Women teachers’ aspirations to school leadership in Uganda

Jill Sperandio
College of Education, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA, and
Alice Merab Kagoda
School of Education, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

Abstract
Purpose – The under-representation of women in the leadership of secondary schooling is a problem common to many developing countries, raising issues of social justice and sustainable development. It has its roots in societal understandings about leadership, the schooling and career aspirations of girls, the organizational characteristics of the education system, and the expectations and preparation of teachers for leadership positions. The purpose of this paper is to identify factors, both specific to the country and common across cultures, contributing to the low numbers of female teachers leading Ugandan secondary schools.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey of 62 female secondary school teachers from six coeducational schools in different areas of Uganda, is used to establish leadership aspirations and teacher perceptions of the factors helping or hindering them in realizing these aspirations.

Findings – The paper reveals that the majority of female teachers surveyed aspired to school leadership, but few had positioned themselves to do well in the competitive application process. Many thought the process corrupt and did not expect to get the support of their current school administrator.

Originality/value – The results of this paper support existing research worldwide that suggests leadership preparation for women should be gender specific. Women teachers need help to visualize a career path to leadership, encouraged to gain relevant experience, and given training that builds confidence in practical school management skills and builds on personal leadership skills.

Keywords Uganda, Teachers, Women, Leadership, Career development

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
School leadership is recognized as an essential element of school improvement and effectiveness worldwide (Daresh, 1998). Countries around the globe committed to reform and development of their school systems must now consider how best to prepare their school leaders to bring about needed changes. In developing countries, just as in some developed countries of the world, this issue is coupled with the need to address the under-representation of women in educational leadership and decision making, and the issues of social justice and sustainable development that are intertwined with this. Uganda, East Africa, is one such country where effective leadership preparation is needed to address the under-representation of women in secondary school administration and leadership.

School leadership preparation can be viewed as part of a complex system of human resource management that demands consideration of supply and demand, recruitment, selection, retention, supervision, and evaluation amongst other issues. A more limited perspective is that school leadership is concerned with developing the capacity of
individuals through initial or pre-service preparation, socialization and induction, and opportunities for in-service professional learning and development. While both perspectives offer a useful approach, Smylie and Bennet (2005) note the initial need is for knowledge of the capacities (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) school leaders must acquire to perform their jobs. Also needed is an understanding of how school leaders develop the capacity for leadership (the social, psychological, and cognitive processes used by leaders to learn leadership), and the resources and strategies that can be used to help them in this process. Consideration of context, as it operates through cultural and gendered understandings about education and leadership, the availability of resources to support leadership preparation, and the desired outcomes of educational leadership, must also guide the design of any preparation program for a specific population.

There has, to date, been little research on secondary principals and school leadership, and female teachers and principals in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mulkeen et al., 2005). This paper uses Uganda as the context for an initial exploration of the measures needed to bring female secondary school teachers into the ranks of school leaders in a developing educational system. Uganda, in common with the majority of other developing countries, still struggles to meet the goal of 30 percent representation of women in leadership roles in education that the Beijing platform considered critical for women to have an impact on decision making (BPA, 1995, Sections 181 and 182). This is despite the country’s excellent record of promoting gender equity in all aspects of life (Wakoko and Labao, 1996; Mutibwa, 1988; Kwesiga, 1997; MoGCD, 1997a, b, 1998, 1999; Republic of Uganda, 1990, 1992, 1996, 2002).

Women currently occupy only 12 percent of the headships and deputy headships of secondary schools in Uganda, 20 percent of the headships in government schools and 10 percent in government-registered private schools (MoES, 2005, 2006a, b). To understand this under-representation requires an examination of the formal processes involved in women’s employment as teachers in the education system, and their training and promotion to leadership and decision making positions. Also required is an understanding of women’s perceptions of education leadership as a career, starting at the secondary school level where girls make choices regarding higher education and vocational training, and continuing as they enter the teaching profession and make decisions regarding additional training and positioning for leadership. Insights into the cultural and organizational supports and barriers to their journey to leadership, and the personal motivation and decision-making required to, respectively, use or circumnavigate these, must be sought from those women who currently fill head and deputy head positions in Ugandan secondary schools.

In this paper, we focus on the perceptions of women teachers in Ugandan secondary schools, both government and private, regarding their interest in moving into educational leadership and the help and hindrances they anticipate if they choose to make such a move. We discuss the results of a survey of 62 female secondary school teachers in the context of commonalities and differences with what is known about the journeys of women in the USA and other developed countries of the world. Drawing on the survey results, we conclude with suggestions for leadership preparation for women teachers that could help further the move to equal representation of men and women in school leadership in Uganda, serving both the cause of social justice and the improvement of the quality of post-primary education for female students.
Conceptual and contextual framework

Uganda, a country of 27 million people situated in East Africa, appears to be a favorable environment for women aspiring to secondary (high) school leadership. The government, recognizing that it cannot fund the expansion of government-controlled schools to the level needed to provide all Ugandan children with a secondary school place, has authorized the expansion of private schools which it registers and inspects (Nsubuga, 2006). This expansion of private schools has created additional leadership positions in coeducational schools, and has increased the number of single sex girls’ schools with their preference for female administrators and teachers. Government affirmative action policies require that a negotiated percentage of new hires be women, and as teachers and school administrators are regarded as government officers, these policies apply to school leadership hiring to the benefit of women. Government regulations also require that each coeducational school has either a female head teacher or female deputy head teacher, a response to calls for the provision of safer and more supportive school environments for adolescent girls in Uganda.

Given this seemingly favorable situation of an increasing number of school leadership positions designated for women, how can the continued absence of women be explained? Drawing on the literature analyzing a similar dearth of women in school leadership in the USA, Australia, and the UK (Brown and Irby, 2005; Eagly and Carli, 2003; Gentry, 1996; Grogan and Brunner, 2005; McKay and Brown, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999), and in developing countries (Luke, 1998; Chisholm, 2001), three possible explanations for this situation present themselves:

1. Few women have the minimum qualifications needed for application for leadership positions.
2. There is a lack of interest by qualified candidates in leadership positions.
3. There are hidden barriers to women applying for, and being appointed to leadership positions.

A discussion of these phenomena in the context of the Ugandan education situation follows.

Gaining qualifications

Women seeking leadership positions in the secondary schools must have training for, and experience in secondary school teaching. Current minimum requirements for a deputy head in a four-year secondary school include a university degree and a qualification in education at the diploma level from a recognized university or training institution. In addition, six years of teaching experience are required, of which two years must be in a position of responsibility in a secondary school (ESC, 2006).

The number of women who applied for the 2005 head and deputy headship vacancies but failed to meet the number of years of service requirement, suggests a very limited pool of qualified female applicants. The Annual School Census data for 2004 indicates that 29 percent of teachers at secondary school level in Uganda have a first degree, with less than 2 percent having postgraduate degrees. Of the remaining 71 percent of female teachers, 96 percent had secondary education only (MoES, 2004a, b, c).

To meet the six years of teaching in a secondary school, applicants would have been among those women in secondary schools in 2000. The school census for that year...
indicates that there were only 1,934 women with the necessary academic qualifications in schools at that time (Table I).

This is explained in part by the limited number of young women completing an education to degree level despite affirmative action policies to encourage women into tertiary education, and the even smaller proportion of women who, on completion of the first degree, would opt for a career in secondary education.

**Disinterest in education as a career**

Secondary school teaching has long been a devalued profession in Uganda, often taken up as a “last option” by graduates who fail to find positions in Uganda’s limited and highly competitive job market. Uganda’s economy is largely dependent on agricultural production and only 12 percent of the labor force is in the formal sector, of which 26 percent are employed in government service (UBS, 2006). Secondary school teachers are classified as government officers with the rank of educational officer.

Having a first degree in Uganda significantly increases the probability of employment, from 34.1 percent for a student leaving school after six years of secondary education to 71.5 percent with a university degree (Xiaoyan, 2002). Mathematics and science graduates are highly likely to find jobs in areas other than teaching. Other disincentives to becoming a secondary teacher have been inefficiencies in the government appointment system leading to delayed payment of salaries, and periodic government “recruitment freezes” (no secondary teachers have been hired since 1999) which leaves probationary teachers unable to obtain teacher status and the increased salary that this bestows. In recent years, the MoES has exercised its option to move teachers from one school to another in an attempt to improve teaching quality, so that teachers can no longer count on permanent employment in one school or area.

The lack of female role models among teachers of adolescent girls may have contributed to the unpopularity of teaching as a career choice for these girls in the past. This issue was addressed by a survey of secondary school girls in nine schools across Uganda in 1996 which included all school types and which asked girls to rank jobs, including secondary school teacher and headmistress, in order of popularity (Sperandio, 1998, 2002). Only in one small town day school did the girls surveyed rank secondary school teacher in the top six popular occupations. The girls in six schools, including four high-ranking schools, placed “headmistress” in the top six preferred jobs. Interviews with girls at the schools suggested that female teachers were perceived as unsympathetic, out of touch with the needs and aspirations of their female students, and struggling with financial and family commitments that left them unfashionably dressed and unwilling to get involved in additional activities with the students. Female head teachers, however, commanded respect as prominent members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
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<td>13</td>
<td>7.14</td>
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<td>1,634</td>
<td>7,527</td>
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**Table I.**

Academic qualification of teachers in Ugandan secondary schools, 2004

**Women teachers’ aspirations**
of the community at large, were seen as interested and concerned in the well-being of students as they lobbied for resources to improve their schools, and materially better off as reflected in their clothes, houses, and cars. These perceptions were strongest in schools with students from middle and upper socio-economic backgrounds.

Teaching may not be a popular choice of profession, but once qualified to teach in government schools, teachers have job security, various benefits and a pension. In a country with few opportunities for paid employment, this still makes teaching desirable, and places women in competition for teaching posts with men. In a male-dominated society, this has excluded women from both teaching jobs, and gaining the better paid posts of responsibility in schools, with the exception of those women employed in single sex girls’ schools. Teaching is currently a male-dominated profession, with women secondary teachers comprising on average only 20 percent of the secondary school teachers in every school district in Uganda.

Hidden barriers to women becoming educational leaders
Promotion procedures from secondary teacher to deputy and head teacher in Uganda are, on the surface, clear and gender neutral or tilted in favor of women candidates. However, evidence from studies of women’s journeys to school leadership in developed countries, and informal conversations with women teachers and school leaders in Uganda suggest there may be many hidden barriers to aspiring women leaders reaching their goal (Marshall, 1997; Coleman, 2001; Shepherd, 2000; Young and McLeod, 2001, Sperandio and Kagoda, 2008). For example, women may not understand the need to position themselves for promotion by taking on responsibilities in their schools, volunteering for activities, and seeking the advice and patronage of senior administrators, instead believing that academic qualifications and long service will be enough (Celestin, 2003; Irby and Brown, 1998).

Male domination of senior administrative positions and the appointment and selection process in the past may have created a situation that discouraged, or actively deterred women from aspiring to school leadership. Women teachers are required to seek recommendations and appraisals from members of the school administration, invariably men, for the initial application process. Uganda has a traditionally male-dominated culture, which has until the very recent past, resulted in a lack of leadership opportunities for girls in coeducational secondary schools and in community and family life where girls have few rights and many responsibilities. Family commitments, to husbands who may feel threatened by a successful and financially independent wife, and to extended families, may cause many women to think twice before taking on the additional responsibilities of running schools in hostile environments (Brown and Ralph, 1996; Kagoda, 2000).

One further factor, which may act as a discourager for women considering leadership positions in schools, is the lack of women role models and mentors in educational leadership. Given the under-representation of women in coeducational secondary schools, there may be few examples of women leaders readily available to provide models for success. Those women that are in leadership positions may be breaking new ground and unable to offer the mentoring and encouragement to other women that many find necessary to overcome their lack of self-confidence and esteem. Other women in leadership positions may be so beset with problems created by resentful teachers, both male and female, who are unwilling to accept a women “boss” that the example they provide does not encourage other women to undertake the same trial by ordeal.
The study

Research questions

The understandings gained from the preceding review of the literature from both the developed world and from the context of Uganda suggested to us that our study should initially seek an answer to the question:

RQ. Do women teachers in secondary schools in Uganda aspire to school leadership?

Following from this, we hoped to establish the reasons why women would, or would not choose to apply for leadership positions. For those women who do aspire, we wanted to know what motivated their interest in leadership positions, and how they perceived their chances of success.

Method

Our survey questions sought to clarify our understanding of the factors that might influence a teacher’s understanding of the promotion process, and her desire to become part of the leadership of a secondary school. We developed our questions using our understanding of the findings of research in the USA and the UK, and the practical experience of several women faculty members at Makerere University who had been school leaders at some point in their career. The survey was piloted with three teacher volunteers at the laboratory school attached to the university.

From six coeducational secondary schools across Uganda, 62 women teachers were surveyed. Of these, one school was in the west of the country, one from the eastern region, and four from the central region, including two schools, a government and a private school, in Kampala, the capital city. All were large schools (over a 1,000 students) selected because the size of the faculty suggested we would be able to obtain ten interviews or more on the day of our visit. As we knew that not all the teachers would be present on any one day, we decided on the strategy of waiting in the staff room where all the teachers gathered during the hour-long lunch break to receive the free lunch provided by the school. As women teachers appeared, we explained to them the purpose of our research and asked them if they would fill in the survey for us during lunch. No one refused to do this and we were able to get ten surveys from every school and 11 from two schools. While this was in essence a convenience sample, we believe that it did provide us with a representative sample of women teachers across the country.

Results

Demographics

Over 50 percent (33) of the teachers were in the 31-40 age group, with 28 percent in the 20-31 age group and 22 percent in the 41 or older group. Most teachers had at least one dependant, 40 percent had between one and four dependants, and 41 percent had five or more. The majority (74 percent) had undertaken additional training since becoming a teacher, but 60 percent had held no position of responsibility in the school. A surprisingly large number (50) responded that they did want to be a deputy or head teacher, with only eight teachers certain they did not aspire to leadership positions, and four undecided. The majority (75 percent) indicated they were aware of the procedures and qualifications needed for making an application for a leadership position, but 11 teachers did not know them, and nine were not sure.
Reasons for not wanting to become a school leader

The analysis of the survey responses of the eight teachers certain they did not want to become school leaders, and the four teachers who were undecided, yielded the following insights. Three teachers indicated that they would not know how to apply for a leadership position. Two of them believed they would not get the support of their school administration, and one respondent believed her husband or family would not support her seeking the position.

Of the eight teachers who were certain that they did not want to become school leaders, six indicated they did not want the responsibilities as the primary reason. Four noted the benefits of promotion were not enough to offset the time and effort needed to get it. One young teacher not only noted both the lack of time due to having a family to look after, but also lack of knowledge about the process and lack of a female role model to help her.

Reasons for wanting to become a school leader

Of the 50 teachers who were certain they did want to be school leaders, and the four undecided, more than 50 percent noted four of the ten possible reasons as very important motivators. Three of these related to a belief that they could help student learning in some way. “I could improve schools,” “I could help girls to be more successful” and “I think I could help the students” were all survey choices that received high ratings. Teachers elaborated on these particular motivators in their comments. Becoming a school leader would allow me “to promote the performance of all the learners in schools, especially the girl child” wrote one teacher, while another noted “I would be a role model in the education sector especially for the girl child,” and a third explained that a school leadership position would “give an opportunity to improve the academic performance of some children especially in rural areas so that they can see a better and brighter future.”

The fourth reason chosen as very important by over 50 percent of the teachers aspiring to leadership was “I have the skills and interest to be a successful school leader.” The explanations offered from teachers to support this reason for wanting to enter school leadership included, “I have some talents that I have not been able to exploit, for I have not yet got the opportunity and it is not so easy when I am just a mere teacher,” and other noted, “I have the skills and interest. It will make me more useful to the community.” However, only three teachers mentioned specific experience gained in schools, one of them responding “I have leadership skills and I have practiced in different capacities in my school, Head of Discipline, Head of Community and Religions Education and class teacher.” A surprising low percentage of the teachers held positions of responsibility in their local communities (39 percent) – those that responded positively noted positions such as youth councilor, church-related positions, and positions on local school committees.

The reasons rated least important motivators for seeking promotion included the two connected with respect in family and community and the response that suggested that being a leader would be more interesting than being a teacher. The aspiring school leaders were more split in their response to the importance of the enhanced salary that promotion would bring to the teacher and her family. A total of 20 teachers responded that this was very important in their decision making, 12 rated it important and 17 rated it less important. A total of three teachers commented on this; one stated
“my finances would improve [after promotion] and it would be a reward for long service in teaching,” while another noted that promotion would bring “a big retirement package and higher pension,” and a third simply stated she aspired to a leadership role “to improve my finances.”

There was a similar split in responses as to whether enhancing self esteem was a motivator to apply for leadership positions, with 14 rating it very important, 16 important and 19 less important. A total of 20 teachers commented on this with remarks that ranged from “the challenge and empowerment it [a leadership position] gives would be good” to “I have the interest, and want to improve my career and self esteem,” while several teachers stated that they were motivated to apply for leadership positions by their desire to be able to demonstrate the leadership skills and the interest in leading schools that they believed they possessed. “To exploit my leadership skills more than in mere teaching” was how one teacher expressed this.

The great majority of teachers (58) stated they would only seek promotion in a government school rather than a private school, because of the job security and pensions the former offered (teachers are regarded as civil servants for the purposes of pay and benefits). The concern with job security, pension, benefits, and transparent expectations was very marked amongst the written responses. However, five teachers did recognize that private schools offered opportunities that the government schools would not. A teacher in this group explained:

[...] I would prefer to be deputy head or head in a private school because it is more rewarding in terms of challenges faced. You are able to develop faster than in a government school.

Two other teachers echoed these sentiments. “There is a high chance of career development in a private school” wrote one, and another voiced the opinion that “private schools encourage competition for the best,” while a third suggested that private schools offered more opportunity to control the educational process, such as student discipline. Two teachers were undecided, one noting that she only had experience in government schools so could not comment, the other prepared to work in “any school that is progressive – my major aim is to serve the community/nation.”

Over 51 percent of the teachers believed they would have difficulty in obtaining a leadership position, mentioning the competition, the interview procedure, and corruption, as hurdles to their applications. There was no mention of anticipated difficulties with the examination that was the initial stage in the application process, although several of the teachers noted they did not have the required qualifications. The perception that the interview committee members and school superiors would require bribes permeated the teachers’ comments. Typical of the 30 comments that specifically mentioned bribery or corruption was “getting through the interviews is a problem, because at times merit is compromised by many factors, e.g. politics, corruption and bribery, religion, and tribalism.”

**Summary, discussion and conclusion**
This initial exploration of female teachers’ interest in school leadership and their perceptions of the feasibility of viewing it as a career path throws light on the some of the factors contributing to the under-representation of women in educational leadership in Uganda. The results of the survey indicate that women teachers, despite often burdensome family commitments, have a keen interest in moving into school
leadership. While motivation for some is the increased pay and benefits they would receive, a large number of the survey group indicated they were motivated by a desire to improve schools and student outcomes, including those for girls. Of those teachers who were unsure of their chances of obtaining positions if they undertook the application process, the most commonly reason cited for possible failure was the corruption of the interviewing committees and the lack of support of school administrators for providing recommendations.

However, the survey raised questions about teachers’ perceptions on a number of aspects of the promotion process. Teachers appear to equate school leadership with administration, and value the security of the Ministry of Education rules and regulations. Several of them suggested that promotion was simply a matter of reward for long service as a teacher. Interviews with current women heads of schools (Kagoda and Sperandio, 2009) suggest that the women who have succeeded in these positions are risk takers and clearly see themselves as leading school improvement against the odds in strained financial situations and socially conservative societies. The teachers also expressed a reluctance to consider the private sector because of loss of job security and pension, understandable in a country where paid employment is a rare commodity and where the ability to cope with extended family commitments gives women status in families that they may not otherwise have. Yet, it is the private sector where expansion is taking place and where the opportunity to gain leadership experience is most available, not in government schools where no new development is taking place and where the pool of candidates for school deputy and head is already full.

Informal interviews with female heads of schools who served on the interviewing committees for the government appointments board suggested that the teachers’ perceptions of this process were far from accurate. Discrimination against female candidates and corruption had in the past both played a part in denying women entry to the pool of school leaders. However, gender equity policies now in place support female candidates and require equal representation of men and women on the committees. The female heads of school who had served on appointment committees suggested that the women teachers had difficulty with the interviews for other reasons. They were poorly prepared to answer standard questions, had not positioned themselves well in obtaining experience in leadership through community work and positions of responsibility in the schools, and had not gained the support of their school administrators and community officials.

It may well be that women seeking positions of responsibility in their schools and the community will face discrimination if competing with men, especially if these positions are in any way connected with power and politics. However, it could also be the case that although the majority of the teachers interviewed indicated that they knew the qualifications necessary for applying for leadership positions, their understanding was limited to formal qualification as indicated by the Ministry of Education, and not to the informal or hidden agenda that was also part of the process. Clearly, with so few women currently in leadership positions in the Ministry of Education and the schools, there are few women to mentor and share their own experiences with teachers interested in the process of gaining promotion.

The results from our survey suggest that further research in this area is important to establish guidelines for empowering teachers to pursue school leadership. An exploration of the experiences of women teachers and those in leadership in the
expanding private sector would throw light on the potential for women to gain leadership experience in this area of the education system. The need to provide leadership preparation and experience for teachers in secondary schools should be explored together with opportunities for teachers to gain a more realistic understanding of what they need to pursue a career in education. Life-work balance, career time lines, and opportunities for additional training and qualifications for teachers in the Ugandan context also need to be researched. These investigations would parallel current initiatives surrounding distributed leadership in the USA and the UK and contribute to the development of models of gender-equal educational leadership and leadership preparation needed throughout the world.

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Further reading


About the authors
Jill Sperandio obtained her doctorate from the University of Chicago and, after a career in international school administration that has spanned many continents, is currently an Assistant Professor in the International Programs of the Educational Leadership program of Lehigh University. Her research interests focus on gender issues in educational leadership, in both the USA and developing countries. Jill Sperandio is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: jis204@lehigh.edu

Alice Merab Kagoda obtained her doctorate from the University of Alberta, and has worked as a School Administrator in schools throughout Uganda. Her research interests include pedagogical issues in history and geography teaching in Uganda. She is currently the Deputy Dean of the School of Education at Makerere University, Kampala.

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