



Women and Leadership: a review of literature from the education sector

Executive summary

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Introduction

There is much shared history and common ground between churches and educational institutions given their particular concerns with serving the community, supporting social cohesion and promoting social justice. A considerable amount of research has been conducted into women's experiences of leadership in the education sector. Yet whilst there are calls to 'make things better', ways forward seem less easy to implement and the same experiences and frustrations continue to emerge in research. The challenge remains to identify what it is that thwarts these good intentions and how a more inclusive practice, and conception, of leadership might be achieved.

A review of the literature from mainly education settings exploring the terrain of women and leadership sought to identify insights for both the education sector and the Church by exploring four major themes:

- i) the representation of women within the leadership structures,
- ii) where women are represented within the structures,
- iii) how leadership is exercised by women,
- iv) the place of leadership development.

Over 222,000 articles were identified through the key search terms of leadership, management and education, which reduces to 80,996 when gender and school are added. The majority were published in the last 10 years (46,358) indicating an increasing interest in the area. Five studies were included in the in-depth review (Fuller, 2013; Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011; Lumby, 2012; Lynch et al., 2014; Morley, 2013). The methodological approach used insights from two major approaches that:

- i) drew upon the insights of intersectionality which argue that the position of women in society cannot be understood by reference to gender alone but must instead take account of other factors such as ethnicity, ability, class, age and sexuality (i.e., setting the study within the equality and diversity field rather than that of gender alone), and,
- ii) sought to move beyond surface level experiences and to identify the underlying events and mechanisms that generate these experiences within specific contexts.

Overview of Findings.

The key findings and implications which emerge indicate that intentions appear to be 'good' in the education sector. However, the concerns and problems previously identified seem not to have gone away despite the implementation of a number of 'technical solutions'.

Theme 1: The representation of women within the leadership structures.

In the education sector, an increasing number of women are represented within leadership structures. However, they remain disproportionately small in number compared to those in the overall workforce. Solutions and initiatives in encouraging and supporting women to take up such positions seem to have some success. Yet relying on the 'pipe line' approach, which suggests numbers will come right if enough time is given, does not appear likely to bring around substantial change. The literature suggests that exploring issues around how women are represented within structures and how they exercise, or are allowed to exercise, leadership may well be fruitful in addressing representation. The lack of concern with intersectionality (i.e. taking into account not only gender but ethnicity, class and other aspects) may well be hiding other injustices and examples of inequity (Coate et al., 2015; Lumby, 2012; Morley, 2013; Shakeshaft, 2010; Showunmi et al., 2015). Placing women and leadership within the wider context of equality and diversity, and applying a critical approach to leadership, have much to offer for the direction of future research (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2012).

Theme 2: Where women are represented within the structures.

Women's representation within these structures often appears to be:

- a) in limited positions of power and prestige and, in particular circumstances, often when the positions are being degraded by wider social changes and agendas (for example, the role of the head teacher in the 'academised' English school system), and,
- b) influenced by ideas about what counts as 'work' and what 'work' is deemed most valuable; particularly as those positions defined as powerful, responsible, and prestigious are more likely to exclude care and less likely to be held by women.

Themes emerge around the gendered divisions of labour, gender bias and misrecognition, management and masculinities, and the concept of the 'greedy organisation'. Those thwarting mechanisms appear within the dominant language of leadership and within understandings and appreciations of culture in organizations and wider society. Undertaking an audit of these values and examining those globalised assumptions and

policies which are ‘valorised’ (Lumby, 2012) is something on which a Christian organization might wish to embark, especially to identify how far, or otherwise, they are in tune with the Christian message.

Theme 3: How leadership is exercised by women.

How leadership is exercised by women is often a contested area with expectations placed upon the individual either as an incumbent or as a seeker of formal leadership positions. Yet much of the literature points to a concern around what leadership is and illuminates how the term is neither value-free nor immutable. Instead the ‘leaderist turn’ with its links to the neo-liberal project and new managerialist (leaderist) approach raises serious questions for an educational sector which has placed, in the past, a particular emphasis upon care, nurture and community rather than on profit, and investment for personal advancement (Grogan, 2014; Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2012; Lynch et al., 2012; Morley, 2013). Simply increasing the numbers of women in educational leadership does not address the deeper problem and bring about a substantial change.

Theme 4: The place of leadership development.

The place of development opportunities, including mentoring, emerges as a crucial but contested area which goes to the heart of the enterprise of leadership and organizational culture. A mechanism of ‘well intended benevolence’ may be operating in who is offered leadership development opportunities and what those opportunities are with repercussions for the representation of women in leadership positions (Hoobler et al., 2014). Development programmes may effectively be mechanisms for ‘fixing’ the participants, with programmes becoming a ‘safe’ solution, avoiding the need to implement substantial change. There are further implications in the call for greater cultural competence of educational leaders in terms of the aims and content of development opportunities. (Lumby, 2012; Morley, 2014).

Recommendations

It is important that faith communities and educational organisations can learn from the working practices, structures and models of each other in dialogue. Yet whilst there is much to be learnt from the educational sector, the Church might be wise to consider carefully how it should conceive and exercise ‘leadership’ and what contribution, if any, the dominant discourses of leadership have in addressing questions around the exercise of power and prestige and promoting greater equality in its appointments.

Understanding how head teachers and others in formal positions of responsibility become designated as leaders through the 'leaderist turn' illuminates how leadership has developed into 'a popular descriptor and a dominant social and organisational technology' (Morley, 2013: 116). Establishing a set of leaders who are differentiated from other members of the staff within a school or educational organization is neither a necessity nor necessarily desirable. Considerable scepticism around the discourses of 'leaders' and 'leadership' might be exercised not only in the education sector but also by the Church as it asks what should count as 'real leadership' and what the appropriate rules of the game are.

These discussions are linked to the question of what counts as education. If paying for teachers is a drain and a burden, then, by implication, what counts as education could be seen to lie in the terminology of 'investments', 'outputs', and 'efficiency', resulting in a 'carelessness' (Lynch et al., 2012; Massey, 2013). Such carelessness might appear contradictory to the values found in Christian teaching. It may well be significant that it was in the religious schools in Ireland that the neoliberal orientation of the ideal 'citizen' engaging in competitive survival was countered more often (Lynch et al., 2012).

Some of the concerns raised in the education sector about 'greedy organizations' and how these affect women may have particular resonance within the Church, which holds the idea of sacrifice for others in high esteem. Yet this raises the question of what is worthy of sacrificing oneself for.

Further research is needed in identifying challenges and then exploring the enabling, delimiting and frustrating mechanisms and structures in addressing them.

This research might involve empirical projects including:

- Taking gender seriously in education contexts and elsewhere.
- Looking at leadership practice in less formal and informal settings.
- Drawing on insights from the intersections between church and schools and between leaders and their religious and spiritual lives.
- Identifying the 'micro-inequities' by which discrimination operates.
- Uncovering the complex relationship between agency and structure.
- Tackling assumptions including those that might appear well-intentioned and those 'safest possible solutions' that fail to question the suitability of the basic modes of operation of organizations and their existing power relations.
- Exploring awareness by leaders of culture at micro, meso and macro levels.

- Imagining how current leadership development might be reconfigured including seeing thinking deeply about culture is as a leadership skill.
- Investigating issues around the distribution of power and influence, and analysing how far current solutions address the power balance.
- Identifying the extent to which religious schools in Britain are challenging and providing alternatives to neo-liberal discourses of carelessness.
- Asking what a leadership with an expanded lexicon might look like.

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