement with their observations in schools appeared to drive their agency and determination to want to do things more effectively. Thus, the formation stage of female heads' careers was characteristic of key agencies that included family and schools, influencing the women's values that would later inform their leadership practice.

Accession to headship was facilitated by middle leadership role experiences, which boosted women's confidence and self-drive, as many of them decided to apply for headship while holding a middle leadership position. Ribbins (2008, 65) suggested that when entering teaching, the-would-be head-teachers typically seek advancement, look for 'experience in one or more leadership roles and in due course for promotion to principalship'. This suggests carefully planned careers, consciously followed and established from the very start upon entry into the teaching profession, which does not typically represent the path taken by majority of the women in this study. Only Laura and Hannah actively sought promotion and decided at the beginning of their teaching careers that they would go for headship, suggesting confidence, agency and a higher self-drive. For the majority of the participants, opportunities were taken advantage of as they happened, with no conscious effort being made to gain leadership experience. Similarly, women in Ribbins (1997b, 182) 'took opportunities as they arose', while for women in our studies, 'opportunities happened'. This resonates with the findings of Moorosi (2010, 553), who concluded that 'preparation through experience had been indirect and unintended and it was only realised and appreciated as preparation when it was time for the principalship'. Perhaps, this is not surprising, given that the visibility and possibility of headship as a prospective career move is more realisable from a middle leadership position. In connection with

this, Patton's (2013) assertion that career choices are related to accessibility of certain occupations, which would beg the question of early exposure to leadership positions, is particularly significant. That most female heads were 'encouraged' to go for headship suggests a relational nature of women's career (Bimrose et al 2014), one that needs to be harnessed, formalised and institutionalised.

The incumbency stage was marred by a lack of confidence that was experienced by all women in their first years of headship. While the lack of confidence is often presented as a barrier to headship access, for these women, the lack of confidence was associated with introducing changes, expectations of the school and staff members and perhaps loneliness in headship. Ribbins (2008) observes that a lack of confidence is often mixed with enthusiasm and excitement. Similarly, participants in this study reported experiencing a combination of positive and negative feelings. Arguably, the positive feelings experienced first when entering headship could be a sign of either women's self-drive or idealistic image of leading a school, which was then diminished by the overwhelming reality that deflated their confidence as they faced the reality of headship. Day and Bakioglu (1996, 211) posit that towards the end of initiation, women's "enthusiasm transferred into realism". Thus, anxiety over failure and a lack of confidence, which many women struggled with, may be an inherent part of the early stages of headship, described respectively by Parkay et al. (1992) and Fidler and Atton (2004) as stages of survival (with 'shock' as the first indicator) and encounter (with 'surprise' as a sub-phase). Both characterise the shock of headship and feeling professionally inhibited, which may result in female heads being overwhelmed.

In the first headship, women experienced very different feelings ranging from frustration, uncertainty and insecurity, to enthusiasm, satisfaction, confidence and control. These are likely to have swayed their perceptions about headship, which may easily change drastically when the women compared their beginnings and the current headship (Day and Bakioglu 1996, Earley and Weindling 2007, Oplatka 2004). Women who changed headships were likely to compare their newer headship, which is often easier to handle, with their previous position of leadership and its main part or ending characterised usually by stability and control rather than with its beginnings experienced in the more distant past. We also observed that feelings about headship appeared to be initially linked with idealism turning into realism over time. Several authors (Kremer-Hayon and Fessler 1992, Day and Bakioglu 1996, Fidler and Atton 2004) have identified replacing idealism with realism as a likely transition to be made in the headship experience. Blackmore (2005) however, perceives the clash between the idealised view of [transformational] headship and its realism as an obstacle to career progression. Since we studied women who had already attained headship, we argue that the requirements of school leadership professionalism within the current performativity culture may have led to women's possible dis-enchantment, caused by disillusionment about the role as Ribbins and Zhang (2006) established. Although we see this through the experiences of one female head (who 'can't stand another inspection'), a closer look at this in further research may begin to address issues concerning the relationship between the individual female heads' career paths, the societies within which they live and the political nature of the educational context in which they work (Gronn 1993). As Blackmore (2005, 174) observes, this marks the 'enduring masculinism of executive power'. We are cautious in our argument in this regard, as the majority of our female heads had changed headships and remained enchanted and optimistic about leading (Ribbins 2008), hence leading to minimal change in their perceptions.

Conclusions and implications

The study yielded some significant findings towards the understanding of women heads' career development. The micro agencies of the formation stage – family and schooling – were found to play a significant role in influencing female heads' career choice and build characters that influenced leadership practice. The participants' decisions to become heads were influenced by their desire to

make a difference and they entered headship with idealised perceptions of headship that changed to realism over the duration of first to second and third headships. We observed that women took longer to get into leadership positions but once they did, progression and final transition to headship happened fast. Once the headship was attained, it is harder to observe the pace of career development as some of the participants settled in their first headship and made it their comfort zone, experiencing more confidence and stability. This signified progression yet with a fear of moving to the unknown territory. Others changed headship undergoing new experiences in new schools which presented them with satisfaction and improved self-confidence. We note that the reality of changes within headship present women with mixed feelings - enchantment and dis-enchantment that determine whether they move on or move out of headship. Nonetheless, we are confident in our assertion that early experiences of leadership build women's confidence to lead and propel them into headship much faster. On the basis of these findings, we would like to firstly, highlight the significance of the roles schools can play by exposing women to leadership roles in the early years of their teaching career in order to facilitate career advancement.

Secondly, although the findings were based on a rather homogeneous sample of English female heads in their 50s, there are implications for other background and countries as well. The female heads attained headship at the time when the NPQH was a requirement for the headship. However, despite the leadership training and the experience they had acquired, the majority of them decried lack of preparedness for the headteachers' office. This shows the daunting nature of the reality of headship that may require a more practical approach to leadership preparation training. We also observed that none of the female heads mentioned any form of guidance towards career choice or development, but relied on informal and individual encouragement and support. This opens up a question of whether career guidance for women leaders ought to be an individual responsibility or part of systemic interventions from programme developers and policy-makers. We propose that in order to improve women's representation in secondary headship, career development should not be left to individual women aspirants but should be part of the broader systemic interventions to ensure that support and guidance are formalised and institutionalised.

Lastly, while our small qualitative sample enabled us to gain deeper insights into and understanding of the female heads' career life stories, we acknowledge as a limitation the snapshot nature of the study that meant we relied on women's accounts as they narrated them. While this has served well for our purposes, we recommend that future research considers a more longitudinal approach that may capture and benefit from the malleable nature of female head-teachers' experiences over the duration of their headship. Additionally, large quantitative studies may prove helpful in capturing the situation of a larger group of women, thereby ensuring generalisability of results that may be more helpful for policy making.

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