

Constructing Identities: female headteachers' perceptions and experiences in the primary sector.

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Abstract

This article presents research undertaken with female headteachers in UK primary schools and explores several influential discourses in relation to female headteachers' identities. It considers themes inherent in women's narratives as they reflect upon their professional lives and discusses various identities inhabited by female leaders which emerge from the data. It also explores dominant discourses related to the masculine construction of leadership, women's domestic responsibilities and women as enablers, which have a significant impact on women's professional lives and upon the ways in which they are positioned. It notes that women's narratives are shot through with ambiguity as they may inhabit several contradictory identities revealing qualities, characteristics and leadership styles which diverge from socially prescribed gender-appropriate behaviours. The article suggests that although there may appear to be a variety of identities from which women may select, there are limits to agency. It concludes that powerful discourses exist which constrain or facilitate ways of being, so impacting on leadership work and the professional lives of female headteachers. Consequently the complex negotiations of women as they take up leadership roles in schools should be acknowledged.

Key words: Female Headteachers, Identity, Discourse

Background

There currently exists a crisis in the recruitment of headteachers^{1*} in the UK, where declining numbers of applicants to primary headship indicate a gap between supply and demand (NCSLCS, 2012). The impact of the neoliberal agenda is significant. Major issues concerning inspection, measures of accountability, competition, external interference and resulting policy change, serve to de-motivate prospective leaders (Apple, 2010). Increased levels of regulation and 'super-surveillance' (Puwar, 2004: 61) act to

¹ The term 'headteacher' is equivalent to that of 'principal' in the USA.

dissuade many competent professionals from ultimately seeking senior leadership positions in public, primary and elementary schools. Key deterrents lie in the perception that school leadership signifies diminishing contact with children, is stressful and bureaucratic and inevitably leads to a significant effect on work-life balance (MORI, 2006; NCSLCS, 2010).

Further, there are gender related issues. Women's particular concerns regarding headship relate to the management of their professional lives together with family responsibilities (ICM, 2008). Additionally there is an imbalance in relation to numbers of male and female headteachers in that men at this level are disproportionately represented across all school phases (Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Conley & Jenkins, 2011). Within the UK, a man has a one in six chance of becoming a headteacher at primary level², but a woman has only a one in fourteen chance of achieving headship (DfE, 2011). Similarly, although the documentation of female leaders in the USA is imprecise, recent statistics from the American Association of School Administrators (ASSA) suggest that women in the superintendency represent only twenty one percent of its membership (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011). At the top level, women are disproportionately represented reflecting international trends where statistics 'verify the persistent dominance of white males in school leadership roles' (Rusch and Marshall, 2006, p 230).

Given the current pressures on headteachers in general and the disproportionate number of male headteachers within the primary phase, what are the perceptions and experiences of female headteachers in this sector? This study explores their lives, the ways in which they position themselves and the ways in which they are positioned. It is concerned with the identities they inhabit and their awareness of how identities are constructed for them. In addition, the research intends to extrapolate from women's narratives the dominant and subordinate discourses which impact not only on their lives but also upon the process of identity construction. The paper investigates the ways in which female heads position themselves as professionals and accommodate to a greater or lesser extent the challenges and opportunities that the role of headship brings. The purpose then is to explore the complexity and difference existing within a sample of female headteachers in relation to how they identify themselves in the leadership role.

Women and leadership

Gender and leadership is a widely contested field. Over the last three decades, social conceptions of women in leadership positions have evolved both in terms of explanatory frameworks and typological features. This evolution has been marked by the subsequent growth and decline in influence of a variety of theoretical discourses which either treat women in their own right or use them as

² Primary schools take pupils aged 4-11

comparators to leadership which, by inference, is essentially male. Although the term 'leadership' has been expanded to include women and their impact (Kellerman and Rhode, 2007) women's qualities and leadership styles have been widely reviewed in relation to men's, specifically in relation to the dichotomies of agentic/authoritative male and communal/personal female (Carli and Eagly, 2007; Blackmore and Sachs, 2007). Because men have greater status and power than women this may lead to expectations that they will act according to notions of gender stereotypical behaviour (Carli, 2001). The historical *recognition* of men in leadership roles may also perpetuate the discourse of leadership as a masculine construction (Schein, 2001) even though women have had a consistent historical presence as leaders (Cranston and Ehrich, 2007).

The influence of cultural feminism on leadership discourses has been significant in relation to women and leadership. Cultural feminism asserts that women need to support each other in the face of a patriarchal society in which male and female qualities may be polarised. Women have been perceived to have a focus on caring, compassionate and relational ways of being as opposed to men's focus on an ethic of justice and the development of rights (Gilligan, 1982).

Cultural feminists draw upon two distinct notions. Essentialist positions have been outworked in universalising discourses positioning women as employing women's ways of knowing (Belenky, et al 1986). Women exercise their own ways of leading through the employment of female leadership styles which are nurturing, collaborative and supportive. However, some reject essentialism attributing distinct male and female styles of leadership to socially constructed roles. Both types of approach however, spawn an oppositional discourse of masculine versus feminine leadership (Collard, 2005). Masculinist gender discourses have similarly endorsed feminist stereotypical discourses, proffering utilitarian, authoritarian definitions of male leadership (Biddulph, 1994).

Essentialist typologies of male and female leadership styles have characterised work on leadership. Eagly and Johnson's significant review of surveys on gender and leadership styles (1990) highlighted that women were more interpersonally orientated and men more task orientated. The review also indicated however that within organisational settings, differences were negligible. With regard to educational leadership, early influential studies included Shakeshaft's identification of five major differences between female and male leaders (1987) and Gray's development of gender paradigms (1987), the feminine exemplified by subjectivity and non-competitiveness for example, and the male by objectivity and competitiveness.

However, subsequent critiques have been made of gender-based stereotypes in relation to male and female leaders (Reay and Ball, 2000). More recently some have argued that while not all women lead in the same way, there are 'preferences and approaches' which characterise the ways in which women lead (Klein et al, 2007). For example, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) identify common approaches as leadership for social justice, leadership for learning, plus relational, balanced and spiritual ways of leading. Further research studies have revealed an increasingly sophisticated stance, findings indicating that all school leaders may

exhibit both male and female qualities and styles. Women may be authoritarian and hierarchical, they may lead in ways associated with men (Rusch and Marshall, 2006) while men may lead in ways which are relational and participatory (Evetts, 1994; Coleman, 1998).

The notion of 'androgynous leader' has emerged whereby both men and women may draw upon both 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities and styles (Coleman, 2005, Fuller, 2009). Fuller (2010) also questions gender paradigms. Her study (2013) revealed that some male and female headteachers drew upon both feminist leadership discourse which aims to empower and 'acknowledges moral complexity' (p53) and also masculinist leadership discourse 'that dominates educational policy' (p53). Research undertaken by Coleman (2002) into male and female leadership styles indicated that both male and female headteachers perceived themselves as 'collaborative and caring' managers, but she makes the point that because culture is 'slanted to men's advantage' their *experiences* of headship will be different (p 117). In this regard, Connell's theory of multiple masculinities and femininities (2005) is pertinent in its exploration of the interaction between gender and social contexts. Other social differences such as class, ethnicity, religious and cultural beliefs and sexuality may influence different ways of leading, negate simplistic stereotyping and undermine notions of essentialist typologies for women as a group (Bhopal and Preston, 2012; Maylor and Williams, 2011). A study of headteachers who were also mothers (Bradbury and Gunter, 2006) focussed on the 'interplay between gender and professionalism' and how this was experienced as social practice. It highlighted the importance of acknowledging how 'professional and personal positioning are... vital to how practitioners...do their work' (p 489). Further, the class of pupils, history and structure of schools may also affect women and influence the ways in which they endeavour to lead (Collard, 2005). Such work informs 'understandings of how multiple interactions in society, systems and institutions work to shape beliefs and practices' (Collard & Reynolds, 2005, p48).

It is the case that an increasingly international research literature is supportive of the view that simplistic stereotyping and essentialist typologies are contrary to the observed styles and qualities of both male and female educational leaders. Although some argue that there may be ways of leading which predominate among women for example, the debate has also moved on to explore differences within groups of women and within groups of men which may be greater than the differences between them (Hall, 1999).

Identities and discourse

Postmodern notions of identity reject the idea of a stable, homogenous and unified identity, rather highlighting multiple, fragmented and contradictory identities in a process of constant being and change. Identities are both fluid and shifting (Reay and Ball, 2000; Townsend and Weiner, 2011). Specifically, poststructural accounts stress the 'heterogenous and the discontinuous' nature of identity formation (Sarup, 1996:67) focusing on the concept of power as it circulates through the 'micro-circuits' of discourses

(Gillborn and Youdell, 2009). For Foucault (1972) understanding concepts of identity are arrived at through discourses. A Foucauldian theorisation of the subject requires an understanding of this key concept of discourse, the productive nature of discursive practices and of how power operates and interrelates in society at a broader and micro-localised level (Youdell, 2004). It involves an awareness of how identities are produced by discourses taken up within the contexts that surround them.

This research is informed by a feminist poststructuralist position which holds that both lives and practices are impacted and shaped by the 'range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strengths of the interests they represent' (Weedon, 1997 p26). As such discourses are taken to mean dynamic, historically, culturally and socially specific bodies of knowledge which both produce and are produced by social practices (Foucault, 1980; Wetherell et al, 2001).

Besides providing ways of deriving meaning from experience, discourses offer ways of being in the world through developing different subject positions which may be taken up by individuals (Court in Collard and Reynolds, 2005) discourses being seen to operate like narratives that exert a compelling power over individuals and their ways of thinking (Sarup, 1996). In this way, discourses provide a public meaning to the outworking of personal experience, so scaffolding meaningful social intercourse. Foucault (1984) identifies discourses as produced by many individuals in a range of institutional settings and as constructing identities. Who individuals are and what they talk about is produced by the various discourses they encounter or "*buy into*", so, individuals are constituted by discourses, some contradictory, some dominant and others subordinate. There exist many competing and contradictory discourses and although subject to certain of these, as individuals we may exercise agency regarding which to take up and where to position ourselves.

Consequently, subjectivity may be viewed as fragmented and multifaceted as the individual is faced with a 'fleeting, bewildering multiplicity of identities' (Hall, 1992) identities which comprise 'the fluid kaleidoscope of an individual existence' (Lumby, 2009, p29). Discourse is integral to the development of subjectivity and as such the poststructuralist view posits that subjectivity may shift according to how individuals negotiate which identities to take up as they encounter both new and entrenched discourses. In this way subjectivity develops through a process of interactive meaning making with others (Court, 1995; Weedon, 1997) and by positioning, repositioning and being positioned. The picture is one of the 'subject in process' taking up shifting positions within language or discourse although the extent to which choice is evidenced will be discussed later.

This article will consider how female headteachers negotiate their identities as leaders and the ways in which this plays out within both their personal and professional lives.

The study

This research was undertaken to explore female headteachers' perceptions and experiences of leading a professional workforce in the context of English primary schools. In this paper, data are presented together with an exploration of the different ways women position themselves and are positioned in the school environment. As one headteacher noted,

H.8: I was aware when I took up the post that many had differing expectations of how I should be and behave. My job has been to carve my own way to say- "actually, this is who I am and this is how I do things"

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to elicit responses and allow for the voices of participants to be captured. The approach taken acknowledged that the interview was co-constructed by both interviewers and interviewees (Walford, 2001; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Although questions were predetermined, the semi-structured approach allowed for omissions and additions according to what seemed appropriate within the specific interaction with the interviewee (Robson, 2007) and provided sufficient flexibility for eliciting rich in-depth responses (Basit, 2010). Within this study, interviews were taken to be actively constructed narratives (Silverman, 2004).

INSERT TABLE 1- Participant data codes

Individual interviews of approximately ninety minutes were undertaken with a cross section of ten female headteachers during which they reflected upon their roles and experiences within the primary school context. Ten different schools were selected from four different local authorities. Of these five were primary schools (four to eleven) three of which included nursery provision, three junior schools (seven to eleven) and two infant nursery schools (three to seven). Schools were of various sizes and located in widely differing socio-economic contexts. They represented an opportunistic sample from schools in partnership with an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) provider. Headteachers reflected a diversity of backgrounds and experience, the eldest being fifty nine years old and the youngest thirty seven. Length of teaching experience ranged from thirteen years to thirty three, while time as a head ranged between one and fifteen years. Regarding ethnic background, eight were White British and two were British South Asian. Seven headteachers had begun their teaching qualifications immediately following their own schooling and embarked on a career in teaching straight after qualifying. Three however had joined the profession from other occupations (actor, civil servant and business).

Ethical issues were addressed and 'informed consent' employed, all interviewees being informed of the nature of the research. Specifically an information sheet was provided, further explaining the voluntary nature of participation, the facility for withdrawal and assurance of confidentiality. In addition university ethics clearance was obtained and the BERA guidelines for ethical research (2011) adhered to throughout.

As a means of analysis, thematic induction was used and inductive coding employed (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Throughout this process, major and minor themes emerged from the data. These were recorded and data segmented and colour coded in relation to the established themes. This ensured that participant responses remained complete allowing for segments to be read within the context of the whole narrative so avoiding misinterpretation (Archard, 2012).

The present study follows previous work exploring identities and leadership style from which various typologies and associated gender theories have emerged. This research was designed to explore how female heads construct a personal discourse around career and leadership which may be interrogated to determine commonalities and differences within their personal narratives. Fuller (2013) has previously identified the problematic nature of buying into one or other of the extant gender theories. She prefaces her own research with recognition that women and men take on multiple femininities and masculinities- a position proposed by Connell (2005): moreover social class, race & ethnicity represent experiential dimensions that influence gender performance powerfully. Consequentially, the present research is an attempt to explore if and how such multiplicities may be evidenced through the leadership discourses of a sample of female head teachers. The thesis that the leadership role may invoke intricate and multiple identity features which will apply similarly to women and men, has been recognised in research literature which utilises notions of androgynous educational management styles (for example Coleman, 2002). Previous literature has been careful to point out however that where such gender paradigms have been proposed (see for example Fuller, 2013 p32) no implication should be taken in respect of their gendered exactness.

This study takes an empirical view of the ways in which these women evidenced their personal motivation, goal setting, sense of purpose, concepts of social justice and work-life balance in the context of their own professional journey. The data analysis whilst new has been produced in the light of previous typologies. It has drawn on women's personal narratives to posit a cluster of behavioural types/ identities, several of which may be inhabited at once and which may emerge or recede over time as contexts shift and as the leader develops as a professional. These relate to ways of being in a complex, multi-faceted work /life space. This resonates with Fuller's (2014) notion of 'polyglossic simultaneity' whereby head teachers may "switch' seamlessly between modes of doing gendered leadership depending on context & circumstances' (p321). In this study, exactness in terms of mutual exclusivity amongst emerging types is neither assumed nor implied. Such typologies are at best indicators of complexity which rise and fall in significance as time passes and the professional career evolves.

The next section presents the different identities which emerged and explores several influential discourses as they relate to female headteachers' lives.

The conduct of the analysis has been described above. Using the procedure indicated, interrogation of the individual narratives enabled the generation of a set of identities through induction. Whilst these were recurring, they were not evident in the discourses

of all the heads participating. Three of the identities could be associated with each of the participating heads. The remaining identities were associated variously with differing numbers of heads. The table below indicates the identities as they emerged, the key characteristics associated with each and the number of heads who evidenced these identities. The identities are in effect clusters of personal qualities and characteristics, which provide a reasonably clear picture of 'identity multiplicity' in action. The emerging identities are:

- The 'Other' (all)
- The Competer (all)
- The Enabler (7)
- The Hero (4)
- The Rebel (4)
- The Juggler (all)
- The Driver (6)
- The Multiple (4)

In the following table, the identities are characterised by the qualities and attributes which define them.

INSERT TABLE 2- Key characteristics of emerging identities

From the descriptors it is relatively straightforward to identify within each identity and across the sample, aspects of what may be referred to as the masculine/feminine duality. This is particularly evidenced in the 'Driver' and the 'Hero' where female heads adopt masculine strategies for leadership and management. Further the 'Enabler' adopts a more 'feminine' position in respect of nurturing, sharing and supporting, whilst the 'Rebel' and the 'Multiple' although differing from the essentialist feminine position, still takes a particularly feminine stance.

Female headteachers: emerging identities

Eight identities are presented below, revealing the various dilemmas faced by female leaders. Wide ranging and often contradictory, each will be considered and discussed in turn.

The 'Other'

Women reflected on perceptions of headship as they had encountered them and were aware that they are frequently constructed as 'other' by groups in wider society. There are strong discourses about what headteachers are and should be and women's narratives revealed that they had a very clear awareness of these as they reflected on the common discourse and assumption that headteachers are not female:

H.7: There's often an assumption that you are going to be male. I recently had a detective talking to me and he was going on to see a neighbouring headteacher and said "I'm going to see the headmaster next door" There was just an automatic assumption...

This 'automatic assumption' was a common feature of the heads' experiences. They recounted recurring incidents whereby parents or visitors to the school naturally assumed the male they were with (from students to deputies) was the head:

H.2: I was in the playground with 'x' the other day... he's twenty years younger than me, and a visitor came up and absolutely assumed he was the Head...'

A further discourse is that headteachers are *not from Black and Minority ethnic groups*- headteachers are white:

H.8: People's eyes just widen. They're just amazed saying 'we've never met an Indian headteacher before'... if it was a man they'd probably be more ok.

Alternative discourses position them as neither young nor fashionable and several discussed negative comments they had received pertaining to their age, experience and dress for example:

H.9: I've heard parents say ..."She doesn't even look like an experienced teacher let alone a headteacher. Someone who's young, who dresses in this way cannot possibly know her stuff."

A common feature of women's narratives was the addition of comments such as 'it doesn't help that I'm a woman' indicating a belief that their male counterparts would not experience the same strength of reaction. Female headteachers described a period of time when they were conscious of having to earn respect.

H.3: I think it's to do with my age and appearance I've had many experiences where people- parents and others cannot believe I'm the headteacher.

Women recognised that they were constantly constructed as 'other' and defined in relation to what they were not. Within the public discourse headteachers are white, male, traditionally dressed in Western clothes and at least middle aged. This is the default position of which these female headteachers are sharply aware.

The Competer

Female headteachers viewed themselves as 'in competition' with men in the promotion stakes whereby men had been promoted to management roles faster than them and in disproportionate numbers. The competitive nature of headship also manifested itself in terms of status and many scenarios were shared where lower-ranked males were given the status of headship and positioned above their female bosses by members of the community. As H.8 notes 'I have a male mature student here and parents will defer to him even when I'm there.'

This public discourse in relation to male headteachers as higher status was an element that women acknowledged and considered at some level as impacting on their perceptions of themselves and their past decision to apply for promotion.

Female leaders observed that sometimes women 'don't even try' as far as applying for headship is concerned because they automatically assume 'they're in a competition where people would appoint a male over a female'

The women in this study frequently drew comparisons between themselves and their male counterparts, showing an awareness of acute differences in both approach and levels of confidence. They observed that men projected a confident, competent image within their roles as teachers or heads but that this may be more to do with those supporting them rather than securely rooted in ability and skills.

H.4: If you think at an interview, um... a male can come across as very confident 'I can do this' and let's face it the secretary's or teaching assistant's been doing it for him, you know- keeping everything tidy.

Narratives revealed more than a degree of cynicism in relation to the promotion of men and whereas some acknowledged women's reticence to go for promotion, clearly all the women in this study had done so. 'Competers', although initially reticent to apply for promotion, acknowledged the competitive nature of headship with regard to gender and had in some instances become more determined to succeed as a result. They were reflective in relation to their own professional lives and to those women they managed.

The Enabler

Female heads consistently constructed themselves as enablers:H4: 'I see myself as maybe the queen bee in the middle but enabling all these people....'

Moreover, they were focussed and strategic in their approach. A typical response was expressed by one head who noted her primary aim 'was to skill my teachers in a whole range of ways...

Headteachers were concerned to facilitate the career progression of their staff:

H.8: I say to my staff "...where do you want to be in two years time? What can I do to help you get there?" Because I've been there... it's made me reflect on how I'm coming across as an enabler for my own staff.

As above, the women were able to empathise with their teams and had a strong desire to develop leadership potential 'helping people move from being managers to leaders'. Female headteachers divulged personal examples of how they were generally not encouraged to aspire to leadership. Where encouragement had been received, it was commonly from one key individual and this became a principal driver in developing others. At a deeper level however, the importance of affecting change within individuals was acknowledged:

H.9: That has been my biggest achievement- actually changing people's attitudes and their commitments is the hardest thing to do.

Female leaders also perceived themselves as nurturers of staff and emphasised the importance of '*intuitive understanding*' '*sensitivity*' and '*emotional intelligence*': Several described their leadership style as 'female' for example, 'I think my particular style of leadership does have a feminine touch to it.' They frequently differentiated themselves from their male counterparts, drawing upon essentialist notions of female characteristics:

H.1: And I rightly or wrongly believe that women on the whole are much more, generically more flexible and more sensitive to the needs of others, they're able to be more adaptable because I think, throughout time women have had to be.

'Enablers' were empathetic and concerned for individuals and teams. Further, they highlighted the importance of nurturing and developing emotional intelligence with staff, children and parents, placing a high value on the creation of a supportive ethos.

The Hero Head

Headteachers noted the '*all encompassing*' nature of headship, articulating their role as '*figurehead*' and the pleasure derived from this: 'I enjoy being the public face of the school... it's mine'. Some described it as an 'integral' part of their lives but in other cases it was clearly more than this- 'this is - this is my life'. For some the sense of control was predominant:

H.8: It's like... the analogy of Captain Kirk... where he stands at the bridge saying "do that and do that"- that's how you can run a school- just beamed up from everything.

Descriptors of the school as a family or child substitute appeared not infrequently. One head reflects on her career as follows:

H.10: I haven't got children. If I had...I think I would have a different agenda because I know what I've put into this- I know [my] dedication...single mindedness... to do this job well, you have to take it home...

Women clearly relished the role and sense of power, but also expressed concern that certain aspects of their lives were lacking:

H.9: The biggest cost is your stress levels- your immediate home life, family...social circle, you don't have time for them...it's so easy to get sucked into a vortex of work.

'Hero Heads' displayed supreme commitment to the school and were driven by inspection and accountability measures. They acknowledged the school took paramount place in their lives, sometimes at significant cost, but were nevertheless strategic and relentless in its promotion together with the pursuit of excellence.

The Rebel

'Rebels' acknowledged the existence of the Hero Head and distanced themselves from her, rebelling against what she stood for. They were quite clear that they would not approach their professional lives in such a way:

H.3: I took over from a Hero Head who [dug] out a pond at the weekend with her husband- that's not me. I'm so proud... I didn't follow- I didn't get sucked into all that- I'm enabling more people so there are more people being leaders and feeling proud- not just me...

They were keen to distinguish between the importance of home and the lesser importance of school and were adamant that their personal lives should not be subsumed into their professional ones:

H.9: That's the hard side- knowing who you are- you're not just this headteacher...because a lot of heads I know don't have families- their school is their life and I don't want to be like that.

The theme of being 'more than a headteacher' recurred throughout the narratives:

H.2: I always compartmentalise my job and my family because I've seen headteachers go downhill who don't and I've always wondered about heads who say "I've been in all summer and well I'm in every Saturday". And I just think realistically that you ...will burn yourself out.

'Rebels' spoke with passion. They were angered about the political context with its emphasis on accountability measures and associated administration. They frequently cited 'burn-out' as a reason for demarcating limits and attempted to put boundaries in place in both home and work contexts.

The Juggler

All women spoke of the difficulties in managing their personal and professional lives. For some, their sense of personal drive had carried them into leadership roles but at a cost.

H.1: I got the job when my oldest son was one... It was quite a strain to be balancing a baby, home and school- and yes- it eventually cost me my marriage.

Headship was described as 'a huge juggling act' as was the route to headship: 'I did have a career plan- but it was about juggling my personal life and my professional one.' Many women identified as taking most responsibility for their domestic situation in terms of childcare and chores even when their partners occupied less demanding professions:

H.5: There's a huge commitment to home... If you've had a family someone has to put the time in. Someone has to be there and it's usually the woman.

The sense of isolation experienced by female headteachers derived from different levels of understanding on the part of family members with regard to their professional role. Pressure on women lay not only in the unequal distribution of chores but at a deeper level impacted on their personal relationships. 'Jugglers' repeatedly acknowledged that the predicaments they routinely faced in both their personal and professional lives, demanded resilience, tenacity and tightly honed organisational skills.

The Driver

Women articulated several key reasons for applying for headship not least of which was their desire for power and the potential for driving change: Aligned to the desire to be 'in authority' was an overriding ambition to operate at a strategic level. The sheer

frustration they felt pre-headship at not being involved in this was noted. Furthermore they commented on the intense sense of reward derived from this aspect of their work:

H.6: I find decision making and strategic development really exciting because I'm shaping policy- key decisions on finances, resourcing, deployment of staff.

An additional reason for applying for headship was women's strong belief that they could do the job better than others accompanied by a moment of realisation which acted as an impetus for their application to headship. As one comments, 'I could see I was just as good if not more so- I had something to offer'.

Women outlined clear and specific plans for becoming headteachers and expressed high levels of self-motivation often in the absence of any expectation or encouragement from others. As one states 'I certainly didn't get that counselling from anybody'. In some instances they were actively dissuaded from applying for promotion. However, Drivers described a vision and strategy for achieving headship:

H.4: I was typical amongst women in that I wanted to prove I could do something before I went to do it, so I set out cold bloodedly to do it and I did it.

These women typically describe themselves as having commitment to securing their goals: 'once I decide to do something-I really go for it!' and as having 'huge personal drive' clearly evidenced in the ways they manage their competing life demands:

H.1: Yes I did have a specific plan to become a head which I stuck to... and I was 6 months pregnant when I applied for my Deputy Headship.

Having achieved headship women perceived themselves as strong leaders who both relished and were energised by power. Satisfaction was derived from the impact they had on practice and a sense of authority. They described themselves as innovative and strong: 'I'm a risk taker, calculated risks- [have] stood me in good stead' and acknowledged that they had a variety of skills.

Equally they recognised that women could be strong and powerful as leaders and employ leadership styles traditionally perceived as male:

H.3: My predecessor was a formidable, powerful woman that people were wary of approaching...more so than a lot of men.

Drivers were clear that they were not afraid to be unpopular and had taken a "hard line" on a number of issues exhibiting significant self-belief and determination in ensuring their end goals were achieved even in the face of considerable resistance:

H.7: Sometimes I have to coerce- sometimes I say no we're just going to do it... it's necessary. In the face of opposition I have to be clear in my own mind it's the right thing.

'Drivers' stipulated that boundaries be outlined for themselves and their staff and were resolute in their determination to adhere to the policies and procedures set.

The Multiple – acknowledging contradictions

The notion of inhabiting multiple overlapping identities was prevalent within the data and women spoke in terms of having different or multiple selves. Their work persona was described as differing from their home persona (see also Fuller, 2010) one head portraying herself in terms of having a split personality as follows:

H.4: I live a double life- I have a different name- I'm not Ms 'X' anywhere else this is my professional name- my stage name. I have another persona at home where I'm Ms 'Y' and I live a totally different life. It's like schizophrenia... I lead two different lives.

This was articulated as a coping mechanism which safeguards the person within the home context.

A different perspective however is that it is imperative to consistently present your 'best self'. The following headteacher reflects that:

H.3: It's such a responsibility because you've got to be your best self all the time because it impacts on so much.

Women presented themselves as having different dimensions, *with* different layers revealing their aspirations to present depth of character within relationships: 'I'm a 3D character'... I need to present the whole 360 degrees.' 'Multiples' depicted themselves as for example, a play director, a builder/interior designer, a cake in the making and a Queen Bee, so using a variety of metaphors for headship.

It was clear from the analysis of women's narratives that they could inhabit a range of identities at any one time. All women inhabited the identities of Other, Competer and Juggler while seven were all these together with that of Enabler. Further identity combinations included four women who were all the above but also both Drivers and Jugglers. A key feature was that several inhabited identities which were contradictory, for example some were both Rebels and Heroes. The next section acknowledges this and extrapolates key influential discourses.

Discussion

In this study, women's narratives reflected diverse, shifting identities as the discourses they encountered and took up shaped and bounded their thinking and practices (Foucault, 1972; Gill et al, 2008). Three dominant discourses emerged which impacted on female headteachers' professional lives. The first concerns the construction of leadership as masculine, the second is related to women's primary responsibility for domestic life and the third is associated with women as supportive enablers.

The construction of leadership as masculine

Despite the evidence that the majority of primary headteachers are female (albeit numbers are disproportionate), the public perception that leadership is male persists. The women in this study were acutely aware of the dominant societal discourse that leadership is inherently male and recognised that within the public discourse they are constantly measured against characteristics of hegemonic masculinity perceived to be appropriate for the role of headteacher (Jones, 2008). Even though women's exercise of leadership in historical and social and educational contexts has been significant (Collard, 2005; Cranston and Ehrich, 2007) this prevalent discourse may in part be a result of the *historical recognition* of greater numbers of men in leadership roles (Burns, 1978; Schein, 2001). In addition female headteachers were acutely aware of public discourses relating not only to the need for male role models but also the demonisation of female teachers (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2011) and believed they had suffered as a result. Women described experiences in relation to their male counterparts in terms of 'competition' not only in relation to promotion, but also with regard to the ways in which they were compared to other 'lower status' males within the educational context, where the men were viewed as professionally senior to them. Women described several instances of male teachers being given rapid promotion and were open in their cynicism about this phenomenon. They were aware of the fast-tracking of men in primary education where in part, as a result of the public discourse, it becomes both more acceptable and more preferable for men to occupy management positions (Jones, 2007). They were clear about the privileging of men within the context of primary education and outside of it (Simpson, 2011). Women's experience together with the disproportionate numbers of male headteachers suggests that the glass elevator still operates within the context of primary education whereby men in female dominated organizations benefit from their 'gender privilege', earn more and are promoted faster than their female counterparts (Snyder, 2008; Williams, 1992). This challenges some of the postfeminist mythologies of female 'success' (Ringrose, 2013). The impact on women in this study was twofold: in most instances it had made them less confident about applying for promotion but in others more determined illustrating how the social construction of gender may affect women's sense of worth and agency (Bose and Kim, 2009). Nevertheless they had achieved their goal and like the headteachers in Fuller's study (2013) 'they overcame difficulties associated with unequal gender relations to progress to headship' (p 107) (See also Coleman, 2002). All the women in this study inhabited the identities of

'Other' and 'Competer', the masculine construct of leadership and its oppositional relationship with women appearing to have a significant impact on female headteachers and the ways in which they perceive their professional lives (Heilman, 2001; Carli and Eagly, 2007).

Women and domestic responsibility

The prevalent discourse that women should take primary responsibility for the home was manifest in the high levels of commitment demonstrated by women within both domestic and professional lives. Headteachers in this study experienced diverse challenges in relation to this (Lyman et al, 2012). They were highly effective in their roles but for many this came at significant cost. Those with partners and families, still maintained the greater amount of domestic responsibility and so had learnt to 'juggle' numerous roles within and outside of their professional lives (Greenstein, 2000; Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie, 2006; Fuller, 2009). This is reiterated by Coleman (2002) who notes that as a result of competing personal & professional demands, younger headteachers are choosing to have only one child, or none.

The ways in which women balance their lives have been the focus of several educational studies (Coleman, 2007; Dillard, 2006). The concept of balanced leadership being predicated on the notion that women who manage their home responsibilities effectively will perform better within their professional lives- that is when they achieve a balance in the two areas: 'achieving such a balance allows women leaders to channel their energies effectively in both spheres' (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011, p23). Very few of the women in this study (apart from 2 Rebels) however described such a state of balance in their own lives; rather they articulated a state of struggle. Descriptions of their working lives indicated that the modernisation agenda within education had worked against their attempts to balance home and professional workloads (Conley and Jenkins, 2011). The impact of the neoliberal agenda has resulted in school working cultures which are increasingly masculinised and which militate against a state of equilibrium with regard to women's personal and professional responsibilities (Bolton and Muzio, 2008).

Female leaders strongly desired the intellectual challenge and fulfilment provided by their career (Farrell, 2005) nevertheless they showed great concern that success at work impacted negatively on their family lives (Lifetime Networks, 2006). Whereas most women's partners were supportive of their careers, this was not outworked in terms of taking on an equal share of domestic duties. Further women sometimes expressed feelings of isolation from their families and a lack of emotional understanding by partners in relation to the time and energy they put into their professional lives. 'Hero heads' acknowledged that their careers were all consuming, sometimes to the detriment of their personal lives, whereas 'Rebels' acknowledged the phenomenon of the 'Hero head' and were determined to achieve work-life balance. What was clear from the data however was that women were conflicted and their narratives in this regard shot through with contradiction. 'Rebels' described various scenarios whereby work pressures had

resulted in feelings of guilt in relation to their families. They experienced tension and struggle, inhabiting identities of both 'Rebel' and 'Hero head' and as such were dissatisfied.

Women as supportive enablers

The women in this study placed a strong emphasis on enabling and nurturing as integral to their styles of leadership. As illustrated by the 'Enablers' above, these narratives were woven with references to emotional intelligence and the development of supportive relationships. It may appear that they were leading in what have been identified as 'women's ways' (Belenky, 1987) in ways which were 'better' or 'softer' than men's (Pounder and Coleman, 2002) incorporating relational leadership and democratic power sharing characterised by power 'with' rather than power 'over' (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011). 'Enablers' were empathetic, supportive and intuitive.

Women in this study more consistently regarded themselves as supporting and nurturing others, as being emotionally intelligent and employing relational styles of leadership. In this regard, discourses related to public *expectation* of appropriate female behaviour may have an impact on female leaders (Carli, 2001). Studies on gender authority document the ways in which leadership behaviours are impacted by gender stereotypes (Eagly and Johnson, 1990). When women deviate from socially prescribed gender appropriate behaviours this causes them to be viewed negatively (Eagly and Karau, 2002), women in leadership positions being more susceptible in this due to the close association of male characteristics with leadership roles (Cundiff and Kommaraju, 2008). Consequently, there is a backlash when women act in ways not socially prescribed as 'female' and women who do so may suffer the consequences of not doing their gender right (Butler, 1990; Puwar, 2004). Women who conform to societal expectations of leadership styles traditionally described as feminine, risk less (Kruse and Spickard Prettyman, 2008). Linked to this is research indicating that it is more important to women than men, that they are liked (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). These aspects may impact on the ways in which women lead and upon their perceptions of themselves as leaders.

'Drivers' however, adopted a very different approach more akin to what have been classed as male leadership styles (Gray, 1987; Osland et al 1998; Coleman, 2002, 2007) displaying autocratic and authoritarian approaches in their dealings with staff, revealing qualities which were at times assertive, aggressive, and impersonal. Whereas most women described themselves as 'Enablers', a minority appeared to inhabit the identity of 'Driver' exclusively. Some women however inhabited both, not regarding the supportive and coercive aspects as mutually exclusive.

The headteachers in this study initially, repeatedly promulgated the public discourse with regard to male and female qualities and styles, drawing upon either essentialism or socially constructed roles to support their views. However, not infrequently, after further

consideration they retracted. For example, one woman noted that, 'men are more driven and powerful in the ways they interact with staff', but in reflecting on a previous head stated:

She was very powerful- very soft and very powerful...I think sometimes there's this perception ...that you can't do both things because there is a perception that men are very focussed, very driven, very powerful- I think there needs to be some work done here.

This was typical and illustrates how women espoused commonly held discourses but when greater depth of thought was given they frequently took a different, even antithetical view. This in itself is an area worthy of further research.

Conclusion

Explorations of gender and discourse illuminate the challenges of the role of headteacher. In this study the narratives of female headteachers were shot through with contradiction and did not conform to traditional gender stereotypes. This erosion of the credibility of essentialist typologies indicates more nuanced understandings of the ways in which men and women operate. Although at times they adopted approaches deemed by some as 'common to women' (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) they could also be seen as exhibiting characteristics, qualities and approaches to leadership traditionally aligned with men. The notion of 'androgynous' professional whereby individuals can select from an extensive range of masculine and feminine qualities and leadership styles (Connell, 1995; Davis & Johansson, 2005) more closely reflects the findings here. Further, there exist differences within the group of women interviewed. Women leaders reiterated discourses associated with both femininities and masculinities (Priola, 2007; Fuller, 2013). They inhabited a variety of identities as evidenced by the 'Multiple' and shifted between several which were sometimes contradictory, sometimes compatible and potentially taken up to enable them to get by (Gill et al, 2008). Negotiating these conflicting identities encompassing both professional and private spaces presented significant challenges for these female leaders (Lyman et al, 2012).

In this study women were vocal in relation to their identities of choice. However, they were not always successful in this. The nature of their negotiation was complex as although they attempted to select from a range of identities, the extent to which they were able to be agentic remains open to debate. While an 'autobiography of choice' exists (Beck, 2009) resulting from the process of 'reflexive modernisation' whereby individuals are no longer affiliated to traditional gender identities (Adkins, 2002) absolute choice over discourses may be constrained due to power structures operating within relations of class and gender (Woodward, 2002; Jones, 2007). Increasingly sophisticated interpretations are necessary which draw on intersectional approaches as the women in this study were influenced by multiple discourses. Within the discourse of successful leadership, they constituted their roles in entrepreneurial ways (Ringrose, 2013). They consistently undermined gender stereotypical norms and inhabited a range of identities within a process of accepting, resisting or challenging different discourses at different times (Billing, 2011).

The impact of the neoliberal agenda and its associated demands is clear. Women in this study articulated the pressures of increased accountability measures and of being under surveillance. They discussed their lives and values and how these impacted on practice. Similarly commenting on their research with female headteachers, Bradbury and Gunter (2006) note that the emphasis on training within government policy is on standards, 'the whole person (parent, partner, child) is not acknowledged' (p 503). 'Training and preparation for headship... needs to engage with the person as subject outside the organisation' (p 489). Taking the ways in which women navigate their multidimensional lives into account, should impact educational policy and elucidate headteacher recruitment.

Issues related to headship are characterised by complexity as female teachers traverse the gendered hierarchies. Still, within the 21st century, discursive patterns are sustained which position women in relation to leadership and power in particular ways. There exist powerful discourses that constrain or facilitate ways of being impacting on leadership work and the professional lives of headteachers. As such there is a need to disrupt the normative discourse of leadership (Collard, 2005) and acknowledge the complex negotiations of women as they take up leadership roles in schools.

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EMERGING IDENTITIES ►

	Other (10)	Competer (10)	Enabler (7)	Hero (4)	Rebel (4)	Juggler (10)	Driver (6)	Multiple (4)
KEY CHARACTERISTICS	Self-aware	Views herself as in competition with men	Ensures others develop skills	Dominated by work	Not dominated by work	Resilient	Compulsive aspiration to headship	Recognises multiple selves
	Recognises traditional gendered discourse	Cynical about male promotion	Empowers others	Enjoys power	Compartmentalises	Balances work-life demands	Strong self-knowledge	Presents 'best self'
	Aware of need to earn respect	Reflective about other women's lack of confidence	Empathetic	Aware of personal sacrifice	Values & protects home life	Organiser	Desires authority	Leadership style often 'masculine'
	Overlooked	Initially lacks confidence in own abilities	Nurturing	Prioritises school above home	Prioritises home above school	Prioritiser	Strategic	Good communicator
	Marginalised	Self-actualising	Intuitive	Pursues excellence	Sets boundaries to work time	Family orientated	Accepts unpopularity as inevitable	Balances professional life
	Victim of automatic assumption	Tenacious	Emotionally literate	Has 'ownership' of school	Passionate	Negotiator	Strong belief in own ability	Can be authoritative
	Strong sense of social justice		Supportive	Supremely committed	Anti-accountability measures		Energised by power	Selects work persona
					Rejects idea of 'Hero Head'			

Table 2. Emerging identities

Headteacher code	School Type
H1	Primary (including nursery)
H2	Primary (including nursery)
H3	Primary (including nursery)
H4	Primary
H5	Primary
H6	Junior
H7	Junior
H8	Junior
H9	Infant nursery
H10	Infant nursery

Table 1. Participant data codes