

Gender, generation and leadership: Lessons for recruiting and retaining the next generations of women leaders

Karen Edge

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Introduction

Do we need to think strategically about how we talent spot, nurture and promote our women leaders? I would argue, based on my personal experience and our research evidence, that the answer is a flat out **YES!** In this paper, we weave together the academic research and our own research evidence, hopefully to provoke readers to consider the individual and collective actions they can take tomorrow and in the future to create conditions for all leaders to flourish – even more than they do today.

While most education systems have collectively made great strides in supporting all leaders, in this paper, we focus on women leaders and what barriers may be in place that do not support the talent spotting, recruitment and retention of women leaders in schools and systems. We believe firmly that until all current members of an education system,

including our own team, can get better at identifying and encouraging all potential leaders, we will not be able to make the most important strides in our schools and communities. We need leaders who bring a range of perspectives and experiences to the table. Those ideas underpin our overall work with leaders and our commitment to widening and deepening the pool of leaders wanting to join the ranks and remain.

Based on early evidence from our Generation X leader study, discussed in previous papers in this series, a distinctly gendered Generation X leadership experience emerged – often along a life/family/work continuum. More specifically, young women leaders had often taken on their leadership roles at a younger age than their predecessors. Simultaneously, women were having children at a later age than their predecessors. This creates an

early leadership experience in North American leaders may be shaking up the notion of a ‘glass floor’ that limits leadership trajectories due to a lack of early leadership experience

unexplored and unique temporal tension between work and family that we have not yet explored in educational leadership. At the same time, we encounter something that even made our team stop in their tracks: consistent assumptions about women and children. These patterns were just the tip of the iceberg.

In this paper, we provide some details about our overall research program and some of the patterns emerging in the wider research on women and leadership. In turn, we then highlight our own gender-specific Generation X leader findings. We then proffer some suggestions about how each of us, as educators, can influence the experience and greater conditions that support the recruitment and retention of women into the most senior leadership positions in our schools.

Exploring Generation X leaders and leadership

Our three-year Economic and Social Research Council-funded research study engages cohorts of 20–30 Generation X (GenX) school leaders in each of three Global Cities – London, New York City, and Toronto (Foreign Policy, 2009). We are specifically interested in these under 40-year-old (GenX) leaders as they have grown up in the most rapidly progressive technological era and tend to be more globally minded, techno-savvy, informal (Zemke et al, 2000), collaborative (Wey Smola and Sutton, 2002), diversity-aware, and more committed to work/life balance (Kunreuther, 2003). To understand more about GenX leadership, we annually conduct 20–30 individual interviews in each city, exploring career development/aspirations, work/life issues professional identity, organisational improvement, and leadership.

We noticed the following emerging patterns, including

1. challenges when simultaneously planning their careers and families;
2. issues of healthy work/life balance aspirations and a lack of role models; and
3. the perceived necessity of support at home from grandparents/partners.

Finally, early leadership experience in North American leaders may be shaking up the notion of a ‘glass floor’ that limits leadership trajectories due to a lack of early leadership experience.

These findings create interesting tensions and consideration for policy/practice leaders interested in supporting and retaining young woman leaders. We conclude with a discussion of the emerging implications for current and future leaders, and those engaged in policy and practice leadership.

Trends in gender and educational leadership research

There are several themes that continue to gain traction within educational leadership research including

- leader recruitment;
- parenthood, gender and promotion;
- work conditions and workload; and
- leadership self-perception and readiness.

Here, we provide a more nuanced discussion of these themes, acknowledging that they represent primer and only a small strand of the wider work related to gender and educational leadership.

Leader recruitment challenges

Leader recruitment remains one of the most pressing issues facing education systems around the world. Within many academic and policy recruitment discussions, gender issues emerge in relation to women's will and ability to access senior school-level roles. In the UK, for example, Coleman (2002, 2011), Fuller (2009, 2014) and Wilson (1997) all highlight a lack of proportional representation of women in both secondary and primary headship. Similar trends have been noted internationally (Blackmore, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1987; Newcomb and Mansfield, 2014).

Two main reasons for recruitment challenges have been posited in the research in the UK. High accountability frameworks in the US and the UK have produced hostile work environments that discourage women from leadership (Shakeshaft et al, 2007; Coleman, 2007; Smith, 2011). In England and Wales, recruitment difficulties are often linked to accountability systems that enhance the vulnerability of school leaders, who may be fired quickly as a result of a negative inspection (MacBeath, 2011; Smithers and Robinson, 1991).

Another reason for the lack of proportional representation of women leaders in English schools is potentially linked to the decentralisation of school leader hiring to school-level governing bodies comprised of community members. Coleman notes a perception amongst women between 1994 and 2004 that governors showed a covert preference for male leaders (Coleman, 2007). While such discrimination on the part of governing bodies is often cited as a barrier for women's advancement (Guardian, 2015), little research has specifically examined school-level hiring bias and the influence of or on gender.

Parenthood, gender, work and promotion

Women educational leaders' career patterns continue to be more affected by home and family (Shakeshaft et al, 2007; Coleman, 2007, Fuller, 2014). More often than not, parenthood and educational leadership discussions centre on women. Rarely do they include deliberations of men, fatherhood and school leadership. Increasing demands of motherhood are often cited as a reason why more women are not pursuing leadership roles (Edge, 2015). These pressures may be linked to the aforementioned accountability pressures; however, Eagly and Carli (2007) found that working mothers on average spent more time with their children than stay-at-home mothers did in 1975. These additional demands of modern mothering create greater pressures on work/life balance.

Similarly, women leaders often discuss the challenge of the public perception of leaders with children and a prevailing assumption may be that women with children are less committed to their employment, less competent than women without children (Williams, 2001), and 'less productive' as a result of domestic responsibilities (Blau and DeVaro, 2007). These stereotypes have been linked by Ely et al (2014) to women's choices to leave jobs after having children because they found themselves in unfulfilling roles and sidelined from promotion. Williams and Segal (2003) also coined the term 'maternal wall' to describe the challenge facing women's career advancement as soon as they become parents. Eagly and Carli (2007) described the loss of income associated with motherhood as a 'maternity tax'.

In England and Wales, recruitment difficulties are often linked to accountability systems that enhance the vulnerability of school leaders

Work conditions and workload

As highlighted above, there are concerns about the influence of accountability-driven high-intensity, high-stakes school leadership roles creating disincentives for both men and women to apply. This ‘intensification’ of the role of school leader encompasses the increasing pressure on headteachers to do more in less time, to be responsive to a greater range of demands from external sources and to meet a greater range of targets (MacBeath et al, 2012). Workload has increasingly pushed leaders to work longer hours, putting additional pressure on life beyond work. For example, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2007) found 61 per cent of headteachers describe their work/life balance as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. Workdays of between twelve and fifteen hours are common (Brunner, 2000; MacBeath, 2011), and 25 per cent of English headteachers work more than seventy hours a week (NUT, 2007).

Based on research beyond education, women appear to be more strongly negatively influenced by ‘extreme work models’ (Hewlett and Luce, 2006), including those with extreme pressure and demanding more than seventy hours a week, as most school leadership roles do. Hewlett and Luce (2006) found that among extreme workers, more men than women have support at home. Professionally, women are more significantly affected by an inability to work extreme hours as a result of domestic and childcare responsibilities (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Halpern, 2008). Also, women are more socially affected by extreme hours because they do not have time to invest in personal relationships, which takes a toll on health and wellbeing (Philipsen and Bostic, 2010). The new generation of leaders, who are known generationally to prioritise work/life balance (Edge, 2014), are also

worried about extreme work hours on the grounds of wanting a more balanced life. This may have a knock-on effect on those willing to step into school leadership roles (Edge, 2015).

Perhaps as a result of extreme working demands, English women headteachers are more likely than men to be single and have fewer or no children (Fuller, 2014). This echoes Coleman’s findings (2005, 2007) that 94 per cent of male versus 78 per cent of female headteachers were married, and 90 per cent of men as opposed to 63 per cent of women had one or more children.

Leadership self-perception and readiness

There is also continued discussion of women and leadership in terms of willingness to ‘step up’ and the factors that influence self-perceptions of readiness for leadership roles. There are many different reasons posited for why women leaders are often not willing to step into more senior responsibilities. For example, unfamiliarity with leadership has been identified over lack of belief in their leadership abilities (Cubillo and Brown, 2003; Shakeshaft et al, 2007). Shakeshaft et al (2007) also suggest that unfamiliarity may also influence women education professionals’ desire to gain more education and classroom experience before seeking headship (Grogan and Brunner, 2005a, b; Young and McLeod, 2001). Grogan and Brunner (2005a, b) report that 40 per cent of women in US-based senior district-level positions felt competent and ready to take on those roles. However, Cubillo and Brown (2003) in their small study found all the women display high levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. While perceived lack of confidence has been attributed to holding women back from aspiring and planning for career advancement, men

Perhaps as a result of extreme working demands, English women headteachers are more likely than men to be single and have fewer or no children

more consistently demonstrate high levels of agency and willingness to engage in self-promotion (Coleman, 2007; Kaparou and Bush, 2007). Within these discussions, Gillespie and Temple (2011) found that perfectionism was the most inhibiting factor in balancing work and family, even over inflexible work places, unhelpful partners and financial pressures.

Intersection of gender and race

Increasing numbers of scholars and publications are addressing not only the influence and importance of both the intersection of multiple attributes of diversity but their effect on the experience, careers and aspirations of school leaders. Much of the emerging research links gender and race or ethnicity with a specific focus on BME (black, minority, ethnic) women leaders (Bloom and Erlandson, 2003; Lumby, 2014). For example, Reed (2012) identified that black female leaders understand leadership in a larger social, historical and political context in a way that positively influences their leadership. Horsford (2012) argues that understanding the influence of the intersection of gender and race, and specifically the role of black female school leaders, could serve to widen policy, research and support.

Remaining gaps

There is a healthy volume of research work related to the lives and careers of experienced women leaders (Coleman, 2003; Fuller, 2010) and a similarly, albeit slightly less intensive body of work related to lives of black and minority ethnic women leaders (Bush et al, 2006; Witherspoon and Taylor, 2010). Many studies of women school leaders remain focused in single jurisdictions (Mestry and Schmidt, 2012), with few examining the lives and experience of Generation X

leaders. There remain few international comparative studies of women leaders (Cubillo and Brown, 2003) and even fewer, to date, on the experience and aspirations of Generation X leaders. Building on this work and that of other scholars working in the field, our Global City Leaders study attempts to address these gaps in the current knowledge of Generation X leaders.

Our Generation X findings

While there are many interesting trends emerging from the data, in this paper we focus on four that we believe have the most significant influence on GenX leaders and their career-related decision making and aspirations to remain in post. These findings create interesting tensions and consideration for policy/practice leaders interested in supporting and retaining young woman leaders.

Simultaneous planning of career trajectories and families

Participants express their frustration with the coincidence of their leadership and reproductive opportunities. This tension relates specifically to the timing of ‘going for it’ in relation to leadership posts and, similarly, making the decision to try to become parents. This tension was felt amongst most participants. We also experienced several rather emotional interviews where leaders shared their as-yet unreconciled belief that they could not sustain their leadership roles and have a second child. On the flip side, while there are those who have chosen explicitly to dedicate their lives to supporting their schools, there was a consistent echo from a group of our participants, mainly

Participants express their frustration with the coincidence of their leadership and reproductive opportunities.

in London and New York City, who felt explicitly that school leadership career paths were not supportive of their desire to find partners and have families.

Work/life balance aspirations and role models

While there are marked differences in the ways in which the participants from all three jurisdictions understand, interpret, and strive for equilibrium between their working and non-working lives, there is no doubt that GenX leaders are fiercely committed to the concept of a work/life balance. Many of our participants have taken advantage of technological developments that allow them to work outside of the workplace (eg, on the commute, at home) to facilitate what they perceive to be a work/life balance. Others show less flexibility, choosing instead to set strict boundaries between their work and home lives, and insisting that their staff members do the same. However, leaders with children explain both the opportunities and tensions provided by parenthood to assist them in trying to find balance. Our evidence takes a very pragmatic look at their daily routines and provides a snapshot of those findings within this section.

Support from grandparents and partners

Perhaps in contrast to their predecessors, this cohort is starting families later than earlier generations. As many are taking on leadership roles earlier than previous generations of leaders, this new generation marks the beginning of a new era of school leaders who are concurrently parenting their young children at home. We met many leaders with babies and toddlers (and a few

even showed up at our focus groups!). This is an issue affecting both male and female members of our cohort, and warrants more research and policy scrutiny both within and across participating cities.

Glass-floor issues

In the popular press, there has been recent discussion of the notion of a glass floor in which limited opportunities for girls to develop leadership skills may be detrimental to their leadership careers as women. In short, boys have been practising leadership on sports fields, and this may in fact reap long-term benefits. Our evidence, at least in Toronto and New York, shows young women leaders whose first leadership experiences were often as sports-team captains, head cheerleaders and very young entrepreneurs. This notion of glass floors and the inter-city differences and implications we intend to explore more fully in a later paper.

Work/life, families and women: Challenging classic assumptions

We found a distinct relationship between how most people conceptualised work/life balance for women. More often than not, work/life balance for women was directly tied to their roles in relation to children and families. This pattern was, in turn, bundled with a set of assumptions that women who did not have children had made that specific choice to further their career. We have seen first hand the pain that this assumption can cause and how destructive it can be for women, as leaders but more importantly as people.

While many women make the choice, which is rightly theirs, not to have children, this does not in any way change who they are or their ability to lead. We strongly believe it should not be a topic of conversation. For other women, not having children was not part of their plan. We encountered, both during our study and after, many women who wanted to have children and more traditional family but that career, life, family and infertility had often derailed their plans. Women often hear comments from colleagues like

Oh, your life is easier because you don't have children.

or

Your career is so much more successful because you don't have kids or only have one.

Again, these comments can be incredibly hurtful and do not create the conditions that make women want to remain in the system. Our advice is to consider what you assume about women and children and, then, reflect on any patterns you may have about asking questions or making comments. We have all done it. We need to stop!

While many women make the choice, which is rightly theirs, not to have children, this does not in any way change who they are or their ability to lead. We strongly believe it should not be a topic of conversation.

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Additional reading

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Dr Karen Edge is Reader at the Institute of Education, and Pro Vice Provost (International), at University College London (UCL). She is also actively involved in the UK education system as a scholar, school governor, parent of a six-year-old and partner of a primary school teacher. She comments that this combination of roles provides some unique and possibly atypical perspectives on the education system. She was raised and educated in the state-funded system in Ontario, Canada, from Grade 1 to PhD. She has also spent time working in provincial government and at the World Bank in Washington DC. Her research has spanned over 25 countries. She notes that, while many observations included in this paper are drawn from her team's research, they are also influenced by her own global educational observations over the last several decades. She can be contacted at k.edge@ucl.ac.uk.

About the Paper

The author argues that we need to think strategically about how we talent spot, nurture and promote our women leaders. She encourages readers to consider the individual and collective actions they can take tomorrow and in the future to create conditions for all leaders to flourish more than they do today. She identifies some of the patterns emerging from wider research on women and leadership, and highlights her team's gender-specific Generation X leader findings. She concludes with suggestions about how, as educators, each of us can influence the experience and promote more enabling conditions that support the recruitment and retention of women into the most senior leadership positions in our schools.

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