

Influences, values and career aspirations of future professionals in education: a gender perspective

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Abstract

Many studies have explored the barriers that hinder women's access to the top positions in schools, but little information exists about the motivations and aspirations of students working toward education-related degrees in Spain.

What do these students hope to achieve? Why do they choose their careers? Is gender a determinant in their career plans? Exploring these questions can help us understand the distribution of gender in different jobs in education.

Using a narrative approach, this study collected information about the influences, values and aspirations of eighteen students (eleven women). In-depth interviews were conducted with five of them. The results show that students' career choices were essentially vocational, with most people searching for care-based jobs as a means for personal fulfilment. Gender differences were scarce and subtle; there was some family pressure on girls' decisions, and also more female than male students stated that they felt more "naturally" prepared to take care of others.

Keywords: gender; students' goals and aspirations; career plans; education-related degrees and jobs.

Introduction

Teaching primary school is generally seen as a feminised occupation, usually undertaken by women and inevitably influenced by gender discourse and practices associated with the care and nurturing of young children (Murray, 2006). Other fields in education are also feminised to varying degrees, as are most jobs that include direct human contact, care and personal involvement, such as nursing and social work. As Acker and Dillabough (2007) suggested, teaching (and teacher education) are examples of the ‘social work disciplines’ in which a predominantly female labour force works in a public service setting.

However, women’s presence in education is unequally distributed. According to Moreau, Osgood and Halsall (2007), three main gender imbalances are generally identified within the teaching workforce: gender imbalance across education phases (women concentrate in the nursery and primary sectors), across subjects taught (there is a lower proportion of women in maths and sciences compared with other subjects) and across positions (women are underrepresented in promoted posts). In the school context, which is the most studied by researchers, previous works (e.g., Woodfield, 2007) have accounted for an unequal male-female distribution across educational levels and management positions. In the European context, Muñoz-Repiso (2003) stated that despite the fact that about 75% of primary teachers are female (reaching 95% in the case of nursery school), only half of the school head positions are held by women.

As Díez (2006) and García-Gómez (2006) pointed out, this suggests that the organisational culture in schools is male-centred, with women developing care and support roles and men exercising leadership, power and authority. For this reason, some authors (Ball, 1987) have used the term ‘pedagogical harem’ to refer to the most common situation in Spanish schools: a male in a head position is surrounded and

supported by many women carrying out the 'hard' work through 'coordinator' positions or coordinating committees, as we can see in the statistics of the Education Office of the Andalusia Government (2005). These positions are of great value and importance for school development, but they are not recognised or even adequately remunerated.

Previous research, both in Spain (Coronel, Moreno and Carrasco, 2010; Díez, 2004; Padilla-Carmona, 2008, 2009) and in other countries (Moureau, Osgood and Halsall, 2007, 2008; Webb and MacDonald, 2000, 2007), that has dealt with female teachers' perspectives on occupational positions has shown that they do not perceive a gender imbalance, or they do not perceive it as problem. These female teachers explain the situation as a consequence of their individual choices and draw on discourses of individualisation to make sense of it. Women's need to juggle work, family and domestic responsibilities is a major argument, with an overwhelming majority of female teachers supporting the view that a management position is incompatible with family responsibilities (Moureau, Osgood and Halsall, 2007, 2008). However, many others clearly state that they prefer being a teacher and having direct contact with children to participating in the bureaucracy associated with leadership roles (García-Gómez, 2006; Padilla-Carmona, 2008).

The above-mentioned studies have focused on analysing the reasons why women do not have access to school leadership positions by examining the barriers that restrict women's opportunities or desires for promotion. However, as these barriers are not always visible and women cannot be considered as an homogenous group, it is necessary to adopt a wider approach to understand the motivations and goals of men and women working in education-related jobs, why they choose these professions, the values they maintain, their career aspirations and how they reconcile their work investment and their involvement in other life spheres (especially family). A focus on

these topics among young university students can provide insight into the complex roles of women and men in the gendered context of the educational workplace.

Our analysis acknowledges the importance of the social role in the production of behaviour. Differences between men and women go beyond the biology, and terms such as masculinity and femininity are more related with gender and the social influence in human behaviour (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007). Therefore, the term gender is culturally produced in the social practice.

We consider that post-structural analyses of the discursive positioning and production of individual cases within education have facilitated greater understanding of gender complexity and fluidity (Francis, 2010). Post-structuralist gender theories have developed the idea of multiple masculinities and femininities, considering sex and gender in a fluid way. Even more, a post-structuralist account of gender relations suggests that we cannot simply read off social behaviour from a pre-existing male-female oppositional binary structure of 'victims' and 'oppressor' (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007).

Other categories of analysis (class, sexuality, disability) are interconnected and influence the construction of identities. Explanations of how identities are constructed are fundamental to the current debates in feminism. Works like those of Skeggs (1997) and Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) showed how class and gender must be fused together to produce an accurate representation of power relations in modern society.

The post-structuralist intersection of gender with aspects like class or sexuality or disability have contributed to the notion of multiple masculinities and femininities, as opposed to a binarist approach. Notable contributions in these fields are those of Connell (1987, 1995), which point to the existence of a variety of manifestations of masculinity, with 'hegemonic masculinity' subjugating others.

Our focus is on the discourses of male and female students working toward education-related degrees, from which we want to explore their goals, motivations, career aspirations and plans in an attempt to understand the gender-related differences in career development in these settings in Spain. As we are more concerned with providing insight into this topic than producing generalisable findings, we employ a narrative approach. Eighteen students explained their reasons for choosing their careers and the personal and professional achievements they hope to attain. Their responses let us examine the similarities as well as the differences between male and female students and suggest some explanations regarding their future roles in educational organisations.

Students' goals and motivations for education-related degrees in Spain

In Spain, education-related degrees are not limited to teacher education. Higher education degree titles are undergoing reform promoted by the Higher Education European Area, and they will change in the short term. Table 1 shows the current degrees and provides information about the types of jobs for which they prepare students. Thus, there exists some diversity in the content of the degrees and in their career outcomes.

(Table 1)

Little research has been conducted to explore students' motivation for educational degrees, and most research has focused on primary and secondary teachers. In the case of elementary teachers, the vocation and idealistic goals (for example, working with children and promoting their personal development) were more important factors in their career choice than other extrinsic reasons (such as the length of the

degree or the work schedule and holidays) (González-Sanmaned, 1995; Sánchez-Lissen, 2003 and 2009).

Idealistic aspirations of helping and working with people played a key role for future secondary teachers, although their initial career expectations were often different and the labour market made them reconsider these aspirations (Esteve, 1997). Some studies (García and Martínez, 2001; Sepúlveda and Rivas, 2000) have found that teaching was not the first option for most of the students or even for many practicing teachers.

Córdoba, Ortega and Ponte (2006) highlighted the need to differentiate students who see teaching as their preferred future job from those who do not. The former group's reasons for being interested in the profession include communicating and establishing relationships with students. The latter group tends to offer more pragmatic reasons, including the work schedule, the long holidays, job stability, etc. Relating students' reasons for teaching to the order (preferential or not) they have chosen the degree is of great importance for understanding career decisions in education.

Unfortunately, the above-mentioned studies have not focused on gender, so they cannot identify differences in men and women's goals and values when choosing an education-related degree. One exception is the research conducted by Rodríguez Lajo, Vila and Freixa (2008), which analysed gender differences in female and male students' likelihood of holding management positions at schools. The authors examined students with different degrees in education to analyse *leadership willingness* and found no significant differences between the two groups. However, the findings were inversely related to age: the youngest students were the most willing to hold leadership positions. As the authors pointed out,

During the access to work market, women do not feel inferior or at lower conditions to arrive to leading positions. It will likely be later in their careers, when new factors will come into the scene, like the conciliation of multiple roles, that this willingness might diminish, and they might adopt self-exclusion attitudes (p. 63).

The longitudinal research developed by Wilde (2010) found some support for this point, as a decrease in the desire for promotion was observed in female teachers between time 1 (training) and time 2 (several years later in their careers).

The present study

The aim of this study is to deepen knowledge about the influences, values, motivations and career plans of Spanish students in education-related degrees by identifying whether gender is a significant factor in their plans and decisions. In particular, we aim to determine if differences exist between men and women's conceptions about head positions and their likelihoods of holding these positions. As mentioned above, there is little research on this topic in Spain, and only one study (Rodríguez Lajo, Vila and Freixa, 2008) has used a gender approach to examine the different attitudes of female and male students.

Our goal is to attain deeper knowledge of students' experiences and plans by developing detailed explanations and providing insight into this topic in a particular context, rather than offering generalised conclusions.

Participants

A purposive sample of 18 students was invited to participate. Several criteria were taken into account, including representation of both genders, representation of students from different degrees, and ease of access. In Spain, there are cut-off points for several degrees, and not all the students pursuing education degrees chose education as their first option. We are more concerned with the values and goals of those who chose educational jobs as their preference; therefore, only students that had chosen an educational degree as their first or second choice were invited to participate.

Table 2 shows the number of respondents by each degree according to gender. The lower proportion of men is due to the corresponding proportion of male students in all the degrees included in the study, which varies from 2% (Nursery Education) to 15% (Pedagogy).

(Table 2)

Data collection

Written narratives about academic paths and influences, values, goals, career plans and the desire for promotion were collected from the 18 participants. Respondents were encouraged to write in detail about their experiences and aspirations.

Once the narratives were read and analysed, five students were interviewed. These students were selected based on their singular features or their peculiar narratives, especially regarding their attitudes and disposition toward holding leadership positions. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Qualitative analyses were carried out by two researchers, who separately identified and triangulated the codes in the information. Some codes were generated deductively based on the research goals (what Miles and Huberman (1984) called a 'start list'), but most were generated inductively according to the students' accounts.

A computer package, NUDIST 6.0, was used for the storage and retrieval of categorised data for both the narratives and the interviews.

Results

Most of the students mentioned the influence of their own teachers in their choice of an educational degree. Many commented that their teachers had inspired them; the students used their teachers as role models and tried to be like them.

Another factor that influenced me a lot in my life, and in the choice of teaching as a degree, was a teacher (...). She is the best teacher I have had because she not only taught knowledge, but also educated to the pupils, and from my point of view, not all the teachers do that. (PEO2, 66-82)

When I get to be a teacher I want to do the same as my teacher; I would like my students to feel good with my practice so that together we can make lessons more fun. (NEA3, 65-74)

Friends also exerted important influences on the students in three ways: as models to imitate, as sources of support and encouragement, and as 'mirrors' that reflected their own teaching skills. That is, by helping their friends in their study processes, the students realised that they had the abilities necessary for the profession.

I have had very important motivations throughout the degree; they have been my friends. These people I met have given me the strength to face the race, and they have been very helpful. I have learned a lot of things because of them, and I have changed because of their influence. (PO3, 54-64)

...I remember last year I helped her quite a lot to study for the university entrance examination. I explained to her the best I could, and she was always telling me, 'I understand the things better with you than with the teacher in class'. That made me think, and it was one of the reasons that helped me choose this degree.

(NEA3, 29-36)

Family was another very important factor in students' decisions, although sometimes their families influenced them in the opposite direction from the students' motivations. Some of the female participants' families tried to dissuade them from choosing an educational degree. This was the case especially among those students whose average marks were high and who, according to their parents, 'could aspire to something better' than being a 'waste' and choosing teacher training instead of another degree with more career opportunities.

After speaking about the issue with my parents and thinking about it, the truth is that they were not very excited about the choice of this degree. They expected 'more' from me because my bachelor marks were good enough, and in some way, they considered it a waste not to choose something more difficult. (SEA1, 19-29)

This blurred, veiled opposition is not exerted through orders or commands, but as advice. In an extreme case, one woman's family did not hide their opinion of the teacher training degree as a 'degree for silly people'.

The first years of my degree (...) my mother was not very proud of 'my choice', and she let me know by telling me that teacher training wasn't enough to me. My brother still says to me that teacher training is a degree for 'silly people'. (PSA1, 19-46)

In spite of this, a close family seemed to be a strong influence in the choice of a degree. In several cases, one or both parents worked as teachers, which allowed students to be in direct contact with the profession and to begin to value and appreciate it.

My family has been the main motivation... (PSA1, 83)

On one hand, I think my mother has been an important influence on me because she is a teacher, and therefore she is an example to follow. She is a person that I analyse day by day... she is like my teacher, training me to be another teacher. (PEA2, 20-24)

In many situations, the social and cultural context of the family determines the way that parents influence their sons and daughters' decisions. These contextual influences support traditional gender roles. The most prominent case was PSA1, a student who declared that her mother had persuaded her not to be a Physical Education teacher because she was convinced that it was not a suitable degree for women and therefore people would 'talk' about her.

I think about my mother as more traditional ... if she says her daughter is studying Physical Education, she would think about what the people would say. These are the kinds of thoughts in small towns. I live in a little village where everybody knows each other... (PS1A, 19-46)

In the SEA2 case, the student was advised by her mother to apply for a degree such as teacher training because 'it is more suitable for girls'.

(...) I remember my mother telling me not to aim high, that I should study teacher training (...). My mother told me not to aspire to something very difficult because I was a woman and I wouldn't need it, as I was going to get married and I would have a family. (SEA2, 81-89)

However, none of the males referred to any comments from their families trying to persuade them that the degree was largely *female*, although this does not mean that none of the families did so.

In regard to the academic paths, most students had carried out the most common itinerary in Spain: Compulsory Secondary Education, High School and University. However, some students had studied for other degrees and then realised that teaching was what they were searching for; for example, PO1, who gave up Biology despite his success in it, or SEA2, who gave up her studies in computing and chose a completely different field.

When I realised that I had made a wrong decision I was in the fourth course of my degree, but it was not too late, and I decided to give it up and 'jump' into the world where I wanted to be: education. I enrolled in teacher training. (PO1, 45-65)

As I studied the computing course, I realised that it was not for me (...). So when I finished the course, I decided not to stay there. I had to do something else and felt that this must be something that made me happy... (SEA2, 14-26)

Regarding the motivations that made them choose an educational degree, in the majority of the cases teaching was the primary vocational goal from childhood.

(...) Because it is a dream that I have since I was a child. (NEA4, 10-12)

I decided to practice this degree because it attracted me since I was a child.

(PEA1, 9-10)

For these students, their vocation is related to the feeling of fulfilment that they experienced when they taught other people. Thus, many of the respondents approached teaching within the context of previous experiences where they felt valued and capable as professionals in the field. These experiences awakened their desire to pursue this

profession and to work with children. The desire to be remembered fondly by their students, just as they remembered their most significant teachers, appeared in several accounts.

I still remember my teachers at school; I would be very proud of being in the memory of other people. (NEA1, 16-16)

We must emphasise the importance of the values that influenced students' choices in most cases. For both women and men, these values were related to working with people, providing care and support, understanding others and helping special needs children.

Helping other people because, from my experience, these are the most pleasant feelings and the gratitude they show you is priceless. (MA1, 47-47)

As Murray (2006) found, caring for others is related to the construction of professionalism for future teachers. These values are linked to the personal abilities and characteristics necessary for the exercise of their profession. Our students had a positive self-concept about the skills required by their chosen degrees. They saw themselves as having the necessary skills to work with people, to explain knowledge and to assist others, and relevant people in their environment had affirmed that they had such skills.

These skills were often identified as 'personality features', particularly by women. Therefore, teaching was considered to fit the respondents' personalities. Furthermore, comments about their care and support abilities were more common among women than men. Most of the women stated that the job 'fit' them, and their close family and friends agreed.

I ended up studying this degree because of my possibilities and personality. If I think about how I really am, my personality ... I am very calm, giving myself to others ... It was a degree for people with these characteristics. I'm quite capable of caring for others, to be with them. (SEA2, 68-72)

Thus, in women, the skills related to care were not questioned, as they were perceived as part of their personality. This conception might be influenced by the socialisation process. Females are expected to care for others and since early childhood, girls build their identities according with such social norms and expectations. Even more, as suggested by Miller (1976), relations are central in women growth, and connection, not separation, is the guiding principle of growth for women. In this study, four women — in comparison with one man — openly stated that they had wanted to be teachers since they were young children and that this was the profession of which they had always dreamed. Similar results were obtained by Sánchez-Lissen (2003), who found that 25.7% of female students, as opposed to 8.9% of male students, stated that they had wanted to teach ‘since always’.

Other important factors influenced students’ career choices. These included extrinsic motivations, such as the number of working hours, economic rewards, holidays, lack of routine work, shorter length of work, giving extra points for the Competitive Exam, being unemployed, and increased training for future jobs.

I always wanted to be a teacher because I loved school, and I think there are many experiences . . . there. But it also appeals to me that it is not a monotonous job because it is about working with people every day and different people every year. (PEO2, 40-55)

When I was unemployed, my goal was to increase my academic knowledge in order to change my labour situation. (MA1, 10-12)

We must note that working hours were mentioned as an important factor in students’ choice (much more than economic reward). This was because teaching provides free time and holidays that facilitate the carrying out of other activities.

I would like to have a good schedule so I could have time to do other things. I believe this profession has an appropriate timetable ... and I would have the afternoon free for other tasks. (NEA3, 194-200)

... Teaching is a profession with many holidays; therefore, I would have free time for my issues and for being with people I appreciate most (...). (PEO2, 281-296)

As we can see in the narratives, these students were thinking about their present lives, forgetting that in the future they will have family responsibilities and having a good work schedule will be a very important factor. Only a few students were aware of this issue:

...a good schedule to have time for other things: the family is equally important. (MA1, 51-52)

A person has also to divide time to run a home, a marriage, and if you have children, it is even more difficult because you sure will pass your free time with them. (NEA4, 52-52)

Another important factor, though it did not seem decisive in students' choices, was the economic reward. All respondents agreed that money was necessary and that it made life easier, but it was a complementary reason, not the main reason for their decisions.

The economic achievement is also very important, as I have to cover my basic needs in order to help others. If I couldn't cover them, it would be impossible to do my job. It is absolutely necessary, and I could put it in the first place. (PEA2, 144-154)

The achievements that students aspire to in their careers are closely related to their values. The respondents held many similar aspirations, especially self-realisation

and caring for others. Although, as mentioned before, the economic reward was deemed necessary and relevant, the primary career goals for the vast majority of the students were to help people, to achieve social change through children's education and to provide support. These achievements are all related to working with people.

I hope my future job gives me the satisfaction of knowing that I am working in the early years of a little person, which are very important for children's development and I am able to do the best I can, because in my opinion, the first teacher is not forgotten, as happened to me. (NEA3, 111-118)

I think the greatest achievement is helping people because, as I explained above, I think being a teacher is having the opportunity for changing future society through the transference of values and knowledge. (PEO2, 278-281)

Although we explicitly asked respondents to talk about their intentions of holding management positions in the future, comments about this subject were scarce. Most students expressed satisfaction with their work as teachers and believed that management would move them away from direct contact with people and from their own self-realisation.

I think that I've never considered holding a leading post within my field because what I really want is to have my own class of students and teach them the best I can, not worrying about a post that always demands time and work. (NEA3, 166-169)

Regarding the importance of being promoted and the opportunity of holding an important post, at the moment, I'm not interested because I would rather work directly with students, and the more I can work with them, the better. (PEO2, 251-262)

We also found some students who, although they did not consider leadership positions to be a career achievement, also would not refuse to take these positions if

they resulted from their efforts and hard work. In these cases, the post was perceived as a type of specialisation or acknowledgement.

(...) even though, if I am qualified to develop such relevant positions, I would like to have a career promotion. It's something I have always kept in mind, and I consider it important... being promoted and getting advanced in my job. (SEA1, 208-214)

In general, promotion was considered by most of the students to be something far away. They situated themselves in the present, failing to take into account that in the distant future their opinions might change. Their responses were influenced by this *present* view. Consequently, they emphasised more immediate career concerns like achieving the necessary qualifications, finding jobs and developing their careers.

Honestly, in view of the possibility of holding an important post... I know it's important, but it's not my goal at the moment. I only have in my mind becoming a teacher. If I feel I'm qualified to hold a post, I won't have any problem. (PEA2, 122-125)

Only two of the respondents, one female and one male, expressed explicit desires to hold top positions.

Right now, what I most value is gaining experience so that I can place myself where I can make the most of my career, and later, when I find this place, I would like to get promoted. (SEA2, 132-148)

I would like to reach an important post wherever I'll be. I've always liked leadership, in a reasonable and respectful manner. I would like to become Head of Mediation in the Andalusian Government. (PO1, 165-167)

In both cases, the values linked to the position include responsibility, solidarity, cooperation and acknowledgement of others' work. All of these values are related to a democratic leadership, based on positive, not coercive, influence on others.

The values linked to the post holding are comradeship, because, first of all, I am a person in spite of the fact that I am your boss. Solidarity is also related because before holding a post I've had to be in the position that this person is, so I have to be respectful, think how I tell you something... (PO1, 176-208)

I've always seen myself achieving a top position, but I don't want to be the typical boss. I want to be a boss that takes into account all her team's opinions, and everybody feels fine. I think that's important; everyone has to feel she/he is valued for her/his work. I think that all that helps to get better productivity. (SEA2, 132-148)

Though we have only two cases and thus cannot generalise, we notice some nuances in the narratives that can be translated into different aspirations for the male and the female. The man accounted for his experience as a consequence of having leadership roles in his personal environment (peers' relationships) and in the university, to the extent that he was the spokesperson for the working teams. Even though his attitude was oriented toward democratic leadership, his discourse suggested that the possibility of instilling his own ideas into the projects is what most appealed to him. He also insisted that he was currently a leader and reflected about the topic as a present reality, not as a matter in the distant future.

Issues of cooperation, work structure, etc., it's always me who deals with ... when a secretary or a spokesperson is needed, it's always me ... but it's the attitude of the others... if they don't do it... it's done by someone else. The motivation I feel towards leadership is because I like to feel...not superior, but I like to take on the organisation of everything, to tell someone 'this must be made in a different way', because most of the time, the leadership means that your opinions are there, and this is a very difficult thing in education, and especially in work groups, because there are other opinions. (PO1, 176-208)

In contrast, the woman's aspirations were related to reaching a head position, but she did not speak about having had a leadership role in her personal and educational history. She hoped to be promoted step-by-step and to exert a kind of leadership in which the most important aspect was taking into account her subordinates' opinions. This better fits the role of a democratic leader, with an emphasis on cooperation and active listening. It seems opposite to the more aggressive leadership described by the man.

Because I think that it's very important not coming to a standstill and being able to go on growing as a person and as a professional. So, for me, it's very important making progress because it's a way to improve, but not for the money, nor the status, but for the personal growing. Though it's clear that also, on the inside, you also give importance to the status that a post gives you, and you have to know how to make the most of it when you reach, keeping your feet on the ground. (SEA2, 132-148)

Discussion and conclusions

One of our goals was to identify the reasons for choosing an education-related degree. It can be concluded that it is a *vocation*-based decision, in spite of other reasons, such as the working hours or the income, which were also considered important. Contact with small children, and particularly the opportunity to care for and help them, was the key reason given by many students for being a future teacher or educator. Likewise, personal fulfilment was an important motive that seems to be related to caring for others and communicating knowledge and values to them. These results are similar to those of González-Sanmaned (1995) and Sánchez-Lissen (2003, 2009).

In addition, although their future career plans were precarious and vague, the students did not seem to be oriented toward holding leadership positions. For many of them, such a decision would move them away from direct contact with children (as found in García-Gómez, 2006 and Padilla-Carmona, 2008), and for others, it is an option to consider only in the distant future. Only two of the respondents had clear intentions of holding top positions, and both of them emphasised a democratic, non-authoritarian leadership style.

Despite adopting a gender approach and taking into account the different nuances in the narratives of both men and women, we can assert that there are more similarities than differences between the male and female students. These findings support previous research (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Penney & Evans, 2002; Webb and MacDonald, 2007). Webb and MacDonald's (2007) study concluded that some discourses of work equally shaped women's and men's experiences. In our study, the common issues for female and male students include the following:

- Caring for and helping small children, especially those with special needs and problems, is the main motivation to study for an educational degree.
- Achieving personal fulfilment rather than more materialistic goals (income, holidays and working hours) is the key career value.
- The low inclination to hold top positions and the trend of considering them in the distant future. This result coincides with the work of Rodríguez Lajo, Vila and Freixas (2008), who did not find gender differences in the leadership willingness of female and male students.

We think that similarities between both genders can be explained by several factors. On the one hand, there are few men studying for educational degrees, so it can

be argued that these degrees attract men who are not conventional regarding their gender roles. On the other hand, the respondents, in general, tended to place themselves in their current life stage when they referred to their career aspirations and plans, ignoring the fact that their future life plans may change because of the development of new roles, like parenthood. In this sense, career aspirations for men and women are very similar at this stage (university), which suggests that their career development may not be different, as supported by the research (Barberá, Sarrió & Ramos, 2000; Benjumea & Aragón, 2005).

However, there were some significant gender differences:

- Higher family pressure on women to choose a 'gender-suitable' career.
- Women's tendency to consider that teaching 'fits' their personality and skills and represent the 'vocation' they have wanted since early childhood. This partially supports Woodfield's (2007) results suggesting that female teachers consider themselves more suited to teaching than male teachers as they possess more of the traits and skills required for the job.
- Finally, a slight tendency in women to prefer democratic leadership that is based on valuing and listening to team members and favouring a cooperative environment at work.

Some of the limitations of this study result from decisions made during the research process. Our deliberate selection of students who had chosen education degrees as their first or second choice might have influenced our conclusions. If we had included respondents for whom education was not their preferred degree, our results probably would have been different, as suggested in the research of Córdoba, Ortega and Ponte (2006). Likewise, there is no doubt that narratives are influenced by social

desirability, and it is likely that students tended to highlight some factors in their experiences more than others.

Nevertheless, we consider this study a first attempt at exploring the attitudes of future educational professionals towards their future careers in Spain. This approach allowed us to better understand female and male students' decisions and aspirations in the field of teaching and education, though we have not set out to provide a definitive answer to the question of why few women choose to hold leadership positions in education.

The results from this study indicate that though there are some nuances and differences in how men and women imagine their future educational careers, it is also important to consider the similarities between them. This aspect is frequently overlooked in gender and leadership work, although it is consistent with post-structuralist perspectives that argue that binaries must be re-examined and that the focus of analysis must be on the discourses that shape a range of subjectivities (Webb and MacDonald, 2007).

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Table 1. Main degrees in education in Spain

TITLES	CHARACTERISTICS	RELATED JOBS
Nursery education	3-year degree	Teachers in nursery schools
Primary education	3-year degree	Teachers in primary schools
Special needs education	3-year degree	Primary teachers specialising in children with special needs
Social Education	3-year degree	Social educators working in informal educational settings
Pedagogy	5-year degree	Less defined: school counsellors, career counsellors, specialists in designing, implementing and evaluating educational programs in multiple settings
Psychopedagogy	2-year degree that requires a previous 3-year degree in psychology, pedagogy or any of the teachers' degrees	Less defined: school counsellors, career counsellors, specialists in designing, implementing and evaluating educational programs in multiple settings
Master in Secondary Education	1-year course that requires a previous 5-year degree	Teachers in secondary schools

Table 2. Gender and degree of the respondents

DEGREE	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
Social Education		SEA1 and SEA2	2
Nursery Education		NEA1, NEA2, NEA3 and NEA4	4
Primary Education	PEO1, PEO2 and PEO3	PEA1 and PEA2	5
Special Needs Education	SNO1		1
Psychopedagogy		PSA1	1
Pedagogy	PO1, PO2 and PO3		3
Master in Secondary Education		MA1 and MA2	2
TOTAL	7	11	18

Note: Each respondent is identified by the acronym of his/her degree (NS for Nursery Education, PE for Primary Education, SE for Social Education, SN for Special Needs Education, PS for Psychopedagogy, P for Pedagogy, and M for Master in Secondary Education). An “A” and “O” stands for female and male, respectively.

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