

# **Appointing Senior Managers in Education: homosociability, local logics and authenticity in the selection process**

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## **Introduction: creating and normalising educational leadership**

While there is extensive research on educational leadership and management (Day et al., 2000; Gunter, 2001; Bush and Glover, 2003; Thrupp and Wilmott, 2003), the selection of educational leaders has received comparatively little attention. The only substantive body of research on leadership selection emerges from New Zealand and Australia in the wake of the reforms of equality legislation governing appointments (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003; Brooking et al., 2003; Barty et al., 2005; Blackmore et al., 2006). As this research indicates, the selection process is crucial as it is at this stage that the definition of a leader is constructed by selection boards and, in turn, interpreted and embodied by candidates as they present themselves as potential leaders. Such research also suggests that selection is a subjective process of decision-making that is strongly bound by the local context. While concerns have been expressed about the falling number of applications for leadership positions internationally (McGuinness, 2005; Gronn and Lucey, 2006; Earley et al., 2002; Blackmore et al., 2006; Fink and Brayman, 2006), the question of how the leadership role is itself constructed and how this is reflected in the processes of selection and appointment has rarely come under scrutiny.

Based on a qualitative study of senior management appointments across primary, second level and higher education sectors, this article explores how educational leadership is constructed through the selection process in the context of Irish

education. In line with international experiences, Irish education is characterised by intensive change and new demands on leadership and management. While many of these changes mirror those taking place internationally, some are specific to the Irish context (Collins and Cradden, 2004), such as the traditional dominance by Catholic ownership and management of Irish schools (Coolahan, 1981). Furthermore an expanding knowledge society, coupled with an intensification of the role of education in influencing life chances, has ensured increasing attention being paid to ‘market’ forces in terms of the quality of schooling, parental choice in education and the expansion of higher education (Lynch, 2006; Lynch and Moran, 2006). Focusing in this paper on the views of assessors across 23 selection panels, we examine the interaction between formal policies regarding appointments and the practices of selection.

This analysis highlights the tensions that can exist for assessors – and senior managers – as they try to balance increasing performativity and new managerialist demands with the more traditional ethical and moral dimensions of leadership roles in education (Lynch et al., 2006). Key concepts of ‘local logics’ and ‘homosociability’ frame the analysis as it is shown how assessors often select ‘safe’ candidates according to known and familiar qualities, thereby normalizing particular leadership qualities (Brooking, 2003; Blackmore et al., 2006). ‘Local logics’ privilege particular understandings about the nature and values of the institution and community from which assessors implicitly draw in their selection of a leader who would be a ‘comfortable fit’ (Brooking, 2003:4). Like homosociability (Kanter, 1977), this process ensures the reproduction of socially homogenous candidates. As Savage and Witz (1992:16) contend, homosociability is often gendered as men (and other

dominant groups) ‘effectively “clone” themselves in their own image, guarding access to power and privilege to those who fit in, to those of their own kind’.

### **Qualitatively researching the senior management culture**

The 23 case studies in this research consist of qualitative interviews with recently appointed educational leaders, an interview with one or more assessors from their selection board and analysis of supporting documentation (advertisements, application forms and other documentation). A strategic sample was taken from national data on educational appointments provided by the Department of Education and Science (DES) to ensure representation from different types of institutions. The three sectors of Irish education were represented, including (a) 8 primary schools, (b) 8 second level schools (both sectors included co-ed and single-sex schools across a variety of urban and rural geographical areas, socio-economic backgrounds and school sizes), and (c) 7 higher education institutions (universities, institutes of technology, further education colleges and a statutory education agency). An equal gender balance of candidates was achieved (except at higher education level where 3 male and 4 female candidates were interviewed). The age profile of candidates ranged from late 30s to mid 50s. Assessors were chosen on the basis of their experience and seniority in the interview process and included chairs of boards of management, representatives from board of trustees and former principals (or academics in the case of the higher education sector). Although assessors were chosen on the basis of experience, their gender profile reflected the general dominance of men in senior management with twenty males and eight females interviewed.

### **Governance and senior management appointments in Irish education**

Historically the Irish education system has been characterised by distinctive patterns of ownership and management. The Roman Catholic Church owns over 90% of primary schools and 60% of second level schools. The Department of Education and Science regulate all schools, with curricula and examinations centrally controlled by the state (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Sugrue, 2006). Primary and second level education has been marked by an increase in legislative and bureaucratic regulation in recent years (notably the Education Act 1998, Employment Equality Act, 1998, Equal Status Act 2000, Education Welfare Act, 2000 and Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, 2004). The new legislation has placed statutory responsibilities and devolved powers of governance onto schools and local boards of management.

The higher education sector comprises of universities, institutes of technologies and colleges of education (in the public sector) and a range of private colleges. Public colleges and universities are funded by a combination of state grants, postgraduate fees, research and other income, with 85% of costs provided by the state (OECD, 2004). Increased autonomy and formalisation of management structures are also evident at higher education. The 1997 Universities Act and 2006 Institutes of Technology Act have concentrated decision-making powers among central bodies (Higher Education Authority and statutory agencies) and local administrators (especially the president/director of institutions). This has changed governance relationships within higher education institutions, as they move from a collegial system of decision-making (particularly in the university sector) to a centralised system of planning and decision-making. This has been allied with the growth of strategic planning, accountability and rising competition between institutions (primarily over research funding).

All of these changes have impacted on the selection process for senior management posts. The remainder of this paper examines the policies and procedures governing senior appointments in Irish education. It tracks the appointment process through the stages of establishing a selection board (examining the role of voluntarism, homosociability and gender) and analyses how the criteria for selection are established and used in the appointment process (including translating criteria to the local logics of the institution, personal qualities of candidates and previous management experience). We examine how the selection process is socially constructed, with assessors making subjective decisions about authenticity of candidates' performances that have an important influence on the selection process and future educational leadership.

### **Establishing the selection board: voluntarism, homosociability and gender**

The power to define and apply the criteria for appointment is very important as it enables assessors to construct and normalise their ideal qualities of leadership. The selection process for senior appointments in Irish education varies according to sectors, with the least formality evident at the primary and secondary sectors where state regulations only list general selection guidelines such as professional qualifications, management experience and reference checks. As a consequence, the chairperson of the board of management and former principals tended to be the most influential figures in primary and second level appointments due to their insider knowledge of the post and school. One of the primary mechanisms was their power to select 'known' assessors whose decision-making can be controlled

the interview panel can be constructed by schools in such a way that the principal wants to steer the succession process, they can use influence so that people aren't even aware of [it] because they are not even tuned into it...it actually looks like a board decision but the principal has made it...When you dig and when you excavate a little bit you discover that this has been set up for a particular purpose which is to anoint person A (Male assessor at second level coed urban school)

While internal assessors were influential in the selection process due to their local knowledge of the institution, external members were viewed as more objective (relative to internal assessors) and brought a wider expertise of educational management to the selection process. They were selected from panels of educational experts (formed by diocesan and management associations) and many were former principals, chosen because they were 'associated with the school closely...I know the sort of person that would suit the school' (Female assessor at second level girls urban school). This closeness can be problematic as Blackmore et al. (2006) point out, in terms of 'homosociability' as assessors select leaders with familiar qualities and characteristics to one's self. While this does maintain ontological security for assessors who can operate within a familiar context of taken-for-granted assumptions (Garfinkel, 1987; Goffman, 1971, 1961), it can also potentially act as a constraining and homogenising force in the appointment of senior managers.

The dependence on known assessors was driven by the ethos of voluntarism that underpinned educational management in Ireland. Boards of management and selection boards of Irish schools were voluntary in nature, resulting in a high dependency on the goodwill and voluntary efforts of a limited number of people. Over half of the assessors involved in this study were former educational leaders (school principals and academics), motivated by their commitment to education to serve voluntarily. This resulted in assessors being drawn from a relatively small pool

of highly involved ‘insiders’. While this gave them important local knowledge of the education system, problems can arise when selection ‘boards have been interviewing for so many years they...have gotten into a nice little rut’ (Male assessor at primary coed rural school). While their wealth of experience and knowledge of the educational system is invaluable (especially in a voluntary selection process), it can create and reproduce the focus on homosociability and predictability – qualities that may not be suited to leading education in a time of rapid change (Sugrue and Furlong, 2002).

This ‘vocational ethics of service’ (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003:172) has become normalised within the wider context of religious control of Irish school management. However, the decline of the religious congregations has made this voluntary system increasingly difficult to maintain and dependent on a very small number of highly motivated volunteers. Tensions were evident between voluntarism and the increased formalisation required by legislation. As a consequence of the growing formalisation, educational ownership and management associations are becoming involved in the selection process in an advisory capacity, offering guidance and training for school staff and selection boards. These management bodies consisted of boards of trustees and associations such as the Irish Primary Principals Network, Joint Managerial Body, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Irish Vocational Education Association and local Vocational Education Committees (VEC).

While their influence in the primary and second level sector was mainly advisory in nature, the VEC second level schools and higher education institutions had developed

more formalised procedures, with greater control given to external groups (human resource consultancies organised the selection process in two higher education institutions in this research). The selection board for higher education appointments was usually larger than the three to five person board in the school sector and included the director or president of the institution. Assessors were usually academics with senior management experience and viewed their assessor role as part of their general work responsibilities rather than a voluntary act.

For many assessors, it was still a transition period for educational management, where they drew on their own experiences and expertise of educational leadership to guide their work rather than the limited training provided. This training was usually one-day courses focusing on equality and employment legislation – what one assessor described as having ‘more to do with covering your tail than anything else’ (Male assessor at primary coed rural school).

The requirement for gender representation on selection boards was also viewed as problematic, although it is a legal requirement. The general lack of female participation at senior management level internationally (Deem and Ozga 2000; Lafferty and Fleming 2000; Knights and Richards 2003) is reflected in Irish higher education in particular (O’Connor, 2007; Lynch et al., 2006) and resulted in a very small pool of potential female assessors. As a consequence, many female assessors at higher education described the large number of interview panels on which they participated and the resultant lack of time for other activities.

The biggest issue is that there are still so few women at a senior level that proportionately too much of our time is being taken on interview boards; it is actually quite a serious problem...this small number of women who are very



good researchers are now finding their time available for research is being eroded by going onto interview boards, selection boards, committees of all kinds when trying to get gender representation. (Female assessor at higher education institution)

Ironically the equality legislation intended to protect and promote women's participation in senior management has had many contradictory effects, putting immense strains on the current female senior managers and causing 'gender inflections [to go] underground' (Brooking et al., 2003:152). The criteria that assessors establish for senior management posts provide key insights into the culture of senior management in Irish education. This article seeks to analyse these criteria under three headings relating to the local logics of the institution, personal qualities of candidates and management experience. What was significant is the clarity with which assessors spoke about these criteria, indicative of their influential role in the selection process. These criteria formed the basis of the interview questions and the marking scheme for selection, but revealed the cultural and attitudinal values of senior management. Also notable was the focus on translating these criteria to the tangible reality of the principals' work, both in terms of relating criteria to candidates' previous work experiences and to what Brooking (2003:4) described as the 'local logics' of the school community.

### **Translating criteria to the local logic of the institution**

The process of selecting an educational leader was mediated by a range of factors, including the expectations, values and experiences of educational leaders and assessors, state regulations and the nature of the local community in which the educational institution was situated (Webb, 2005:72). The 'local logics' of the post and institution was particularly important in the Irish case as the education system responded to intense social and economic change. The traditional care and

development logic of education had to be translated to the requirements of contemporary Ireland with its emphasis on a knowledge economy, performativity and educational capital (see Lynch, 2006; Lynch and Moran, 2006 for detailed analysis of this transition). The care and development logic retained an emphasis on values such as ethos, disadvantage and community. The ethos of the school was a vital component of Irish education, particularly in terms of the traditional dominance of religious orders in primary and second level schools (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). Applicants were expected to demonstrate and embody the ethos or characteristic spirit of the school, but identifying these qualities in the selection process can be quite elusive.

we would be confident that [ethos] is something very valuable that we want to preserve and we are looking to see can the person...get at the heart of the ethos. Now there is a whole lack of confidence around this area because [assessors] have been uneducated...my generation wouldn't have been well educated around ethos, it would have been a very conformist faith...The big issue for us would be around having the confidence to proclaim this [school] as being Christian...without getting too evangelical about it. That's obviously a huge concern (Male assessor at second level boys rural school)

The ethos of Catholicism acted as a shorthand code for pastoral values of care and Christianity that were valued within Irish education. Gendered consequences were evident in the prevalence of single sex schools in the Catholic system. Although assessors accepted that gender should not be a factor in the appointment process (as Irish legislation states), norms and expectations around gender roles in the segregated tradition of Irish schooling still existed. Assessors commented on the feminisation of the teaching profession, with contradictory implications being expressed. Some assessors were concerned about the negative implications in terms of lack of male role models in schools as a consequence of the feminisation of the teaching profession. In other cases, the desire for positive female role models was emphasised

if you send your daughter to an all girls school, I would expect there would be a woman principal and I did that with my own daughter and the reason is there are so few role models for women... I imagine if was an all boys school that some people might be inclined to say 'sport' and things like that...and some people might be caring of the woman candidate and say 'well it might be too much and it might be charitable not to put her in charge of those very unruly boys' you know, it might be...seen as a tough job (Female assessor at primary boys urban school)

Assessors translated the job criteria and qualities to the other 'local logics', including designated disadvantaged status. Irish state discourses have tried to deal with the persistence of disadvantage in particular communities through a targeted policy of supporting designated disadvantaged schools (Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2005). The chair of a board of management for one designated disadvantaged school revealed how selection criteria for these schools were bound up with an implicit sense of care and empathy that the principal had to create.

I was at pains, I think, in my initial meeting with the [other] assessors to try and explain that to them, that we weren't looking for a general run of the mill principal, that being a disadvantaged area...the whole social make up of the families, family life and everything that's here, just demands as such a kind of a level of understanding and empathy that is much greater than would be necessary elsewhere...I do think that they are very particular values...the way the whole staff care for the children and the sense of trying to help the families in so far as they can. (Male assessor at primary coed urban school)

Similarly, assessors at other designated disadvantaged schools described how they gave weighting in the marking scheme for candidates' understanding of the local logics of disadvantaged schools. This was contextualised in candidates' empathy with students, their parents and the local community. This had to be combined with management and administrative criteria as these schools had an extensive administrative workload associated with the funding requirements for disadvantaged and special needs initiatives. This holds potential conflict as Webb (2005:78) described in the UK context where the moral leadership role (of family and

community care) promoted by inclusion policies simultaneously comes into conflict with standards agenda (performativity and accountability demands of the state). These dual tensions made leadership positions in designated disadvantaged schools a very demanding role.

Other schools were entering a process of change that was specific to the Irish setting as they moved from religious to lay leadership. Due to the decline in religious orders, many Catholic-owned schools were appointing their first lay principals and would lose the support structure that the religious orders had offered. This meant that the new principal had to develop alternative structures of middle management within their existing teaching staff. Assessors were keen to ensure that future principals would lead these changes with sensitivity for staff and the religious ethos of the school. For other schools, the rural culture of its location was important. As the local school was at the heart of the community, the ideal principal was expected to be a school and community leader.

Even though a community minded principal would always be a desirable asset to any school or any area but probably more so in a rural area. However that can be enacted [in] many different ways...within the school context by keeping the community in mind and the community traditions in mind, whether it is sporting, musical or athletic. (Male assessor at primary coed rural school)

Community-based activities were important 'local logics' in a rural context, where promoting and coordinating community-based activities like sports and music became important criteria for leadership. The importance of the principal as a community leader in rural areas was rooted in the high status traditionally given to teachers in rural Irish communities. This stood in contrast to urban-based schools where general management and leadership skills were highlighted. Likewise, the assessors in the (urban-based) higher education sector emphasised professional criteria, including

curriculum development, teaching and learning effectiveness, and strategic planning. Assessors at two fee-paying second level schools and higher education institutions stressed the need for ‘skill and experience in financial management... managing the interface between finance and the service provided’. (Male assessor at secondary boys urban school). This highlights the variation across sectors, as the location, management and social class background of the institution resulted in different aspects of management being emphasised.

### **Embodying educational leadership through personal qualities of candidates**

Assessors outlined a range of personal criteria that they associated with leadership positions. Candidates were expected to embody these qualities or ‘manage their insides’ as they internalise these qualities into their identities and presentation of self (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Many of these characteristics were framed within a discourse of career dedication (qualities such as ambition, drive, commitment and energy that were viewed as essential for the intensity of the leadership role). Assessors wanted someone who was

strong, self confident and [with high] self esteem, the ability to keep putting one foot in front of the other. One of my hobbies is sailing, people who can sail into a headwind for 24 hours at a time and have that stamina and doggedness to stay with it...the absence of that in sufficient measure to my mind is one of the reasons why some people go under, not being able to see that they can come out the other end of it. (Male assessor at secondary boys urban school)

These qualities evoke the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), which is encoded in the new managerialist discourse of single-minded dedication to the job. This role, by virtue of its demanding nature, excluded many people (especially women and others with care responsibilities). Leadership is a form of ‘greedy work’ (Gronn, 2003)...occupying an ever-expanding space and requiring intensified and

sustained 24/7 performativity-driven levels of individual engagement' (Gronn and Lacey, 2006:406). It is mobilised through organisational culture and language, which adopts the rhetoric of the battlefield or sports ground and reproduces stereotypical gender roles (Halford and Leonard, 2001:54). When this discourse of individual dedication and strength was combined with the hierarchical position of the leader as ultimately responsible for all aspects of the organisation, it created a very tough and demanding role. As a consequence, assessors sought evidence of the candidate's dedication and strength to perform these tasks; '[the principal] has to give over and above but unless they have it in themselves to give that, the whole thing will grind to a halt. So we have to ensure that those personal qualities are there first' (Male assessor at second level boys urban school). Female assessors and senior managers spoke of gender implications of this all-encompassing leadership role when it has to be combined with care responsibilities.

Since I came into the post I'd say, on average, I work an 85-hour week...you do work phenomenal hours and you are probably hearing this as well from school principals. That is another issue for women who still have caring responsibilities. I mean I don't, my children are grown up...most of us I'd say at the level I am at, it is just work, there is nothing else in our lives. That is an awful thing to say but there really is very little else if you want to really keep everything going. That is a big question for the university sector and the education sector generally. (Female assessor at higher education institution)

The sense of living in a risk society (Beck, 1999), especially in the context of a rapidly changing Ireland, also intersected with this new managerial discourse. Assessors specified how they wanted committed and ambitious leaders who could modernise and develop their school, especially where the institution was expanding or amalgamating. These personal qualities of dedication, strength and modernisation still had to be combined with the traditional caring ethos of education. This was particularly important at school level where assessors highlighted interpersonal qualities of care, sensitivity, communication and teamwork with staff and students.

These personal qualities should be embodied in candidates' personality and value system. Goffman's work (1961, 1971) on the presentation of self suggests a strong inclination on the part of the individual to present a competent 'self'. As assessors highlighted, the truth/authenticity of this performance or presentation of self can be difficult to ascertain through the interview process and was described in impressionist terms; 'when you interview somebody, there's an overall sense that you get...there's an impression that you get when you're interviewing, I'm not sure that I can put it into words better than that' (Male assessor at primary coed urban school). The selection process was a social performance, where candidates attempted to 'offer a plausible performance, one that leads those to whom their actions and gestures are directed to accept their motives and explanations as a reasonable account...a true [performance]' (Alexander et al., 2006:32).

Assessors judged the authenticity of personal qualities through the body language and attitude that candidates expressed throughout the interview; 'sincerity is very important, you have to judge that and that can be difficult...you have to notice everything, little half smile can mean so much' (Male assessor at primary coed rural school). They focused on personal qualities and described how they were trying to match a candidate's temperament with the school ethos and value system. Some differences were evident across sectors, as personal qualities became less important for senior management posts at higher education where assessors emphasised strategic vision, status and management skills instead. However, personal qualities still remained important as background evidence for qualitative judgments of candidates made during their interviews and from informal tours of the institution beforehand.

[The candidates] were all offered the opportunity to visit [the institution]...and his [the guide's] opinion would have been fed back to the interview board...the type of things that they were looking at and type of personality that they had, their general knowledge and their interest, all of that type of stuff. (Male assessor at higher education institution)

### **Embodying leadership through previous management experience**

Assessors also judged candidates' suitability to the post in terms of their previous experience of management and leadership (including professional training and qualifications). Gaining management experience was only one element, along with the ability to reflect upon one's past experiences in written and verbal interview formats. The capacity for reflectivity was taken as an indicator of how a candidate would perform in a leadership role; 'you have to look at the job and then you have to look at the experience of the person...because a basic predictor of how you're going to be is what...you have done in the past...It's the ability to reflect on experience and learn from it' (Male assessor at primary co-ed urban school). Candidates' ability to reflect upon their experiences gave practical illustrations of their management and leadership capacity and reduced the 'burden of risk' inherent in the selection process (Gronn and Lucey, 2006:117).

Assessors spoke about the increased importance of management and administrative aspects of the leadership role, especially as a result of the growing performativity and bureaucratic demands of recent years. They placed a particular emphasis on interpersonal and communicative management skills as a core part of being a senior manager. As noted previously, interpersonal criteria were often related by assessors to the local logic of the institution and they examined how candidates embodied these criteria (for example, a preference for a young and dynamic principal as a counter-



balance to the older age profile of staff, gender sensitivity in a single-sex school, good interpersonal skills to deal with a history of difficult staff relations). Assessors at second level also specified leadership in relation to curriculum development, team building and staff development. Reflective of the growth of new managerialism in education, administrative management skills were emphasised across all sectors.

I think the most important change from 50 years ago when I went on the board [of management] is that it has become a tremendously administrative job dictated by the Department of Education...that was one of the major things we were looking for because if you can't administer it you will be absolutely bogged down. You won't be able to run the school in any way if you can't do the administrative part. (Male assessor at second level boys urban school)

This concern that leaders would become 'bogged down' or overwhelmed by the changing demands of the role was also expressed by other assessors who spoke of leaders 'go[ing] under' or 'sink[ing]' in Simkins' (2005:14) terminology. The reiteration of these concerns highlighted the fears for educational leaders as their administrative and managerial role expanded. Assessors were keen to ensure that the candidates possessed the skills necessary to run the organisation. They judged this through evidence of previous management experience (posts of responsibility and middle management) and how it was embodied through the personal qualities of the candidates (assessed through interview, especially suppositional questions about 'how would you deal with X situation', 'describe a past experience where you had manage Y type of situation').

Higher education assessors were also conscious of the importance of management skills, particularly administrative and financial management ability. As senior management in higher education came from academic backgrounds, evidence of management skills was not a pre-given and candidates had to demonstrate their

management capacity through their application and interview. Unlike the personalised and localised focus of the principalship interviews at primary and second level, the management skills that higher education assessors emphasised were framed within a discourse of strategic vision, negotiation and competitive context of higher education.

I think strategic vision is very important in terms of; you are in quite a competitive arena...you would be looking as well for the other management skills in terms of...somebody who understands finances and who...can distribute budgets, manage budgets. You are looking for somebody who is a negotiator because they have a lot of negotiating to do both internally and externally in terms of funding and the likes. You certainly are looking for somebody if you can who has some knowledge, now that doesn't have to be personal knowledge, but who has gone to the bother of getting knowledge of what third level education is about, what the sector is about, where the sector fits in Ireland. (Female assessor at higher education institution)

Assessors for higher education institutions also spoke about the importance of senior managers having a professional track record of academic achievement in their own field to gain the respect of their colleagues. Having high academic status as well as experience was vital to command the respect that would enable them to lead.

We would also expect them, and that would be specific to each faculty, to have some track record and the capacity to gain respect in the academic areas over which they would preside...we were looking for a capacity to provide managerial leadership in their area but also to have a personal track record that would command respect amongst those they would lead. (Male assessor at higher education institution)

This was a point that was not mentioned by primary or second level assessors who did not problematise the link between experience and respect; if school principals had gained experience and could reflect upon it, respect seemed inevitable. A combination of academic respect and experience was considered essential for senior appointments at higher education.

Gender was a significant underlying factor here as women – and other carers – often lacked the same level of management experience as male candidates (Davis-Netzley, 1998; Brooking et al., 2003). There is a gendered division of labour where the teaching profession is considered feminised, but this does not translate into representation at higher management levels (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003: 149-150). While there are multiple factors impinging on this process, the competitive nature of the current promotion process at higher education leaves women, especially those with children, at a disadvantage as they will have taken maternity leave and career breaks disrupting their career progression and senior management experience.

we're back to a situation with women and childcare...at the most likely time in your career where you are going to get this management experience, many women have taken time out to rear kids or maybe are rearing kids and are working and if they are, well then they are in all probability not going to put themselves forward to take on extra loads, particular extra loads that are going to cause as I say an absolute work/life [im]balance. (Female assessor at higher education institution)

### **Judging the performative nature of senior management interviewees?**

Once candidates were shortlisted on the basis of their written application, they had to present themselves as potential leaders in the interviews. The interviews at primary and second level explored candidates' suitability as leaders of the specific school. Interviews at higher education level consisted of a presentation on strategic vision by the applicant, followed by an interview with the selection boards. In each case, one interview was conducted before selection occurred. While there are wider questions about the suitability of standardised applications and interview as a selection tool (Blackmore et al., 2006), this process was accepted by most of the participants in this research as appropriate (although it must be noted that we only interviewed assessors

and successful candidates). There was evidence of a cultural shift from informal to more formal practices as the use of interview preparation among the candidates illustrated, dovetailing with findings internationally (Caldwell et al., 2003; Gronn and Lucey, 2006). Formal preparation for application and interview was most evident in the higher education sector, while the informal and fresh approach that was favoured at primary level militated against such preparation. Assessors felt that training was becoming increasingly important as the appointment process was formalised (especially at higher education level) and candidates were strategising their career plans. Applicants described a range of preparation, including CV preparation, mock interviews, postgraduate study on leadership and management, analysing strategic plans and talking to former leaders and staff. The detailed application process for higher education posts encouraged candidates to develop and present a strategic vision for the institution. This presentation served several purposes as the assessor for a higher education institution explained

The presentation was something on strategic management...for the institution as it went into the future...it would have played an important role from a number of points of view. One from the point of view that you need a communicator...It is also important to have some type of strategic vision and leadership skills that someone would demonstrate through both their thinking behind their presentation and their delivery of that presentation. (Female assessor at higher education institution)

Many assessors were sceptical about interview coaching and research; feeling that this 'grooming' would diminish freshness and sincerity evident during the interview. This relates to the wider question of the suitability of interviewing as a selection tool, as it involves a performance that may or may not be authentic. Alexander et al. (2006:55) described an authentic performance as one where the person 'seems to act without artifice, without self-consciousness, without reference to some laboriously thought-

out plan’. This concern with authenticity was most evident among primary level assessors.

I wouldn’t be dazzled by people who are coached at interview, there are other ways of finding out. It is nice to be coached, to be confident but it doesn’t give you a true picture and I prefer to see the true picture. Then you have to do other things like checking references and asking key questions and using common sense. (Female assessor at primary co-ed urban school).

The formalisation of the interview process and consequent demand for greater preparation was double-edged. As the earlier comments indicated, many assessors found it difficult to decipher rehearsed from sincere performances. This raises the problematic issue of performance and authenticity – is a performance less authentic and sincere because it is rehearsed? For some assessors, the increased formality of interview questioning made it difficult to probe rehearsed answers, while others acknowledged the value of interview preparation

There is a value in training in the sense that it can help you make use of an interview time, you can get better at getting to the point, you can get better at focusing on the answer...But generally I think all the training in the world won’t substitute for *capacity*, but for the person who has the capacity the training will get them that extra edge. I suppose what I am saying is [that] people who are reasonably experienced interviewers will reasonably rapidly distinguish between the person who is just a good interview performer rather than a *substantive* performer. (Male assessor at statutory education agency; added italics).

The task of assessors involved the capacity to judge the ‘substance’ of the performance, to look behind the front stage performance of the interview to seek actual ‘capacity’ (Goffman, 1971). Assessors described how they used different types of questions to encourage candidates to demonstrate their suitability for the position. These included reflective questions on ethos, teaching experience, management capacity, and previous experience. Selection boards also positioned these questions in terms of the local logics of the institution, for example interpersonal and conflict

management skills in schools with a history of difficult staff relations or leading a school in a disadvantaged area. Candidates were asked to reflect upon past experiences and give concrete examples as a means of illustrating their senior management and leadership capacity; what one candidate described as ‘probing questions, looking for your own attitudes, your own experience and how you would handle things in your way...how would I handle stress and things like that. (Male principal at primary co-ed urban school)

Reference checks from former employers also played an important affirmation role in the selection process. Assessors at primary and second level schools described the reference checks as a means of confirming that a suitable candidate was selected for the post. They were a form of reassurance for the decisions made during the selection and interview process. Verbal reference checks were particularly important and trusted, as many ‘people are so wary of putting anything in writing, and the other side of it, people will give glowing references to get rid of teachers that they are not fond of’ (Male assessor at primary level school).

### **Selecting the candidate: the impact of homosociability and authenticity**

The selection of successful candidates was a qualitative judgement of capacity and authenticity, as assessors tried to match the qualities and experiences of candidates with the requirements of the individual institution. Assessors described how increased regulation and employment legislation governed their work. They used formal marking systems to rank each candidate’s performance in terms of the listed criteria (judged from their curriculum vitae, references, interview and/or presentation). Freedom of information legislation meant that any written comments

by assessors as a collective body were available to candidates. This had made the selection process more transparent and quantifiable, but also held potential difficulties in terms of how assessors interpreted criteria and subjectively assessed the authenticity of candidates' performance.

It also raised the issue of homosociability and ontological security as assessors tried to reduce risk and maintain consensual selection processes by staying within the parameters of the familiar and accepted order (Blackmore et al., 2006). Assessors described a norm of consensual and unanimous decision-making because 'people have a familiarity with the kind of [educational] landscape and have a reasonable familiarity with interviewing [so] that a consensus is extraordinarily common' (Male assessor at higher education institution). The similar backgrounds and educational experiences of assessors promoted familiarity and consensus. On a positive front, this has protected the traditional care and development logic of education from the performativity demands of new managerialism, but it also potentially resists change and promotes conservatism (Sugrue and Furlong, 2002). Gronn and Lacey (2006:119) describe a similar process of 'cloning' in the Australian selection process, where assessors look for qualities of 'loyalty, predictability and avoidance of risk'. In many cases, homosociability was the central mechanism in the assessment of candidates' suitability (Blackmore et al., 2006).

They [other assessors] were able to say that 'she came from a very good family', you know...this was something that gave these people a bit of comfort then because they could situate them within a context and they could begin to visualise them, even though they didn't know them...they knew their family and that gave them the level of comfort they needed (Male assessor at second level coed urban school)

Although this assessment by family background contravenes equality legislation, it gives a clear insight into the operation of homosociability as assessors sought the comfort and reassurance of locating candidates in a known context – in this case family background. While the influence of homosociability and ontological security on subjective processes like selection boards is unavoidable, there is a danger that ‘unfamiliar’ or non-traditional candidates may not be appointed (including women, minority groups, disabled people etc).

The selection process is inherently performative and subjective, as assessors negotiate the relative strengths and weaknesses of each candidate and qualitatively assess their suitability to the position.

It is more a knack than a science isn't it?...you can get two quite strong candidates for a job...So what you have to then do as honestly and honourably as you can go back to their interview and discuss the respective strengths of them against the marking scheme almost...It is a finely balanced judgement at the end of the day. But it would be quite unusual for it not to be a consensual judgement. You spend time at it to be quite truthful, you'd spend whatever time it took to do justice to people. (Male assessor at statutory education agency)

Once again we returned to the issue of confidence and authenticity, in this case the truthfulness of the finely balanced subjective judgement that assessors had to make. What was evident from this research was the performative nature of the selection process both in terms of the candidates' presentation of self – as a suitable educational leader – and in terms of the assessors' judgement of this performance. It was part of the ‘discretionary powers’ that was central to professions (Frowe, 2005), as assessors – in this case – draw upon their past experiences and reflective capacity to judge the authenticity of the performance and the suitability of candidates to the post.

**Conclusion: performing and judging the selection process**



This paper argues that the selection process for appointing senior managers in education is a socially constructed process where particular qualities of leadership are normalised. It is a relatively unproblematised stage of educational leadership which needs more research and analytical attention to understand how educational leadership is subjectively constructed and judged by the selection board assessors and, in turn, embodied and performed by potential candidates. As Blackmore et al. (2006) contend the apparent clarity of merit selection in the selection process disguises its socially constructed nature and the tendency to reproduce familiar qualities and experiences. This selection process has to be contextualised within the wider political, economic and socio-cultural background of the education system. With respect to the Irish education system, this includes the intensive and rapid societal change that has resulted in growing demands on educational management, tensions between the traditional care ethos of education and new managerial demands, the role of voluntarism in educational management coupled with new governance structures (especially arising from the decline of religious congregations' involvement in the school sector, and the restructuring of higher education). These developments are framed by the growth of a knowledge economy and socio-cultural changes in Irish society in recent decades.

The data illustrates the complex interaction between formal procedures of appointment and the practices of selection; it identifies a range of professional and personal criteria that are used to identify and select candidates for senior management posts in education. The formation of the selection board is vital as homosociability plays a key role in the selection process, where assessors come from a similar background and tend to construct criteria of educational leadership in line with

familiar qualities and characteristics. The power to select and interpret criteria is central as it enables assessors to create and implement their visions of educational leadership that are 'safe' and predictable. While this does maintain ontological security for assessors and candidates who can operate within a familiar context of taken-for-granted assumptions, it can also act as a restraining and conservative force against change. This is particularly problematic when educational leadership is faced with intense organisational and socio-cultural change. This is also problematic in gender terms, especially in higher education, where the prevailing leadership model is a masculine one. It means that women and other minority groups could be excluded.

Differences between sectors are evident, with the primary and second level sectors translating criteria to the local logics of the institution and emphasising the personal qualities of candidates. The higher education sectors were more formalised in their application process, highlighting their own 'local logics' of strategic and professional management criteria. While assessors looked for evidence of management capacity, the higher education discourse was marked by a concern that leaders would become overwhelmed, especially due to the expansion of management and administrative tasks. Female assessors and senior managers were acutely aware of the gendered division of labour and spoke about the pressures of balancing the competing demands of leadership and care work. The male assessors were less conscious of these pressures, only talking about care work when explicitly asked by the interviewer. While an intensification of the management role was evident across all sectors, it was particularly acute in the higher education sector whereas the shorter hours of the school sectors was perceived as facilitating care and leadership work.

The protection offered by equality legislation and the feminisation of the teaching profession have had contradictory gender implications. Brooking's research in New Zealand concluded that 'restructuring [of equality legislation] has not opened up new leadership opportunities for women in primary schools in the way one might have expected, and is unlikely to do so in the future under the current policy environment. It has created opportunistic gaps for women to fill when either the market or male credibility has failed, but even then there has not been a significant shift considering the high proportion of women in the workforce, compared to men...the autonomy, power and "local logics" employed by boards, is effectively gate keeping the masculinised culture in place.' (2003:11). This conclusion is equally applicable to the Irish context as the senior appointments in education research demonstrates.

The construction of senior management criteria was also influenced by the specific context and requirements – the 'local logics' – of the institutions that were matched to the personal qualities of candidates, senior management skills and previous experience. As the qualities of educational leadership can remain quite elusive and difficult to judge, assessors tended to translate criteria to the local logics of the educational community, primarily aspects of the school such as ethos, designated disadvantaged status, gender profile of the school, changing management structures from religious to lay management, socio-economic background and the differing needs of rural and urban-based communities. Assessors outlined a range of personal criteria that they expect candidates to embody in their identity and presentation of self. Qualities of dedication and strength intersect with the new managerial culture of strategic reform, performativity and change. There was a continuum of performativity with a high emphasis on it in higher education and a much lower

emphasis in primary education. Interpersonal qualities of care, communication and sensitivity appear especially important in the school sector where the traditional care ethos of education continues to predominate.

The ability to reflect upon previous experiences is relatively unproblematised in the primary and second level sectors where management experience is presumed to bring respect. The lack of management experience amongst the academic applicants at higher education results in assessors focusing on candidates' professional track record and academic standing as a marker of capacity. The framing of these leadership criteria varied; with the primary and second level assessors evaluating how candidates embodied these qualities in their past experiences and personal qualities, while higher education assessors placed leadership within a wider sense of strategic vision about education. The focus was frequently on getting leaders who could achieve or maintain competitive advantage for a given university or college. This latter frame fits into the neo-liberal discourses on higher education more neatly while the former expressed a stronger focus on the local circumstances of the individual school.

The interpretation of selection criteria by assessors and applicants highlights the socially constructed and situationally specific nature of the appointment process. Assessors spoke of the difficulties of judging these performances, especially the authenticity of the performance, qualitatively interpreting the body language and substance of the performance to identify suitable leaders for the institution. The findings show that homosociability, local logics and authenticity are key values in leadership selection despite the increased formality and regulation of educational appointments. It indicates that the selection process must be considered by policy-

makers, training agencies and educationalists in developing a more proactive and inclusive approach to educational leadership.

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