

## **Gender representation and social justice: Ideology, methodology and smoke-screens**

### **Charting the game**

A number of researchers have provided an overview of the progress of research focusing on gender and educational leadership/management in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Bjork, 2000; Blackmore, 2006; Shakeshaft, 1993, 1999; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Zheng, 1999). Shakeshaft (1999 p. 522) casts descriptive studies of representation generally 'documenting the absence of women' as an early phase of research, followed by studies which focused on other aspects of women in leadership roles, driven by a developing range of phenomenological and radical perspectives. Representation of men and women in leadership roles has persisted as a key focus throughout this period. During their history, studies of representation have been attacked from a number of theoretical viewpoints, for example as inappropriately essentialising women (Butler, 2004), or as embedding a 'zero sum game' (Marshall, 1993, p. 4) which pits various under-represented/disadvantaged groups against each other, or as putatively redundant in the light of advances in gender equality (Lumby with Coleman, 2007). All three perspectives are highly contested. This article reviews the purpose, nature and methodological challenges of studies of gender representation in educational leadership/management and charts one international effort to make progress. It offers comment and critique on an attempt to map data on women's representation in educational management across Commonwealth countries. It also explores the significance of the difficulties encountered and possible links to ideological and power flows. It aims to illuminate one small corner of the game of resistance to sexual divisions in education labour.

### **The aim of the game**

#### *Supporting social justice*

Finding a term which works internationally to describe the activity of the head of a school is problematic. In the US 'administration' is the preferred term. In the UK 'leadership' is used. In many parts of the world the term 'management' is common. All three terms have negative and positive connotations depending on the context within which they are used. For the purposes of this article, the term 'management' is utilised as arguably the most generic internationally, but should be taken to indicate those activities variously referred to as administration and leadership. The term 'principal' is used to indicate the role of the leader of an individual school, as an alternative to 'head teacher' which is a largely UK title.

Though data indicative of gender representation in educational management are available in the US from as early as 1910 (Tallerico & Blount, 2004), a general paucity of evidence across the world has been deplored over time. This may have displaced to some extent a wider debate on what is being represented and the purpose of such representation. Differences in understanding may be significant for both developing theory and practice. The term 'representation' is widely assumed to indicate a mathematical relationship between one population, in this case women principals, and another. Equality is sometimes implicitly defined as an equal ratio; for example, if 50 per cent of the workforce in question is women and there are 50 per cent women in the population used for comparison. Which population to use for comparison is problematic in the

case of educational management. Is the comparator the number and percentage of women within the profession of teaching, or in the particular type of school as categorised by the age of students, or in the general population, or in the local community, the regional community or the national community? Consider, as an example, the representation within the English state-funded nursery (kindergarten) and primary (elementary) phase. Figures compiled by the government Ministry (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) show the gender of principals in 2006 as 67 per cent female and 33 per cent male, compared to 84 per cent of the total full-time teaching force in nursery and primary schools who are female and 16 per cent who are male. An analysis of the 2009 English Edubase databank shows 10,220 (63 per cent) female principals and 5884 (37 per cent) male principals, so little has improved over two years.

Some might argue that this shows that women are under-represented in the English nursery and primary school principalship, if comparison is to the total number of teachers in this age phase of schooling. The figures show that men are disproportionately likely to be principals, even in a phase where women form the vast majority of the teaching population. Others might claim that men are under-represented and that social justice would be better served if the population for comparison was the general population. If approximately 50 per cent of the principals of the nursery phase were men, the stereotypical identity of women as carers of young children might be dented. This example highlights the vital connection between the value judgment of how social justice might be served and the use of representation figures.

National statistics for principals are often presented as above, with women as a homogeneous group, obscuring the differences in representation between women of different ethnic groups, religions, abled/disabled and of different sexual orientations. Assuming that such a disaggregation of data were possible (though we are far from being able to achieve this), the points of comparison become multiple; minority ethnic women, women with disabilities, and so on. For each of these groups, the choice of population for comparison is key. For example, if the percentage of minority ethnic women principals is representative of both the teaching profession as a whole and of the proportion of ethnic minorities in the national population, is this a satisfactory outcome if the local population has a much higher percentage of minority ethnic women? Some might argue not. Others might argue that if the proportion of minority ethnic principals equal to that in the national general population were achieved in all locations throughout the nation, the assumption might be weakened that minority ethnic women and men principals were primarily needed in schools in ethnically diverse communities, rather than in communities of every kind. There are therefore questions about how representation is framed. It is not the percentage of men and women in management roles *per se*, but the chosen population for comparison and how meaning is drawn from the comparison which is the critically significant choice.

The preceding discussion challenges the widespread assumption that the purpose of presenting data on representation is self-evident, as essential data to inform action to increase social justice. While such data may demonstrate that women are less likely to become principals of co-educational schools than men, whatever age phase of education they are in, they cannot help decipher what greater equity might look like. The goal of achieving undefined 'representation' is simplistic in the light of the kinds of difficult choices outlined in the previous paragraphs. In fact, there appears to be a range of very different and contested kinds of purpose, underpinned by varying value judgements. For example, an early example of a survey on workers' gender and

ethnicity was the 1987 *Workforce 2000* report by Johnson and Packer. The discovery that demographic trends indicated that US business was going to be staffed by a majority of women and minority ethnic people by the year 2000 had little to do with issues of social justice and much to do with planning human resource for continued economic success. Representation as discussed in this report was related to business values and issues.

There are also challenges as to whether representation, that is, an equal ratio with whatever comparative population is chosen, is an appropriate aim at all. The works of Sen (1984) and Nussbaum (1999) have shaped capabilities approaches to equality, where social justice is suggested to be served best by enabling people to live lives they value, rather than targeting an equal occupation of positions of authority or power. Quality of life is a primary indicator of progress. Logically, therefore, if people are empowered to have a range of opportunities and to decide between them, they will make different choices, so equal representation becomes an irrelevant concept. If a job provides poor quality of life, women's choice to adopt other roles is a triumph, not a defeat. The role of principal is arguably such an unattractive role in many contexts. A survey of a thousand teachers in England found that 68 per cent had no plans to be a principal (**National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services**, 2008). There is much evidence that empowered choice does not currently exist. Women are barred from choice by many hurdles such as the socialised perceptions of their role or by the construct of leadership in masculine form. This is not the point of contention. Rather, the issue here is whether it would be preferable to adopt the goal of quality of life, and not women occupying any particular proportion of management roles. If such an approach were adopted, then representation becomes less relevant.

### *Displacement activity*

The collection of data may also function as a displacement activity (Lumby, Harris, Morrison, Muijs, Sood, Glover & Wilson with Briggs & Middlewood, 2005). The current system privileges men, white people, the abled and heterosexual. Sociobiological, social constructionist and political analyses suggest that there is a fundamental compulsion for groups to act for self-defence and self-aggrandizement (Alexander & Levin, 1998; Ball, 1987; Gantt & Reber, 1999). If such a perspective is adopted, there is little rationale for the privileged to dismantle systems which underpin their advantage and a strong incentive to find strategies to sustain them. Some evidence suggests that data collection may be one such strategy (Lumby et al., 2005). National and organisational administrators, well-schooled by a performative environment, may present statistics on representation as a smokescreen for lack of action, having become excellent manipulators of data. Educational organisations and state governments may busy themselves with presenting figures as evidence of commitment to and action towards greater equality. It is evidence only of action to collect figures, but accepted by many as a vital element in the overall plan to increase equality. The absence of the rest of the plan may be less noticed than might be the case were there not such foreground noise around the busyness with figures. It may not be so much a case of measurement indicating what matters, as measurement obscuring continuation of indifference to disadvantage. Where no representation data exist, considerable effort may be expended in encouraging governments, national and international organisations into collecting them. Much effort is expended to arrive at a document or website presenting data. The danger is

that this is seen as the end point. Action in response to the data does not follow but vindication of commitment and effort is publicly on show.

Expending great time and effort may be very effective in preventing change. Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia & Nolly (2004) outline one issue:

The problem, though, with existing versions of equity audits (whether based on civil rights, curriculum auditing, or state accountability systems) is that they typically produce enormous amounts of data, which overwhelm decision making efforts.... Few people associated with a district or school will have time or motivation to read through a document 200 or 300 pages in length and then use the results well in planning school change. (p. 140)

The aim, they claim, is:

tools that will easily and simply reduce some of the complexity of the data without stripping the data of their utility for increasing equity. (p. 140)

Such a holy grail has been sought by those concerned with gender equality for some time. Setting aside the issues raised concerning the nature and purpose of representation studies, how feasible is it to achieve a simple tool which would allow comparison of the number of women in educational management in countries across the globe and over time?

### **Methodological challenges**

If a simple tool is to be achieved, considerable methodological and design challenges require resolution. These include decisions on:

1. How to define management roles and select which roles are to be counted;
2. How to identify the gender of those in the selected roles;
3. Whether the entire population or a sample is to be used;
4. The disaggregation, if any, between characteristics of men and women in the role(s);
5. The disaggregation, if any, between characteristics of the schools of role holders; and
6. The time frame for collection of data.

### **Defining which management roles**

Management roles are not similarly constructed throughout the world. In England and in many other countries the primary management role is of head teacher/principal; that is, an individual in a single school with overall executive responsibility and a seat on the governing board. However, increasingly in England and elsewhere, principal roles are developing. More than one principal may share headship or a single principal lead a group of schools. Glatter & Harvey (2006) found three different variations:

- executive heads who have responsibility for more than one school;
- federations, in which groups of schools agree formally to work together in part through

structural changes; and

- **co-headships**, where two heads jobshare the leadership of the school, or dual headship where two full-time heads lead the school (pp. 3–4).

An executive principal may lead upwards of two schools which remain separate entities. Federations comprise a group of schools where separateness has reduced. They are formally linked in partnership; that is, their goals, staff and accountability are amalgamated to some degree and they are lead by a single principal.

In the Netherlands (Collins, Ireson, Stubbs, Nash & Burnside, 2006) the structure of management includes:

1. Federations of schools with one board and a superintendent;
2. Federations of schools with one board, no superintendent and several principals or more-school heads; and
3. Federations of schools with one board, without being overseen by a superintendent or more-school head (p. 4).

A ‘more-school head’ is one who has responsibility for more than one school.

In the US superintendents lead a number of schools which are independent of each other and in a defined geographic area. Their powers and responsibilities are similar in many ways to those of principals in the UK, but in relation to a group of schools which contains usually a larger number of schools than is the case with UK federations. The US schools are not a formal partnership. Comparisons of the percentage of women in a particular country who are principals or superintendents or ‘more-heads’ and their deputies are therefore not comparing the incumbency of women and men in equivalent roles. The challenge becomes deciding which aspect would be the best indicator for judging equity in representation; is it a question of comparing salary level, degree of autonomy, range of authority or many other alternative possibilities?

### **Identifying the selected management roles**

Assuming there is clarity about which kind of role or roles are under scrutiny, the next challenge is to identify how many men or women hold them. Analysis of English data serves as an example of the difficulties that can arise. In attempting to construct figures for England, the statistical unit of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) was approached. In a personal communication responding to a request for data on deputy principals a representative explained that the unit could not help and that ‘the data has a lot of miscoding of teachers within the leadership group’. An analysis of data using the national educational database Edubase, which contains information about every school in England, was undertaken. The task of selecting the appropriate role titles from a very long list in order to identify from the database which individuals held the role of principal/deputy principal was problematic. The principal role was defined as:

The head administrator of a school who has been appointed to her/his position by the governing body or provincial management or other body. The principal, in conjunction

with the school governing body, makes strategic decisions. She or he has primary responsibility for the executive function of the school.

The task proved difficult because of the very wide range of descriptors of roles. The potential for miscoding data was very clear. It is highly challenging to untangle the nature of roles held by men and women. Assuming that one has a definitive list of those holding such roles, gender is not evident from the data. Names can be misleading. In the absence of gender data collection at appointment to a post, which appears to be the case in many countries, the most reliable method is self-designation. The probability of limited survey returns renders this problematic. Statistical methods might be used to calculate proportions if there is a sufficient volume of returns, but a definitive picture is unlikely to be possible.

### **Entire population or sample?**

Tallerico & Blount (2004) point out that many studies are limited by depending on a sample rather than using the entire population. Although statistical significance can be communicated as part of the presentation of findings, analysis of the entire population would be preferable. This may imply the cooperation of regional and national administration to make national datasets available. There is a second reason for involving those who manage data at various levels. Moser (2005) explores the different values underpinning audits, assessments and evaluations in relation to gender. She sees the provenance of gender audits as financial accounting systems which stress compliance with the rules and regulations agreed by the profession and embedded in law. The position which is presented as the outcome of audit is a summative and external view. She contrasts this with 'participatory gender audits' (p. 1) which stress self-assessment and support for innovation. Given that one of the problems associated with the collection of gender data is the use of the activity as displacement for policy and practice innovation, there is a strong incentive for involving in any audit process the officials and ministers who hold power. This may not lead to either the intention to change or action to achieve it, but holds out greater hope of that possibility than a detached, summative assessment. If this is an aim, then working with the whole population would seem to be preferable both on methodological and political grounds. Unfortunately, initial research of existing data sets suggests that many countries, including well resourced Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) nations, do not hold data on the gender of principals and or deputy principals. Samples collected via survey would seem to be the only option in many locations.

### **Dissaggregation between characteristics of women and men**

There are multiple characteristics which influence how men and women are perceived and consequently both their chances of being appointed as a principal and the parameters within which they enact the role (Lumby, 2008). The necessity to consider ethnicity alongside gender has been argued for over a century (Du Bois, 1903/1968) and the dangers of gender audits or surveys which take no account of ethnicity highlighted (Marshall, 1993). Taking account of further characteristics as well as ethnicity is advocated by groups with a particular interest. The need to address the many roots of disadvantage is urged ever more strongly. Intersectionality theory is consequently influencing approaches to gender studies more than previously. The theory suggests that multiple characteristics are relevant to understanding women's experience (Valentine, 2007).

In South Africa, for example, not only ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation may be relevant to taking and enacting a management role, but language, religion and culture. Which of the eleven[1] official languages is the first language of an individual may be as pertinent to how that individual is perceived as their gender (Lumby & Heystek, 2008). In the UK religion is also highly subject to stereotypes. Being Islamic may frame the expectations of individual administrators for both men and women (Shah & Shaikh, 2009). While some surveys attempt to capture the fine-grained characteristics of educational managers, where national datasets categorise they do so most commonly by gender, by age and sometimes by disability. They frequently do not hold information on ethnicity, let alone sexuality, religion, culture or language. Any attempt to collect data internationally on representation therefore faces a Scylla and Charybdis choice of either the extremely challenging task of collecting disaggregated data, detailing a full range of characteristics of school administrators, or the criticism of various individuals and groups who believe the data is of limited value unless it captures one or more characteristic other than gender.

### **Dissaggregation between characteristics of schools**

The probability of a woman being appointed to a principal role is likely to be influenced by the nature of the school as well as by the characteristics of the individual. The relevance of the age of students has long been recognised; women are less under-represented in schools for young children. A range of other factors may also be important; whether a school is privately or state funded, coeducational or single sex, faith-based or secular. In collecting data, the influence of the structure of schools may therefore be significant. However, comparability issues are problematic. There is enormous variation in how education is structured and funded across nations. The particular context will colour how any data on representation might be framed and interpreted. For example in Pakistan, where schools are both faith-based and single-sex, women have a clear unimpeded path to leadership roles in girls' schools. Representation issues may therefore be framed very differently from countries where co-educational schools are the norm. Equally, the issues will be quite different in the Solomon Islands where there are few schools. Meaningful international comparisons about women's representation in and experience of the principal role in hugely varied contexts presents a considerable challenge.

### **The time frame**

Longitudinal studies are relatively rare and generally cover a limited time span (Zheng, 1999). Tallerico & Blount's (2004) study, which presents data from 1910 to 1998, is one exception. However, studies are generally within one nation state. Analysis which allows comparison globally and over time is absent. Ruijs' (1993) international study of women administrators in a limited number of countries is a rare excursion into comparative international data. If an intention is to collect national data over time, with a view to comparing the progress towards equity with a perspective beyond a single state, or beyond OECD states, there are two problems; first, the research infrastructure, level of activity and availability of relevant data varies considerably amongst countries and second, where it exists, the form of data collected may vary over time even within each state. A rigorous longitudinal tracking of representation in one state, let alone incorporating numerous states, is therefore problematic. International comparison across nations and longitudinally is currently a distant dream. Those organisations which one might imagine

would adopt this goal, such as the OECD, currently do not. The international role is vacant.

### **The Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management**

The Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) is an association of affiliated national societies related to educational management based across a range of Commonwealth countries. Amongst CCEAM's Constitutional purposes are:

- Facilitating and disseminating knowledge about research and practice in educational administration, management and leadership.
- Through gender equity, to foster close links and exchanges among individuals and associations concerned with the improvement of educational administration, management and leadership.

The CCEAM Research and Development Committee, recognising the paucity of evidence on women's representation in educational management has adopted an ambitious aim to map representation of women as school principal/head teacher and deputy and their perceived experiences in achieving and enacting a leadership role in CCEAM member countries as a contribution to increasing international comparison and understanding. With the support of an international advisory group, it has established a template for the collection of data to map the representation of women as principals and deputy principals in Commonwealth countries. The template was pre-tested by entry of English data. It was piloted in South Africa in 2010 sponsored by the Commonwealth Foundation and the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, as a first step to explore the methodological and ideological issues related not only to the compilation of data, but its use comparatively over time and between different nation states. The nature of the template is briefly outlined in what follows.

The project has sought a degree of resolution of the issues raised in the earlier part of this paper. There is acknowledgment that some Commonwealth countries do not have the resource or expertise to compile finely disaggregated data, and yet the inclusion of all member countries is axiomatic. The template therefore needs to be sufficiently robust to allow entry of a variety of factors which might be significant in particular contexts, but also to allow entry of aggregated data when realistically this is all that is achievable. The gender of principals and deputies is entered by category of school, defined by the age of students. Definitions of each phase have been established, drawing on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) and OECD definitions. The project provides definitions of:

- Pre-primary education
- Primary education
- Lower secondary education
- Upper secondary education (general programmes)
- Upper secondary education (vocational programmes)
- All levels of education.

Further categories of disaggregation are public and private sector schools, co-educational or single sex and faith-based or secular. It is not seen as feasible to have a single comparative

framework for ethnicity, religion, language and disability within the template. Rather, the intersection of gender and ethnicity and other characteristics and their effect on becoming and being a principal will be tackled by a second method, by collecting qualitative data.

### **Expanding the picture**

In the course of pursuing the CCEAM project numerous objections and caveats were raised by those commenting on or involved in the project. They included objections to focusing on women principals and to the advisory group being all female. It was asserted by some that such a project was unnecessary as the data already existed. The mistaken conviction that developed economies must hold relevant data seemed unshakeable in some.

The first two objections relate to a long history of resistance to positive action (Peters, 1996). There is a propensity to confuse positive action, that is, training or other forms of support to aid under-represented groups to compete more successfully for jobs or education/training places, with affirmative action/positive discrimination which gives preference to those from under-represented groups in appointment to jobs (Lumby et al., 2005). Affirmative action is widely resented, primarily but not only by those who are or were previously advantaged by the system. The grounds for objection are that it is both unfair and unwise. Unfairness is discerned by some in giving differential support to individuals or groups (for example, flexible working for parents). The un wisdom is seen as a result of perceptions that the excluded are perceived as properly so because they are less competent (DiTomaso & Hooijberg, 1996). Representation is therefore sometimes equated to high risk in maintaining the efficacy of any system, educational or economic. Both of these charges are rejected. The project asserts that a focus on women's representation is justifiable and necessary, both because it addresses existing unfairness and because it relates to the educational and economic wisdom of tapping fully into the skills of half the population.

Concerns about potential narrowness of representation data have also been addressed through the addition of qualitative data to sit alongside the statistical data. The interview instrument draws on that developed by Marianne Coleman and used successfully in a number of parts the world. A rich picture of women's practice and lives will therefore be available as contemporaneous with the figures on their presence in school leadership roles.

### **Using the data**

Assuming that a body of data which has sufficient validity and equivalency can be collected from a number of nation states, a further set of challenges arises in establishing possibilities for linking its analysis to multi- and inter-disciplinary feminist theory. If, for example, there are considerable differences in the level of representation between nations or over time, or both, what theory or framework might have utility to relate such differences to cultural, political, economic, religious or social factors? Alcoff (1988) sounds a note of pessimism:

Subjective experiences (which) are determined in some sense by macro forces including social discourses and social practices, are apparently not over determined, resulting as they do from such a complex and unpredictable network of overlapping and criss-crossing

elements that no unilinear directionality is conceivable and in fact no final efficient cause exists. (p. 416)

From Alcoff's perspective, the likelihood of identifying the causes of the disadvantage suffered by women, and so the issues which need to be addressed, is minimal. There are those who are more pessimistic still. They adopt a post-structuralist position to challenge both the ontological foundation of experience and the intention to act:

...while methodological individualists admit that human intentions are ineffective, post-structuralists deny not only the efficacy but also the ontological autonomy and even the existence of intentionality. (Alcoff, op cit. p. 416)

Such a stance denies the possibility of intentional human advance. In contrast, Butler (1988) accepts the possibility of action. She asks that we think what it is to do before we decide on doing. Her philosophy demands we consider deeply the nature of thought and action, but nevertheless accords power to women to create their gender despite the compelling forces which shape and limit. Those involved in the CCEAM project adopt Butler's stance; first, that they have agency, that is 'the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles' (Mahmood, 2001, p. 206) and, second, that there is a need for deep reflection on what it is to act and how to act.

Mahmood posits that feminism has a 'dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project' (p. 206). Mapping representation is primarily a contribution to the analytical aspect of feminism. The use of data to contribute to political prescription is problematic, given the ontological and theoretical challenges which have been raised. Analysis of both representation and qualitative data may allow identification of a range of women's goals and the means to achieve them. The former cannot be assumed. 'Greco-Roman, Christian, Western intellectual traditions' (Bajunid, 1996, p. 63) have dominated feminist discourse, privileging the hegemony of freedom and equality for women. Mahmood (op cit) argues for a more inclusive approach to any political prescription emerging from feminism:

It is quite clear that the idea of individual liberty as *the* political ideal is relatively new in modern history, and many societies, including Western ones, have lived with aspirations other than this. Nor for that matter does the narrative of individual (and collective) liberty exhaust the desires by which people in liberal societies live. Indeed, if we accept the notion that all forms of desire are socially constructed (as much of recent feminist scholarship has argued), then it is important to interrogate the conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including those for submission to a variety of goals, and not naturalize those that ensure the emergence of feminist politics. (p. 208).

There has, as yet, been little progress in theorising and addressing a wider range of goals and action than those embodied in Western liberal hegemony and little progress in clarifying the ontological and political assumptions underlying representation studies. The international engagement envisaged by CCEAM offers an incentive to make such progress.

## **A way forward**

The CCEAM sponsored research will map national comparative data, allowing for the initiation of research projects in different parts of the world. It takes place in a context of uncertainty. The article has explored how women's representation in educational management raises questions about what is to be done and why. The ontological and epistemological bases of representation studies remain clouded and progress stumbles. Efforts remain largely theoretically blurred, confined to work within national geographic limits and dependent on internationally uncoordinated research efforts. They inevitably encounter both political and methodological issues; the capacity of scholars, practitioners and policy makers to cooperate internationally is challenged. Progress may demand that scholars combine deep reflection on their position relative to their agency with a willingness to accept some pragmatic compromise in order to work together. The agenda has passed beyond studies which are confined to national boundaries and are predicated on Western liberal or radical theory. We may need to move beyond Western feminist accounts as being 'merely one tale in a meta story' (Lumby et al., 2005, p. 159) towards a more inclusive account of the whole story. The rich and positive as well as the oppressed and negative experience of women educational managers in many contexts needs to be seen in its totality as well as its constituent parts. The challenge to international cooperation is ever more strongly present.

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 [1] The eleven official languages of South Africa are Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu. Many others are also spoken.