The under-representation of women in senior management in UK independent secondary schools

Margaret McLay
Department for Continuing Professional Development, Faculty of Education, Manchester University, UK

Marie Brown
Department for Continuing Professional Development, Faculty of Education, University of Manchester, UK

Introduction

Recent figures released by the Department for Education and Employment, and quoted in an article by Howson (1999) show a steady, albeit small, increase in the number of women achieving headship in state secondary school in England and Wales. From 22 per cent in 1994 the increase of female secondary heads has risen to 27 per cent in 1998. Unfortunately these figures are not split by type of school, therefore it is not possible to tell what proportion of the 27 per cent are heads of all-girls schools, as opposed to coeducational or even all-boys schools.

The independent sector has a large proportion of single sex schools, therefore we have taken these out of the equation, because the problem of inequity occurs largely in coeducational schools. Even in independent single-sex schools, however, there is an uneven balance.

Figures taken from the Independent Schools Yearbook, 1998-99, show that 10 per cent of all-girls secondary schools have male heads, and 0 per cent of all-boys schools have female heads.

Looking at the percentage of female heads in each of the organisations with coeducational secondary schools, there are marked differences (see Table I).

The very low percentage of women in HMC headships is in marked contrast to the percentages in the other two organisations. The ISA percentage is encouraging, but it should be borne in mind that many ISA schools are very small, some with fewer than 50 pupils, and they often specialise in specific learning difficulties like dyslexia, where women may be perceived as being better in the “pastoral, caring role” needed for such children.

A search of the literature reveals virtually no published work on any aspect of the UK independent sector, reasons being the lack of funding – independent schools are small businesses without finance for large-scale research – and the relatively small number of children who attend them: government figures (DfEE, 1998) show that only 7 per cent of children are at independent schools. Our research is timely, however, for three reasons:

1. as Rae writes (1981, p. 142) “for good or ill, the independent schools remain a potent factor in British society”;
2. maintained schools have been forced into taking a more market-oriented approach, and so it is useful to look at the experience of the independent sector, which has had to take such an approach for many years;
3. there is an assumption that independent education is better than state schools. Woodhead makes just such a claim (1998) when he talks about “the gap which, sadly, continues to exist between the state and the independent sectors ... if I were the parent of a bright three-year-old who could not afford to pay for my child’s education, I would be even more disturbed”.

Given the lack of research – there is only one study about women in senior management in UK independent schools (Davidson, 1995) – it is useful to look at studies in the maintained sector which may provide benchmarks. Aspects of women’s leadership in general are relevant to our research, especially in the current debate about whether “entrepreneurialism” necessarily contradicts “empowering” leadership.

Barriers to promotion

Barriers within the system

In a report on equal opportunities in state education, by the Equal Opportunities...
Commission, Arnot et al., (1996, p. 133) write that:
One of the most worrying features to emerge from the research has been the evident continuing dominance of white male cultures in school and LEA hierarchies.

If the situation in state secondary schools, where several efforts have been made to encourage women into management, is still not particularly favourable, then that in HMC schools is decidedly discouraging despite the move to coeducation in many formerly boys-only schools. A detailed account of the type of prejudice met by women trying to break into this most male of strongholds is given by Davidson (1995). Her study looks at the role of senior mistress, a title now peculiar to independent schools. Many boys' independent schools have a top management structure of headmaster, second master, senior master. On becoming coeducational, a role for a comparatively senior woman was usually created. As Davidson reports, this role is not without its opponents: attitudes such as "we must not upset the already established male staff" and "a senior mistress will not fit into the management structure of the school", are uncovered in her research (p. 6). Many HMC schools became coeducational for financial, not educational, reasons, and the ethos, therefore, was not necessarily conducive to accepting women either as pupils or academic staff. This hostility, therefore, has a long, historical basis.

She reports a further problem in that the move to coeducation coincided with an enforced change in management style. HMC heads were traditionally largely autocrats, but the greater complexity brought about by the many educational reforms from the late 1970s onwards has meant that they have had to delegate more. Most have set up a senior management team in which the senior mistress was often (but not always) included. She often became the focus of male hostility to the changes. Davidson writes that there was a tradition in HMC schools that promotion was gained through time-serving rather than ability, therefore the new senior woman was seen as a parvenue who was responsible for upsetting the status quo. A typical comment from a male colleague was (p. 72):
It was never like this until you arrived, there was no need for your new-fangled management teams, just a quick chat amongst us men over coffee in the Common Room.

Even in HMC schools with younger heads and male teachers, the governors remain a real stumbling-block to women's promotion. As one of Davidson's respondents said (p. 80):
Governors are very much more conservative than heads in general.

In the independent sector, governing bodies are usually heavily dominated by men of an older generation, and this can have implications for female applicants. In selection for senior posts in the maintained sector, Coleman (1996a, p. 325) states that:
there is some evidence, that, in the past, the involvement of LEA officers in the selection process may have benefited female candidates.

With recent reforms, as the influence of the LEA decreases and that of local governors increases in the selection of heads, this may have an adverse impact on the appointment of women heads in the maintained sector too.

### Barriers from outside the system
There are clear barriers, then, to women's promotion, at least in some types of independent schools. But how far are barriers constructed by women themselves, either consciously or subconsciously? Two areas suggest themselves:

1. Lack of confidence is often cited as a barrier to women applying for promotion, however, the subjects of Coleman's (1996a) study of female state school heads had been confident in applying for senior posts, and Cubillo (1998, p. 5) cites a survey undertaken by the NUT in 1980 which shows that, out of 2,800 returns "female teachers, both married and single, show a high degree of career orientation

### Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Number of coeducational schools</th>
<th>Percentage of female heads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference (HMC)</td>
<td>160 (approx)</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society of Headmasters and Headmistresses of Independent Schools (SHMIS)</td>
<td>50 (approx)</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent School Association (ISA)</td>
<td>96 (approx)</td>
<td>23.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The figures for the number of coeducational schools are accurate to within one or two. Some former all-boys schools are still in the process of changing to coeducation, which makes exact figures impossible.

---

**Margaret McLay and Marie Brown**

**The under-representation of women in senior management in UK independent secondary schools**

Margaret McLay and Marie Brown  
The under-representation of women in senior management in UK independent secondary schools  
The International Journal of Educational Management 14/3 [2000] 101±106

and would welcome the challenge and opportunity of promotion".
2 Coleman (1996a) reviews a number of different barriers to women's progress, both overt and covert, as well as constraints from other causes such as taking a career break to have a family. Women more often than not experienced demotion on returning to work after a career break, whereas men did not, even when they had worked outside teaching. The women in Coleman's study were all married but all had domestic arrangements which "emphasised partnership, rather than women's place" (p. 327). Despite this, those headteachers with children had experienced role conflict at some time in their careers. Court (1997), in interviews with six women education leaders, looked at the difficulties they have in balancing home and work. The three older women in the study were all married with children, and one "had faced considerable stress and difficulties as a result of having to be the main breadwinner" (p. 19). The other two claimed that work at home was divided equally between their partners and themselves, but it was clear from their interviews that they were still doing the bulk of the work. Court argues that these women actually contribute to maintaining the situation, by taking pride in the fact that they were better organised and more efficient at home than their husbands, even if this led them to take on a heavy burden of domestic work.

It is often argued that notions of leadership and good management are framed in masculine terms, which can be unappealing to women. In her study of female administrators in Ontario, Taylor (1995, p. 128) cites three of her interviewees discussing the applicator process; they were: "acutely aware that existing ideas and practices operated to favour male administrative aspirants. They mention their discomfort with several aspects of this environment including: competition, hierarchy and the assumed separation of professional and personal lives". Gold (1996) states that training-courses are often devised with men in mind, and are therefore ill-suitable to women's needs.

Leadership

There have been several studies of headship in state schools in Britain. Here, we shall be considering only the most recent material. We shall also look at Higginbotham's (1990) account, which is almost unique in being about an independent school; most accounts of leadership in the independent sector are biographical or autobiographical and tend not to be recent enough for our study.

Gender issues

Turning to the issue of why the under-representation of women in education leadership matters. Gold (1996, p. 421) writes: "...one point is of simple equity: I believe that women should have the same access to power and resources as men. Davidson (1995, p. 68) points out that it is important for the HMC to provide good promotional opportunities for women if they are to attract the high calibre teachers which the parents will expect, and who will provide good role models for pupils of both sexes.

The question of whether women's leadership styles differ from those of men has been well rehearsed. Gold (1996), Hall (1996) and Coleman (1996b) note that it is unhelpful to talk in terms of "female" and "male" styles, or to imply that one is superior to the other. As Coleman writes (p. 173): It is even possible that gender has little relevance to management style and that the most important factor may be age or the way[s] in which the personality of a headteacher shapes how he or she interprets and plays the role (Ribbins and Marland, 1994, p. 5).

There are, after all, examples of women heads who do not espouse what might be seen as "feminine", i.e. caring and empowering, styles, as a recent case (ATL, 1998) in which a deputy head was allegedly bullied by his female head would suggest. Even when women may act out of the best of motives, they may not go about it in the most collaborative of ways. Brown et al. (1998) note that a new female head in a state school they were researching attempted to introduce more participatory management but did so apparently without consultation!

Gender alone, then, does not present the complete picture. Hall (1996, p. 3) states that her study of six women heads in maintained schools was "not about gender differences ... which look at how men and women differ in their management behaviours ..." She did not set out to compare women with men, but to construct an account of headship based on how women interpreted and did the job. "I assumed that the differences between women are potentially as great as between women and men."

As it is the only paper on leadership in independent schools, it is useful to look at Higginbotham's (1990) personal account which stems from his experience of setting up a new independent grammar school in the
Entrepreneurialism versus empowerment

The increasing move towards competition and the use of market forces in the maintained sector has led a number of commentators to examine the effects of entrepreneurialism on management styles and such accounts are useful since independent schools have long been used to consider themselves as businesses. Are women able to espouse empowering styles of management within the new entrepreneurialism? Hall (1996, p. 188) found that her female subjects managed to do so. They preferred “power for” rather than ‘power over’, using power to empower, sharing power”. They “demonstrated a model of educational entrepreneurialism that eschews managerialism, in order to preserve the integrity of the educational enterprise and its ultimate goal: young people’s learning and development” (p. 192).

As there is no published research into leadership styles in the independent sector we need to fall back on Higginbotham’s account. However, in contrast to his “masterful” imagery, a paper given to directors of music of independent schools by Ritchie (1993), chief executive of Bowrings, does stress the importance of empowerment in management. He describes it thus (p. 12):

...letting people know they are valued, making them feel involved. But it also means letting people make their own decisions... it means having a flat management structure.

Whereas Higginbotham (p.9) states that the commercial and PR aspects of running an independent school mean that “no matter how united his staff are on a particular idea, the head cannot be ‘bounced’ into any decision which cannot be sold to the parents” this, having just given an illustration of how easy it is to dupe parents and press! Ritchie (1993, p. 11) on the other hand, states that it is fundamental to commercial survival to value staff’s input:

...the competitive edge provided by your people, your human resources, is unique – it can’t be copied. Man management, then, is of central importance.

The apparent gulf between Higginbotham and Ritchie suggests that independent school leadership may lag behind other commercial institutions.

Hall (1996, p. 14) considers entrepreneurship in the light of women’s styles of management. She finds that “Women’s capabilities as innovators are not necessarily superior to men’s, but our analyses of the ways in which they learn to act in ‘masculine’ environments show that many have evolved a repertoire of management and leadership behaviours that work to the ethical as well as social benefit of education”. Generally, as Hall’s (1996) and Coleman’s (1996a; 1996b) studies show, a picture is emerging of a number of women heads being more sympathetic to collaborative leadership, for the benefit of, and with concern for, the total school community, whilst still coping with modern market-led trends.

Professional development

Do women see the need for professional development differently from men, and, if so, does this hold them back from achieving promotion? There is only one study of training needs in the independent sector. This research by Waite and Watson (1998) shows a surprisingly high proportion of staff in independent schools who do not feel the need for any development:

...one of the most disturbing findings of this study is the relative high level of complacency amongst senior staff in the individual schools. They seem to have failed to grasp the enormity of the changes that have taken place in the state sector and which now threaten the very survival of many independent schools (p. 510).

The authors, however, do not consider the possibility that staff in the independent sector often have to pay for their own training because independent schools are often too small to offer opportunities for promotion, and they are most unlikely to pay...
for the training of an individual who might have to go to a rival school for promotion. Senior management courses are often beyond the pocket of many such individuals.

Waite and Watson do interpret their results by gender. They note that of those who state that they require no further training there is a higher proportion of women, 39.4 per cent as opposed to 40.6 per cent of men. Of those who say they require further training but do not seek promotion, there is also a higher proportion of women: 53.5 per cent as opposed to 46.5 per cent men. In the group which seeks further training to gain promotion, there is a higher proportion of men: 52.8 per cent as opposed to 47.2 per cent, and of these women, more are in the younger age-groups and more are single. Do the figures for older women represent a lack of ambition, or thwarted ambition, or social immobility because of family circumstances?

One other factor not considered by the authors is the suitability to women of styles of training courses, something which has been questioned in other studies. For instance, Cubillo (1998, p. 1) studies the NPQH looking at gender differences in the response of applicants to the assessment centre. She says “despite recruitment being carried out on ‘equal’ terms there was a discernible gender difference in the performances of candidates during the needs’ assessment process”. It became evident that several of the women under-performed in the observed group discussion and there was a tendency for women also to under-assess their achievements in the self evaluation. The women gave a variety of reasons, including lack of confidence, not wishing to show off, viewing the self-evaluation activity as a development exercise. On the other hand, one of the male candidates awarded himself the highest score in the self-evaluation, giving as his reason that he knew he could do the job if he had to. The women cited lack of confidence for their poorer performance in group discussions, showing diffidence to speak up against more dominant (male) personalities. Cubillo argues that the TTA needs to reexamine the criteria used to measure effective leadership and to look at its training strategies “that appear only to serve to promote and strengthen the existing structure and culture of the organisation” (p. 10). Cubillo does not report whether any of the female candidates failed the needs assessment because of their approach, or whether they were put off continuing with the training-process. This information needs to be sought in further research.

Gold (1996, p. 424) emphasises the point: “the pedagogy of management development programmes should be planned to ‘fit’ all participants, and not vice versa”. She chides those management development courses which stress that there is only one “right way of managing”, and which reduce management to a series of technical skills and systems, which are dependent on inputs from famous “gurus”, and which do not value the “innumerable transferable skills” which learners bring with them. Such aspects are designed to be antipathetic to women. She also considers women’s silences on such courses. She notes, as does Cubillo, that women are less likely to speak in committees, but takes silence as a metaphor to describe women’s reluctance to participate in management courses which are not congenial to them. She concludes by suggesting points for “woman-friendly” management courses based on Kolb’s cycle of learning experience; these could include taking account of professional experience to date, building in opportunities for reflection during the programme, inputs from famous education managers “linked with the experiences and reflections and discussions that have gone before, thus making sense to the learners”, linking theoretical frameworks to “the reality of the work-place – participants go back to their places of work with helpful and realistic plans, and thus carry the learning from their course with them in a practical way”.

**Mentoring**

An important finding from Cubillo’s study is that “the women particularly valued any guidance and advice they had received from their assessors and from their heads at school. They consistently identified the need for such support as essential to help them determine their strengths and build confidence” (p. 9). Gold (1996, p. 424) also emphasises the importance of sponsorship and mentoring for women. Davidson (1995) notes the difference in support for the senior mistress in those HMC schools where the head had thought through and welcomed the introduction of co-education, and those heads who had introduced coeducation reluctantly because of financial pressures. In the latter type of school the senior women was “not only left without a job description but was also without any active support from her headmaster” (p. 54).

**Conclusion**

It is clear from Davidson’s study that much needs to be done to improve the status of women in many HMC schools.
Further studies need to be carried out in schools in the other independent education organisations to compare the situation of women there.

Studies such as those by Gold suggest that training-courses should become more “woman-friendly” to encourage women to put themselves forward for professional development.

Research by Gold, and Cubillo suggests that women particularly value mentoring to build confidence.

Studies in the maintained sector suggest that women can combine more empowering styles of leadership with entrepreneurialism, but the only leadership study in independent schools suggests that market forces can be used as an excuse for forcing through measures. Further studies need to be done to see whether this is a typical leadership style in the independent sector.

Ritchie from the business world makes the case that human resources are the most valuable in a competitive economic climate, and that they make each organisation unique, something which applies very much to schools, and which suggests that schools of all types should adopt collaborative styles of leadership if they are to thrive.

References


National Union of Teachers (1980), Promotion and the Woman Teacher, NUT, London.

Rae, J. (1981), The Public Schools Revolution, Faber & Faber, London.


Further reading