Women and leadership in education: implications for professional development from a critical realism

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# Overview

- This presentation is concerned with equality and diversity in the education workforce.
- Reports call for things to be make better for women in leadership in the education sector and elsewhere.
- Yet the same concerns and frustrations continue to emerge in research.
- What are the things that thwart these good intentions and how might a more inclusive leadership be achieved?
This topic matters because:

• Education and workplace learning should not be reduced to a form of ‘technicism’.

• A concern for the equality and diversity of children and young people should not be divorced from a concern for adult employees in education.

• The aims and processes of education cannot be isolated from the wider organizational and structures.

NB The review drew on critical realism as its theoretical basis (not critical theory).
Thinking deeply about culture in schools

• Recognising the ethnocentric and class related ideas at work within teaching and education (Jacky Lumby 2012).
• Head teachers’ views of diversity amongst students and staff are related and linked to their own experiences (Kay Fuller 2013).
To review of literature from the education sector about women in leadership to explore:

I) the representation of women within the education leadership structures,

ii) where women are represented within the education organization structures,

iii) how education leadership is exercised by women in those formal positions,

iv) the place of education leadership development.
That the staff of educational institutions:
• should be a visible embodiment of equality and diversity,
• draw on the benefit of the ‘richness of diversity’ as it leads to better learning,
• have a moral imperative to lead change in society because schools have a special place in forming the minds and attitudes of the young.
• Most teachers in both secondary and primary schools in the UK are female.
• Most heads of secondary schools are male.
• The proportion of male heads in primary schools is large in comparison with the overall number of women in primary teaching.
• The proportion of female headteachers and deputy headteachers is growing.

(Marianne Coleman 2005)
Gender has become a codeword for female. Having now accumulated considerable work on women’s leadership to add to the already existing research on male leadership, we might be able to begin to examine the ways in which gender, race, and educational context influence leadership behaviors and outcomes, rather than looking at women in isolation.

(Charol Shakeshaft 2010)
Critical Realism seeks to move beyond the surface level experiences in seeking to identify the underlying events and the mechanisms that generate these experiences within the specific contexts with a view to drawing out effective ways forward (Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar et al. 1998; Thorpe 2014).

Affective structures in social changes and structures going beyond psychological feelings or understandings (Kathleen Lynch et al. 2012).
Increasing numbers of women in formal positions within the hierarchy of educational organizations does not, in itself, address the deeper problem and bring about a substantial change.

- The place of leadership development and opportunities
- Problem of the safest possible “solutions”.
- Issues of the discourses of ‘leaders’ and ‘leadership’ in education.
The neo-liberal turn

- What counts as ‘real’ leadership?
- What counts as education?
- Neoliberal - paying for teachers is a drain and a burden.
- Outputs, efficiency and private money are investments in education.
- Not caring but being ‘careless’ (Kathleen Lynch et al. 2012)
- The ideal ‘citizen’ engaging in competitive survival.
The leaderist turn and ‘leaderism’

- ‘..leadership has developed into a popular descriptor and a dominant social and organisational technology’ (p116).
- The re-orientation of public services towards the consumer-citizen with leadership as an ‘organisational panacea’ is ‘leaderism’ a new managerialism in disguise (O’Reilly & Read 2010; 2011).
- Current dominant idea of leadership in education is an important mechanism for generating and maintaining these ‘safe solutions’, e.g., professional development.
• Traditionally excluded groups being given positions either with considerably less power and lower prestige or else once prestigious posts now transformed into less powerful roles.
• Formal development programmes which may be offered to ‘fix the women’ to continue and reinforce the current situation.
• Mentoring (both formal and informal) that replicates existing power relationships and established views and practices.

‘Safe- solutions’ examples I
• Versions of caring leadership which are manipulative, involve dispensing favours, making decisions that maintain their power in the name of ‘caring’. (Like ‘leaderism’ this is managerialism - a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’).

• Muted forms ‘sugaring the pill’ with great emphasis on motivation and support- but to do what, at what cost and with what concern for social justice?

‘Safe- solutions’ examples II
Ways forward?

1. Rejecting simplistic approaches and styles of ‘what works’ literature in education.

2. Taking equality and diversity seriously in education contexts and tacking assumptions—however well intentioned.

3. Challenging non-educational ideas of leadership in leadership development programmes.

4. Identifying the ‘micro-inequities’ by which discrimination operates.

5. Recognising agency and structure are always in tension.
Question

How might the examples of ‘safe solutions’

i) resonate with your experiences in your organizations?

ii) what you might seek to change in your own organizations to promote equality and diversity?
References


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